

The Homegrown: Race, Rap and Class in London

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It's down to an identity crisis. It's not to compare the UK to the US because the US are deep within their infrastructure. I mean 6-700 years. At the most blacks have been here (Britain) for 100 years, and as a black force. In a way as being a force to reckon with in British society it's only been for 100 years and getting certain opportunities. As far as identity goes, we haven't actually established this proper black British culture. Even though we have a British hip hop sound, people are not embracing it enough. That's the problem. That's the identity thing. You are not proud of it enough (Tony, a British rapper).

Tony's comments encapsulate an aspect of the discourse around race among UK blacks that relates to the impact of African American culture on black British young people. While Tony recognizes and acknowledges that blacks in both the UK and US have lived in their respective countries for different periods of time, he nonetheless chooses to contextualize his discussion of race and cultural identity by using black American-ness as an established identity from which to gauge the validity of black British identity. Indeed, Tony's style of rapping has been developed through contact with his relatives in the New York and Virginia areas, whom he would visit, returning to London with American phrasing and vocabulary. Yet, the accent that he raps in, however, is reflective of his Jamaican and Nigerian parents and his upbringing in London. In this way, Tony, like other blacks, negotiates several sources of diasporic culture – the UK, the Caribbean, Africa and the US – forming them into what has come to be known as black British culture. These cultural influences are increasingly disseminated through forms of popular culture such as rap music and the wider hip hop culture. This essay discusses the de-territorialization of racial and class identities that are facilitated by the globalization of popular culture (Waters 1995; Hall 1997), with a particular focus on how the globalization of rap music and hip hop culture impact the definition of racial and class identity for black youth in the UK.¹

Historical Context of the Black Presence

After World War II, there was a massive influx of black immigrants to the UK from the Caribbean, with the largest group coming from Jamaica.² They came in search of employment, called by the “Mother Country” to rebuild those areas of England that had been damaged by the war. Most often, Caribbean immigrants were steered into low-paying jobs in sectors with poor working conditions, such as transportation (London Transport) and the National Health Service (NHS), and were typically denied access to better paying jobs or job training programs regardless of their previous educational or employment qualifications (Harris 1993). In large part, this was the result of racial ideologies that relegated black workers to manual labor. This kind of racism often came as a surprise to West Indians who had been socialized in the Caribbean to feel that Britain was the “Mother Country.” As one youth whose mother immigrated to London during this time remarked, “my mother felt the Queen was next to God.” The discrimination directed towards blacks in the employment market extended to their access to housing and education. Essentially a color bar was erected between blacks and the rest of society that limited blacks’ mobility.

In turn, West Indian immigrants in Britain became racialized in a particular way that conflated race with cultural and economic inferiority.³ Consequently, the construction of race was not merely social but profoundly political in the sense that the state generated and authorized inferior racial and cultural identities as devices for the allocation and distribution of social and material resources (Carter, Harris and Halpern 1996:153). Moreover, the debate around immigration control has been an area where the British state has played an active role in creating a particular image of black people in order to not only control the influx of (particular) immigrants into the country, but also legitimize racism directed against blacks in the country.⁴ As part of anti-immigrant discourse, the concept of cultural difference between blacks and whites became a primary way to draw distinctions between those populations who were seen as either upholding or threatening the “English way of life.”⁵

In the 1970s, notions of aliens over-populating Great Britain gave way to more subtle forms of anti-black discourse. Although this new era’s rhetoric of exclusion produced the same racist sentiment, the way in which anti-black sentiment was phrased relied less on stopping immigration into the UK. Instead, attention turned to the immigrants and their progeny residing in the UK, especially in the inner cities of the UK’s major urban centers. Here, the

British government and press constructed a dichotomy between foreigners and those who “really belonged” in a way that conflated race, nation, and culture in what came to be known as “common sense racism.” According to one commentator discussing the period, “blacks are pathologized once via their association with the cultures of deprivation’ of the decaying inner cities’ and again as the bearers of specifically black cultures” (Lawrence 1982:56). In this setting, the discourse of racial difference was both biologized and socialized. Subsequently, racist policies directed at blacks became viewed as acceptable because these groups were by nature unlike the British. In this instance culture became an area where these differences were rationalized. These rationalizations generated a broad ideological assault by the media and politicians that established young blacks as a criminal element in British society (Hall 1978).

