



**This electronic thesis or dissertation has been
downloaded from Explore Bristol Research,
<http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk>**

Author:
Gibson, Alex J

Title:
Conspiracy Theory and Consciousness in Hip-hop Music

General rights

Access to the thesis is subject to the Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International Public License. A copy of this may be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. This license sets out your rights and the restrictions that apply to your access to the thesis so it is important you read this before proceeding.

Take down policy

Some pages of this thesis may have been removed for copyright restrictions prior to having it been deposited in Explore Bristol Research. However, if you have discovered material within the thesis that you consider to be unlawful e.g. breaches of copyright (either yours or that of a third party) or any other law, including but not limited to those relating to patent, trademark, confidentiality, data protection, obscenity, defamation, libel, then please contact collections-metadata@bristol.ac.uk and include the following information in your message:

- Your contact details
- Bibliographic details for the item, including a URL
- An outline nature of the complaint

Your claim will be investigated and, where appropriate, the item in question will be removed from public view as soon as possible.

Conspiracy Theory and Consciousness in Hip-hop Music

Alexander Gibson

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in
accordance with the requirements for award of the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the Faculty of Arts.**

Department of Music.

September 2022.

Word Count: 74618

Abstract

Conspiracy theory has a persistent presence in US hip-hop music and culture. It is especially prominent in the context of social crises which have disproportionately affected African Americans. Conspiracy theories which linked the crack cocaine crisis and HIV/AIDS epidemic to notions of racially-motivated genocide in the 1980s set important precedents for conceptions of knowledge and power in the music. I contend that these narratives arise from a sense of pessimism and paranoia invoked by a history of racial repression and exploitation exemplified in events such as the CoIntelPro political assassinations (1969-71) and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1932-72). Such events not only engender paranoia but demonstrate how it can function as both a survival response and a legitimate aspect of political discourse in a racist society. I argue that hip-hop music built upon a lineage of 20th century African American expressive culture which explores notions of paranoia, pessimism and racial genocide, from early Civil Rights era political tracts through to novelists of the 1960s and 70s such as Ishmael Reed and John A. Williams. Hip-hop music emerged as the ideal expressive form to crystallise, exaggerate and expound upon these ideas. As such, it provides an excellent opportunity to examine how conspiracy theory functions in the context of expressive culture. Hip-hop's proclivities for humour, misdirection and signifyin(g) mean that it can provide a more nuanced perspective on how such discourses actually function in pop-cultural practice, moving beyond the caricatured notions of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists which have too often shaped academic perspectives on the subject. Furthermore, it addresses the role of race in conspiracy theory – and what discourses are delineated and/or discredited as conspiracy theory – which forms another significant shortcoming in existing literature.

Acknowledgments

I would firstly like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership, under the Arts and Humanities Research Council, without which the work behind this project would not have been possible. I am also grateful for their provision of training and guidance which have been useful to my development as a researcher over the past four years.

I am very grateful to have been a part of the Department of Music at the University of Bristol. It has been an immensely welcoming place from the very beginning, and continues to be a source of intellectual nourishment and social conviviality. I would especially like to thank members of the departmental writing group who provided useful comments on early drafts of this work from a brilliantly broad range of perspectives: Dr Argun Cakir, Dr Felipe Corte Real de Camargo, David Dewar, Zach Diaz, Dr Kate Guthrie, Prof Sarah Hibberd, Prof Emma Hornby, Asli Kaymak, Dr Maeve O'Donnell, Paul Rouse, Dr Tommaso Sabbatini, Dr Dianne Scullin, Dr Melanie Shaffer, Dr Shaena Weitz and Lei Ye.

Also a highly active member of the group was my primary supervisor Prof Justin Williams. He deserves special thanks for providing extensive commentaries and critiques of drafts of this work throughout the writing process. His approach to hip-hop, academic work and writing about music in general is deeply influential to my own work and always serves as an excellent example to aspire towards. Beyond that, he is the most helpful and personable supervisor a doctoral student could hope for, and I am very grateful for all he has done to help me develop as an academic.

I would also like to thank my co-supervisors. Prof Sarah Hill (then Cardiff University) was my secondary supervisor through the first two years of this project. I am grateful for her commentary on early drafts and her extensive musicological knowledge of political and social movements. After Prof Sarah Hill took up a position at the University of Oxford, I was required to find a new co-supervisor within the South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership, and was immensely gratified that Dr Carlo Cenciarelli (Cardiff University) agreed to take over the role. I am thankful for his insightful comments on drafts of this project, for rapidly getting up to speed with my work and providing a welcome fresh perspective on the subject matter.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends. My parents Jane Baker and Robin Gibson have always been incredibly supportive of my interests and fostered an intellectually and culturally rich environment which I appreciate more and more each day. My sisters Katie Thompson, Harriet Gibson and Jessica Gibson have also always supported me and their CD collections had a formative impact on my musical taste. My partner Chelsey Gilmour deserves the most thanks of all for her encouragement, her immense knowledge of pop music, and for challenging my thinking every day.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED:Alex Gibson..... DATE:....31 August 2022.....

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	9
0.1 Origins of 'Conspiracy Theory'.....	15
0.2 Defining (and Diagnosing) Conspiracy Theory.....	17
0.2.1 'The Paranoid Style'.....	19
0.2.2 In Cultural Studies.....	27
0.2.3 In Psychology.....	34
0.3 Hip-hop Politics and Hip-hop Knowledge.....	36
0.3.1 Imagined Communities, Interpretative Communities, Theorising Communities.....	36
0.4 Structure of Feeling: Historicising the 'Paranoid Style'.....	39
0.5 Methodology.....	43
0.6 Chapter Summaries.....	47
 Chapter 1. Stay Woke: Hip-hop Conspiracies and Critical Consciousness...	50
1.1 Staying Woke in 20th Century African American Discourses.....	53
1.2 The Nation of Islam and The Five Percenters.....	62
1.3 Theorizing the Ghetto in Hip-Hop's 'Golden Era'.....	64
1.4 Aesthetics of Conspiracy.....	72
1.5 Conclusion.....	85
 Chapter 2. Staying Woke: Crisis, Commercialism and Cultural Back- channels in 21st Century Hip-hop.....	89
2.1 Hip-hop's Crisis of Commercialisation and the Consolidation of the Entertainment and Media Industries.....	91
2.2 Mixtapes as Cultural Back-channel.....	101
2.3 Conspiracy Revivalism: Kanye, Kendrick and 2pac in Cuba.....	107
2.4 Conclusion.....	122
 Chapter 3. 'How we stop the Black Panthers? Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer': Crack Cocaine Conspiracy Theories in Hip-hop Culture.....	125
3.1 Close the Crackhouse: Early Anti-Crack Hip-hop.....	129
3.2 Gary Webb's 'Dark Alliance'.....	138
3.3 The Canonisation of Crack Conspiracy Theories.....	145

3.3.1 'The infiltrator, tribe intoxicator, people incarcerator, liberation movement annihilator': Crack Conspiracies in Conscious Hip-hop Post-1996.....	145
3.3.2 'Reagan era, I ran contraband': Crack Conspiracy Theories in Gangsta Rap Post-1996.....	155
3.4 'This dark diction has become America's addiction': Music-as-Crack Metaphors and the 'Corrupted Rap' Conspiracy Theory.....	165

Chapter 4. 'And I know the government administer AIDS': HIV/AIDS

Conspiracy Theories in Hip-hop Music.....	174
4.1 Black Male Celebrities and HIV Rumour Culture.....	182
4.2 <i>America Is Dying Slowly</i> (1996).....	190
4.2.1 Red Hot Organisation.....	190
4.2.2 HIV/AIDS in Hip-hop Music of the Early to Mid-90s.....	193
4.2.3 The Music.....	196
4.3 Raising Awareness versus Raising Consciousness.....	210
4.4 Conclusion.....	215

Chapter 5. 'Bush knocked down the towers': Conspiracy Theory in Hip-hop Responses to the September 11th Attacks.....

5.1 Academic Responses to 9/11 and Post-9/11 Culture.....	224
5.2 Music after 9/11.....	231
5.3 Surveying Hip-hop Responses to 9/11.....	236
5.3.1 Initial Responses: 'They wasn't aiming at us, not at my house'.....	236
5.3.2 Later Hip-hop Responses.....	244
5.4 Jadakiss - 'Why?' (2004).....	248
5.5 Immortal Technique - 'Bin Laden' (2005).....	259
5.6 Conclusion.....	267

Conclusion.....	269
6.1 Future Research.....	280

Bibliography.....	284
--------------------------	------------

Appendix to Chapter 5.....	301
-----------------------------------	------------

List of Tables and Illustrations

Fig 1.1 Album cover for Jedi Mind Tricks' <i>The Psycho-Social, Chemical, Biological & Electro-Magnetic Manipulation of Human Consciousness</i> (1997).....	76
Fig. 1.2 Book cover for Valdamar Valerian's <i>Matrix III: The Psycho-Social, Chemical, Biological & Electro-Magnetic Manipulation of Human Consciousness</i> (1992).....	77
Fig. 1.3 Album cover for Non Phixion's <i>The Future is Now</i> (2002).....	80
Fig. 1.4 Album cover for Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s <i>Conspiracy</i>	82
Fig. 2.1 Single artwork for 'Heard 'em Say' by Kanye West, featuring Adam Levine (2005).....	109
Fig. 3.1 Screenshot from Professor X 'Close the Crackhouse' (1993) music video.	134
Fig. 5.1 Jadakiss 'Why?' rhythmic chart measures 2-6.....	250
Fig. 5.2 Jadakiss 'Why?' rhythmic chart measures 14-17.....	251
Fig. 5.3 Jadakiss 'Why?' looped material rhythms.....	252
Fig. 5.4 Jadakiss 'Why?' rhythmic chart measures 26-30.....	253
Fig. 5.5 Jadakiss 'Why?' track layer chart.....	255
Fig. 5.6 Immortal Technique 'Bin Laden' rhythmic chart 1.....	260
Fig. 5.7 Immortal Technique 'Bin Laden' rhythmic chart 2.....	261

Introduction

This thesis proposes that conspiracy theory has played a central role in conceptions of knowledge and politics in hip-hop music. Conspiracy theory, in simple terms understood as a nefarious secretive plot between powerful agents, is most evident in the music's responses to social crises. Shortly after Hurricane Katrina (2005) devastated New Orleans, the most prominent rapper from the city, Lil Wayne, released a track which suggested that there had been tampering with the flood levees, citing a number of apparent historic precedents. At the same time, other hip-hop artists were continuing to provide musical voice to conspiracy theories concerning the September 11th attacks, years after the event itself. Whether a rapper's music was more usually focused around drug-dealing narratives or imperialist injustices did not seem to matter; both 'gangsta' and 'conscious' hip-hop conjured an image of a US government willing to attack its own people to justify war. This also holds true for the hip-hop music responding to the AIDS and crack-cocaine crises of the mid-1980s, which almost universally points the blame towards governmental involvement as a root cause.

Whereas hip-hop studies has tended to focus on the music's 'contradictory articulations' (Rose 1994, 2), the persistent presence of paranoid discourse and knowledge in US hip-hop indicates an important *continuity* at the political level. It suggests that US hip-hop music, from roughly the mid-1980s up to the time of writing (the historical frame of the present study), has maintained a consistent sense of political orientation and strategy which is brought to the fore in the pressurised

context of crisis response. This orientation is characterised by: a distrust of the state, media, and the official narratives constructed by both; an emphasis on the power, agency, and intentionality of political and financial elites; and the fear of the return of the most violent and extreme forms of racism – slavery and genocide. Strategically, there is a focus on using hip-hop in order to educate listeners and expose apparent conspiracies, in ways which draw heavily on key formal and performative aspects of the music – sensationalism, exaggeration, misdirection and irony. This is not meant as an account of what constitutes the politics of US hip-hop (in which case an emphasis on contradiction and variety is warranted), but rather how the category of the political is negotiated and theorised through the music.

The notion of 'staying woke,' resurgent in the Black Lives Matter protests (2013-) but traceable back to 1960s African American expressive culture and beyond,¹ points towards the more generalised forms of paranoia and scepticism articulated through hip-hop music. It posits a fundamental link between a state of heightened sceptical awareness, oppositional forms of knowledge, and the development of political consciousness.² Whilst articulation of specific conspiracy theories is the most overt form of the phenomena, it is only one form through which a more general paranoid 'structure of feeling' is articulated (Williams, 1954).³ When

¹ The phrase is discussed in a *New York Times* article by William Melvin Kelley (1962) and is also used in Barry Beckham's play *Garvey Lives!* (1972). It is heard yet earlier in a recording of blues singer Lead Belly's 'Scottsboro Boys' (1938). The history of the phrase will be addressed in chapter 1.

² An aim which has itself formed an important part of the music's history and identity (Rose 1994).

³ A 'structure of feeling' refers to the ways in which given historical conditions shape modes of thinking and emoting, as well as their attendant artistic conventions and forms of expression. First introduced by Raymond Williams in *Preface to Film* (1954), he provides an explanation in an

Kendrick Lamar opens his track 'YAH.' (2017) with the lines 'I've got so many theories and suspicions / I'm diagnosed with real nigga conditions,' he conjures the idea of seeing and knowing the world through an affective lens formed out of the historical experience of US racial stratification. At the same time, he points towards how race also plays a role in stigmatising and pathologising those perspectives. This paranoid structure of feeling stretches out beyond the origins of hip-hop, and even perhaps beyond the contemporary understanding of conspiracy theory. This will be explored in chapters 1 and 2, which provide an historical long view of the phrase 'stay woke'. For now, it will suffice to say that references to conspiracy theories are only one manifestation of a deeper current running through hip-hop music and African American expressive culture.

Conspiratorial hip-hop presents a challenge for notions of 'resistant' or 'counter-hegemonic' popular culture so often invoked in scholarship concerning popular music and hip-hop (Almeida 2017 and Krims 2000 provide extended descriptions and critiques of 'resistant popular music'). When music with an apparently resistant character also features sexist or otherwise problematic language, this has often been presented as an internal contradiction that might undermine its resistant character, but falls short of negating it entirely.⁴ The conspiracy theory in conspiratorial hip-hop cannot be analysed in the same way if the primary thesis presented here holds true. If conspiracy theory is indeed central

interview in *Politics and Letters* (1977a, 159): 'It was a structure in the sense that you could perceive it operating in one work after another which weren't otherwise connected... yet it was one of feeling much more than of thought – a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones, for which the best evidence was often the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing.'

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) discusses this kind of argument with reference to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s defence of rap group 2 Live Crew in an obscenity trial held in 1990.

to hip-hop's conception of knowledge and politics, the two are more difficult to separate than in the case of the rapper who might have successfully highlighted police brutality but employed sexist tropes in the process. The problematic nature of many conspiracy theories, academic critiques of which will be explored in the following section, thus forces a deeper evaluation of the categories associated with 'resistant' popular culture in this context. Whilst problematising that notion, however, it also is important not to preclude the possibility of this music, and conspiracy theories more broadly, having some social or political utility. Indeed, moving beyond the vagueness of the 'counter-hegemonic' and 'resistant' labels is key to providing a more specific mapping of the popular-discursive terrain. Whether that is to do with the origins of conspiratorial hip-hop or the role it would later play in the context of the lead up to the Iraq War, it is crucial to make more specific arguments about the historical conditions which gave rise to these musical-political articulations, and the ways in which they might in turn affect those conditions.

The increasing mainstream popularity of hip-hop through the 1990s and 2000s throws such questions into relief. Whereas hip-hop music addressing the crack cocaine crisis of the mid-1980s often reflected localised popular suspicions, rappers producing conspiratorial material relevant to the 2000s were doing so in the context of expanding and increasingly diverse global audiences. This could suggest that there are aspects of conspiratorial hip-hop which have a contextual and racial specificity and therefore become more potentially problematic when commercial popularity pushes it into broader view. On the other hand, conspiracy theory may have acted as a kind of gravitational pull for hip-hop to retain elements of radical

fringe politics and oppositional critique as it gained broader popularity. In practice, conspiratorial references have often been used by 'mainstream' (widely popular) rappers as an authenticating gesture towards more 'conscious' (politicised) or more 'underground' (non-commercial) styles. This therefore creates the opportunity for these new, large global audiences to tap into earlier, more fringe material, and the history of struggle and suspicion contained therein. Whilst this creates the conditions for certain forms of knowledge-exchange and solidarity, it also brings with it a large potential for misinterpretation, especially when appropriated across racial, cultural and class boundaries.

Race plays an important and under-examined role in the history of conspiratorial discourse in the US more generally (Turner 1993; Waters 1997). Chapter 1 positions conspiracy theory in African American expressive culture as borne out of an historical struggle to survive in a racist social order; 'stay woke' is an imperative focused on immediate threats to life as much as abstract, horizontal political goals. The paranoid mode of writers like John A. Williams,⁵ and musicians such as Gil Scott-Heron,⁶ who both conjured the possibility of concentration camps for African American dissidents, is not so outlandish when the necessary historical context of racialised surveillance and violence is invoked: the Jim Crow Laws, Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1932-72), the CoIntelPro political assassinations (1969-71). Just as conspiracism emerges in African American expressive culture as a response to struggles with state and racial violence, the

⁵ Most famously his novel *The Man who Cried I Am* (1967), which will be discussed in chapter 1.

⁶ The song 'King Alfred Plan' (1972) plays off conspiratorial aspects of Williams' novels, also discussed in chapter 1.

conspiracism of the US state and its ruling class is borne out of its own struggle for racial and political domination. On the global stage, the primary threat in the mid-to-late 20th century was the influence of communism; internally, the threat was posed by African American political organisation. Blackness and communism therefore emerge as twin poles around which the institutional paranoia of the US state is organised in the late 20th century, with McCarthyism and CoIntelPro being its most overt and violent domestic manifestations.⁷ This paranoia was also put to work the development of a surveillance and military apparatus aimed towards addressing those threats both internally and externally, and thus feeding back into popular conspiracy theorising in the process.

Hip-hop music first emerged in the 1970s from an environment shaped in no small part by this context. In the late 1960s, at the same time the US government was conscripting Black civilians to fight communism in Vietnam, state security services were assassinating and imprisoning a generation of left-wing African American politicians. The following decade was marked by a political malaise brought about by the resultant vacuum of political leadership and the unfulfilled promises of the Civil Rights era,⁸ whilst urban public housing became increasingly underfunded and run-down (Harvey 2006). At the same time, however, public-housing architecture was being developed in its own paranoiac direction, with the

⁷ Timothy Melley (2008) provides an interesting perspective on the Cold War as a central impetus for conspiratorial thinking in his essay on the origins of 'brainwashing' as a category in US news and popular culture. He argues that its origins lie in the US military's panic about cultural conformity in the People's Republic of China. Furthermore, he shows how this ironically led to the US military themselves performing mind control experiments, engendering 'conspiratorial' responses in US popular culture through the 60s and 70s. Elsewhere, Jodi Dean (1999) discusses UFO panics in the US and how this relates to Cold War anxieties and arms races.

⁸ Imani Perry refers to this as the 'post-soul generation' and discusses it in the context of the emergence of hip-hop music (2004).

gradual appearance of closed circuit television cameras and the high, sharp fencing now ubiquitous in working class housing throughout the world (ibid.). Hip-hop music was formed from conditions of generalised social paranoia – it would go on to wield it as a powerful but unstable discursive weapon.

0.1 Origins of 'Conspiracy Theory'

The term 'conspiracy theory' emerged in the late 19th century (Blaskiewicz, 2013; McKenzie-McHarg 2019; Oxford English Dictionary 2022). Its basic meaning was virtually identical to its contemporary usage: an accusation or supposition of a secret nefarious plan amongst powerful agents. Bailyn (1967) and Wood (1982) both argue that this was considered an ordinary way to think and write about politics in 19th century USA, especially amongst the political class itself, and was therefore not stigmatised at the time. So whilst the basic definition might extend back this far, the distinctive discursive status of the term – as an apparently dangerous, unruly, or pathological form of text or analysis – had not yet developed.

This might explain why a number of sources attempt to locate the origins of the term much later on, well into the 20th century. Lance deHaven-Smith (2013) claims the term emerged from discourse surrounding the Warren Commission into President Kennedy's assassination, whilst a recent documentary series produced by Adam Curtis points towards a hoax letter about the Illuminati published in *Playboy* magazine in 1969 (2021).⁹ Although these accounts make serious historical

⁹ Curtis (2021) claims this letter – which suggested recent political assassinations had been orchestrated by the Illuminati, a fictitious construct based on the Enlightenment Era secret society – was intended to reveal the absurdity of conspiratorial thinking but was taken seriously and substantially promoted the topic in US popular culture.

omissions by failing to account for earlier instances (Blaskiewicz (2013) responds to deHaven-Smith with corrective examples), they do identify an important development, with the term beginning to take on more negative and complex discursive connotations and functions. Part of that complexity is reflected in conspiracy theories about the origin of the term 'conspiracy theory,' which often claim the term was popularised by the US security services in order to discredit those who questioned them (deHaven-Smith 2013).

It is worth mentioning that the more basic meaning of the term extends much further back historically, even if the term itself does not. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a society which does *not* produce theories and accusations about its most powerful groups and individuals, even if these were conceptualised in radically different ways. As such, there is a relatively large amount of academic work published which reads the category 'conspiracy theory' back beyond the origins of the term, to revolutionary France (Cubitt 2009; Konda 2019), Early Modern Europe (Coward and Swann 2004) and even Classical Roman and Greek cultures (Pagán 2008; Roisman 2006). Rather than indulging in ahistoricism, however, this work effectively points to the universality of the basic meaning lurking behind a term which has become so highly charged in recent history. Those with power and influence will usually attempt to work to protect and expand their interests. They are often able to keep their actions secret, or can even monopolise information in a much broader sense. Potential political rivals, as well as 'popular opinion' – whatever form that might take on in radically different historical and social contexts – therefore necessarily engage in certain forms of suspicion and supposition in

interpreting the actions of the powerful. How aspects of such processes were subsumed into the category of 'conspiracy theory,' especially in the latter half of the 20th century, will be explored in the following review of academic literature on the topic.