Racial conflict in areas like Handsworth in Birmingham and Brixton in London not only revealed the increased animosity black immigrants faced, but also invigorated the stereotypical public representations of black youth that were circulating. In 1981, youth in Brixton revolted against the increased police presence and unfair treatment resulting from “saturation policing,” a strategy that had caused already strained relations between police and black communities to deteriorate even further. The rebellious actions by blacks in Brixton alarmed much of mainstream Britain as images of insurrection made blacks appear lawless, and consequently further outside of the national identity.

During this time, artists began to form organizations – such as the Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa – to address these concerns. As an outgrowth or stop gap measure, black arts projects received funding while at the same time a burgeoning race relations industry began to attempt to address the tenuous racial climate of the period (Bianchini 1997). Underrepresented groups such as people of color as well as gays and lesbians began to receive funds for art-based projects in order to directly address the paucity of alternative representations of working class histories. In this way, public representations became the key spaces in which racial and sexual identities were being produced, and where the shifting realities associated with blackness were being debated and documented. As one official in the GLC’s Arts and Recreation Committee stated, “representation is not just a matter of parliamentary democracy, it is one of the principal means through which the cultural and political configurations of a social formation are historically produced” (Bianchini 1997: 109).

During the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal administration pushed to privatize the gas, steel, and telecommunications industries, resulting in a spiraling unemployment rate and cuts in funding for the arts, recreation, and youth centers. These are the conditions that spawned the emergence of rap in the UK, conditions that are similar to those that were occurring in the United States during the same period (DeMott 1988; Chambers 1986; Jones 1988). While the early 1990s ushered in a new Labour government that under Tony Blair promoted a "Third Way," this period was still characterized by the privatization of industry, and a moral and ideological backlash directed at the welfare state, along with continuing rates of unemployment. What was different from previous periods, however, was the emergence of a new cultural openness and the development of the ideology of "Cool Britannia." This term referred to London's cultural vitality, especially in the arts, design and popular culture. Simultaneously, there was a marked increase in the use of the term hybrid in discourse related to the production of culture, especially the types of music produced during this period, which in many cases was used to suggest the erosion of racial and class boundaries in major urban centers. During this time, the UK witnessed the cross-fertilizations of various indigenous urban musics such as jungle, drum and base, and two step, all of which fused forms of rapping and up tempo staggered beats with the production techniques found in hip hop music – mainly sampling, looping, and the use of break beats combined with variants of dance music.⁶ U.S. hip hop, then, became part of the British popular cultural scene, as second generation West Indian youth began to look to hip hop culture as an alternative cultural frame. In doing so, they forged a new identity – one that relied on the aural and oral imagery of expressive cultures from black America through the medium of hip hop culture, adding a new dimension in what it meant to be young and black.

The Birth of UK Rap

The vocal styles that have emerged in UK rap use a Jamaican reggae influenced pattern and delivery that bears similarities to the chatting and toasting of previous reggae sound system artists, alongside additional rap styles that use a traditional London accent. These styles reflected the varied cultural and racial backgrounds of the artists comprise the rap community, and called into question the boundaries of what is traditionally considered rap music. By writing and performing rhymes, young blacks in Britain disseminated ideas that

reflect the diasporic nature of the music's elements and history while simultaneously representing the particularities of racial and class formation in multicultural London. At the same time, a generational shift was occurring among young working class blacks and other disenfranchised racial groups, who increasingly turned their attention to the popular cultural forms developing in the United States. Mastermind Roadshow, a sound system that played rap and electro music, came into prominence during this time. Mastermind's members were well-known for their sessions at clubs and especially at the Notting Hill Carnival.⁷ Herbie, the founder of the Mastermind Crew, became interested in playing rap music after hearing the American hip hop DJ technique of using two turntables to play records and manipulate breaks, creating extended mixes of songs.⁸ Mastermind began to incorporate the two-turntable style, departing from playing primarily reggae, then a one-turntable technique.

This kind of transformation was seen as liberating by many young people. As one young man remembered,

When hip hop came it gave man [people] an alternative. Hip hop took people away from the reggae scene. You had the writers, the *Wild Style* movie.⁹ My cousins who came from Canada showed me poppin' moves¹⁰ when I saw them in Bermuda on vacation.

For many of these youth, black America came to represent the racial and cultural vanguard because of their ability to create a globally accessible cultural idiom such as hip hop. In addition, they used hip hop to forge a new sense of racial community, one that was diasporic and multigenerational:

Even though we saw Puerto Ricans in the video, it [hip hop] was expressed as an ethnic thing it was something that minorities who had been undermined could express how they felt. How they were trapped in ghettos, pushed to the bottom certain things. It was an opportunity to tell people about how they lived. Whites had pop music and other mediums to express how they felt. We [blacks] didn't have anything. We had soul, but even within our soul and jazz music we couldn't get out to wider masses and some of this wasn't reaching the young kids. But hip hop, it was something that no matter how old or young you were you could get involved.

Cassette tapes of New York hip hop radio shows were traded in school yards, documentaries about UK and US hip hop were featured on television and in movies passed through cultural channels between the US, the UK, and the Caribbean. In this way, hip hop became enmeshed into London's cultural fabric (Codrington 2001).

In his documentary *The Darker Side of Black*, black British film director Isaac Julien explored the influence of rap and reggae on black identity in the UK:

Rap music has not the same importance in Britain as it has in America, except for the black diasporan communities in Britain and the Caribbean, where it has great influence especially in younger audiences. With regard to representations of black identities the homeboy image plays a transnational role to mythic dimensions in black youth culture (Julien 1995:2).

Here, Julien is arguing that while young blacks in London were well versed in the intricacies of several different racialized music styles, a dominant style has tended to define individual allegiances to a particular musical genre at specific moments. The production and consumption of particular forms of popular culture, therefore, “express, construct and mediate a sense of internal collective equivalence and external difference” (Briggs & Copley 1999:342), a sense that is historically, politically, and economically contingent. This has also been the point of several scholars who have evaluated the more general experiences of people of African descent in the UK, and who have understood identity formation as a process that is forged through the manipulation of diasporic practices within particular relations of power (Brown 1998, Fryer 1988, Gilroy 1987, Walvin 2000, Shyllon 1982, James and Harris 1993).

The fluid nature with which black British culture is created is evidenced by the production of music by the black youth among whom I conducted ethnographic research in the 1990s.¹¹ Through the consumption and production of these forms of music, black Londoners identified themselves in relation to each other and to other blacks in the diaspora, as well as to the rest of London more generally. While many Londoners were more knowledgeable about rap music in the US than they were about rap music being produced in their own

city, with an increasing number of radio shows and television outlets that specialized in UK rap, and with the higher national profile of British artists who were beginning to gain exposure and sales, this was changing.

During the early years, no one commercial impetus dominated the production of rap music in London. As a result, artists tended to focus on a set of unique themes specific to working class youth, with lyrics addressing conditions in London's inner city areas. Topics such as lack of financial resources, the selling and use of drugs, lack of employment and the dearth of political options were common, as were recreation and lyrical skill based messages. A relatively relaxed commercial atmosphere around rap also provided a degree of self-reflexivity that communicated a less fantastic representation of reality in comparison to some subsets of commercial rap in the US. In London rap, class was often stressed as a lived practice that was symbolically and materially grounded in daily activities. This was also reflected in the ways the music was produced. While increasingly available in major retail outlets such as Tower Records, Virgin Records and HMV, it was not uncommon for rappers to produce albums in homes or in the community studios located in low income neighborhoods that offered working class youth inexpensive access to recording and production equipment. Rappers also sold their music in these areas and in smaller specialty stores.