0.2 Defining (and Diagnosing) Conspiracy Theory

Academic research on conspiracy theory has been thriving in the past two decades, following on from a relative scarcity beforehand. A large proportion of the work published has been produced by psychologists, generally with the aim of understanding the psychological factors which might predispose individuals to believe in conspiracy theories. Two recent papers provide summaries and meta-analyses of this flurry of research: Goreis and Martin (2019), and Stojanov and Halberstadt (2020). Butter and Knight's essay 'Bridging the Great Divide' (2017) also summarise and critique this body of work, in an attempts to remedy the lack of interaction between psychological and humanities research.

A range of arts and humanities disciplines have also experienced a recent boom in research on conspiracy theory, which is visible in the number of special edition journals, including *Episteme* (Coady 2007), *New German Critique* (Bathrick, Huyssen, and Rabinbach 2008), and *Historical Social Research* (Schröder 2013). There have also been two recent large-scale research projects: a Leverhulme-funded project on 'Conspiracy and Democracy' (Uscinski 2013-2018) at the University of Cambridge and an EU-funded project 'Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories' (Knight & Butter 2016-2020). The latter of these has also led

to the publication of a *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Knight and Butter 2020). Aimed at a more general readership are *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theory* (McConnachie and Tudge 2005) and *Conspiracy Theory for Dummies* (Von Kannon and Hoddap 2008).

Having outlined the current state of research on conspiracy theory in terms of volume, I will now offer a mostly chronological review of research on the topic. This begins with the work of mid-century US historian – especially Richard Hofstadter, whose 1964 essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' has been a singularly influential contribution – as well as a brief mention of Karl Popper's use of the term. There then follows a period of paucity which runs up to the 1990s, when disciplines such as cultural studies, Black studies, communications, and literary theory began producing book-length works on the topic. It is in this period that academic definitions and conceptions of conspiracy theory started to become more sophisticated, partly by criticising aspects of earlier work which had found their way into conventional wisdom.¹⁰ The 1990s also saw the emergence of a small but distinct strand of research in philosophy, which stands apart from other humanities disciplines in terms of methodology and frame of scholarly reference. The intense interest focused on the subject by psychologists began later on, building steam in the early 2000s. All of these strands of research continue up to the present and

¹⁰ For example, Karl Popper's invocation of what later became known as 'Hanlon's Razor' (2013, originally 1945) – social problems are more likely to be caused by incompetence than they are by malice – is reproduced almost endlessly. Here are a selection of headlines from one newspaper, *The Guardian*, invoking the idea: 'Cheriegate 'a cock-up not conspiracy' (Penman 2002); 'Cock-up not conspiracy,' (Meacher 2003); 'Oligarch's prosecution may be more cock-up than conspiracy,' (Tisdall 2005); 'Chaos and cock-up always trump conspiracy,' (Kermode, 2006); 'Iraq War minutes would show cock-up, not conspiracy,' (White 2009); 'Conspiracy theory or cock-up, Portsmouth plot thickens,' (Jackson 2010); 'Benefit loans: cock-up or conspiracy?' (Butler 2013).

within most of these disciplines now appear to be attracting more scholarly enquiry than ever before.

Throughout this review, I attempt to draw out a thread of research which addresses the role of race in conspiracy theory – a glaring and ultimately hobbling omission in much of the existing literature. I will do the same with respect to the interplay of conspiracy theory and expressive culture, another complex and easily misunderstood interaction. These threads, between which there is substantial crossover, are minor within the context of the existing research but nevertheless contain many of its most crucial insights. Both raise questions about how conspiracy theory functions at the social and historical level, the highly varied modes and levels of belief involved, and how irony, performativity, and artistic expression play into the complex discursive life of this phenomenon.

0.2.1 'The Paranoid Style'

Conspiracy theory and the social-political conditions which tend to produce them – often referred to as 'political paranoia' or 'the paranoid style' – begin to appear in the US historical work of the mid-20th-century (Hofstadter 1964; Davis 1969, 1971; Bailyn 1967). This was prompted especially by the need to account for the period of US politics running from the late 19th Century up to the Second World War, in which popular conspiracy theories about finance capital, the influence of England, Catholicism, and the expansion of the US federal government were generally prominent and had representation in the political system. Such discussions tended to focus on the Populist movement of the 1890s and the involvement of the US in

the late stages of the First World War. In Europe, writing concurrently with the aforementioned US historians, Karl Popper used the notion of conspiracy theory as part of his criticism of Hegel and Marxism in *The Open Society* (2013, originally 1945). Whilst wielding the phrase 'the conspiracy theory of society' (2013, 307) to discredit historicist approaches for ascribing too much intention and competence to the powerful, he leaves the concept itself unexplored. Nevertheless, this argument is frequently reproduced almost a hundred years later, and also provides an early example of using conspiracy theory to build a sense of guilt-by-association.

Hofstadter's 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (1964) was written shortly after the nomination of Barry Goldwater as the Republican presidential candidate. It responded especially to his links with the John Birch Society, a right-wing movement which promoted McCarthyite conspiracy theories about a communist takeover of key US political posts.¹¹ He saw the same 'sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy' (ibid.) – the so-called 'paranoid style' – in the John Birch Society that he had seen in his research on the

¹¹ Bob Dylan's 'Talkin' John Birch Paranoia Blues' (1970) also documents the 'paranoid style' of this era of right-wing politics in the US:

'I was looking high and low for them Reds everywhere,
I was looking in the sink and underneath the chair,
I looked way up my chimney hole,
I even looked deep down inside my toilet bowl,
They got away.

...

'Well, I investigated all the books in the library
Ninety percent of 'em gotta be burned away
I investigated all the people that I knowed
Ninety-eight percent of them gotta go
The other two percent are fellow Birchers . . . just like me

...

'Well, I fin'ly started thinkin' straight
When I run outa things to investigate
Couldn't imagine doin' anything else
So now I'm sittin' home investigatin' myself!
Hope I don't find out anything . . . hmm, great God!'

Populist party of the 1890s and later in US political discourse after the First World War, which both emphasised the role of international finance capital in subverting US democracy (1955; Olmsted 2009).

Hofstadter points to religion, nationalist discourse, class conflict, and 'historical catastrophes and frustrations' as 'conducive to the release of such psychic energies,' and furthermore claims that:

...the central situation conducive to the diffusion of the paranoid tendency is a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise. The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular social interest – perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of its demands – are shut out of the political process. Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed. (1963)

Whilst this would suggest that the 'paranoid style' becomes more prominent in specific historical conditions, he also claims however that an historical long view 'emboldens [him] to make the conjecture... that a mentality disposed to see the world in this way may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population' (ibid.). So whilst the 'paranoid style' might be modulated by historical conditions, it ultimately emerges from an innate pathological tendency of a minority subset of the populace. This confusion of historical and psychological explanations has been influential in many discussions and studies of conspiracy theory ever since, as will become apparent in the remainder of this chapter. The fundamental contradiction of this approach is that it

addresses an historically contingent phenomenon, whose manifestations clearly operate at a social and mass-cultural level, and positions the individual and their mental health as its ultimate determinant.

Hofstadter also asserts, however, that 'it is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant' (ibid.). His conjecture about conspiracy theorising is therefore that there is a consistent part of any population psychologically predisposed to it and, in certain historical conditions, this can spread out to a larger number of people and take on a prominent role in public discourse. Thus, while he says he is 'borrowing a clinical term' but not 'speaking in a clinical sense' (ibid.), Hofstadter nevertheless produces a sense of conspiracy theory as a discursive disease: its symptoms can be listed, its patterns of contagion understood, and perhaps even cures developed. The basic shape of Hofstadter's argument has been highly influential in how conspiracy theory has been discussed since, both in more popular accounts and in academic work, especially in the case of the flurry of psychological research on conspiracy theory published in the past two decades (discussed later in this chapter).

Elaborating more on the actual content which defines the 'paranoid style,' Hofstadter cites Norman Cohn's work on the European millennial sects of the Middle Ages (1957), who he claims also finds a 'persistent psychic complex that corresponds broadly with what I have been considering – a style made up of certain preoccupations and fantasies' (1964). Cohn identifies this as 'the megalomaniac view of oneself as the Elect, wholly good, abominably persecuted, yet assured of ultimate triumph; the attribution of gigantic and demonic powers to the adversary'

(1957, 309). This Manichaeic tendency is also present in Hofstadter's own analysis, however. When defining his 'paranoid style,' he says '[o]f course this term is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good' (1964). What constitutes a 'good cause' is entirely unclear in his account, a vagueness which puts an immense pressure on the question of who and what can be subsumed into the category of the 'paranoid style' and thus also 'conspiracy theorist'.

Although Hofstadter enumerates a number of typical features which characterise this style, it seems that one could be implicated merely by sharing 'certain preoccupations' (1964) with those already delineated as paranoids. There is a kind of deterministic interpellation at play, where it is fairly easy to be labelled as a paranoid, and then have all your ideas seen as simply products of paranoia. In this context, the vagueness of the formulation 'paranoid style' clashes with the severity of the accusation of being a 'paranoid' and the delegitimation which follows. This points towards how labelling someone as a 'conspiracy theorist' would become a very damaging and powerful discursive tactic in its own right. The mode of analysis inaugurated by Hofstadter therefore feeds into certain discursive and political manoeuvres in which the term can be used to delegitimise individuals and groups which might share 'certain preoccupations' deemed to be outside of the realm of legitimate discourse by those with the power to make such determinations.

All of these aspects of Hofstadter's argument – psychological-individual explanations of history, Manichaeism, determinism – sets the terms for how conspiracy theory has been discussed since. This is especially the case in

psychology, which often reproduces and amplifies these assumptions, in no small part because Hofstadter often remains the single anchoring reference for psychologists to provide some historical and sociological context. Furthermore, research in cultural studies and other humanities disciplines has often been written partly in reaction against these assumptions and the way they have been reproduced in popular culture, public discourse, and conventional wisdom.

Nevertheless, Hofstadter's essay contains nuances which point in a number of interesting directions relevant to current research. For example, despite highlighting its inherent 'affinity for bad causes,' he also states that '...nothing really prevents a sound program or demand from being advocated in the paranoid style. Style has more to do with the way in which ideas are believed than with the truth or falsity of their content.' The question of 'the way in which ideas are believed' will emerge as a complex and ambiguous theme of conspiratorial hip-hop and the discourses related to it, where performative and interpretative complexity come to the fore.

Despite the influential status of Hofstadter's work, which has formed a touchstone for almost all research since, the decades following his 1964 intervention produced little research on conspiracy theory. US cultural historian David Brion Davis forms one important exception. His book *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (1969) builds upon Hofstadter's concept and applies it to the notion that South slave-owners had undue political influence which they would use to conspire to capture the federal government. His more sympathetic

stance towards the 'paranoid style' allows him to advance the notion by considering its potential political utility:

To contrast one's own openness and sincerity of motives with the secrecy and artifice of an antagonist was partly a matter of tactics and partly a cultural ritual reaffirming democratic values. (Davis 1969, 29)

Thus, 'slave power' (the alleged political conspiracy of slave-owners) became 'a powerful symbol that could stand for all the contradictions between appearance and reality in American society' (30), producing a simplification which was politically useful for the Northern states and for liberal democratic ideology. This shifts from the view of conspiracy theory or the 'paranoid style' as an inherently negative psycho-political symptom, and towards the question of how such discourses can be mobilised towards specific social and political ends, in a sense neither inherently negative or positive. Davis went on to write a sweeping historical account of conspiracy theories in US political history, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to Present* (1971).

Another exception is found in *Black Rage* (1968), written by two African American psychiatrists, William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, with the aim of understanding mental health problems specifically affecting their Black patients. Similar to Davis, they look towards social utility as part of their explanation. In discussing 'functional' psychoses, they argue that 'those that include paranoid systems are by far the most prevalent among black people' (135) because, for that group, 'survival in American depends in a large measure on the development of a 'healthy' cultural paranoia' (135). In some senses this is a view concordant with

Hofstadter's analysis: it could be the case there is a baseline of cultural paranoia in society, and that this is exacerbated in certain conditions – such as Hofstadter's 'historical catastrophes and frustrations' – which African Americans had experienced in an especially concentrated sense through slavery and the Jim Crow era.

In other senses it moves far beyond the frame of reference of both Hofstadter and Davis, however. First, it assumes a process of interpellation is at play: Black people are put into social conditions which necessitate some degree of paranoia, but then they can 'hailed' (socially perceived) as a paranoiac and thus can be discredited – or even institutionalised.¹² Second, in the formulation 'healthy' cultural paranoia,' Grier and Cobbs shift firmly away from reliance on individual-pathological explanations and towards those which are more properly social-historical: 'healthy' suggests paranoia is not always pathological, but is in fact an appropriate way to respond to aspects of a racial social order; '*cultural* paranoia' locates the phenomenon at the social level, which is after all the domain where its historical effects are manifested and interpreted. As such, this analysis anticipates many of the insights which would only be articulated in the humanities decades later, and which are all-too-often absent in contemporary psychological research. It is the acknowledgement of race as an important factor in these processes which produces such a radical reappraisal of paranoia so soon after Hofstadter's attempt to define its role in US political history.

¹² I use these terms in the sense outlined by Louis Althusser in his essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (2014, originally 1970). The basic meaning is that the state plays an important role in the ideological determination of a person as a subject, and in the status of their subject-position.

0.2.2 In Cultural Studies

The material discussed here only loosely coheres around cultural studies as a discipline, with contributions actually ranging from legal scholars to critical theorists to sociologists and so on, but it does form a centre of gravity in terms of overall aims, the sympathetic treatment of the object of study, and the prominence of the field, its perspectives and methodologies in the 1990s and 2000s.

Fredric Jameson might be partly responsible for instigating this period of research interest, with an aside towards the end of his essay on 'Cognitive Mapping' (1990), in which he refers to the

...striking... omnipresence of the theme of paranoia as it expresses itself in a seemingly inexhaustible production of conspiracy plots of the most elaborate kinds. Conspiracy, one it tempted to say, is the poor man's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content. (356)

Conspiracy theory is therefore conceived as a hobbled version of what Jameson is pursuing in his own work,¹³ an attempt to 'map out' the distance between localised subject positions and overarching structures of class in the postmodern age. However, conspiracy theory is presented as a mystification masquerading as a *demystification*; it seems like an answer but only really serves to obscure the question. Therefore, Jameson's basic orientation is to unveil it as ineffective and

¹³ Jameson also wrote a book-length analysis of the conspiracy thriller sub-genre in US cinema, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992).

misleading. A similar argument is made by fellow Marxist Carl Freedman in his essay on paranoia in Phillip K Dick's writings (1984). Freedman uses Lacanian theory to argue it is an inevitable response to a world of advanced commodity fetishism, for him represented in Dick's books by commodities which speak, and demand money and attention (17-18). Ultimately he wants to reveal it as an ideological reduction inadequate to challenging capitalism, but concedes that paranoia is 'of all ideologies perhaps the most "reasonable" and the most nearly approximating to knowledge of capitalist society' (22). The common theme is to view conspiracy theory as a understandable but ultimately misguided response to late capitalist society: a view which has acquired something of a hegemonic status. A secondary theme, the acknowledgement that conspiracy theory is not too distantly related to critical theory, will be further explored by other authors.

John Fiske's 1994 *Media Matters* features a chapter on what he calls 'blackstream knowledge,' forms of oppositional knowledge spread through alternative African American talk radio shows on illegal 'pirate' or 'micro-watt' radio stations. Fiske takes the notion of sympathy towards his subject matter much further than Jameson or Freedman, all but endorsing conspiracy theories about AIDS as genocidal germ-warfare:

We will never know "objectively" whether or not AIDS is part of a genocidal strategy, for any evidence that might establish such a truth will be "lost," or, should it survive, be strenuously denied. (215)

Elsewhere Fiske reproduces lengthy transcriptions of the show in a way that makes it unclear which of their many claims he supports. He takes two important steps in

the context of research on conspiracy theory, however: first, he does not by default assume that conspiracy theories are false; second, he looks at actual examples of how such ideas are articulated in popular culture. These leads to him pointing out the popularity of AIDS and crack conspiracy theories based on poll data – crucial contextual information absent and probably inaccessible to earlier writers. It also means that he questions the lack of any discussion of the USA's documented history of biowarfare research, which is again a useful and necessary contribution. These aspects are overwhelmed by the problems his approach creates, however, whereby he produces his own form of reductivism to match the newspapers and academics he cites as having not taken concerns about the origin of AIDS seriously enough. For example, he refers at one point to '[t]his Black knowledge of AIDS-as-genocide...' (192). Generously, this might be seen as an accident of academic jargon, but, either way, it implies quite offensively that there some kind of settled 'Black' view on the matter.

Far more sensitive to internal difference and ambiguity in conspiracy belief is folklorist Patricia Turner, whose book *I Heard it through the Grapevine* (1993) uses interviews to study African American rumour culture in late-1980s New York. Similar to Fiske's notion of 'counterknowledge' or 'blackstream knowledge,' Turner argues that 'rumors and contemporary legends' about the origin of AIDS or crack-cocaine 'often function as tools of resistance for many of the folk who share them' (xv). Importantly, however, she draws attention to the fact that, regarding rumours about governmental involvement in the crack-cocaine crisis, 'it was difficult to determine whether informants actually believed it. Some stated categorically that

they did. Most informants, however, said merely that the item was "plausible"...' (188). The potentially widespread existence of these more low-level modes of belief in conspiracy theories contrasts with the view of the 'paranoid style' as a product of the pathologically paranoid, and is supported by polling data which usually shows surprisingly high levels of conspiracy belief in general. For example, a recent poll by YouGov indicated that 20% of adults in the US believe their own government played a part in the September 11th attacks. In Mexico, their results indicated 49% believed this, and in Saudi Arabia, 38% (2021).

Sociologist Anita Waters' 1998 paper argues for conspiracy theories as a class of 'ethnoscology,' or 'the theories that ordinary people use to explain social phenomena' (114). She sees this approach as demanding that she does not assume conspiracy theories are false, and as not 'treating believers as paralyzed politically' and that the 'effects of conspiracy belief on political action be an empirical question, not a given' (115). She offers the compelling conclusion that:

Calling AIDS, drugs, and attacks on elected officials "conspiracies" may be more metaphoric than literal. The choice of that language serves as corrective to the way in which ethnic inequality is often treated by European American writers as the outcome of accidental, inexorable social and political processes for which no one can, or should, be held accountable. The use of the conspiracy metaphor is a way of "bringing men back in" (Homans, 1964) to the discussion of ethnic inequality. (122)

These insights – recognising conspiracy belief as ambiguous, conspiracy theories as potentially metaphoric, and as 'the ultimate recognition of agency in social action'

(123) – will be crucial to understanding the role of conspiracy theory in the expressive context of hip-hop music.

Interestingly, these three studies, which are entirely focused on African American conspiracy theory, arrive early in this period of interest in conspiracy theory in general, just before many book-length works were published on the topic in the 2000s. The discussion of the role of race in conspiracy theory would be more muted in this period, despite the fact that these studies would build upon many of the arguments summarised above. The history of the academic study of conspiracy theory thus itself lends credence to my argument that race forms a hidden locus of conspiracism in US culture, one all too often occluded by omission.

I will now summarise the most significant concepts produced by the boom of conspiracy theory research in this period. Michael Barkun's *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2013), first published in 2001, introduced the notion of 'stigmatised knowledge'. By this he means 'knowledge claims that have been ignored or rejected by those institutions we rely on to validate such claims' (2013, 115). This category allows him to connect conspiracy theory belief with other forms of stigmatised knowledge, such as 'unorthodox forms of healing and beliefs about Atlantis and UFOs,' which, as he argues, sometimes go hand-in-hand.¹⁴ The crossover between conspiracy theory and other forms of discourse and belief have been studied in more depth in a collection of anthropological work edited by Todd Sanders and Harry West (2003) who use the term 'occult epistemologies' to describe certain religious

¹⁴ This confluence is depicted very strongly in *The X-Files* (Carter 1993) where the main character's attempts to uncover a conspiracy between extra-terrestrials and a secret world government alternate with plots about esoteric religious practices and cryptozoology.

beliefs, mysticism, and conspiracy theories. For them, finding a universal way of distinguishing between these categories was not possible (6-7).

Literary theorist Timothy Melley produced a number of useful concepts in his two book-length studies of conspiracy theory. *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000) introduced the notion of 'agency panic': 'intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been "constructed" by powerful external agents' (62). Meanwhile, the growth of faceless 'agencies' under neoliberal capitalism prompts this crisis of individual autonomy; a society which promotes individualism increasingly precludes it by processes of surveillance and cultural homogenisation. This is reflected in Jameson's study of conspiracy-thriller cinema, where he sees in films such as Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974) an 'absolute collectivization' of narrative roles, where there is 'no longer an individual victim, but everybody; no longer an individual villain, but an omnipresent network; no longer an individual detective with a specific brief, but rather someone who blunders into all of this just as anyone might have done' (1992, 34).