Nevertheless, the primary way in which rap records have gained public exposure has been through radio, particularly on the nationally broadcast Radio 1 Rap Show that was aired Friday and Saturday nights on BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). At the time of my research, one of the main local London rap shows was CHOICE FM's Friday Night Flavors. CHOICE FM was considered to be a "community" station, which meant that it was aimed primarily at black audiences, and that it had a weaker broadcasting signal than larger radio stations. Outlets of the Rupert Murdoch owned satellite cable network Sky TV also played a number of rap and urban music videos. And BBC 1 showcased UK rappers on their urban music radio show called "Extra" that was available on-line and through digital television cable that feature UK rap shows. Finally, indigenous rap music was featured on pirate radio stations, illegal stations that tapped into available radio frequencies. Because the signal of pirate stations is regionally limited, artists whose music was played on these stations tended to develop followings in particular neighborhoods in particular parts of the city, further localizing their popularity.¹²

Black Hegemonies

A distinctive feature of the new Black British identity is the extent to which it has been Americanized. Its ideal images, its stylistic references are very powerfully Black American. Even though the style may be indigenized, given a British home grown stamp, all leads come from Afro-America. The lines of Black transatlantic communication grow ever more complex and intense. And that too has consequences for the relation to Blackness (Hall 2000:129).

Stuart Hall's argument here positions black American popular culture in an always dominant position vis-à-vis black British identity. He sees blackness as a notion that is produced transnationally (and diasporically), but as one whose innovations are always generated by African-Americans. Yet, in a study of the influences of African-American rap on hip hop in south London, sociologist Les Back has emphasized the ways black Londoners recognized similarities between themselves and black Americans based on the conditions of economic disenfranchisement and racial marginalization, they did not just adopt African-American rap wholesale. Back argues instead that rap in London

looks out and plots cultural connections with African Americans, while at the same time looking in and reconstituting the local aesthetics of South London. The language and style of South London are thus laced with symbols and cultural fragments from urban America and the Caribbean that are rearranged in a unique way (Back 1996:209).

Popular cultural appropriation is, in this view, a differentiated process, and it thus becomes important to situate what is being appropriated and why, and how this appropriation influences the formation of racial and cultural identities in Black Britain at particular moments. In what remains of this essay, I will discuss three modes of appropriation that are apparent in London among the populations that collectively comprise the rap community.

A group that I refer to as mainstreamers comprises a visible component of the hip hop community in London. This group follows the commercial rap music played on DJ Tim Westwood's Radio 1 Rap Show. Although ranging in class position, most mainstreamers that I knew were Black working class youth

who consumed the commercial US rap music whose images have come to be associated with a hip hop lifestyle. In this instance, hip hop culture was presented in a particular way through print media, music videos and music. For example, this group dressed in current styles of hip hop related clothing that are made by particular manufacturers or labels such as MECCA, FUBU, AVIREX. They also read a number of mainstream publications such as the British rap journal, Hip Hop Connection and American rap magazines XXL and The Source, and watched American films in which rap artists played major roles such as 8 Mile, Belly, and Honey. They tended to emulate popular modes of blackness that were generated by commercial rap in the US, such as the gangsta (outlaw), the pimp (womanizer), the baller (wealthy/ successful male), the hoochie (female sex object). These kinds of characterizations – characterizations that were popularized by U.S. rappers like Jay Z, 50 Cent, and Lil' Kim – were also echoed in this group's speech, for example in the use of the term "nigga" by young blacks in reference to each other.

These performative aspects of hip hop identities were also associated with actual instances of violence, and subsequent ideological developments that linked hip hop to violence. For example, the month before I left London (July 1999), DJ Tim Westwood was involved in an altercation in which he was shot after a hip hop event in South London. The press and others in the rap community suggested that he brought this type of violent incident on himself by playing "aggressive" rap music. Here, the link between the content of the music, the audience, and violent behavior was made clear. In addition, elements within both rap and garage communities publicized their various tensions, or "beefs" as they are known in the United States. Members of this group of rap aficionados have also appropriated the tendency to foreground particular narratives about artists' backgrounds as drug dealers, playas, or serious gangstas in order to sell records. In London, this has taken on an almost surreal tone because the closely associated forms of material consumption and presentation of real and scripted violence found in rap music in the US are rarely seen in the UK. These adoptions of US style have contributed to an emergent moral panic regarding black popular culture and violence that has also been expressed by sectors of white and black communities in the United States, and that has become part of Britain's public discussions about youth. These discussions portray rap as primarily a black art form that had somehow "infiltrated" sections of the white community. "Make no mistake," one writer from the conservative

Daily Mail newspaper wrote, “this is not just a problem with inner city black youth; you can hear aggressive rap in pubs, shops and clubs across Britain” (*Daily Mail* July 21, 1999).

These kinds of violent incidents separate this community of rap enthusiasts from black Britishers are interested in promoting different aspects of hip hop culture. A young man in his mid-twenties explained the influence of US commercial rap music on black youth in terms of generational differences between himself and this group, differences that are reflected in the kinds of images that are now circulating transnationally as the result of recent technological developments often associated with contemporary processes of globalization:

They [black teenagers] are not into the UK stuff and they are not as proud of their music and know what kind of influence that they could get from their music. Instead they are building on Queensbridge [a part of Queens, New York that has birthed several well known current rappers]. These kids are influenced by trends. They are cable babies. We had that foundation of actually going to the jams at the Brixton Academy 7-8 years ago. We had the opportunity to see the tours. Biz, Shante [famous US rappers]. We went to the Fridge [London hip hop club in the 1980s]. We had local gigs all around the area. Tabernacle, the Albany. Now the only concerts these youths go to are Mase and Puff, Wu Tang [US rappers]. A lot of their success is based on image. Wu Wear [Clothing line brought out by this group] is almost more important than Wu Tang. That’s the foundation that these kids have.

What this speaker is arguing is that a previous generation of hip hop aficionados experienced the musical culture “live and direct,” while today’s youth are left only to consume it, via U.S. media.

In essence, young people in the UK have been subjected to the hegemonic forms of blackness that are seen and heard in the US, and have emulated these images in similar ways as have American youth. However, the fact that this emulation occurs in a social and political context that is markedly different from that of the US is masked because the images and lyrics associated with U.S. hip hop are decontextualized through the marketing campaigns of transnational recording companies.¹³ This has resulted in a predominance of images and

themes that are presumed to resonate with urban working class youth across the globe (realness, living on the streets, etc.), and at the same time, the presentation of a very mainstream narrative around upward mobility. It is not uncommon, for example, for US rappers to discuss their rise from poverty to recording popularity and to show the spoils that come with such success through their own consumption and by owning their own record labels. In UK rap videos, racial and class-based parallels with African-Americans are being directly posited, both visually and lyrically. In this sense, the blackness that is viewed and emulated in the UK is that which is without local context, and which therefore blurs the specificity of racial formation over time in both countries. Nonetheless, this commercial rap music from the US has informed the ways in which some blacks in the UK have represented themselves and articulated critiques of British race relations. In London's increasingly violent urban city areas, messages related to sensationalized depictions of this life in the US are popular among youth who listen to US hip hop music, generating public discussions of race and class marginalization that have traditionally been side-stepped within the ideological context of multiculturalism.¹⁴

While I have discussed rap music and hip hop culture as a hegemonic form of music that conflates particular instantiations of race, class and culture, it is also being used to squarely reflect the experience of blacks in the UK in a clearly identifiable black British voice. One artist who embodies this Afro-British rap style is Roots Manuva. He incorporates West Indian and London-based language into his raps as a way of keeping his music, themes, and approach to rap locally grounded. He also uses both patois and London accents to reduce the degree of American influence on his music's vocabulary. Roots Manuva's style is also, in part, rooted in the mix between reggae and rap style that was popularized by raga hip hop groups that fused these musics during the mid 1980s.