Melley's second book on conspiracy theory focuses on the 'covert sphere': 'the clandestine counterpart of the increasingly embattled public sphere, a Cold War security state in which the supposed need for secrecy routinely overrides the principles of liberal democracy' (150). Whilst a certain amount of secrecy has always been a necessary part of what constitutes a state (Fenster 2008, 11), Melley provides a way of describing the particular developments of the US in the Cold War and afterwards. Conspiracy theorists have a more commonly used term for this –

the 'deep state'. Both Melley and historian Kathryn Olmsted, in her book *Real Enemies* (2009), have been highly effective in showing how the paranoia of the state, in terms of its build-up of military might, surveillance technology, and propaganda campaigns have produced an environment which seems to beg a popular conspiratorial response. Further, Olmsted's work concentrates on the interaction between proven conspiracies associated with the US government and popular conspiracy theorising. If a state acts suspiciously, it will produce suspicion.

Mark Fenster, in reference to Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), coined the phrase 'classical conspiracy narrative' (2008, 122). By this he means a trajectory wherein the power of an heroic investigator, 'the truth' or 'the people' can unmask the conspiracy theory and return society to a previous idealised state (122). He thus sees the classical conspiracy narrative as an argument for liberal democracy: it places faith in the power of democratic practice to overturn the anti-democratic conspiracy, and wishes to restore a version of liberal democracy free from such corruptions. In a perhaps related sense, he also argues that part of what motivates conspiracy theorists is '[i]t manifests a popular desire to reconstruct the master narrative as a mode of expression' (95).

It is interesting to consider Fenster's 'classical conspiracy narrative' and D. B. Davis' earlier notion of the paranoid style as a 'ritual reaffirming democratic values' (1969, 29) in the context of conspiratorial hip-hop, which conjures no such earlier, un-corrupted state to return to. In fact, Fenster's work provides an excellent example of how inadequate attention to race in the context of US conspiracy theory can produce problematic generalisations. For example, Fenster claims that:

[s]tructural, institutionally-based inequities in the distribution of power, capital, and resources, and the manipulation and abuse of state power to establish, maintain, and extend political control, do not constitute conspiracy in the sense that conspiracy theorists would describe (as some anomalous, apocalyptic moment within a heretofore perfect democratic republic). (2008, 11)

There is clearly a particular, if unarticulated, vision of the conspiracy theorist at play here, and it is one that does not include very many African Americans. The forms of conspiracy theory articulated within hip-hop music more often take on the opposite form: another injustice in an historical chain which goes back to the violent vanishing point of the middle passage. Gang Starr's 'Conspiracy' (1992) describes a conspiracy not as an anomalous moment, but instead seems to put the intentional distribution of crack cocaine and AIDS on equal footing with, for example: negative television coverage, educational inequality, and the exploitation of African American musicians through 'whack contracts'. What unites the injustices enumerated by rapper Guru is the racial logic he sees as governing it all: race itself is positioned as the 'conspiracy'. I introduce this example merely to show that even sophisticated accounts of conspiracy theory can fall short if they fail to account for race and the variety of ways in which they are put to use in popular culture.

0.2.3 In Psychology

Research on conspiracy theory in the field of psychology proliferated in the 2000s and continues to grow. It has taken a radically different direction than the other disciplines discussed so far. Following on from the psychological aspect of

Hofstadter's psycho-historical argument, they tend to focus on profiling conspiracy theorists and those who might be open to them. These studies almost always rely methodologically on questionnaires. In this context, research has focused on the relationship between conspiracy belief and mental health issues such as anxiety (Goertzel 1994), paranoia and 'schizotypy' (Darwin et al. 2011; Barron et al. 2018;), as well as more general behaviours and traits such as: a sense of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al. 2002), uncertainty (van Prooijen et al. 2012), low levels of trust (Pummerer 2021), and lack of control (Moyer 2019; Stojanov and Halberstadt 2020). Bost's meta-analysis of these studies (2015) argues that there is an agreement and convergence in the results which suggests it will one day be possible to provide full mapping of the psycho-pathological and environmental factors leading to 'conspiracy ideation'.

Whilst such a thing may well be possible, it would only be in a profoundly limited sense if environmental factors are conceived only in terms of personal experiences and relationships, and don't include social and historical factors. Worse yet is the consistent assumption that conspiracy theories should always assumed to be false. To put this in a specific context, what is the validity of these studies if it counts people who had correctly believed a cover-up had taken place in the Hillsborough disaster (1989)? Or the huge amount of people who correctly believed that stories about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction were intentional falsehoods designed to justify a war? What value would there be in providing psychological profiles of such individuals, except perhaps to give a positive example to those who place too much trust in newspapers?

This also gets toward another serious problem in this body of work: circular reasoning. These people are conspiracy theorists because they believe things I define as conspiracy theories → conspiracy theorists have the following traits → these traits make people susceptible to conspiracy theories. A more extended critique of circular reasoning in conspiracy theory literature is provided by Knight and Butter (2020). Specific to psychological studies, they also point towards the lack of a clear definition of the term 'conspiracy theory', which is treated as 'a timeless and stable concept' (23), and criticise the questionnaires used for a reliance on 'a very crude notion of what it means to believe in a conspiracy theory' with little room for ambiguity (21).

0.3 Hip-hop Politics and Hip-hop Knowledge

0.3.1 Imagined Communities, Interpretative Communities, Theorising Communities

Benedict Anderson's highly influential book *Imagined Communities* (1983) argues that the development of new media technologies has been crucial in the development of nationalism and the nation state throughout the world. He points especially towards the printing press, and the eventual spread of national newspapers as creating a national 'imagined community' not just amongst the actual readership but amongst its potential readership as well, as formed by the area to which the newspaper was addressed. Later on, the radio plays a similar function, each morning hailing its imagined community. Although Anderson's argument is focused on the development of nationalism and the nation state, it is clear to see

how imagined communities could operate at different levels, such as in the case of publications and programmes aimed at a specific gender, race, class, or age group.

Justin Williams draws on Anderson's concept, along with Joseph Schloss' notion of hip-hop music possessing a coherent intellectual system (2004), to claim that the 'hip-hop world' is an imagined community. He takes this further by combining it with Stanley Fish's notion of 'interpretative communities' which are in Fish's words 'made up of those who share interpretive strategies for not reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties' (1980, 14). Since there is an 'audience expectation that hip-hop is a vast intertextual network' (2013, 15), these interpretative strategies are in large part formed around the chains of musical borrowing and reference on which the music is based. The variety of different musical frames of reference and cultural knowledge amongst such vast communities form the basis for the 'reading and misreading of these [sampled or otherwise referenced] sources, as reflected by constantly shifting interpretations within hip-hop's imagined communities' (14). This concept is highly relevant to conspiratorial hip-hop, where the audience's prior knowledge is varied not just along lines of hip-hop and the music it samples, but of a similar intertextual network of conspiracy theories.

In the context of conspiratorial hip-hop, it is useful to connect Williams' 'interpretative communities' with notions of music-as-theory found in works on afro-futurism by Kodwo Eshun and J. Griffith Rollefson. Eshun's *More Brilliant Than The Sun* (1998) describes how, in academic contexts '...theory has always come to Music's rescue,' (1998, -4) and argues that this relationship should be

reversed. He points towards theoretical concepts proposed by musicians within their music, beginning with jazz musician Sun Ra's notion of 'MythScience,' and pointing in further directions with hip-hop as a prominent component of this alternative intellectual history:

Instead of theory saving music from itself, from its worst, which is to say its best excesses, music is heard as the pop analysis it already is. Producers are already pop theorists: Breakbeat producer Sonz of a Loop da Loop Era's term *skratchadelia*, instrumental HipHop producer DJ Krush's idea of *turntabilization*, virtualiser George Clinton's studio science of *mixadelics*, all these concepttechnics are used to excite theory to travel at the speed of thought, as sonic theorist Kool Keith suggested in 1987. (1998, -4)

He continues that 'far from needing theory's help, music today is already more conceptual than at any point this century, pregnant with thoughtprobes waiting to be activated...' (-3). In short, Eshun identifies a specific thread of Black popular music related to Afrofuturism which offers its own theoretical apparatuses and thus presents the opportunity to reverse the conventional relationship between music and theory.

Rollefson applies this sort of thinking in a more specific context in what he calls the 'Robot Voodoo Power Thesis,' building on a concept from Kool Keith's 'Earth People' (1996), and putting this in dialogue with Sun Ra's notion of 'myth science' and theorist Paul Gilroy's concept of 'anti-anti-essentialism' (1991, 1993). He sees the Afrofuturist project not just as a form of artistic expression but as a 'field of scholarly enquiry' in its own right (2008, 87). Further, he argues that 'it is the seamless embodiment of Afrofuturist hybridity/simultaneity in the performative

musicality of these artists that render their philosophical statements so powerful' (92). Once again, the theoretical dimension of the work comes from within, rather than being imposed externally by academic theorists, and it in fact draws its philosophical and political power from its embodiment of theory in music and sound.

Conspiratorial hip-hop is perhaps even more explicit than Afrofuturist music about its own status as a means for theorising about society and social crises from a bottom-up perspective. Further, it allies itself with other non-academic modes of theorisation – conspiracy theory literature, the modes of pseudo-spiritual thought which often accompanies them, and the properly religious mythology of Nation of Islam and its offshoots. I suggest that combining the notion of imaginative/interpretative communities with a perspective which allows us to see music as theory is an appropriate framework for conspiratorial hip-hop. This music engenders a theorising community. Exemplar tracks are packed with reams of information and attendant citations, both musical and literary. Its frequently bombastic, sensationalist presentation has the effect of encouraging discussion and theorisation, for hip-hop fans but also in the media, politics, and broader popular and public discourse.

0.4 Structure of Feeling: Historicising the 'Paranoid Style'

As cultural theorist Mark Fisher has pointed out, even the most commercially successful films produced by the most dominant parts of the entertainment industry, such as Disney-Pixar's *WALL-E* (Stanton 2008), can have an anti-capitalist message

(2009, 12). The film suggests that one mega-monopoly has been formed by the corporation 'Buy n Large' and that the results of this have been to create a polluted and uninhabitable world and a population of de-skilled, obese humans barely capable of standing up. In such a circumstance, Fisher draws on Robert Pfaller's notion of 'interpassivity' (a portmanteau of interactivity and passivity) to argue that 'the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity' (2009, 12).

Musicologist Adam Krims has made similar points in the context of musicology, arguing that many accounts of popular music and politics do not take account of contemporary and historical political economy, the creative industries, and the ability of capital to incorporate or *precorporate* supposedly 'resistant' sounds and images (2000, 3). Several musicologists have argued that such misapprehensions have led to an over-emphasis on 'resistant' popular culture in musicology (Almeida 2013; Krims 2000; Nooshin 2017). Whilst aspects of this critique are inarguable – if 'resistant' or 'counter-hegemonic' are to be used as analytic categories, they cannot rest simply upon the text's claim to occupy them – it also carries the danger of closing off the possibility of meaningful political interventions in the pop-cultural sphere whatsoever. What are the limits on what capital or the dominant society can incorporate?

Raymond Williams, the cultural theorist who in the same essay went a long way towards defining both 'resistant culture' and 'counter-hegemony', provides an partial answer to this question:

...no mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts human practice, human energy, human intention... . On the contrary, it is a fact about the modes of domination that they select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice. (1973)

A pattern which emerged from the present study is that whilst conspiratorial hip-hop tracks from the early 1990s are fairly likely to be found on an ordinary album, such as Gang Starr's 'Conspiracy' in *Daily Operations* (1992), later examples such as Immortal Technique's 'Bin Laden' (2004) and Lil Wayne's 'Georgia Bush' (2006) both appear on mixtapes. Thus, even in a situation where the 'dominant culture' is motivated to enforce limits on expression – such as pressure on hip-hop musicians not to challenge the official narratives proceeding from the September 11th attacks, perhaps in the form of record label anxiety about certain topics on major releases, or in the documented censorship of political music on radio stations throughout the US (covered in chapter 5) – there are limits on how effectively it can do this. The popular energies that have gone into the historical development of the US mixtape economy, and the creative energies of artists like Lil Wayne, who has released much of his most acclaimed music for free in this format, should not be underestimated in this context.

There are also more general ways in which we might better understand the material conditions of the music's production without precluding its capacity to articulate an oppositional politics. Raymond Williams coined the phrase 'structure of feeling' as part of his project of pursuing a 'cultural materialist' framework, which aims towards an 'analysis of all forms of signification... within the actual means and

conditions of their production' (1981, 64–5).¹⁵ It especially applies to aspects of expressive culture which are difficult to quantify, such as the popularity of a specific trend or mood in particular era of theatre or cinema, for example. Out of what conditions was that tendency produced? And, in turn, how might it have affected those conditions? As such, this can be used to satisfy Krims' critique: it provides more attention to how 'resistant culture' works in the context of contemporary capitalism, whilst avoiding the trap of closing off arguments about the work's potential social and political salience.

Regarding the tendency for conspiracy theorising in hip-hop, we can demonstrate that this was shaped by a specific period of highly racialised historical conditions and experiences which at once cultivated a certain culture of scepticism and paranoia, as well as a tendency for expressive forms to feature misdirection and irony, such as in 'signifyin(g)'.¹⁶ Chapter 1 makes a detailed argument for how these paranoid/sceptical themes developed through the 20th century, and were crystallised and exaggerated in hip-hop music from the late 1980s onwards. Having understood the role of historical conditions in shaping this persistent tendency, we can then look at what role it might itself play in affecting those conditions. This is explored in specific case studies of hip-hop's conspiratorial responses to major

¹⁵ Williams' vision of production is in no sense limited to the economic sphere and the production of commodities, but rather the 'production of society itself, and of men themselves, material production and reproduction of real life' (1973). He refers to how Marx's analysis of production of commodities is a narrowed version of 'his more central notion of productive forces, in which... the most important thing a worker ever produces is himself, himself in the fact of that kind of labour, or the broader historical emphasis of men producing themselves, themselves and their history' (ibid.).

¹⁶ A concept elaborated by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his book *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). In the context of hip-hop, this most often manifests as a controversial surface meaning which misdirects inattentive listeners, whilst a more nuanced and usually contradictory meaning is hidden in plain sight for those with insider cultural knowledge.

crises: the crack cocaine crisis, the AIDS epidemic, the September 11th attacks, and Hurricane Katrina.

So whilst we can't assume that hip-hop is resistant or even that 'resistant' culture is an inherent good, we can do historical and musicological work to show why certain tendencies persist and to understand their function over time. This thesis demonstrates that conspiratorial hip-hop is relatively resistant to straightforward commodification, even in a period of large mainstream popularity for hip-hop, but which nevertheless itself crops up in the most mainstream and visible contexts. We can see how, across a range of different styles, conspiratorial perspectives would consistently re-emerge in response to a variety of social crises, and would echo down through the music long afterwards. So whilst we can't assume an essential political character or social utility of this music, as vague invocations of 'resistant culture' or 'counter-hegemony' tend to do, we can show how specific notions of music-as-politics/music-as-theory come about historically and, from there, assess their inner-workings, and their significance at specific historical moments. This provides a more precise way to understand what we mean when we say that popular music 'resists' the dominant culture or official narratives.

0.5 Methodology

The methodology of the present study is based around the question of how best to analyse the structures of feeling involved in conspiratorial hip-hop. This will variously involve outlining a long historical view on the development of these

structures, surveys of conspiratorial hip-hop by topic alongside accounts of the popular discursive conditions surrounding them, and in-depth musical analysis.

The first two chapters present an historical survey organised around the evolving notion of 'staying woke' in African American popular culture in the 20th and 21st centuries respectively. Methodologically, this grew first from a search for the earliest recorded use of the phrase. I proceed to track its development and the important discursive influences on this development through the following decades. A combination of textual and hermeneutic analysis follows this thread up to the musical examples of early hip-hop and its immediate precursors. From there, musical analysis takes on a more prominent role in situating the meaning of 'staying woke' and specific conspiratorial rhetoric within the realm of sonic and musical expression. From that point onwards, throughout the rest of the historical survey in chapter 1 and 2, but also through the case studies from chapter 3-5, a consistent methodology for conducting sweeping surveys of a range of music is adopted.

The subject matter of this study requires that a large range of music is covered such that strong arguments can be made about the general shape and content of hip-hop musical responses to specific social crises. Although there is a lot of value in deep musical analysis of hip-hop music which focuses on the use of sounds, its specific methods of production, and its distinctive forms and structures, this need for broad surveys of a variety of hip-hop music covering a specific topic requires an approach more focused on lyrical content. It must be acknowledged that this adds to a shortcoming that is, broadly speaking, widespread in hip-hop studies. As a form which often contains a large amount of lyrics per track compared to other

popular music styles, and which often makes controversial statements within them, this has been an attractive approach for scholars and media commentators alike. Unfortunately, this has sometimes led to taking lyrics out of context, missing nuances and misdirections suggested by the sonic content of the track. It also fundamentally divorces the analysis from the way in which this music is experienced by its audiences and by the artists who make it.

My approach is aimed towards minimising these problems whilst also being able to cover a lot of musical and thematic ground. I do this by picking musical examples first by prioritising those which make explicit lyrical reference to a given event, idea or conspiracy theory, but I then situate my analysis of what these lyrics mean with reference to the sonic world and form of the track, with special attention to dialogic chains of meaning through sampling and other forms of reference to musical or extra-musical works. This holistic approach is further pursued with attention to music videos, live performances, television performances and interviews. This also has the benefit of enabling a more grounded assessment of a given artist's relationship to a conspiratorial idea. Whilst one artist might personally believe in a conspiracy theory and be driven to use their music as a means to propagate it, another might simply be name-checking it as one cultural touchstone amongst many in a virtuosic sequence of rhymes and references. Since audiences, especially engaged fans and 'hip-hop heads' often pay attention to extra-musical aspects of an artist's public presentation, this also has the benefit of better reflecting their experience. Occasionally, when it is especially valuable or necessary for understanding a crucial aspect of the music, more in-depth musical analysis is used.

The most lengthy example is an analysis of Jadakiss's flow (the rhythmic, expressive and performative delivery of his lyrics) in his track 'Why?' (2004).

There are some major scholarly limitations which it is important to acknowledge at this stage. The first is my subject-position as a British white academic working within an established institution in which Black people are under-represented both in the faculty and student bodies. The working structures beyond my institution also largely reflect similar problems of racial representation. It would also probably be fair to say that women are currently under-represented in hip-hop studies. This creates some problems in terms of my cultural removal from many of the hip-hop artists I discuss and large parts of the US audiences on which I focus in the present study. I hope to mitigate this by deep engagement with the music which always aims to respect and take seriously its expressive meaning and political statements. The notion of music-as-theory is one way in which such efforts can be supported at the theoretical level. The problems with representation in my broader working environment are something which is difficult to immediately overcome, although I hope that academic responses to my work after it is completed might help to address oversights which might be derived from a lack of dialogue with non-white and non-Western scholars. Gender also presents a significant issue, especially considering the overwhelmingly male composition of the artists I am discussing, and of the broader world of conspiracy theory discourses. My means of addressing this is in part to focus on critiques written by women, non-binary and transgender people, especially in contexts where misogyny becomes an explicit aspect of my subject matter. This is especially relevant in the chapter on HIV/AIDS.

I am also lucky to be able to draw on a rich legacy of Black and female writers who pioneered the academic study of hip-hop. Engagement with their work and ideas provides an ideal means to avoid the worst pitfalls associated with the limitations noted here, and is testament to the value of their contributions.

0.6 Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 provides a discursive history of the term 'stay woke' through the 20th century. It begins with the earliest recorded example of the term I could find, in Lead Belly's 'Scottsboro Boys' (1938), and follows the phrase through its position in popular African American slang in the 1960s, and its relation to discourses of racial genocide in early Civil Rights Era writings from the 1950s onwards. This provides important context for the proto-hip-hop spoken word poetry of Gil Scott-Heron and his use of conspiratorial narratives produced by author John A Williams. This thread of expression and cultural discourse is then followed into the hip-hop music of the so-called 'Golden Era' (mid-1980s to early-90s), where the attitudes and ideas contained in the phrase 'stay woke' found a complementary expressive form. The remainder of the chapter discusses examples of conspiratorial articulation in this music, and tracks its development through the 1990s, where it diverges into specific forms related to the 'conscious' and 'gangsta' rap sub-genres.

Chapter 2 continues this historical survey, focusing first on the apparent 'crisis of commercialisation' discussed by many hip-hop commentators. I show how conspiracy theory formed one way for the music to maintain a critical and oppositional edge through this era, despite its increasing mainstream success and

the monopolisation and consolidation of the media and entertainment industries during this time. I then discuss mixtapes as a crucial cultural backchannel in the mid-2000s, with specific reference to its consequences for political and conspiratorial responses to Hurricane Katrina. Finally, I look at the music of contemporary hip-hop superstars Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar, examining the turn towards revivalism and interiority in their use of conspiracy theory.

Chapters 3 to 5 then deal with the major case studies of my research, each focusing on a specific US social crisis and the conspiracy theories found in hip-hop music responding to them. Chapter 3 addresses the crack cocaine crisis of the mid-80s onwards. The music in this chapter is split into two periods, based around the publication of the *Dark Alliance* (1996) articles by journalist Gary Webb, which alleged CIA involvement in cocaine trafficking. Whilst the earlier period focused on anti-drugs messaging and notions of crack as a chemically-engineered biological weapon aimed against African Americans, the latter period shifts towards a process of canonisation of those earlier theories, drawing on Webb's work as a source of evidence. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a conspiracy theory which alleged that corporate-influenced hip-hop had itself become a weapon aimed at disrupting African American communities. This draws on the frequent imagery in hip-hop that the music acts like crack cocaine in its capacity for making people rich, its addictive appeal, and its apparent promotion of discord and violence.

Chapter 4 looks at the HIV/AIDS crisis and a similar line of conspiratorial thinking to that described above – that it was intentionally engineered as a weapon of white supremacy. This chapter discusses rumour culture in hip-hop, namely the

rumours that certain rappers and Black celebrities were HIV positive or possessed a secret cure for the illness. It also looks in detail at the *America is Dying Slowly* (1996) compilation album produced by the HIV charity and production company the Red Hot Organisation. This raises questions about the interaction of conspiratorial hip-hop with public health and charitable initiatives. This is explored through comparison of notions of 'raising awareness' with 'raising consciousness'.

Finally, chapter 5 addresses the September 11th Attacks and the popular conspiracy theories about the event as a 'false flag' attack. Attention is paid to nationalistic discourses and patterns of censorship on US radio in the wake of the attacks. Musically, this chapter looks at both conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial responses to the attacks in hip-hop, with an extended analysis of Jadakiss's 'Why?' (2004) and Immortal Techniques 'Bin Laden' (2005), which is built off a sample of the former track. What follows is a discussion of literal and metaphorical meaning in the conspiratorial articulations of these musical examples.

Chapter 1. Stay Woke: Hip-hop Conspiracies and Critical Consciousness

So I advise everybody to be a little careful when they go along through there [Alabama]. Stay woke! Keep your eyes open!

Lead Belly 'Scottsboro Boys' (1938)

I am known to stay awake
A beautiful world I'm trying to find ...
What if it were no niggas
Only master teachers?
I stay woke

Erykah Badu 'Master Teacher' (2008)

Lead Belly's warning rounds off a recording of a song which drives home the same sentiment through each and every verse. Their alternating opening lines, either 'Go to Alabama, you better watch out...' or 'I'm gonna tell all the colored people...', couldn't be any clearer in articulating the song's intended purpose. Despite this, the singer spells it out one more time, now outside of the music but still within the record-form, as if to make perfectly clear that this warning should be heard in the most literal sense: stay out of Alabama, watch out for false accusations, lynch mobs and all-white juries; stay woke, or you too could end up like the Scottsboro Boys.¹⁷

¹⁷ The Scottsboro Boys were a group of African-American children and young adults who were falsely accused of rape in 1931 after a racially-motivated altercation on a freight train in Alabama. The legal trials for the group were characterised by all-white juries, a lack of due process, and the presence of lynch mobs. Charges against some defendants were eventually dropped, but five were convicted. All the convictions were eventually overturned or the defendants pardoned, but the final pardons for the group were only issued in 2013. Uffelman (2009) provides a brief summary and Carter (2007) provides a book-length analysis.

Seventy years later, Erykah Badu employs a similar mode of urgent repetition, transforming the phrase 'I stay woke' – heard forty-four times in 'Master Teacher' (2008) – into an incantation.¹⁸ For her, it functions less as a warning, however, and more as a commitment to raising consciousness, with the phrase 'master teacher' evoking a tradition of Black radicalism. What at first appears to be a symbolic or even spiritual usage of a phrase which, for Lead Belly, was much more literal, turns out to share a certain immediacy and materiality: if you stay woke, it will help you to navigate existence in a racist social order. The phrase at once suggests both keeping your eyes open, cultivating a heightened awareness of the realities surrounding you (Lead Belly), but also that you should attempt to see *through* the apparent appearance of things, perceiving the underlying forces hidden beneath the surface (Badu).

Put in historical context, I argue that 'staying woke' maps metonymically onto various interlocking ideas and subjectivities surrounding discourses of paranoia and pessimism which proliferated in African American cultural production in the late 20th century. I want to focus on a specific aspect of this cultural-political terrain, namely the development of a persistent conspiratorial thread in hip-hop music, a phenomenon which takes some of the notions underlying the phrase 'stay woke' (survivalist warnings and consciousness-raising) to their logical and expressive extremes, and which, as I will argue in the subsequent chapters, has become crucial in how hip-hop music and its audiences respond to social crises.

¹⁸ Badu's usage may have been one influence for the term 'woke' to have gained prominence in the Black Lives Matter protests (2013-), and thereafter to be run through the discursive ringer of mainstream and social media, coming out the other side meaning something closer to 'political correctness'; I intend to focus on the earlier, more distinctive usage.

I begin by attempting to bridge the historical distance between my opening musical examples, exploring and elaborating some of the cultural continuities lurking behind the phrase common to them both by reference to Civil Rights Era political discourse, Nation of Islam doctrine, and African American film and music in the 1970s. I then move on to an historical overview of conspiracy theory in hip-hop, beginning with the so-called 'Golden Era,' a musical period running from the mid-1980s to early-90s which has been heavily mythologised in hip-hop culture for its politically conscious output. Examples from this era are read alongside Patricia Turner's excellent fieldwork-based research into rumour culture in late-80s New York (1993); the conspiratorial threads of the hip-hop of this era seem to almost directly reflect the kinds of conversations and suspicions she records, as it were, on the street-corner. 'Staying woke' in this era and in these places, could involve questioning the origin of AIDS and crack cocaine, not to mention the motives of the owners of fast food franchises, sugary drinks, and clothing marketed at African American consumers. Conspiracy theory had become its dominant form, and these were the places from which much 'Golden Era' hip-hop music was emerging.

I will then track how the conspiracy thread in hip-hop music develops and diverges through the 1990s. Gangsta rappers such as 2pac or the group Junior M.A.F.I.A. would position themselves as conspirators (in the sense of a criminal conspiracy) whilst also holding that in tension with older notions of racism-as-conspiracy. Concurrently, 'horrorcore' groups such as Gravediggaz took the 'conscious' threads of the Golden Era in an alternative direction, exploring instead the wacky and weird aspects of conspiracy culture (concurrent also with the then-

immensely-popular TV series *The X-Files* (Carter 1993)) which would go on to be crystallised in a 'conspiracy rap' sub-genre, with groups such as Jedi Mind Tricks and Non Phixion staking their artistic identity and aesthetic around such ideas – indeed, in this process we see an aestheticisation of conspiracy theory. Although in some senses these tendencies might seem culturally marginal, I will argue that they had an outsized impact on hip-hop's political orientation and critical capacities, setting the stage for how it (and its audiences) would respond to social crises. For the Golden Era, it was the already unfolding AIDS crisis and crack cocaine 'epidemic', whilst for the conspiracy rappers, it was setting the stage for responses to the September 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina and the 2008 Financial Crisis.

1.1 Staying Woke in 20th Century African American Discourses

As a phenomenon transmitted primarily via oral culture, the origins and direct lines of historical development of the notion of 'staying woke' are difficult to track in detail and, moreover, such an attempt would provide diminishing returns in terms of historical insight. Instead, I begin here by providing a handful of examples which at least demonstrate its vernacular persistence, and are moreover suggestive of its overall philosophical import and historical development, especially around the time of the Civil Rights movement and the period immediately following it.

William Melvin Kelley's 1962 New York Times article 'If You're Woke You Dig It: No mickey mouse can be expected to follow today's Negro idiom without a hip assist' locates 'woke' as a term then strongly associated with African American New Yorkers, even to the extent that it forms part of the basis of certain

contemporaneous Black stereotypes. Such stereotypes – whose contemporary cultural echoes stay with us in the (often de-racialised) iconography of the 'jazz cat', the 'beatnik', and indeed the more generalised notion of 'cool' – draw on strong associations with certain forms of cultural production, especially jazz and spoken-word poetry, and are also linked with the radical Black politics and the general milieu of the Civil Rights Movement (1952-1965). Barry Beckham's play about the life of early pan-Africanist activist Marcus Garvey, *Garvey Lives!* (1972) provides more direct evidence of this linkage between staying woke and Black radical politics:

I won't go to sleep. I won't. I been sleeping all my life. And now that
Mr Garvey done woke me up, I'm gon' stay woke. And I'm gon' help
him wake up other black folk.

The specific association with Marcus Garvey is perhaps no coincidence; it might suggest that his towering figure bears some long-term impact as an originator or early propagator in this as in much else. His speech to the 25,000 delegates of the 1920 'International Convention of Negro Peoples of the World' included the plea: 'wake up, Ethiopia! Wake up, Africa!' (Garvey 1967, 4; also Cone 2003 for background information on the event itself).

Already in these three short examples, we see this phrase crop up in the rhetoric of both pre- and post-war Black radical politics, and also in African American literature via the two writers cited,¹⁹ complementing the musical

¹⁹ William Melvin Kelley and Barry Beckham were both novelists. Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* provides what is perhaps the clearest example of a novel encapsulating and exploring

examples which opened the chapter. Whilst this demonstrates that the phrase carries a certain weight and persistence in terms of its political and cultural salience, it is also clear that the phrase takes on a variety of meanings. Garvey's usage (and Beckham following him) falls under the previously discussed category of consciousness-raising, here in the mode of a direct, unadorned call-to-arms. The title of Kelley's article meanwhile suggests a valence not yet discussed, that of insider-knowledge, being linguistically streetwise and 'in the know'. Whatever the specific content of this insider knowledge was, it should be as clear to us as it surely was to Kelley that such a thing could not be imparted to readers of *The New York Times* merely by them learning or copying the 'Negro idiom' of the time. Rather, I would suggest it was a knowledge that was racially inscribed at the most fundamental level, borne out of the lived experience of African Americans, a necessary vigilance and survival instinct of the basic kind advocated by Lead Belly and stretching back to the slavery era. Such structures of feeling²⁰ reach out far beyond the individual and their struggle for life, however, mapping onto, even forming the basis of, much bigger ideas: how to conceive of race, how to conceive of society and one's place within it, how to pursue a distinctive African American politics and culture.

Such questions were addressed from a more scholarly perspective even earlier in W.E.B Du Bois' notion of 'double consciousness'. Introduced in his book

the 'stay woke' attitude, in an often openly conspiratorial mode. An evocative line early on in the book seems to anticipate the obsession with the Illuminati found in hip-hop music from the 1990s onwards: 'Someone once said that beneath or behind all political and cultural warfare lies a struggle between secret societies' (1972, 19-20).

²⁰ A concept introduced by Raymond Williams in *Preface to Film* (1954) which I will elaborate in the following chapter.

The Souls of Black Folk (1997, originally 1903), he describes the concept evocatively: ‘One ever feels his two-ness, –an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.’ (38) The term suggests that there is a tension inherent in the clash of racial identity and consciousness with national identity and consciousness which resulted from the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This tension is not only necessarily a negative thing, however, as it also results in a unique historical experience and perspective which functions at both a broad political level but also at the level of personal feelings (‘one ever feels his two-ness’) and ways of seeing and articulating things.

Du Bois thus describes a state of awareness specific to African Americans, born out of the historical experience of transportation to America and slavery and post-slavery eras, of ‘see[ing] himself through the revelation of the other world’ (ibid.). More visual imagery is present in his description of ‘the Negro [as] a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with the second-sight in this American world’ (ibid.). ‘Double consciousness’ is not merely a contradiction to be overcome in the process of striving for racial liberation, but a ‘gift’, a ‘second-sight’ which can see things those without the experience of double consciousness cannot. These concepts of awareness, consciousness, and visual metaphors being so central to one of the key concepts associated with this visionary figure in shows that some aspects associated with ‘staying woke’ were present in African American scholarship even before Lead Belly’s recordings and Marcus Garvey’s orations.

Having demonstrated briefly that notions of ‘staying woke’ have some level of persistence and salience in 20th century African American politics and culture, I

will now look at this in more concrete terms by comparing two texts which, as it were, put the idea of staying woke into practise: the 1952 Civil Rights Congress petition to the United Nations, and singer-poet Gil Scott-Heron's 1972 'King Alfred Plan'. Both texts deal with the idea of a genocide of African Americans in the US, but differ quite radically in their form and ideological underpinnings, reflecting in part the historical trajectory of African American cultural politics before and after the Civil-Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Congress petition, whose most prominent authors and signatories include William Patterson, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois, bore the title 'We Charge Genocide' and attempted to prove that treatment of African Americans by in the US satisfied the conditions set out in the 'Genocide Convention' adopted by the United Nations in December 1948. Whilst its evidenced, methodical approach to its argument that the treatment of African Americans constitutes genocide should be taken at face value, the term is also employed as a rhetorical device, especially in terms of making resonant political comparisons to Nazism and the Holocaust – indeed, the document makes several direct references to Hitler and 'the Hitler crimes'. This duality of literal and figurative meaning coexisting simultaneously is a persistent feature of the cultural output discussed in this study as a whole, and is explored in relation to this specific text in Phillip Knight's chapter on 'black paranoia' in his book *Conspiracy Culture* (2001, 143-167). He asks if what is described is an intentional conspiracy to commit genocide – citing a 1952 Paul

Robeson text²¹ which describes 'monopoly capital' as the 'prime mover of the mammoth and deliberate conspiracy to commit genocide against the negro people' (1952, 26) – or if the term is being employed as a kind of interpretative framework (2001, 145). I would respond that both aspects are at play simultaneously, but that the 'intentional conspiracy' is not conceived of here as a particular group of conspirators with specific aims, but is rather a way of thinking about the historical and structural basis of race in general. White elites *have* conspired to decide the fate of entire races of people – what else was the Berlin Conference of 1885? – but the question for the Civil Rights Congress was to name the forces which worked to enable such events and to ensure the continued oppression of African American people.

Whereas 'We Charge Genocide' makes a largely indisputable case when it argues that, even after slavery, the extreme state violence aimed specifically at African Americans met the newly-defined international criteria for genocide, the version articulated in Gil Scott-Heron's 'King Alfred Plan' (1972) may seem somewhat far-fetched in comparison. Whilst the earlier document presents a revisionist perspective, attempting to use the notion of genocide as a way to better understand the struggle of African American people in the historical period between the end of slavery and the 1950s, this newer text is written in the mode of anticipating a genocide in the near future or, more accurately, revealing one which

²¹ An essay entitled 'Genocide Stalks the USA'. Even in this text, Robeson is not describing a conspiracy in the conventional sense of a shadowy cabal. Following Marx, he sees capital as the 'automatic subject' of history under capitalism. In other words, he argues that capitalism creates the conditions whereby genocide of the 'negro people' is inevitable, rather than relying on a specific conspiracy of individuals to instantiate it.

is already (secretly) underway. The 'plan' is outlined in the track's introduction, delivered in a matter-of-fact a capella monologue:

The concentration camps that we used during the Second World War to house Oriental-Americans are now being refurbished to, um, confine their new residents, i.e. black people. Brothers and sisters, there is a place for you in America. This is the King Alfred Plan. (1972)

The main body of the track sees the tenor of Scott-Heron's voice shift up into a higher-pitched, full-bodied declarative tone. His insistent repetition of 'night and day' underscores a message of maintaining a constant vigilance and scepticism ('the white boy's plan is being readied night and day, night and day, night and day'). Simple and repetitive accompaniment on hand drums and flute reinforce the vocal performance. The African (or, perhaps more accurately, Afro-centric) influence in terms of simple acoustic instruments and the power of repetitive, consistent rhythmic drive suggest that black musical traditions can be a crucial part of propagating this sense of vigilant scepticism and the value of 'staying woke.'

The 'King Alfred Plan' originated in John A. Williams' novel *The Man who Cried I Am* (1967), and suggested that the ground was being laid to rapidly imprison large numbers of African American political dissidents without trial. Williams was very keen to use the plan, which he had typed up in a style which accurately aped that of classified government documents (having removed anything that might indicate its fictional context), as a sensationalist way of marketing the book. Rebuffed by his publishers, who refused to send the plan to various newspapers and foreign embassies as he had requested, Williams decided instead to distribute pages

of the plan on the New York subway (Emre 2017a). In doing so, he apparently created a social panic so strong amongst Black New Yorkers that the idea of the plan caught on in the popular imagination (Boyd 2002). Interestingly, and despite being its author and distributor, Williams himself appears to have seen the plan as meaningfully true. Merve Emre quotes from letters to a publicity director at his publisher:

I don't believe it is cheap publicity....The concentration camps do exist. I have since learned that the Federal government does have such a contingency plan. We know that the Army and National Guard as well as the local police are undergoing riot training. What in the hell is cheap about the truth? (2017b, 241)

Whether Gil Scott-Heron had read Williams' novel, or himself saw the plan as fact or fiction, is therefore largely unimportant. The essential 'truth' of the document, as these artists might have seen it, remains the same – and remains transmissible – regardless of its origin as 'fiction'. Indeed, a brief look at the increase in prison populations of African Americans between 1972 and now will demonstrate with clarity the very truth which these texts attempt to convey.²²

Whilst 'We Charge Genocide' strove for legitimacy, making scholarly, legalist arguments in a bid to achieve political recognition from the United Nations, Scott-Heron's 'King Alfred Plan' appears in many senses as its opposite. In contrast to the official format of the earlier text, it is comprised of spoken word over light percussion, with explicitly conspiratorial content delivered by a radical whose

²² It is also crucial to remember that for both artists, the ongoing regime of intimidation and political assassination of Black activists and radicals (the CoIntelPro assassinations (1969-71)) was an immediate threat and a fact of life.

poetry often deals with heroin addiction, alcoholism and revolutionary politics. Just as Williams could only convey his political concerns through a fictitious document, so Scott-Heron could only amplify and modify them from a subcultural, politically marginal position. In doing so, he brings the African American discourse around genocide back to the realm of popular oral forms from which all African American culture necessarily emerged. This shift, from striving towards institutional legitimacy right back to oral, vernacular discourse from below, reflects the changes brought on in African American cultural politics by the Civil Rights Movement. Whilst the 1950s and 60s were pregnant with political possibilities for African Americans, some of which would be realised in the mid-60s, the post-Civil-Rights era and its so-called 'post-soul' generation (Perry 2004) were instead grappling with the fall-out of a vision realised only in part, and the disappointment, apathy, and pessimism of dealing with ongoing and developing forms of racism – or, to put it more strongly, the apparent impossibility of overturning or meaningfully altering structures of racial oppression – through the 1970s and beyond.

Taken together, these texts demonstrate the continuity of notions bound up with 'staying woke' across different periods and forms: 'We Charge Genocide' asks you to open your eyes to the reality of past and present racial oppression, 'King Alfred Plan' asks you to open your eyes to what might happen next (or already be in motion around you). They also show how the threads of paranoia and pessimism bound up with staying woke would be intensified in the post-Civil-Rights cultural milieu, and would begin to be aestheticised and crystallised in emerging cultural forms, such as the spoken-word poetry style employed most famously by Gil Scott-

Heron and The Last Poets. Other examples include jazz singer Jeanne Lee's experimental album *Conspiracy* (1974), and Ivan Dixon's political thriller *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (Dixon 1973, based on Sam Greenlee's 1969 novel). This process even seems to anticipate the imminent arrival of hip-hop music as a form well suited to representing these notions. Indeed, the style of spoken-word poetry over percussion employed most famously by Scott-Heron and The Last Poets is often presumed to be an important early influence on the music. It is important to note that this trend was not limited to African American cultural production and politics, however, but formed part of a broader cultural moment in the late 1960s and 70s. Scandals such as those surrounding the Vietnam War, the Kennedy assassinations, Watergate, and indeed the entire complex development of technology, politics, and social life bound up with the Cold War set the stage for a general attitude of distrust in institutions and social paranoia in the United States. The most prominent cultural manifestation of this is seen the boom of (white) conspiracy films in the 1970s, most famously Alan Pakula's 'paranoia trilogy'.²³ This trend receives extensive treatment in Fredric Jameson's monograph *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992).

1.2 The Nation of Islam and The Five Percenters

Before moving on to how these cultural threads crystallised and developed in hip-hop music, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of a group whose influence – in terms of these specific aspects and its ideological basis in general – is difficult to

²³ *Klute* (1971), *The Parallax View* (1974), and *All The President's Men* (1976).

overstate: the Nation of Islam.²⁴ The group formed a consistent presence throughout much of the 20th Century, having been founded in the 1930s and later giving rise to a number of splinter groups, such as the Five Percent Nation in 1964. These groups put forward a distinctive African American form of Islam which emphasises a commitment to a Black nationalist politics. Its militancy in comparison to the more mainstream Civil Rights Movement, its emphasis on recruitment via prisons, and its influence on the radical Black politics of the 1970s (most notably the Black Panthers, via Malcolm X) positioned the group and its teachings to have a profound impact on hip-hop music, especially from the 1970s-90s.

The group has propagated and published texts advocating conspiracy theories, including the antisemitic book *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews* (The Nation of Islam, 1991) which purports to demonstrate that the Transatlantic slave trade was orchestrated by Jews. Indeed, the origin-mythos the group puts forward to explain racial divides itself describes a conspiracy: a group of African scientists are betrayed by one of their own, Yakub, whose eugenic experiments lead to the invention of the white race, with whom he hopes to take over the world. This notion of race-as-conspiracy bears some resemblance to the rhetorical framing employed in the Civil Rights Congress address, as discussed above. Whilst it would be unfair to reduce a religious belief system to these elements alone, they clearly play an important role in how the group communicates with the wider African American community: Patricia Turner, in her research on ghetto rumour culture, frequently received the answer 'Minister Farrakhan' (long-

²⁴ Miyakawa (2005) and Knight (2013) provide detailed accounts of the Nation of Islam's influence on hip-hop culture.

time Nation of Islam leader) when asking where an interviewee had heard a given conspiratorial perspective on the AIDS crisis, the crack epidemic, and various other popular concerns (1993, 188). This influence will be seen figuring prominently in many of the examples of conspiratorial hip-hop explored in the following section.

1.3 Theorizing the Ghetto in Hip-Hop's 'Golden Era'

'How do you think that the crack rock gets into the country? We don't own any planes. We don't own no ships.'