This kind of Afro-British rap uses a traditional approach to rhyming with some added reggae influences in the vocabulary and delivery. It reflects the Caribbean heritage that influences of many members of this group, yet this heritage is moderated by the black British space in which the rappers exist. Roots Manuva's style has a unique focus that uses a South London drawl with a delivery that maintains an off-and-on relationship with the beat. Roots may not be on beat all the time, but his delivery is calculated to exist in a rhythmic relation to the beat. This means that rather than maintaining the same rhythm

throughout the rap, he raps on and sometimes around the beat. Definitely experimental in nature, his flow is unique and is a good example of what London rap can sound like when it maintains a degree of West Indian influence especially in the use of accent, beats, and rhythms. On his albums *Brand New Second Hand*, *Run Come Save* and *Dub Come Save Me*, Roots offers examples of the full range of black British music, from hip hop to ragga¹⁵ to drum and bass beats. The way that Roots raps—word choice, flow/cadence, and themes—are British. He remains within the genre of rap but with a reggae influenced sounding voice and style that provides some indication of the ways in which the boundaries of rap in the UK are stretched.

Another uniquely British voice in rap music is seen recently in one of London's most popular rap artists, Dizzie Rascal. Dizzie is a British rapper of Nigerian descent in his late teens. His music melds elements of US rap, garage, and rock through low-tech production techniques, which gives his music a stripped down unencumbered feel. This musical fusion is characteristic of the new breed of rappers that are becoming popular. While heavily influenced by US hip hop imagery, style and vocabulary, his thick east London accent, in conjunction with his raps that focus on life in London from the perspective of a young black male, make his music resonate with youth throughout the city. For example, his video for *Jus' A Rascal* features Dizzee rapping atop the deck of a barge floating down the Thames River while a large group of black youth dance and rap on the floor below. As the video progresses, major London landmarks such as Tower Bridge and The Millennium Wheel are used as backdrops, thus making the link between rap music and local institutions as spaces that can be inhabited by young blacks.

With Roots Manuva and Dizzie Rascal, hip hop is used to challenge particular hegemonic forms of blackness within the UK. For example, as Tim, a Nigerian youth, remarked

T: A lot people in this country grow up and attempt to be West Indian. Hip hop gave me something else.

RC: Your background is not ragga [reggae orientated] but you can appreciate it?

T: Yeah, but I don't have to act it out and it's not the end all be all. I don't take it on and try to act like it. I don't forget where I come from. Hip hop gives me an opportunity to act independently, ragga wouldn't give me that opportunity to chat lyrics. Ragga wasn't for me, so I turned to hip hop.

Another youth of Nigerian descent suggested that in the past, Africans like himself disassociated themselves from African accents and music to take up the Jamaican influence so that they would not stand out in relation to other blacks. Yet now, they have been able to negotiate their difference (from other blacks in London) through hip hop, thereby displacing the local hegemony of Jamaican popular cultural forms. And a journalist related the following interaction with Dizzie himself:

he says he's often mistaken for a Jamaican or a Ghanaian, and because he prides himself on being hard to figure out, he can be playfully evasive on the question of ethnicity. "I'm Cockney," he said, half-smiling. "That's about as white as you can get, innit (isn't it)" (Sanneh 2003).

Here, it is interesting that Dizzie downplays his Nigerian heritage and foregrounds instead his English background as his primary mode of identification. Such a strategy seems to be more commonplace in the UK now, a trend that leads us to question the place of diasporic roots in the formulation of identity. Yet Dizzie's problematizing of blackness here also questions the category of whiteness (here conflated as Cockney). This does not mean that blacks do not acknowledge the presence of West Africa or the Caribbean in their backgrounds, but it does mean that an attempt is being made to aggressively redefine what it means to be black and British through new sources of rap music and hip hop culture that were previously either unavailable or unnecessary. Hip hop, therefore, has created a space where dominant ideas about race are suspended, and racism can be challenged.

Conclusions

I have been grappling in this essay with the extent to which British rap has created counter-hegemonic possibilities for the expression and creation of

identities, and with the suggestion that popular culture provides a lingua franca for working class youth of various racial backgrounds in multicultural environments (Back 1996). While I agree that hip hop has brought groups together in certain ways, the terms under which these groups have contact, as well as the contexts within which these interactions occur, invites a different perspective on multiculturalism. Given the significant number of Africans and Asians living in London, discussions relating to the consumption and production of culture must increasingly address the presence of these groups. The question remains, however, as to how these groups will be included in wider discussions around blackness. In certain cases, individuals within these communities choose to identify with a larger black urban community, and rap and hip hop culture becomes a way to define both individuals and solidarity within this community. At the same time, contextual changes transform the extent to which rappers identify themselves as either African, Asian or British hip hoppers. In spaces that bring together blacks of various backgrounds, hip hop music and culture has become a the bridge that has allowed young people to navigate complex understandings of blackness that are not dealt with in other segments of English society.

Taking cues from West Africa, the Caribbean and the US, blackness in Britain has been forged through public acts of consumption, production and representation of cultural identity. The imagery used in the music and music videos by those rappers who are interested in creating counter hegemonic forms of blackness has focused on the mundane aspects of life in London, such as street scenes and shots of housing projects. Such an approach to visual representation is a function of low budgets for urban music videos, but is also an attempt to link a particular urban aesthetic with a particular place. The use of housing estates, street scenes and landmarks in videos stresses the importance of place and neighborhood to the artists and to rap more generally mark these with class indicators and imagery that address the range of everyday experiences of life in London (Foreman 2002). This mundane urban scape speaks to how global movements of images are used to actively create forms of blackness. The use of inner city imagery draws parallels between various marginal urban locales and conditions taken from experiences related to similar processes of racialization and class marginalization occurring in different areas across the globe. As a result, the movement of rap music and hip hop culture has

facilitated the creation of divergent forms of black British identity by helping blacks redefine and recontextualize their local surroundings.

In all hip hop has become a way to level out some of the differences that obtain among blacks in Britain. For people of African and Caribbean descent, hip hop appears to be a neutral space in which both can participate in creating and recreating a type of black urban identity that in relation to both racial and class based discrimination. This process has been influenced both by U.S. definitions and expressions of blackness, and by African-American responses to racism, yet is still particular to black Britishers' own understandings of and responses to state based racism. In a diasporic context the production and distribution of forms of popular culture de-emphasizes the distance between populations and instead stresses the movements that facilitate new forms of identity creation among groups that are geographically dispersed. Through the manipulation of images and styles, then, the globalization of hip hop has allowed both for the reproduction of hegemonic notions of blackness, and for the development of counter-hegemonic racial expressions.

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Notes

¹ Definitions of blackness are complicated by the political context of the term black, which in the 1970s included people of Caribbean, African and South Asian descent. Scholar-activist A. Sivanandan (1981) viewed the position of South Asians, African and Caribbean blacks as marginal. Hence they represent a stance from which to create an effective political movement and identity. Through their common exclusions, a political struggle could be forged. In contrast, Modood (1994) emphasizes the complexity in using the term black to refer to people of African, West Indian, and Asian descent. He suggests that the term in Britain is not inclusive enough to identify and mobilize different groups that have been categorized. In his opinion, black cannot be a viable political category, as this category does not address the historical, cultural and political differences between people of African, West Indian and Asian descent. I will limit the discussion to blackness as it relates to people of African descent.