Boyz in the Hood (Singleton 1991)

Whilst a number of converging social and cultural trends would seem to set up hip-hop music as the ideal form to channel and amplify the threads of paranoia and pessimism already discussed, it would be some time before this took on the specific form of conspiracy theory as a prominent subject matter for rappers. With the music being initially oriented more towards live performance and club settings, and having not quite cohered stylistically into the well-established form we know today, it would take until the emergence of hip-hop's so-called 'Golden Era' (mid-1980s to early-90s) for these discourses to re-surface as part of the music's overt lyrical themes, even if paranoia and pessimism were inscribed in its sonic worlds from the very beginning. This era was characterised by more increasingly intricate rapping styles and a general sense of commitment to raising consciousness – political, social and racial. This latter aspect inaugurated the idea of 'conscious hip-hop,' which remains to this day one of the music's most prominent sub-genres. As its name suggests, it is animated by the same impetus that drives 'staying woke': having a heightened awareness of one's immediate situation and the broader socio-political

context, the sense of a duty to educate or warn others, and finally to keep alive the oral transmission of knowledge upon which African Americans have always had to rely (the 'stay' part of 'staying woke'). It could even be said that the notion of 'staying woke,' above tracked back to Marcus Garvey speeches and Lead Belly recordings, had finally found in conscious hip-hop its very own cultural form, which would crystallise and amplify the various ideas and experiences embodied in it, especially by way of conspiracy theory. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted mainly to offering a brief historical account of how conspiratorial themes developed in conscious hip-hop and later crossed over into gangsta rap and more mainstream contexts.

Gang Starr, one of the most lauded groups of this period, demonstrate with some clarity the links between staying woke, conspiracy theory, and emerging notions of consciousness in their 1991 track 'Conspiracy':

You can't tell me life was meant to be like this,
A Black man in a world dominated by whiteness.
Ever since the Declaration of Independence,
We've been easily brainwashed by just one sentence,
It goes: "all men are created equal."
That's why corrupt governments kill innocent people.
With chemical warfare they created crack and AIDS,
Got the public thinking these were things that Black folks made.

The opening lines quickly alert us to what kind of conspiracies the track's title refers to, pithily invoking the idea that the twin crises engulfing Black communities throughout the USA in the 1980s and 90s – the AIDS and crack 'epidemics' – were

intentionally engineered by the government.²⁵ The memorable first couplet indicates a much broader conception of conspiracy, however. As the closing couplets of each verse drive home, we are not dealing with a specific conspiracy with well-defined goals and nameable participants, but with a more generalised form, 'the conspiracy':

(1st, 2nd, 3rd verse ending couplets)

I'm telling the truth so some suckers are fearing me / But I must do my
part to combat the conspiracy

...

Genocide is for real and I hope that you're hearing me / You must be
aware to combat the conspiracy

...

I hope you listen to the things that I'm sharing see / We all have a job to
combat the conspiracy

'The conspiracy' seems to refer to generalised, structural racism. MC Guru offers a sweeping account of its various components, addressing: disproportionate coverage of Black violence and criminality in the news media, class bias in the education system, depictions of Jesus as white, incitement of Black-on-Black violence, banning rap music, sending Black people to war, encouraging artists to sell out to commercial interests, and exploitative record contracts. On the one hand, this offers a conception of racism as conspiracy which bears the influence both of the Nation of Islam²⁶ with their ideas of whiteness created via conspiracy, and also of the Civil

²⁵ There is a great deal to say about both of these topics and the music which addresses them. Chapters 3 and 4 will be devoted to them respectively.

²⁶ Guru was affiliated to the Nation of Gods and Earths (more informally known as the Five Percent Nation). His name stands for Gifted Universal Rhymes Unlimited, in a 'backronym' tradition which links to the idea of a Supreme Alphabet found in Nation of Islam philosophy.

Rights Congress and their discourse around Black genocide ('Genocide is for real...' in the above quotation). On the other hand, it seems to conflate structural aspects of racism such as education system iniquity and media bias with very specifically conspiratorial perspectives such as the reference to crack and AIDS as forms of 'chemical warfare'. I would argue that the fact that these are grouped together suggests that these specific conspiracy theories emerge not as some pathological misinterpretation or performative exaggeration of reality, but rather reflect sincere attempts to theorise the situations in which ordinary African Americans found themselves in the ghettos of the 1980s and 90s.

It is this sense that animates the monologue delivered by the patriarchal figure of *Boyz in the Hood* (Singleton 1991), Furious Styles, which is quoted at the start of this section. Looking at one's immediate surroundings, and the specific forms of social devastation running through them, his question would seem a highly relevant one. In contrast to the routinised refutation of conspiracy theory – that it focuses on individuals and secretive cabals at the expense of structural critique – the African-American popular culture depicting the ghettos of the late 80s and early 90s rather voiced a desire to seek specifically structural explanations for general living conditions and for the AIDS and crack-cocaine crises which had become pervasive in their communities. When Furious Styles asks a gathering street-corner crowd to tell him who has the resources to bring cocaine from South American jungles to North American ghettos, he is emphasising the material factors at play and the questions these provoke.

If there are limitations to this attempt at structural critique, they are for the most part imposed from above rather than arising from the mode of critique itself; the state maintains an impressive monopoly on information regarding matters of geopolitical and neo-imperial importance, as in the case of relations between the US and Central and South America. And as Gary Webb's reporting has demonstrated (1998), the common conspiracy theory about crack cocaine – that the US government had a hand in spreading it to impoverished African American neighbourhoods – is not completely unfounded.²⁷ Specifically, the CIA had substantial ties to the Nicaraguan 'Contras' who in part funded their activities through the cocaine trade between the US and Central America. The actual amounts involved and the general impact of this particular relationship do not add up to anything approaching a country-wide conspiracy to get African Americans hooked on a new drug – what might be called the 'hard' version of the conspiracy theory – but the fact remains that these popular suspicions have some basis in reality. It is crucial to avoid the usual dismissal of these conspiracy theories as a straightforward substitute for structural critique; crack cocaine did not merely emerge out of some objective logic of capital, white supremacy, or anything else, but also through a number of relationships between specific actors and networks, including organised crime and various state and non-state organisations. If conspiratorial thinking can shed light on specific relationships, such as those between African American crack

²⁷ The impact of Gary Webb's *Dark Alliance* (1998) and the various attempts to either discredit or verify his reporting will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 3 alongside an account of crack cocaine conspiracies in hip-hop music.

dealer Rick Ross and members of Contra organisations, as Gary Webb's reporting did (1998), then it cannot be dismissed altogether.²⁸

Patricia Turner's research (1993), derived from a large number of interviews with African Americans in poor New York neighbourhoods in the late 1980s, demonstrates just how widespread popular suspicions surrounding these topics were. Initially intending to investigate rumours surrounding historical assassinations, such as that of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, as well as contemporary rumours involving certain fast food chains, junk foods, and clothing brands, she quickly had to pivot her work after discovering that 'no single topic generated as much response as did illegal drugs' (180). Having begun her interviews in 1989, she found that many respondents say the rumours surfaced around 1985, around the time the problem had become bad enough to warrant mainstream media attention, and a year before the introduction of heavily punitive laws which targeted crack cocaine specifically. These laws, introduced by the Reagan administration, attached the same legal consequence to possession of 5 grams of crack as to 500 grams of ordinary powder cocaine. With crack being more readily available to Black users and the more expensive powder version more accessible to whites, this created an enormous disparity in prison sentencing that contributed to mass incarceration of African American men. The general trend of increasing incarceration rates in the US, along with the general racial disparities involved, continues to this day, and in some sense realises the apparently paranoid concerns

²⁸ It is important to note that Webb's work fell short of demonstrating that the CIA had knowledge of this relationship and cocaine imports. Although he offered some circumstantial evidence to this effect, his reporting at times overstated the conclusions which could be drawn from it. This is discussed in detail in chapter 3.

of John A. Williams and Gil Scott-Heron. It is in this context that we should interpret the crack cocaine conspiracies found in Golden Era conscious hip-hop; they attempt to question and explain how this drug suddenly appeared in poor Black communities, swiftly followed by aggressive laws which targeted its users specifically. Many felt that they had been caught in a trap and, as such, there was a need to understand how such a thing had been set up and who might bear responsibility for it.

With the Black radical political leadership of the 1960s and 70s significantly diminished, mostly through assassinations and imprisonment, explanations for these issues had to come from alternative sources. Upon asking for the original source for the rumours being relayed, Turner received a fascinating variety of responses, with frequent reference to Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam since the mid-1970s, popular television presenters including Oprah and Geraldo Rivera, more generalised answers such as 'on the street,' 'in school,' or 'in church,' and (especially for younger respondents) 'rap music in general or specific rap artists such as Ice T, Public Enemy, and NWA' (188). Although this would seem to indicate that hip-hop music played a significant role in propagating these notions, I would suggest that its inclusion among such varied and generalised sources suggests that rappers were, for the most part, reflecting views that were already widespread in poor urban African American communities.

There was some degree of intensification involved in hip-hop's articulations of these ideas, with many rappers outlining 'hard' versions of conspiracy theories, for example that crack was engineered and distributed to ghettos by elites or the

government in order to intentionally destroy African American communities, whilst Turner found that 'most informants... said merely that the item was "plausible,"' (188) remaining ambivalent about specific explanations and theories. This intensification may be explained partly by the music's emphasis on exaggeration, imported from earlier oral culture influences such as 'signifying' and 'the dozens' (Gates Jr. 1988), and also potentially by the influence of the Nation of Islam, with whom many rappers mentioned had direct links. What is important, however, is that hip-hop in the late 1980s and early 90s was reflecting what it meant to 'stay woke' or be 'conscious' in poor urban African American communities at that time. These theories were derived not just from attempts to understand the social crises enveloping them, but also a longer historical memory of the scars formed by CoIntelPro, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and John F Kennedy, and indeed the Jim Crow era and beyond. Since the 1970s, these communities had seen increases in urban poverty and incarceration rates, 'white flight' to the suburbs, the defunding of city governments and a transition to the post-industrial era (Harvey 2006; Krims 2007; Rose 1994), along with the virtual disappearance of radical African American political leadership and organisations. Turner's respondents, Gang Starr's Guru, and Furious Styles were all asking the same apposite questions: how did we end up here? And what should we be paying attention to in order to understand our situation?

1.4 Aesthetics of Conspiracy

Towards the tail-end of the 'Golden Era,' (the mid-90s), there was a boom in the popularity of conspiracy theory in mainstream white American culture, just as there had been in the 1970s with conspiracy cinema. Two of the most popular manifestations of this trend were the hit TV show *The X-Files* (Carter, 1993-2002) and Oliver Stone's controversial (and Oscar-winning) *JFK* (1991). Whereas conspiracy theory in Golden Era hip-hop generally takes the form of a conspiratorial reference contextualised in a broader political critique of racism or urban poverty, and reflected quite directly in the communities from which it arose, these two works are based heavily around the aestheticisation of conspiracy theory itself.

JFK presents what Stone calls a 'counter-myth,' designed to respond to the 'myth' put out by the official Warren Commission into Kennedy's assassination (Scheer 1991). We see the story from the perspective of Louisiana District Attorney Jim Garrison and, as he pieces together his (conspiratorial) interpretation of events, we follow him into the past, modulated by pastiche and overlay techniques, sepia or black and white colour saturations, combining to create an effective, often dizzying, investigative aesthetic which plays on the appeal of both journalistic intrigue and the reconstruction of a hidden national history (Fenster 2008 and Jameson 1992 both provide in-depth analysis of this film). *The X-Files* (Carter 1993) also relies on an aestheticisation of conspiracy theory, but looks more towards the fantastical and paranormal possibilities lurking beneath the ordinary. An office worker's sudden violent turn reveals a government brainwashing programme, a sleepy rural town conceals a satanic conspiracy, the new possibilities of computing age mingle with new age mysticism, and the mysterious machinations

of the US security services ultimately conceal a conspiracy to enable a planned alien invasion. A memorable score, which draws heavily on other-worldly synthesized sounds and digital delay effects, plays an important role in weaving together these various aspects into a highly distinctive 'spooky' conspiratorial aesthetic (Stilwell 2003).

This trend anticipated a similar aestheticisation of conspiracy theory in hip-hop music, contrasting with the earlier, fairly direct reflections of popular theories and suspicions. This took on two distinctive forms in the mid-to-late 1990s: the emergence of a specialised conspiracy rap subgenre of conscious hip-hop, and a distinctive usage emerging in gangsta rap which focused instead on the rapper as conspirator, in the sense of a criminal conspiracy. The former is exemplified in Jedi Mind Tricks' debut album *The Psycho-Social, Chemical, Biological & Electro-Magnetic Manipulation of Human Consciousness* (1997). If the sort of conspiratorial ideas advanced by Golden Era groups such as Gang Starr owed their existence in part to African American discourses surrounding genocide, including both the Civil Rights Congress and Gil Scott-Heron, and also as a reflection of popular suspicions articulated in poor African American communities at that time, this new conspiracy rap genre builds upon and intensifies these cultural threads whilst also beginning to depart from them in some ways.

I lead millions to the promised land
The holy lamb, the planetary Hologram
Blowing your Chakras to oblivion
Digital man, biblical man like Simeon
Vanishing breed, the holy throne
Presidents of United Snakes are now clones

The zones of the virus, the eye of Cyrus
The last waltz of the tyrants
The harvesting begins now
Infinite information like Wuji Tao
Jedi Mind Tricks - The Three Immortals (1997)

The above passage captures the wide-ranging content and stream-of-consciousness style which characterises much of the output of Jedi Mind Tricks. References to ancient civilisations, esoteric belief systems, alien invasions, torture and violence intermingle in a vague but all-encompassing conspiratorial framework which is ever-present but never fully explained: 'Presidents... are now clones,' 'the harvesting begins now'. The lyrical themes seem to bleed into the musical elements, with the typical 'boom-bap' style of 90s New York hip-hop – short harmonic/melodic samples underpinned by drums with a bass hit on the first and second beat and a snare on the third – augmented by suitably strange speech samples and emphasis on dark, ambient, and off-kilter sounds in the rest of the mix.

These aspects can be heard in 'Chinese Water Torture' from the same album. The main melodic sample comes in the form of a simple piano melody rocking between two notes a semi-tone apart. The already menacing shape of this melody is intensified by a sampling style which samples each note slightly too early, meaning that the note which originally preceded it (in the sampled song) is heard briefly beforehand, giving the sense of the someone playing the wrong notes. The off-kilter effect this creates is augmented in several ways: the piano sample occasionally misses a note or cuts out seemingly at random, bassy ambient sounds

mimic the uneven rocking motion of the piano melody,²⁹ and there is a general lack of quantization in the beat (an effect on digital samplers which 'snaps' sounds precisely to the correct part of the measure). An overly loud sample of dripping water randomly interrupts this material as it loops, bringing together the musical elements and the track's lyrical themes; it is perhaps this aspect that most of all distances this music from other New York hip-hop of the time, a semi-literal drowning out of the famous boom-bap style.

Although this album shares a 'question everything' attitude with Gang Starr's 'Conspiracy,' I would argue that there has been a shift away from notions of race-as-conspiracy and towards a more generalised paranoid mode, in which government, technology, and consciousness are questioned at the most abstract level. This is most apparent in the case of consciousness, which has moved away from referring to racial and political consciousness grounded in African American history and experiences of racism and poverty, and towards something which is overtly spiritual or mystical. This is in part a unavoidable trajectory of conspiracy theory, whose structure tends to link more and more things together, forming a grand conspiratorial framework as is often found in infamous conspiracy tracts such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1920) and *Behold a Pale Horse* (Cooper 1991; discussed in Gilroy 2000, 352-3). That said, it is worth noting that Jedi Mind Tricks and fellow-travellers Non-Phixion are both predominantly white groups, which likely contributed to this sense of conspiracy rap becoming somewhat unmoored from a sense of specifically racial struggle.

²⁹ The use of ambient sounds to create spooky, creepy, or uncanny affect suggests some similarity with scoring of *The X-Files* (addressed by Stillwell (2003)).



Fig. 1.1 Album cover for Jedi Mind Tricks' *The Psycho-Social, Chemical, Biological & Electro-Magnetic Manipulation of Human Consciousness* (1997).

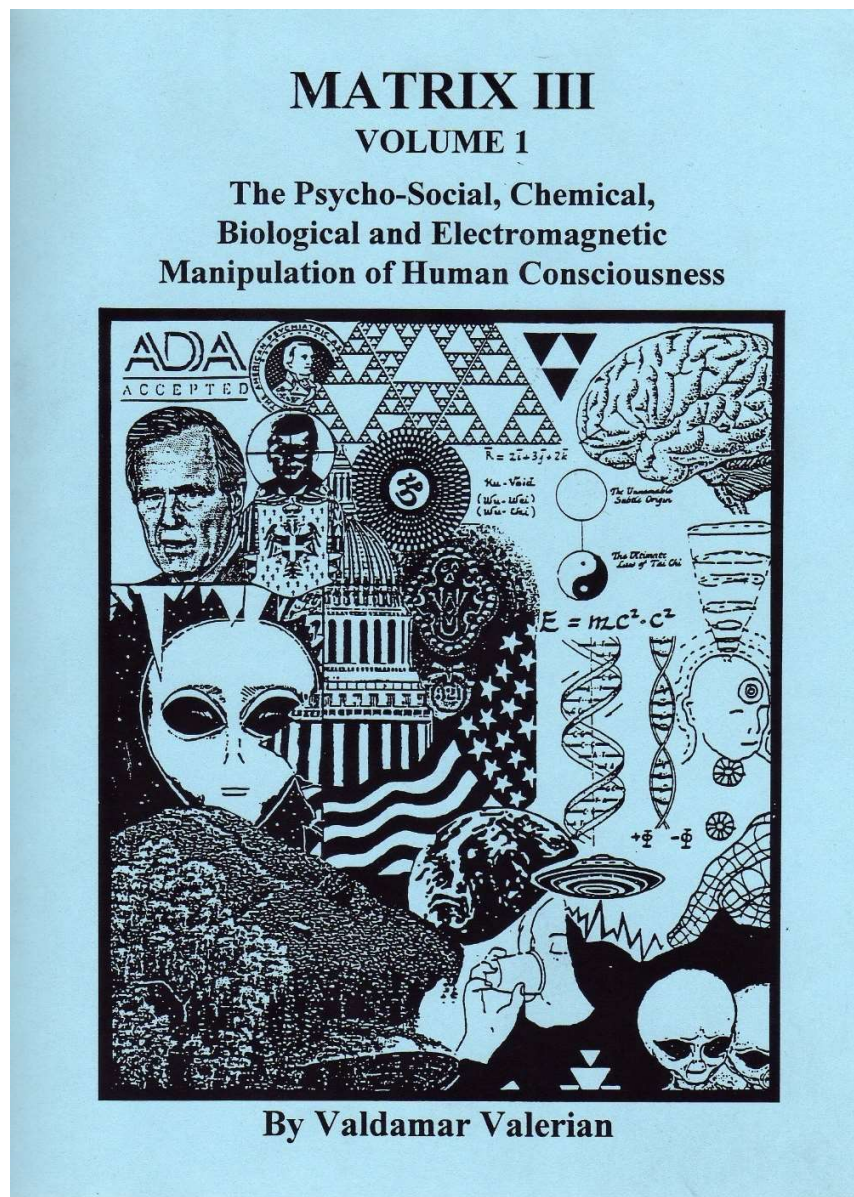


Fig. 1.2 Book cover for Valdamar Valerian's *Matrix III: The Psycho-Social, Chemical, Biological & Electro-Magnetic Manipulation of Human Consciousness* (1992).

The Jedi Mind Tricks album takes its title directly from an esoteric conspiracy text by an author writing under the pen-name Valdamar Valerian,

entitled *Matrix III: The Psycho-Social, Chemical, Biological & Electro-Magnetic Manipulation of Human Consciousness* (1992), a lengthy account of the all-encompassing 'New World Order' style conspiracy theories which surged in popularity after George Bush Sr.'s use of the phrase in a speech marking the end of the Soviet Union and the era of dual global power. West and Sanders provide an excellent anthropological account of this trend in their collection *Transparency and Conspiracy: Power revealed and concealed in the New World Order* (2003), looking especially at its prominent manifestation in right-wing US militia movements in the 1990s. More broadly, they focus on how the ideology of geopolitical and financial 'transparency' was advanced under the new near-absolute global hegemony shared between the USA and various international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Sold as a global political effort led by the US to combat corruption and create more equality in global markets, the material reality of this new geopolitical epoch was increased surveillance and more efficient forms of economic extraction and political domination, such as the use of the IMF debt control third world economies under the aegis of debt repayment programmes. West and Sanders argue that official top-down narratives of transparency gave rise to an inverse, bottom-up reaction focusing on concealment and conspiracy. For the average American, this can perhaps be better understood as an understandable concern about how all the technological innovation and build-up of military power involved with the Cold War might be used now that the country's main enemy had disappeared. Although conspiracy rap may have been a culturally marginal expression of these notions, the

concurrent mainstream popularity of the Oscar-winning *JFK* (Stone 1991) and the record-breaking ratings of *The X-Files* (Carter 1993) suggest that this is a strong thread in what Jameson would call the 'popular unconscious' of 1990s America.

With notions of international financial domination having always been a major feature of conspiracy theory, especially antisemitic theories, the open declaration of a 'new world order' in a moment of profound historical change understandably provided a new focus for these ideas. Such anxieties were amplified by the onset of the 'digital age' and the increasing availability of personal computers and the internet, technologies which would enable Bush Sr.'s international 'transparency' and a trend of increasing surveillance. These can be seen in the reference to 'electro-magnetic manipulation' in the book/album title, also in the hellish, over-stimulated vision of the 'future' depicted in the album artwork of Non Phixion's debut album (fig. 1.3). Ironically, the digital age also provided new means for the production and distribution of both conspiracy theories – previously reliant on word-of-mouth and texts such as *Matrix III...* (Valerian 1992) – and popular music, 'underground' styles perhaps especially.



Fig. 1.3 Album cover for Non Phixion's *The Future is Now* (2002).