² While the post-World War II period does not mark the initial entry of blacks into the UK see Brown (1998), it does signal a significant shift in the history of blacks in Britain.

³ For further discussions of the process of racialization see Omi and Winant (1983), Solomos (1989), and Gilroy (1988).

⁴ When concerns of being overwhelmed by immigrants were articulated, they tended to reflect racist sentiments rather than concerns about actual overpopulation. While approximately 36,000 black immigrants entered Great Britain between 1950 and 1955, the 250,000 Southern Irish and other European immigrants who also entered during the same period were not subject to the same political rhetoric (Carter, Harris, and Joshi 1993).

⁵ The concern around immigration to the UK culminated in Conservative Member of Parliament, Enoch Powell's infamous river of blood speech in 1968. This speech deemed immigration a problem that threatened the English way of life and Powell suggested that immigrants and their progeny re-emigrate. For Powell, the presence of black immigrants in Britain would increase tensions between immigrant and native populations, with the potential effect of causing a similar racial rift as obtained, in his view, in the United States.

⁶ For discussions of British urban music genres, see Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma (1996); Eshun (1999); Briggs and Cobley (1998); Osgerby (1998); Hesmondhalgh and Melville (2001); and Oliver (1990).

⁷ Carnival is Europe's largest street festival attracting over a million people over several days. It is a celebration of soca music and is widely seen as a "black" event, although others participate.

⁸ Breaks are sections of songs that feature musical interludes such as drum or bass solos, and are sometimes referred to as the most "musical" parts of hip hop.

⁹ The movie *Wild Style* introduced much of mainstream America to hip hop culture, and it is considered one of the most enduring hip hop movies every made. It is also a term used to describe a particular style of graffiti.

¹⁰ Poppin' is an early hip hop dance technique.

¹¹ I conducted fifteen months of ethnographic research among working class young people in North London. The broader study of which the analysis here is a part examined the creation and practice of rap music by people of Caribbean, European and West African descent. I evaluated different facets involved in the creation and practice of rap music and the wider hip hop culture to which it belongs by including time spent with my informants in their homes and neighborhoods. In addition, I integrated myself into the rap community by attending events such as UK and US hip hop performances, hip hop recreational events (jams), in-home and studio recording sessions, video-taping events, listening to weekly hip hop radio shows, interviewing US and UK artists, and writing for US and UK hip hop publications. The recreational events were particularly revealing because this allowed me to gain a wider ethnographic perspective in relation to the racial and class demographics of the rap community. In other words, it was difficult and somewhat rare to find autonomous spaces where only blacks were present. This absence reflects the demographic marginality of the black population in the UK, as well as dominant social attitudes and public discourse around race that incorporates a liberal multicultural reading of racial and cultural interaction that de-emphasizes racial difference.

¹² For further discussions of pirate radio, see Hind and Mosco (1985).

¹³ While styles and images have become globalized, so too have critiques around issues that impact the production of hip hop music and culture on a global scale. At the Hip Hop and Social Change Conference at the Field Museum in Chicago, scholars, activists, and artists from the US, South Africa, Chile, Tanzania, and Brazil addressed concerns such as the commodification of hip hop

and the need to create links between hip hop's progressive factions. The discussions at this conference revealed the nuanced ways that hip hop is being practiced, and the links that exist locally, nationally, and internationally.

¹⁴ The lack of public dialogue around racial issues was discussed in an article in the Guardian entitled "Gifted, Black, and Gone." The article stated that in England, "there is no critical capacity to talk about race issues here; we have no such intellectual tradition. We talk in very regressive ways; 19th century ideas about genes and blood are at the heart of a lot of 'commonsense' thinking, which is not challenged in schools" (May 30, 2000).

¹⁵ Ragga, sometimes called dancehall or bashment music, is a reggae derivative that feature thick patois vocals rapped over a dominating bass. The lyrics are sometimes considered harsh due to their focus on Jamaican street life.