If the historical context of this music was broadly defined by the new global hegemony of the USA after the fall of the Soviet Union and the increased accessibility of the internet, its historical context in terms of hip-hop culture was bound up entirely with its 'underground' status. Though this had always existed to some extent – rappers with cult followings and/or without a record deal, 'underground' emerged as a distinct sub-genre in its own right in the late 1990s, reacting to the perception of the increased commercialisation of hip-hop, through

both the mainstreaming of gangsta rap in the 90s and the increasing crossovers with RnB and pop styles going into the 2000s. Although in some senses the notions surrounding 'staying woke' tracked through this chapter might seem to find their natural and most concentrated form in conspiracy rap, I suggest that it is through gangsta rap that they cut through to the mainstream in the same way achieved by *The X-Files* (Carter 1993).³⁰

The sense in which gangsta rap articulates conspiratorial discourses is quite different to the musical examples discussed up to this point, however. Although it is surely as saturated with paranoia and pessimism as any music can be, its protagonists tend to position themselves as criminal conspirators rather than the victims of a broader plot (fig. 1.4). Much more narrative-focused and drawing heavily on mafia films, especially *Scarface* (De Palma 1983) and *Carlito's Way* (De Palma 1993), the mafioso rap variant of gangsta rap often features descriptions of elaborate crimes, schemes, double-crossings and, consequently, the ubiquitous presence of the police, the DEA, and the IRS. Two early masterpieces associated with this style also birthed two of hip-hop's first globally popular, superstar artists: Notorious B.I.G.'s debut *Ready to Die* (1994) and Jay-Z's *Reasonable Doubt* (1996).

³⁰ The sense of an opposition between gangsta rap and the more mystical, 'spacey' style found in conspiracy rap is captured in 'The Infamous Prelude' from gangsta rap group Mobb Deep's *The Infamous...* (1995):

'And, oh yeah, to all them rap-ass niggas
With your half-assed rhymes
Talking about how much you get high, how much weed you smoke
And that crazy space shit that don't even make no sense
Don't ever speak to me when you see me, know what I'm saying, word
I'ma have to get on some ol' "high school" shit
Start punching niggas in they face just for living.'

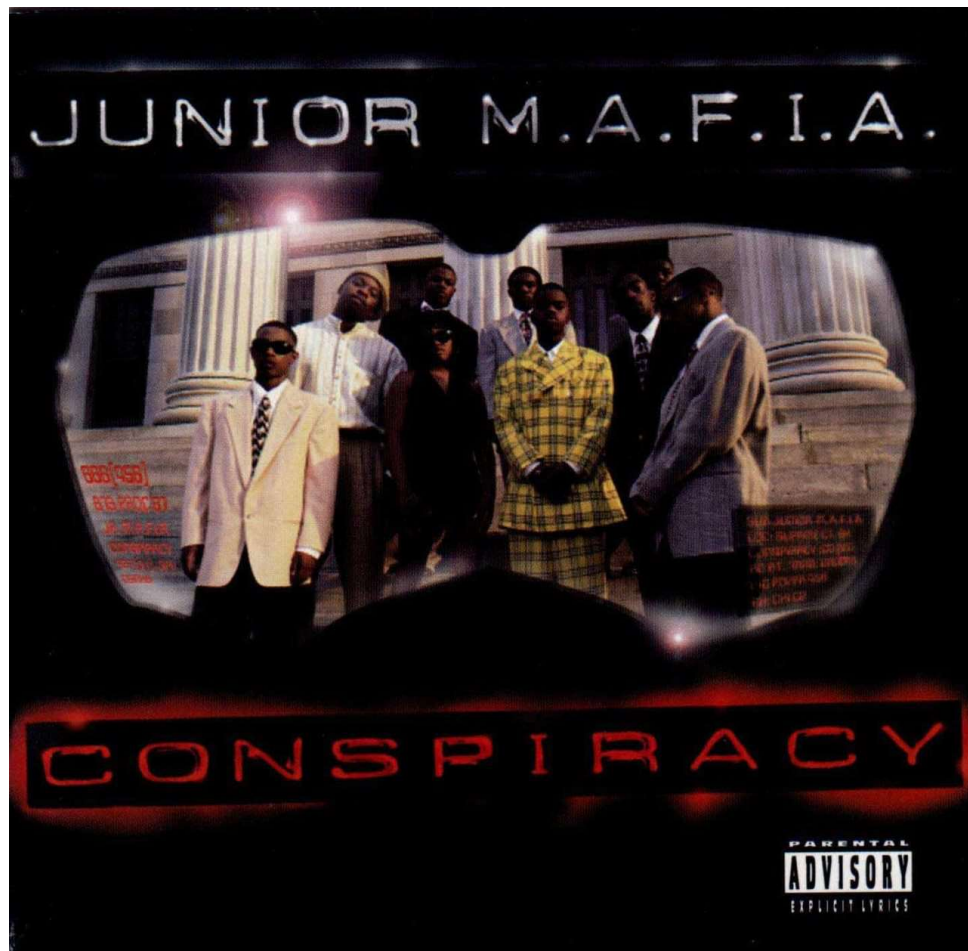


Fig. 1.4 Album cover for Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s *Conspiracy*.

Although this music tends not to outline specific conspiracy theories in the manner seen in previous examples, it does provide some of the most potent expressions of the experience of state surveillance and generalised paranoia, as in (another rap superstar) 2pac's *All Eyez on Me* (1996) (Quinn 2002 discusses this album in relation to Hofstadter's 'paranoid style' (1964)). In contrast to the references to black helicopters and New World Order invasions found in the music of Non Phixion, for example, this instead articulates a more realist depiction of

increasing state surveillance in forms much closer to those experienced by ordinary Americans. Another distinction is found in the more individualist conception of paranoia generally found in gangsta rap. Whilst the conspiracies alluded to in Jedi Mind Tricks' music are generally positioned as affecting entire social groups and populations, gangsta rap tends to concentrate this right down to the level of interpersonal relationships, with tracks such as Jay-Z's 'D'Evils' (1996) presenting a narrative of distrust and violent betrayal amongst childhood friends. Going even further, the music frequently articulates a 'trust no-one' philosophy: the implication hidden within the title 'All Eyez on Me' is a dark paranoiac equivalence that can be drawn right from open antagonists such as the police and rival gangs to one's closest friends and family.

The opposition between conspiracy rap and paranoiac gangsta rap is easy to overstate, however. The album usually credited with founding mafioso rap, Raekwon's *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* (1994), for example, is also peppered with references to Nation of Islam mysticism, lurid comic-book imagery, and esoteric spiritualism which characterise the group of which he is a member, the Wu-Tang Clan – a style which was profoundly and directly influential on underground groups such as Jedi Mind Tricks and Non Phixion. In a similar sense, the group Gravediggaz are associated with the so-called 'horrorcore' style which had a big influence on alternative and underground hip-hop (for example, the sudden, egregiously violent lyrical turns in *The Psycho-social...* (1997)), but frequently wrote lyrics in the gangsta rap vein – narrative-heavy and frequently concerning organised crime. The other major continuity between the articulations of a

paranoiac and conspiratorial themes in conspiracy rap and gangsta rap is that neither invoke what Mark Fenster identifies as the 'classical conspiracy narrative' (2008, 121) in a chapter focusing on *JFK* and *The X-Files*:

The classical narrative's central point of identification is a character who is able to effect change in himself/herself and in the world, and who, in so doing, brings about a narrative resolution that appears to be a reasonably happy ending. The narrative's resolution returns that which had been either threatened or captured by the conspiracy (often the nation or all of humanity) to a relatively secure, stable position free from the centralised power of the conspiracy. (2008, 122)

Both conspiracy rap and gangsta rap instead invoke a world where the protagonist is not able to effect any meaningful change in the world around them, and furthermore do not postulate a 'secure, stable' position to which society can return. Rather, they both provide different versions of the aestheticisation of a paranoia and pessimism that result in part from the inability to effect meaningful social change.

Despite these significant similarities, however, the cleavage which developed between the broad sub-genres of gangsta rap and conscious rap (from which conspiracy rap is an offshoot) through the 1990s was very real, as were the commercial forces shaping how hip-hop entered the mainstream and was reproduced there. The turn of the millennium saw this culminate with what is frequently referred to as a crisis of commercialisation in many historical accounts of hip-hop music (Perry 2004 and Rose 2008 devote significant attention to this issue). The 2000s saw hip-hop finding increasing purchase in the charts, but almost exclusively in the forms of gangsta rap and in the more pop and RnB cross-over style productions of producers such as Timbaland. Perhaps the most potent

expression of this development is the near ubiquity of hip-hop influences in the pop music of this era, as exemplified in the output of boy-band NSYNC and Christina Aguilera's 2002 hit 'Dirrty' (featuring rapper Redman). The following chapter attempts to account for how hip-hop's conspiratorial articulations adapted to this new landscape.

1.5 Conclusion

'Staying woke' has formed a persistent discursive thread in African American popular culture and discourses since at least the 1930s. It takes on a variety of meanings in shifting historical contexts, but is consistent in attempting to explain structural inequality and racism, as well as attempting to provide strategies for dealing with the internal state power and political culture of the world's dominant superpower. Early articulations tend to focus on survivalist warnings, but already gesture towards notions of consciousness-raising and structural critique which would emerge fully-formed in the discourses surrounding the Civil Rights Movement and its fallout. African American popular culture in the 1970s transformed some of the ideas introduced in the Civil Rights Movement, most notably conceiving of US race relations as genocide, and transformed them into a more paranoid and conspiratorial perspective. Thus the music of Gil Scott-Heron and the writings of John A. Williams allege government plots to round up and imprison the Black population in concentration camps, in a way that seems to self-consciously blur fact and fiction – set against a context of an open programme of

state repression and assassination targeted at African American political movements.

These developments set the stage for hip-hop music, already emerging in the 1970s, to appear as the natural inheritor of these discourses. By the time the music had cohered as a distinctive form, and had achieved the sonic and thematic complexity associated with hip-hop's 'Golden Era' (mid-1980s to early-90s), many of its most prominent artists were providing distinctly conspiratorial explanations of contemporary social conditions and crises. 'Staying woke,' in this era, meant questioning the government's role in reproducing poverty, structural racism and, perhaps most notably, the crack and AIDS crises which were so brutally affecting poor African Americans. In the process, hip-hop music tended to not only reflect but exaggerated and intensify the popular suspicions and rumour culture of its environment, in part due to the tendency towards bragging and exaggeration inherent to its form. As conspiratorial logic and framing emerges as a key aspect of hip-hop's mode of social and political critique, it can be seen to play an important role in how hip-hop producers and audiences conceive of the music's political role. Later, this thread was developed and aestheticised, with a cleavage which split along the lines of broader divides emerging in hip-hop music between 'conscious' and 'gangsta' rap, the former tending towards mysticism and the broader world of conspiracy theory, and the latter adopting a view where gangs and the police are both viewed as rival criminal conspiracies.

In some senses these were fairly marginal developments, with conscious conspiracy rap occupying a self-consciously 'underground' position in hip-hop

culture, and with overt notions of conspiracy playing a fairly minor role in gangsta rap as a whole. Despite this, these developments ensured that conspiracy theory became firmly established as part of hip-hop culture, and that distinct 'hip-hop conspiracies' would be recognizable to listeners (and could be referenced by rappers and sampled by producers) many years later. The existence and notoriety of these notions seems to act as a kind of centre of gravity for hip-hop's politics, or its perception of its political role, pulling it towards stances which emphasise absolute suspicion towards the police, the state, and White America. They also emphasise structural explanations, making sure no widespread social problem is seen as 'natural' or inevitable, instead emphasizing aspects of intention, design, and political organisation in explanations of material conditions and lived experiences of African Americans. Of course, these discourses also engender a variety of problems, especially apparent in the production of faulty medical advice in the context of a deadly epidemic, and in the reproduction of antisemitism and other prejudices more generally.

Nevertheless, the process of African American discourses of paranoia, pessimism, and conspiracism being developed and embedded in hip-hop music set up how the music would respond to major events and social crises for years to come. Although not heard frequently in the hip-hop music of the 2000s and 10s, as it previously was in the 1980s and 90s, conspiratorial discourses dominate the music's responses to ruptural events and social crises, most notably the September 11 Attacks and Hurricane Katrina. Furthermore, two of hip-hop's most popular artists and influential political voices, Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West, frequently

reference Golden Era hip-hop conspiracies in their music, effecting a new shift towards revivalism and interiority. As such, conspiracy theory appears as a persistent part of hip-hop's collective unconscious, emerging especially in moments of crisis when other modes of critique seem to fall short. These currents will be explored in the following chapter, which takes this historical overview of hip-hop conspiracies into the 21st Century.

Chapter 2. Staying Woke: Crisis, Commercialism and Cultural Back-channels in 21st Century Hip-hop

The preceding chapter positioned historical usage of the phrase 'stay woke' as a starting point for an account of discourses of scepticism and paranoia in African American popular culture. These tendencies were crystallised in the emergence of conscious hip-hop in the mid-1980s, especially in its frequent reference to contemporary conspiracy theories. By the late 1990s, conspiratorial discourses in hip-hop music had developed and proliferated in increasingly specialised forms in both 'conscious' and 'gangsta' styles. This chapter looks at how these discourses fared in the rapidly shifting pop-cultural terrain of the 21st Century: how would the 'stay' part of the 'stay woke' imperative fare in the context of profound social and economic shifts for hip-hop music?

The turn of the millennium saw the emergence of an apparent crisis of commercialization for hip-hop culture (Asante 2008; Perry 2004; Rose 2008), with the music finding increasing purchase in the charts (Negus 1999; Quinn 2002), a massive proliferation of crossover records ranging from boy bands to RnB singers (examples given in the following section), and a perceived side-lining of conscious hip-hop (Dyson, 2007; Forman 2010; Perry 2004; Rose, 2008). Rather than being consigned to 'underground' status along with conscious hip-hop, however, conspiratorial rhetoric would continue to figure sporadically but persistently in hip-hop music through the 2000s and beyond. This would be especially true in the context of ruptural events affecting US society, such as the September 11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina, where hip-hop music would continue to be looked to as a

source of meaning and interpretation when other modes of popular discourse were found lacking. As such, I argue that conspiracy theory has functioned to maintain a critical discursive element in mainstream hip-hop music in a surprisingly durable and flexible manner, working to shore up a sense of historical continuity of experience and struggle in periods where more conventional discursive responses failed to resonate.

This so-called crisis will be situated amongst the seismic shifts occurring in the music industry at large, with the emergence of mp3 players (Bull 2007; Garofalo 1999; Sterne 2012), file-sharing (Cusic et al. 2005; Liebowitz 2006) and, later, streaming (Eriksson et al. 2019; Haupt 2012; Johansson et al. 2017). This occurred alongside a massive consolidation of the global entertainment and media industries, with more and more avenues of cultural production and distribution being controlled by a diminishing number of multi-national corporations (Bagdikian 2004; Garofalo 2007). In this context there was a resurgence of popularity of hip-hop mixtapes (Ball 2011; Ciccariello-Maher 2005; Williams 2018), with many of the most prominent artists in this era releasing some of their most popular work in this largely non-commercial format. This will be explored in reference Lil Wayne and DJ Drama's influential *Dedication 2* (2006) and the references to Hurricane Katrina conspiracy theories on the track 'Georgia... Bush'.

Finally, I will discuss the role conspiracy theory and 'staying woke' have played in shaping the more generalised articulations of paranoia and scepticism found in the music of contemporary hip-hop superstars Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar. The extended dialogue Kendrick enters into with 2pac's music – and the

conspiratorial afterlife of his persona – will form an important area of discussion, with reference to his album *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015). In general, both Kendrick and Kanye employ conspiracy theory in ways that differ substantially from earlier material, especially in the development of prominent themes of revivalism and interiority. This is read alongside Raymond Williams' concept of 'structures of feeling,' which helps to explain the durability of hip-hop conspiracies, and suggests some ways to resolve the difficulties posed by the simultaneous desire to both valorise and disavow these powerful political-expressive articulations.

2.1 Hip-hop's Crisis of Commercialisation and the Consolidation of the Entertainment and Media Industries

The notion that the turn of the millennium represented a crisis of commercialisation for hip-hop music is well-represented in academic accounts. Imani Perry sums up some of the common attitudes and strength of feeling surrounding this issue:

The late 1990s witnessed the success of a plethora of MCs with mediocre skills, rhyming primarily about consumerism or murder with mild, watered-down beats and weak production. And yet hip-hop also became the most popular musical form in the United States. ...there can be no doubt that it constitutes a more simplistic, less innovative, and softened version of original hip-hop, meant to cater to a broader listening population, driven and shaped by markets.... (2004, 191)

Perry goes on to argue that the process described above presented substantial risks to hip-hop culture, especially in terms of its sense of racial ownership and identity:

...hip hop is in the process of reformulating itself in the face of mainstream co-optation of many of its elements and widespread

separation from its cultural context. Co-optation is designated by a repetition of these softened versions until hip hop becomes defined for many (if not most) by those versions instead of by the underground or by those maintaining underground sensibilities. Those of us who love hip hop fear its disintegration into pop, or that it might be "Elvisised," assimilated and recorded in history as its most watered-down and "acceptable" iterations. (2004, 191-2)

Here we also see the emergence of the category of 'underground' as the purported inheritor of an authentic hip-hop sensibility, in contrast to those that are co-opted by mainstream (white, commercial) culture.

A few decades on, many aspects of this critique seem easy to refute. Nevertheless, the tensions it articulates were widespread in cultural commentary of hip-hop and within hip-hop music itself. There were also underlying shifts in technology, economics and culture which undergirded this apparent process of commercial co-optation. This section will proceed by criticising the specific points made by Perry and others, before assessing their merit in terms underlying processes.

First, the point about 'consumerism or murder' (191) becoming a predominant subject for rappers in the late 1990s and 2000s. A contemporary vantage point could seem to suggest the opposite if we compare the broadly 'conscious' output of popular rappers Kendrick Lamar or J Cole to the original development of gangsta rap in the early-to-mid 90s, in the hands of Snoop Dogg, Ice Cube, Nas, 2pac and the Notorious B.I.G.. Tricia Rose sums up the view of gangsta rap as a by-default negative form of hip-hop when she defines commercial hip-hop as 'the heavy promotion of gangstas, pimps, and hoes churned out for

mainstream consumption' (2008, 24). Again, in retrospect, this seems to obviously clash with the fact that the rappers I have just listed are widely respected as some of the most skilled and culturally significant musicians in hip-hop. What's more, their success cannot be attributed to 'powerful corporate interests' (24) alone, at least no more than any other widely popular musician.

Second, the accusation of post-2000 hip-hop as characterised by 'mild, watered down beats and weak production' (191) seems especially wide of the mark from the present vantage point. Hip-hop producers working in the 2000s, such as Just Blaze, Kanye West, and Timbaland, are not only venerated within hip-hop culture, but in terms of their role in development of popular music in this era more generally. With the increasing sophistication and viability of digital audio workstation software such as Pro Tools, hip-hop producers were better suited than most to take advantage of the possibilities of digital, mobile production. Whereas the concept of the 'bedroom producer,' able to produce music from home that matched the sonic quality of recordings made in expensive recording studios, was new to most popular musical styles, hip-hop producers had been doing this for decades. They were therefore well-placed to take advantage of these new possibilities and, along with dance music producers, were therefore able to influence the style of popular music away from a guitar and rock orientation and towards that based on heavy drums, bass, sampling and digital synthesis.

Third, the notion of a 'softened' version of hip-hop becoming more popular. There are several meanings at play here, but all are again quite easy to refute. The popularity of New York rappers Cam'ron ('Killa Cam') and Jadakiss ('Al Qaeda

Jada') in the 2000s shows that a 'hard' aesthetic was prominent at the time in terms of persona and an aggressive, uncompromising rapping style. If softness is taken to indicate a lack of rapping skill, one could also point to the veneration of the immensely skilled MF DOOM in the post-2000 era, known for his complex rapping style and anti-commercial persona.

Finally, there is the accusation that hip-hop came to be aimed at a 'broad listening population, driven and shaped by markets' (191). The obvious reply to this is that Sugarhill Gang's 'Rapper's Delight' (1979), one of the earliest prominent hip-hop releases, was itself shaped by these imperatives. It interpolated a popular piece of music by Chic from the previous year ('Good Times' (1978)), and was arranged by music producers who put together the group with the express purpose of making a popular charting hit, rather than, say, popularising an existing group with an organic local popularity. Further, the global popularisation of hip-hop in the 1980s was in no small part due to the influence of well-connected, middle-class industry figures such as Malcolm McLaren, previously known for having managed punk bands such as the New York Dolls and the Sex Pistols. His 1983 album *Duck Rock* charted in the UK, Australia and New Zealand and played a significant role in popularising hip-hop (although branded by him as 'electro') in the broader Anglophone world (de Paor-Evans 2020).

Nevertheless, it is this final point that has the most saliency in terms of the historical development of hip-hop during the 2000s and 2010s. Rose cites figures from the Recording Industry association of America which report the market share of hip-hop increasing from an average of 9-10% in 1990-98 to 14% in 2002 (2008,

3-4). She also notes that in this same time frame the market share of rock, country and pop were all decreasing (4). There are also shifts which are impossible to capture in figures but which are potentially even more significant; the sonic qualities and production techniques pioneered by hip-hop were becoming central to the aesthetic of popular music in the broadest sense, influencing the production and aesthetic of all manner of musical styles. The most obvious examples of this were the plethora of pop and RnB songs featuring collaborations with rappers in the 2000s, such as Christina Aguilera's 'Dirrrty' featuring Redman (2002), Ja Rule's 'Always on Time' featuring Ashanti (2001), and Nelly and Kelly Rowland's 'Dilemma' (2002).

Even more significant, I would argue, were hip-hop sound and aesthetics becoming central to the music of one of the most successful pop boybands of the era, NSYNC. Their song 'Girlfriend' (2002) was produced by The Neptunes, a duo made up of Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo, and had a music video with a distinctly 'urban' aesthetic playing off automotive hip-hop culture and featuring clothing choices and dances with a clear hip-hop influence. NSYNC member Justin Timberlake would go on to be one of the key representatives of this shift towards hip-hop sound and aesthetics in his solo career. His 2006 hit 'SexyBack,' produced by legendary hip-hop producer Timbaland using classic hip-hop samplers the Akai MPC3000 and Ensoniq ASR-10, had a clear hip-hop influence running through it, most obviously evident in the chorus refrain 'go 'head be gone with it' which clearly draws on African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The call-and-response vocal interplay between Timberlake and Timbaland is an important authenticating

musical gesture in terms of adding a sense of hip-hop credibility. Each line sung by Timberlake in the verses gets an ‘ad lib’ response from Timbaland, either ‘yeah’ or ‘uh-huh’, whereas in the choruses, the roles are reversed, with Timbaland delivering spoken/rapped lines and Timberlake responding in AAVE ‘go ‘head be gone with it.’ The musical format of call-and-response and use of vernacular both point towards this being a racialised authenticating gesture. This is supported by a sense of sonic continuity between the voices created through the common use of distortion effects on both. The track, which went three-times platinum and won a Grammy award for best dance song, is a good representative example of how a variety of hip-hop influences came to dominate popular, dance, and RnB music.³¹

Although this this kind of cultural shift in some senses speaks to the good health and cultural impact of the form, it does also carry risks for the racial and oppositional aspects of the music which were so important in the 1980s and 90s. The strong reservations expressed by Perry, Rose and others were therefore clearly not unfounded in this respect. Further, this shift in popularity and cultural impact were coincident with – and interdependent on – substantial and sweeping changes affecting the whole entertainment and media industries, and along with this the ways in which music is distributed and consumed.

Some of these shifts favoured hip-hop music, such as the development of Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) software, most significantly Pro Tools, as

³¹ This new level of reach into the broader sphere of pop music should not be taken as de facto evidence of hip-hop's political and racial character being side-lined, however. Artists such as Dead Prez and Talib Kweli were producing popular and heavily political hip-hop in this period, and their protege Kanye West would go on to combine political rap with the new hip-hop-pop crossover style to great artistic and commercial effect. Further examples of this will be addressed in following sections.

mentioned previously in this chapter. Dance music such as house and techno also found itself in a similar situation, primed to take immediate advantage of this technology, in contrast to rock and country music, whose need for live playing and multi-tracking presented more difficulties and expense in the recording process. The shift in popularity towards these styles and away from rock and rock-oriented pop is probably due in part to this technological development.

Many of the other broad material shifts underway had more ambiguous consequences, however: the invention of the MP3 format, file-sharing and, later, streaming; the consolidation of the recording industry, radio stations, and live music industry into the hands of fewer and fewer corporations; and finally, the War on Terror and its effect on political and social attitudes towards artistic expression and censorship in the US. Whilst the consequences of these shifts were wide-ranging, I will quickly sketch out some of the specific implications for politically-oriented hip-hop.

The advent of the MP3 format and the ability to upload and share music on the internet meant that it was easier for musicians of all kinds to distribute their music without the infrastructure of record labels and music publishers. It also meant that listeners could share music between themselves without paying for it, using software such as Napster, Kazaa, and uTorrent. This opened up space for music to be produced for increasingly specialised audiences, who could share their interest in a music without a connection to a local music scene, but also meant that it became more and more difficult to earn money from music distribution alone. Streaming arguably worsened this latter effect and also led to the formation of a new monopoly

– a true monopoly consisting of just one dominant company – when Spotify became the predominant music streaming service. For political and conspiratorial hip-hop, this meant the ability to produce whatever music the artist wanted, but also that there were limited ways to tap into a truly mass audience in the way that, for example, Public Enemy or N.W.A. had in the late 1980s through the more conventional music label and record shop distribution model.

The consolidation of the music labels into the 'big four' – EMI, Sony BMG, Universal Music Group, and the Warner Music Group – by the mid-2000s (Sony and BMG combined in 2004) meant that the traditional system was dominated by a number of large corporations. Whilst these corporations still worked with smaller labels who specialised in genres such as hip-hop, it meant that the market was difficult to navigate for hip-hop artists. Keith Negus describes the strategy of 'portfolio management' used by these large labels and its consequences for hip-hop:

...it is more than diversification. It is a way of managing the company's diverse range of interests, as each unit can be assessed and categorised according to its performance and level of investment required. Well-established genres such as rock and country are often labelled 'cash cows' to indicate how, with minor modifications and modest ongoing investment, this category brings in regular profits. A genre such as rap, however, despite the revenues it continues to generate, may be classified as a 'wild cat' by industry analysts who are uncertain about its future aesthetic changes and 'potential market growth' and by business personnel who are uncomfortable with the politics of black representation that are foregrounded by the genre, and anxious about the political pressure from the moral opponents of rap. (Negus 1999, 493)

Whilst this was written a number of years before the consolidation of the big four was complete, the largeness and inflexibility of these corporations means this information is still relevant through the 2000s. It shows that, despite the increasing commercial share of hip-hop in this period, it was still treated with relative suspicion in comparison to genres which had maintained long-term profitability over many decades. As such, departments or partnerships dealing with 'urban' music styles were much more likely to be suddenly dissolved if the corporations as a whole had a difficult financial quarter. Negus provides the example of Capitol closing its entire 'urban division' in 1996, dropping almost all of its artists in RnB and hip-hop and laying off eighteen staff members (1999, 494). Hip-hop music, due to its 'wild kat' commercial categorisation and potential for controversial racial and political content, was especially vulnerable to being side-lined in the context of music label consolidation, despite its commercial success in this period.

Adding to this was the fact that the Telecommunications Act of 1996 had altered anti-trust laws, allowing for similar processes of monopolisation in the radio, advertising and live music industries. The most prominent example was the expansion of ClearChannel in all of these areas, which meant that, when the September 11 Attacks produced an intense cultural backlash in the US, the facility existed to prevent certain kinds of music from being broadcast across a huge range of local and regional radio stations, and also meant that artists could be effectively banned from live performance venues throughout the country all at once. These issues are covered in the chapter on the September 11th Attacks and the War on

Terror, and are summarised by Nuzum (2004), Cloonan (2004) and Garofalo (2007).

What is important to point out now is that the War on Terror provided an important test both for the consequences of monopolisation and consolidation in the entertainment and media industries, just as for the 'crisis of commercialisation' thesis with respect to hip-hop music. For the latter, it became clear – through the censorship of a variety of music in 2001 and 2002, and with phenomena such as the pressure applied to country group the Dixie Chicks to support the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq – that this process was having serious cultural and political consequences for popular music and musicians. For hip-hop, the outcome is much more surprising. Against the predictions and analysis of commentators such as Perry and Rose, hip-hop musicians responded to the attacks and culture atmosphere following them with strongly oppositional perspectives which often drew on the newly forming conspiratorial narratives about the event. Both gangsta rappers like Jadakiss ('Why?' (2004)) and conscious, political rappers like Immortal Technique (whose 'Bin Laden' (2005) samples Jadakiss's aforementioned track) put forward conspiratorial narratives and general perspectives totally at odds with prevailing cultural sentiment found in mainstream media and evidenced in Clear Channel's radio censorship.

Whilst this will all be covered in detail in chapter 5, it will suffice to say for now that the continued presence of conspiratorial themes emerged as one of the ways in which radical and oppositional racial and political rhetoric would be kept alive in hip-hop music despite its increasing commercial popularity. Evidence of

this is found again in response to another US social crisis of the 2000s, Hurricane Katrina. This instance revealed another way in which hip-hop was navigating the economic and cultural issues outlined in this section whilst maintaining a sharp critical, oppositional and distinctively conspiratorial edge: mixtape culture.

2.2 Mixtapes as Cultural Back-channel

Mixtapes had been part of hip-hop culture from its inception, with tapes being used to circulate live performances by the original generation of New York DJs such as Melle Mel and Afrika Bambaataa (Shapiro 2001, 11-15). 'Pause tape' mixing was also a feature of early hip-hop culture (Ettelson 2015). It provided a way to mix between tracks in a seamless manner reminiscent of DJs mixing between two vinyl records without necessarily having access to a set of expensive direct-drive turntables. This allowed hip-hop fans and artists to make their own mixes and only required access to a domestic tape player. By the 1990s, a form of mixtape which involved copying tracks from other albums into a customised compilation was common amongst fans of various kinds of popular music (Moore 2005). Common uses of these kind of mixtapes were to create a curated selection of tracks to share with friends or listen to in a car or on a portable tape player.

The form of mixtape which emerged as a distinctive artistic format in hip-hop drew on these various applications, but was more akin to a conventional album, showcasing a rapper (or group of rappers) over an assortment of beats – with the key difference that these usually taken from earlier releases by other artists. They often served as a promotional tool for up-and-coming rappers, creating hype which

could lead to an official record deal. Many famous rappers pursued this model, including 50 Cent with *Guess Who's Back?* (2002), and Drake with *Thank Me Later* (2010). Mixtapes could be distributed for free but in the 1990s and 2000s were often sold through informal distribution channels: either directly by the DJs themselves or via networks of local stores (Shapiro 2007).

A number of DJs became famous for their mixtape releases in this format, with DJ Clue and Ron G being influential figures known for this style in the 1990s. By the 2000s, the format had switched over to CDs, and popular DJs such as DJ Drama continued to expand their popularity. This reached a high-point around the mid-2000s, with Drama claiming to have been making over \$50,000 a month at his peak (ibid.). This popularity led to a strange situation where mixtapes filled with unauthorised samples, or even entire beats lifted from copyrighted music, ended up being sold on huge official platforms such as iTunes and in stores such as Best Buy – as in the case of DJ Drama and Lil Wayne's *Dedication 2* (ibid.). There is also a question of whether the rappers were compensated for these releases, rather than the money just going to the mixtape DJ – Lil Wayne would a few years later condemn mixtape DJs along these lines, although he did later continue to release mixtapes with Drama (ibid.).

This blurring of commercial and non-commercial boundaries marked a turning point for mixtape culture in hip-hop. Whereas the record industry and law enforcement had previously turned a blind-eye to mixtapes, which were after all a useful promotional and 'A&R' tool for the labels, 2005 saw police raids on record stores in Manhattan, with employees being arrested and mixtapes confiscated

(Madden and Carmichael 2020a). A notable instance involved DJ Drama and collaborator Don Cannon, at this time the most prominent producers of mixtapes. The duo were charged with bootlegging and racketeering and, although they were not prosecuted in the end, all their funds, assets and equipment were seized indefinitely (2020). This case was well-publicised and marked the end of this period of mixtape production. Distribution then largely moved online and were available to download for free from sites including DatPiff (founded 2005) and HotNewHipHop (2007). This brief history demonstrates some of the ways in which hip-hop was adapting to the new technologies and creative economy developing through the late 1990s and 2000s onwards. It created new channels of popularisation for artists in a period of major label consolidation, a way to continue for a time the hip-hop tradition of unlicensed samples, and avenues for expression that stood outside of pressures noted in the previous section from commercial interests and political pressure, whether that be from labels, publishers, radio conglomerates, or retail distributors.³²

Lil Wayne's 'Georgia... Bush' is rapped over the beat from 'Georgia' by Field Mob and Ludacris, which was released in 2005 and reached position 39 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart (2006). This track was in turn based around a sample from the classic Ray Charles recording of 'Georgia on My Mind' (1960). The licensing situation of this sample is unclear: it was used in the radio version of the Field Mob and Ludacris track, but was replaced by Jamie Foxx (who had recently starred as Ray Charles in the biopic *Ray* (2004)) singing the hook for the version used on the

³² For example, Walmart did not stock CDs containing 'explicit content' and would only sell 'clean' versions of albums at this time (Strauss 2016).

album and music video. In any case, the sample was not licensed for use by Lil Wayne and DJ Drama.

The track presents an emotive and personal response to Hurricane Katrina, its effect on New Orleans (Lil Wayne's hometown), and the poor government response to the crisis. He uses the 'Georgia...' refrain-sample as a way to accuse and insult George Bush – Lappas (2013, 63-72) discusses the misogynist elements of this rhetorical move. In terms of introducing a conspiratorial perspective on the crisis, Lil Wayne (2005) sets it up with an anti-police critique:

But they don't let you know what's really going on
Make it look like a lot of stealing going on
Boy them cops is killers in my home
Nigga shot dead in the middle of the street
I ain't no thief, I'm just trying to eat
Man fuck the police and President (Georgia) Bush

Whilst the mainstream media was frequently claiming that Black residents were using the flooding as an opportunity to loot (eg. NBC News 2005), Lil Wayne turns this around by claiming this is merely a pretext for indiscriminate police murders. The distrust of the police, the state, and the reference to an indeterminate 'they' preventing people from knowing 'what's really going on' reflect a version of the 'stay woke' imperative outlined in this chapter and the previous one. This leads directly into the following, properly conspiratorial lyrics:

So what happened to the levees, why wasn't they steady?
Why wasn't they able to control this?
I know some folk that live by the levee
That keep on telling me they heard explosions

Same shit happened back in Hurricane Betsy
1965: I ain't too young to know this
That was President Johnson but now it's (Georgia) Bush

The 'stay woke' anti-police sentiment of the previous line, which emphasises the need for an awareness of negative portrayals of Black people and the violence it justifies from the police and state, sets up a specific conspiratorial accusation. Rhetorically, we move from an imperative to be suspicious of police violence and media misinformation, to then being suspicious of the flooding itself, and the unspoken imperative to therefore be suspicious of everything. This shift is an excellent example of 'stay woke' as a structure of feeling, how the more general need for suspicion and critical awareness can then be channelled into distinctive oppositional interpretations of events.

Lil Wayne also makes the typical move of backing up his conspiratorial accusation with a reference to historical racism – here an apparently similar situation when the city was flooded in 1965. Although I could not find any reference to similar theories or accusations made at that time, it seems likely that this reference ultimately derives from the documented dynamiting of levees in the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Levees were strategically exploded to flood poor, mostly Black neighbourhoods in order to try to protect the city centre and financial district (Barry 1997). Lil Wayne was not the only one to make this accusation: numerous New Orleans residents claimed to have heard explosions and were publicly supported by figures such as Louis Farrakhan and director Spike Lee (Myers 2005).

The question in terms of the context of mixtape culture is whether or not Lil Wayne would or could have released this track on a conventional album distributed

by a record label and music publisher. Whilst it is clear that the 'Georgia' sample would have been problematic in this context, it is less clear whether the conspiratorial subject matter would have received push-back in a more properly commercial setting. What is clear is that this format allowed for a certain freedom in putting together a musical response to the crisis very quickly – by taking a beat wholesale from another artist – and with complete creative freedom from any potential tension over the lyrical content.

The mixtape as a whole is regarded as one of the greatest releases in this format and is frequently included in 'best of' lists by music journalists (Coleman II 2019; Pitchfork 2016). The mixtape was also unusual for actually charting on the Billboard Hip-hop and RnB album chart at position 69 – an impressive feat considering the lack of label backing and a patchy hybrid distribution network. The cultural impact of the *Dedication 2*, along with another mixtape *Da Drought 3* (also 2006), can partly be seen in the boost it gave to his commercial album releases. *Tha Carter III*, the next project which followed these releases in 2008 far outstripped the success of his previous albums, debuting at number 1 on the Billboard 200 chart, and winning the Grammy for Best Rap Album as well as its singles winning Best Rap Performance and Best Rap Single.

Such responses were noted for their significance by a number of commentators. Asante (2008) sees the hip-hop response to Hurricane Katrina as a turning point away from commercial hip-hop and a new starting point for a 'post-

hip-hop generation'.³³ Whilst hip-hop has continued to form a central part of the commercial pop industry, his arguments can be seen as anticipating the later resurgent popularity of 'conscious' rappers including J Cole and Kendrick Lamar. In an article on hip-hop's relation to the Obama presidency, Murray Forman cites the government response to Hurricane Katrina as 'perhaps the most galvanizing event for many hip-hop identified youth in the US over the past decade' (2010) – an effect that could not have taken place without musical responses representing this feeling.

2.3 Conspiracy Revivalism: Kanye, Kendrick and 2pac in Cuba

Perhaps more well-known than any of the actual music addressing Hurricane Katrina was Kanye West's appearance on a TV fundraiser, in which he went off-script, declaring (next to visibly uncomfortable actor Mike Myers) that 'George Bush doesn't care about Black people'. Generally speaking, West has embraced the increasingly commercial and mainstream status of hip-hop, exploring and inhabiting the role of a celebrity both within his artistic work and public life. Paradoxically, he has also at times positioned himself as carrying the torch of conscious rap. Moments such as his Hurricane Katrina statement exemplify this contradiction: he takes over the standard, de-politicised 'celebrity cause' context by making a strident statement that brings race and politics back into the discourse, creating a media storm in the process.

³³ Other examples include Jay Electronica, "The Levees Broke (Katrina)" (2011); Jay-Z, "Minority Report" (2006); Lil Wayne with Robin Thicke, "Tie My Hands" (2008); Papoose and Razah, "Mother Nature" (2005).

I would argue that West has used references to conspiracy theories popular in 80s and 90s hip-hop music as a way to re-affirm a conscious political persona. This can be heard in his early hit 'Heard Em Say' (2005):

Before you ask me to go get a job today,
Can I at least get a raise on a minimum wage?
And I know the government administered AIDS,
So I guess we just pray like the minister say,
Allahu Akbar and throw 'em some hot cars

The AIDS conspiracy theory is wrenched out of the context of the original crisis and appears as a brief aside in a slice-of-life social commentary. 'Allahu Akbar' is used in a similar sense, a de-contextualised throwback to the heyday of the Nation of Islam in hip-hop culture. What makes this especially interesting is that it was done on a track featuring a well-known white pop singer, Adam Levine of Maroon 5,³⁴ which peaked at number 26 on the Hot 100 singles chart. Lyrically and musically, the song encapsulates the nostalgic take on conscious rap which was so important to Kanye's early artistic persona, with introspective stream-of-consciousness lyrics reflecting on contemporary experiences of an African American childhood, set over a delicate jazzy piano figure lifted allosonically (imitating rather than directly reproducing the original sound, Williams 2013) from Natalie Cole's 'Someone That I Used to Love' (1980).

³⁴ Kanye seems to have had a certain level of discomfort about collaborating with a mainstream pop artist: "I had to fight with myself 'cause he's so good, yet he's so popular. The popularity takes away from the illness of having him. ... It just seems so post-Grammy... but [Adam's] so ill! His voice sounds like a f---ing instrument" (Reid 2005).



Fig. 2.1 Single artwork for 'Heard 'em Say' by Kanye West, featuring Adam Levine (2005). 'Since 77' in the bottom-left corner refers to Kanye's birth-year.

The two music videos shot for the single build upon these themes. The original was produced by French director Michel Gondry, depicting Kanye and three children running through the New York Macy's flagship store afterhours at Christmas time, having been let in by a security guard played by Adam Levine. A different video was then produced by animator Bill Plympton; this time, Kanye drives around with some children in the backseat, with animation sequences which dramatise parts of the lyrics. The themes of childhood and nostalgia also leap out from a memorable sonic marker at the very beginning of the track, with a dramatic, echoing voice

shouting 'Wake up Mr. West!'. In the context of the album, this voice is identifiable as a schoolteacher, following on from a preceding sketch in which a young Kanye is being told off (a recurring theme on his earlier albums, and reflected in their titles: *The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), *Graduation* (2007)).

The cumulative effect of these aspects is to conjure a balancing act between a dream-like childhood flashback and contemporary social commentary. Although the lyrics make explicit reference to his nephews and their childhoods, the track is clearly also about Kanye's own upbringing, and a sense of the conditions faced by Black children being recurrent and cyclical. Through this manoeuvre, he creates a sense of interiority that is nevertheless couched in a broader social critique. Although this sense runs through many elements of the track and its accoutrements, it is the conspiratorial reference that most clearly signals a sense of artistic lineage and political continuity with Golden Era hip-hop and the legacy of Black radical politics; if the conditions that hamper Black children remain the same, so do some of the modes of expression and analysis which attempt to get to grips with them. By raising the spectre of AIDS as an engineered disease targeting minorities, Kanye evokes a mode of thinking and being familiar to those well-versed in cultural production which asks its audiences to 'stay woke', but catapults this loaded reference into a thoroughly mainstream area of popular culture, reaching global audiences many times the size of those enjoyed by rappers in hip-hop's Golden Era.³⁵

³⁵ When 'Heard Em Say' was released as a single (November 8th 2005), Kanye had a number 1 hit on the Hot 100 Billboard chart with 'Gold Digger' – a track whose themes runs contrary to some ideals of conscious hip-hop. That these tracks would be occupying the charts at the same time sums

This can be interpreted in a number of ways – on the one hand it could be seen as an empty resignification of earlier ideas, decontextualised and commodified for mainstream consumption, or alternatively as a strategy for injecting radical ideas into the pop-cultural zeitgeist of the mid-2000s. Taking Kanye's musical output and artistic persona as a whole, it is easy to see how both of these processes might be at play simultaneously. He is both a torchbearer for a conscious style whose popularity had been in decline, debuting alongside conscious rapper Talib Kweli and releasing a number of politically-charged singles,³⁶ whilst also being a hit-maker with a permanent-sunglasses superstar persona; it is difficult to escape the conclusion that part of his appeal rests on a keenly-felt awareness of these contradictions amongst his audiences.

Although I hope this demonstrates the role that conspiracy theory plays in evoking the spirit of conscious hip-hop in Kanye's music, it is also clear that this hinges on a single line amongst many,³⁷ in what could easily be a throwaway reference in a musical style which depends on intertextuality in the first place. Another quick example reinforces my argument and specifically the sense that an historical lineage of cultural production is being evoked. 'Crack Music', also from the album *Late Registration* (2005), begins with the strident opening lines:

This that crack music nigga!
That real Black music nigga!

...

up the duality of conscious and mainstream which has figured throughout his musical output and his public persona.

³⁶ 'Diamonds from Sierra Leone' (2005), 'Jesus Walks' (2004).

³⁷ 'Gorgeous' (2010) features a similar line: 'I treat cash the way the government treats AIDS / I won't be satisfied till all my niggas get it, get it!'

How we stop the Black Panthers?
Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer.
You hear that? What Gil Scott was hearing
When our heroes and heroines got hooked on heroin.

Here we have a clearer example of how an apparently throwaway reference to a conspiracy theory can set off a breadcrumb trail right back through Golden Era hip-hop to the history of 20th century Black radical politics. Whilst the AIDS and crack conspiracies are fairly well-known in popular culture, there is still a certain level of cultural 'insider' knowledge required to trace the 'Heard Em Say' reference back into its historical and political context. If we imagine for the moment a completely naive listener, however, we can see how the music traces a path which could guide them towards this knowledge: listen to 'Heard Em Say' as a popular single on the radio → buy the album and hear 'Crack Music' → exposure to the AIDS and crack conspiracy theories → look up Gil Scott-Heron → listen to 'King Alfred Plan' → and so on. And of course, this doesn't require a concerted attempt on Kanye's part to model his music as a curriculum, but is already part of the structure of the music, where sampling and other dialogic interaction between texts is part and parcel of the genre, which thus naturally tends towards the articulation of African American musical history and thought. 'You hear that?' addresses the listener directly, and suggests that they are hearing the same things Scott-Heron did: the sounds of inner-city poverty in a racist society, as well as the music that those conditions produces ('that crack music...').

Whilst this maps onto ideas about the importance of 'knowledge' as a fifth element of hip-hop culture, it is clear that it is conspiracy theory specifically which

is acting as the fulcrum for this historical dialogue. More than 'knowledge' in general, what is being invoked here is the specificities of 'staying woke' as a cultural imperative. Whereas 'knowledge' in hip-hop refers generally to different notions of 'knowledge of self', such as self-awareness and knowledge one's position in an historical racial struggle, 'staying woke' contains indications of a set of expressive conventions, emotional states and survival strategies for navigating life in a racist society. More specifically, it suggests the necessity of a paranoid attitude towards state authority and official narratives, and a value in propagating this perspective through sensationalist counter-narratives. Just as the more general 'knowledge' depends on certain conditions of reproduction via sampling and intertextuality, so does the specific 'staying woke' on a less tangible but equally necessary set of structuring conditions – what Raymond Williams termed a 'structure of feeling'.

This phrase refers to the ways in which given historical conditions shape modes of thinking and emoting, as well as their attendant artistic conventions and forms of expression (originally coined in *Preface to Film*, 1954). Williams, despite his reputation for providing concise definitions of academic terminology in *Keywords* (1976), seemed to struggle to articulate this somewhat slippery concept. He describes it as '[an historical understanding of] affective elements of consciousness and relationships' (1977b, 132) and emphasises its apparent contradictions: 'as firm and definite as "structure" suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity' (1961, 64). The most apposite description of the term for the present study was presented in a later collection of interviews:

It was a structure in the sense that you could perceive it operating in one work after another which weren't otherwise connected – people weren't learning it from each other; yet it was one of feeling much more than of thought – a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones, for which the best evidence was often the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing.' (Williams 1977a, 159)

Whilst the 'pattern of impulses... [and] tones' involved in conspiratorial hip-hop have been summarised in previous explorations of the notion of 'staying woke', the 'actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing' could be identified as the reference to specific conspiracy theories, a use of a direct mode of address towards the listener, and the sampling or referencing of earlier works, artists, or political figures to add a sense historical weight.

Whilst Williams is more concerned with this concept in relation to what he calls 'emergent' culture, that which is novel and disrupting the 'dominant' discourse, the historical trajectory of 'staying woke' relies heavily on what he would instead call 'residual' cultural aspects, that which persists through differing historical conditions. What the 'stay woke' discourses do share with Williams' concept is the sense of being somewhat intangible and indefinite, not linked to a well-defined mode of thinking or ideology, but evoking a more general 'feeling' that is at once obvious to those involved but difficult to demonstrate as an historical phenomenon. This concept will be explored further in relation to the music of Kendrick Lamar, but for now it is worth outlining how it relates to the material covered so far: we saw notions of 'staying woke' initially arising from the historical conditions formed by the Jim Crow era of segregation and racial terror in the mode of survivalist

warnings in Lead Belly's 'Scottsboro Boys' (1938), later as a way of conceptualising genocide and confinement in the Civil Rights Era, then as a way of theorising urban poverty in the ghettos of the 1980s and 90s, and in the 2000s in a self-consciously nostalgic or revivalist mode referring back to those earlier articulations. What is remarkable is the persistence of this cultural thread, and its adaptability to differing cultural conditions. There is a sense that the earlier manifestations remain intelligible in the nostalgic references of the later ones, and that the 'structure of feeling' underlying them remains fairly constant, even if its specific dimensions and articulations do change.

Kendrick Lamar's music sheds more light on how a 'structure of feeling' can work in practice. Whereas Kanye uses conspiracism as a very noticeable and identifiable way to mark out that discursive lineage, in Kendrick the sense of 'staying woke' is more generalised. Take the following opening lines from 'YAH' (2017):

I've got so many theories and suspicions,
I'm diagnosed with real nigga conditions...

Straight away, a paranoid tone is established and is linked to a sense of what Ronald Judy calls 'nigga authenticity' (1994). What makes this effective in both senses, in setting the tone and as an authenticating gesture, is the readiness with which audiences (both 'insider' but also more widely) will identify this as referring to paranoia as a structure of feeling in hip-hop music. The inclusion of 'theories' furthermore gestures to the more specific 'stay woke' structure of feeling, by invoking the notion of social analysis from below found in Golden Era

conspiracism. As in Kanye West's music, there is also the sense of these notions turning inward: where Guru might have seen his role in 'Conspiracy' (1991) as diagnosing social problems (analysed in the previous chapter), Kendrick instead opens in a mode of self-diagnosis.

Also shared with Kanye is the sense of looking backwards at earlier hip-hop, though the emphasis is less on nostalgia and more on a sense of historical and musical revivalism. Pero Gaglo Dagbovie (2015) uses the concept of 'historical revivalism' to explain the widespread endorsement of Barack Obama by many hip-hop musicians. He argues that the celebration of Obama 'as a black leader... built on a tradition of "historical revivalism" inaugurated by members of the early years and "golden age" of hip hop that revered and memorialised famous Black "firsts" and freedom fighters' (4). Whilst he mainly locates this tradition in the hip-hop music of the 80s and early 90s, he notes Kendrick Lamar's 'HiiiPOWER' (2011) as a notable recent example. The opening lyrics set the tone: 'Visions of Martin Luther staring at me / Malcolm X put a hex on my future, someone catch me.' This is then reinforced by references to different Black Panther Party leaders in each of the track's choruses. First, 'Huey Newton going stupid', next 'Bobby Seale making meals', and finally 'Fred Hampton on your campus'. Each time this is followed by 'you can't resist his HiiiPOWER', indicating that the political concept for which the track is named draws heavily from the political ideology of the Black Panthers.

It is the revivalism of a musical figure which would emerge as most important in Kendrick's music, however. The music video for the track (dir.

Fleishman and Tovar 2011) features as part of its opening sequence a lengthy quote presented in a plain white-text-over-black format. The final lines state (2011):

I got a visit from Lesane Parish Crooks. Research the name. I remember being asleep. His image said "Don't let me die." I was paranoid. I said "why"? He said "because you the....."

Lesane Parish Crooks is the birth-name of Tupac Shakur, stylised as 2pac for his musical persona. In terms of references within the music, the track ends with Kendrick repeating 'thug life', a famous catchphrase of 2pac which was tattooed across his stomach, and also the name of a rap group he was a member of from 1994-5. The reasons behind Kendrick's 2pac revivalism are complex, but can be summarised as follows: suggesting that he is continuing 2pac's legacy of representing the meeting of gangsta and conscious rap styles, using a legendary rapper from his locale to claim legitimacy as a representative of Compton and West Coast hip-hop, evoking a musical lineage which connects with the Black Panther Party (via 2pac's relatives, who were members), and drawing on the paranoid structure of feeling present in 2pac's music.

These latter two aspects are most important for the present study. First, on the general paranoid mode found in 2pac's music, we could look to the title of his highly successful album *All Eyez on Me* (1996) as an indication of how important notions of surveillance and paranoia were in his music. As discussed in the previous chapter, his music drew on the differing forms of paranoia articulated by both gangsta and conscious styles, based on police surveillance and more properly conspiratorial themes respectively. There is a broader conspiratorial structure of

feeling which has bled into his posthumous reception as well, however, which is also a key part of Kendrick's revivalism. His highly-publicised and unsolved murder in September 1996 eventually led to conspiracy theories amongst fans that his death had been faked and he was living in Cuba.

Although probably sharing some of the motivation behind similar theories surrounding Elvis Presley (for general information about this, see Marcus (1999) and Clarke (2019)) – namely that fans found it difficult to accept the death of a deified musical icon – the theory had a core of truth in the lives and activism of 2pac's relatives. His mother Afeni Shakur had been a member of the Black Panther Party, his step-father and godmother, Mutulu and Assata Shakur, had been members of the Black Liberation Army, a paramilitary group made up partly of Black Panther members. Assata Shakur was convicted for several charges including the murder of a state trooper in 1973 but escaped prison in 1979 before fleeing to Cuba where she received political asylum. Whether or not this was widely known to fans of the rapper, it clearly formed the basis of the similar myth surrounding his death. This context provides Kendrick with an ambiguity which can be exploited expressively; it is notable that the text from the 'HiiiPOWER' video plays off 2pac's death and musical-mythical afterlife – 'don't let me die' followed by 'I was paranoid'. The statement plays off the popular rumours surrounding the rapper's death whilst also allying Kendrick with 2pac's aesthetic sensibilities and musical-political legacy. The unfinished nature of the message and its five-dot ellipsis further play off the mysterious lack of closure surrounding 2pac's death, suggesting an unspoken mystical connection undergirds the musical connections he is forming.

The following passage of lyrics from 'HiiiPOWER' (2011) show how other fan-based conspiracy theories are incorporated into the music, and also demonstrate the pattern of more recent examples of conspiratorial hip-hop turning that rhetoric inward:

Who said a Black man in Illuminati?
Last time I checked, that was the biggest racist party
...
And I want everybody to view my autopsy
So you can see exactly where the government had shot me
No conspiracy, my fate is inevitable
They played musical chairs, once I'm on that pedestal

The first couplet is repeated twice during the song and references fan conspiracy theories that various successful hip-hop artists and industry figures are allied with 'the Illuminati' – a conspiratorial construct based on a real secret society from Europe's Enlightenment Era which purports that a network of powerful individuals orchestrates world events, the media and popular culture.³⁸ Whilst dismissing this based on an argument which appeals to a racial logic (wouldn't an all-powerful secret society be a white supremacist one?), he then moves on to the conspiracy theory that the US government orchestrated 2pac's assassination. He frames this as 'no conspiracy' but rather an inevitability that he will inherit along with 2pac's musical and political legacy. There is again a sense that the structure of feeling at play here is expressed in a way that turns it inward; the consequences of these

³⁸ Its popularity in the past decade or so (also referenced and denounced by J Cole in 'Villuminati' (2013), for example) likely responds to the increased commercialisation of hip-hop over time, and more specifically the fact that there are now some artists and industry figures who have become immensely wealthy, such as Russell Simmons and Jay-Z.

feelings of paranoia are not explicated in terms of a racial or political community or identity, but in terms of personal struggle and interior thoughts.

A further aspect of Kendrick's 2pac and conspiracy theory revivalism is his use of codes and symbols. Each verse of 'HiiiPOWER' ends with the variant of 'Get off that slave ship / Build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs.' I would suggest that this refers in part to the neologisms and backronyms which characterise his own and 2pac's lyrics, and hark back to Nation of Islam rhetoric and symbolism. The term, 'HiiiPOWER,' for example, refers to more than 'just a song. It's really a big movement we've got in LA that's spreading like wildfire... the three I's represent heart, honour, respect...' (Kendrick quoted in an interview, Horowitz 2011). The phrase 'thug life' which Kendrick references at the end of the track similarly had a hidden meaning coded into the letters: The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody (Buchanan 2018). Hidden inside the apparent endorsement of a gangster lifestyle is a code for the repercussions of poverty and institutional racism for African American children; the code reveals for those in-the-know a unity of conscious and gangsta rap styles. Kendrick suggests that by using your own hieroglyphs, one can be freed from the metaphorical slave ship; in other words, coded expressive language can be part of a strategy for racial liberation. Built into this is an historical awareness of the historical development of hip-hop and African American music as linked to forms of coded language and signifyin(g) going back to the enslaved generations and the actual slave ships (Gates Jr. 1988). Conspiratorial references themselves are another form of hip-hop 'hieroglyph,'

recognisable symbols which can be referenced quickly by the rapper but which to carry an occluded but complex chain of interpretative and historical meaning.

This revivalist theme has persisted through Kendrick's music, forming the basis of his album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), which is a backronym of TUPAC, but with the last letter changed from B to C, which itself reflects the Cripps/Blood gang rivalry and the practice of Bloods members altering words which start with 'c' (for example, 'Compton' becomes 'Bompton'). Musically, the album draws heavily on jazz in terms of what material is sampled and also in some of Kendrick's vocal performances, especially 'For Free (Interlude)' (2015), which employs a rapid, virtuosic vocal style reminiscent of scat vocalists and spoken word jazz styles popular from the 1950s-70s (Hendricks, Lambert and Ross and Gil Scott-Heron being two prominent examples). The legendary funk bandleader George Clinton himself makes a vocal appearance in the opening track of the album, forming a literal sonic connection back to the genre often identified as the primary musical precursor to hip-hop. Both literal and gestural sonic revivalism therefore figure prominently in this album. 'ELEMENT.', from the later album *DAMN.* (2017), revisits the themes of 'HiiiPOWER' (2011) with the lines 'Mr 1 through 5, that's the only logic / fake my death, go to Cuba, that's the only option'. In most of the examples referenced in this section, we see hip-hop's conspiratorial rhetoric consistently revived, but treated quite differently than in previous periods. Although it still functions to reference a consistent historical and racial struggle, and the attitudes and modes of expression tied up with it, those latter aspects – the structure

of feeling behind conspiratorial hip-hop – seems to take over somewhat, turning to themes of interiority and inwardness.

This turn towards notions of 'the personal as political' is not just evident in the treatment of conspiratorial themes, but even in the names of the artists themselves: both Kanye and Kendrick are notable for using their given names as their stage names. This creates an implication of their artistic and musical expression as inseparable from the artist as a person. In the context of conspiratorial hip-hop, the artist themselves is absorbed by the structure of feeling. This contrasts with earlier instances, which were mediated by persona and entailed a more explicit form of broad cultural, social and political context. Conspiracism by the mid-to-late 2000s and 2010s becomes fully part of the background hum of hip-hop culture; references to conspiracy theories themselves are perhaps less frequent and less explicit, but the paranoid and pessimistic structure of feeling underlying it has become so pervasive as to be an inescapable part of personal and artistic identity for those involved with the music.

2.4 Conclusion

By viewing the history of 21st century hip-hop through the lens of conspiratorial themes, one thing which becomes clear is that this presents a challenge to the common conception of the 2000s and beyond as a commercialist deviation from hip-hop's roots. What is commercial and what is oppositional or radical is not easy to separate in this period. The examples above show that hip-hop continued to play its role of providing unconventional, controversial and meaningfully oppositional

perspectives in the context of major US social crises in the 2000s (the September 11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina), and further that conspiratorial themes in particular continue to play a role in revivalist politics in the music of two of the most popular rappers of recent decades, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar.

Further, I contend that conspiratorial themes in hip-hop, and the structure of feeling and sense of historical struggle they carry with them, have been one way in which hip-hop music has navigated difficult cultural terrain for politicised popular music. Challenges were presented by the increasing commercial success and influence of the music at a time where political policy and broad cultural trends had created a strong tendency of monopolisation and centralised power in the media and entertainment industries. Conspiratorial articulations acted as a code which signalled at once a sharp break with official narratives surrounding social crises, whilst also referencing back to a long history of African American expressive culture and its content and modes of expression.

I argue that we can draw an historical thread between the advice to 'stay woke' given by Lead Belly in a 1938 recording ('Scottsboro Boys') right up to the use of the phrase by Erykah Badu in 2008 ('Master Teacher'), and the subsequent (apparent) influence this had in carrying that phrase to the contemporary Black Lives Matter music. It is not just the phrase that persists, but important aspects of its meaning – to remain vigilant and aware of racial hatred, and suspicious of those in power. Over this time, it has come to carry with it a structure of feeling, namely a collection of attitudes, ideas and forms of emoting which accompany these imperatives and the expressive cultural forms in which they have persisted and

adapted over time. Whilst the 'stay woke' structure of feeling is an historically contingent phenomenon, the amount of time and variety of cultural contexts through which it has persisted are remarkable.

A notable contemporary challenge to this persistence is the changed contemporary meaning of 'woke'. In essence, the word has been appropriated for use in mainstream discourse, with a meaning which more closely resembles 'politically progressive' or 'the false appearance of political progressiveness' rather than anything particularly to do with the present subject matter. This usage is now largely generalised in Anglophone popular and public discourse and is frequently referenced by newspapers and prominent politicians. In the process, it has largely lost its specifically racial connotation, aside from the fact that awareness of racism might be associated with various notions of progressive politics – which is itself a slippery term at the best of times. A large part of the purpose of this chapter and the previous one, in this context, are to document and re-affirm the older, more meaningful, and more long-standing meaning of the term 'woke' in the context of 'staying woke' in African American popular culture and discourse, in the hope that this history will not be entirely eclipsed by the more dominant contemporary usage.

I hope to have demonstrated that an understanding of the usage of this term through the 20th century, and in its persistence in hip-hop culture through much of the 21st century so far, reveals a rich history of cultural expression with interesting and unique features in terms of its varied modes of expression and ambiguous but significant cultural impact.

Chapter 3. 'How we stop the Black Panthers? Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer': Crack Cocaine Conspiracy Theories in Hip-hop Culture

It is difficult to underestimate the influence of the crack cocaine crisis on US hip-hop music. The social devastation it caused flows through the history and sounds of hip-hop from the mid-1980s onwards. The music of that period documented the rise of the drug, its new dealers, new users, new tropes and characters – the young kingpin, the Latino 'connect', the 'crack whore'. Decades later, hip-hop continues to provide a popular history of the long-term effects of the crisis, with many contemporary rappers having been born at its peak in the mid-to-late 1980s. Just as artists such as N.W.A., Public Enemy and Ice-T haven been described as part of the 'crack generation',³⁹ so can contemporary rappers such as Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar be seen as part of a 'post-crack generation'.⁴⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the drug finds itself at the centre of a number of conspiracy theories in hip-hop culture which have persisted and evolved through the music's history. The purpose of this chapter is to historicise this phenomena and to assess its consequences for hip-hop culture and its relation to social crises.

³⁹ Ice-T narrated the 2011 documentary *Planet Rock: The Story of Hip-Hop and the Crack Generation* (dir. Lowe and Torgoff).

⁴⁰ Kendrick Lamar's 'ADHD' (2011), for example, addresses the apparent consequences of being born a 'crack baby,' someone whose mother smoked crack whilst pregnant: amongst other things, the apparent tendency towards developing ADHD and having high drug tolerances.

'You know why we crack babies
Because we born in the 80's that ADHD crazy
Eight doobies to the face
Fuck that, nigga, twelve bottles in the case nigga, fuck that
Two pills and a half, wait nigga, fuck that
Got a high tolerance when your age don't exist '

Having initially become popular in the West Coast in the early 1980s, use of the drug had become widespread through much of the country by the decade's end, sitting at the crux of a variety of intersecting social and political issues disproportionately affecting African Americans. The drug's popularity attracted the attention of the Reagan administration which from its outset had promised to intensify the so-called 'war on drugs' initiated by previous governments. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 saw the introduction of a large amount of 'mandatory minimum' sentences for all manner of drug offences, including an especially strict rule for possession of crack cocaine, the infamous '100:1' disparity: whilst 5 grams of crack would require a 5 year minimum sentence, one would have to possess 500 grams of regular powder cocaine to receive the same punishment. The fact that the former was more popular with Black users and dealers and the latter, more expensive and purer form more popular with whites led to enormous racial disparities in incarceration rates which remain a problem to the present day (Sawyer 2020).⁴¹

The influence of cocaine in general can be seen in the names of some of the first hip-hop MCs, such as Coke la Rock from DJ Kool Herc's crew and, later, Kurtis Blow, whose 'The Breaks' (1980) was one of the biggest hip-hop hits of the early 80s. This has continued especially in the form of names appropriated from famous drug dealers, to the point that Miami-based rapper Rick Ross was unsuccessfully sued in 2010 by the real 'Freeway Rick Ross', a major crack dealer who will emerge as central to both the history of the drug's consumption in the US and to its

⁴¹ Barack Obama's administration reformed the law somewhat in 2011, but retains a smaller weight disparity between crack cocaine and powder cocaine.

conspiratorial afterlife in popular culture. Journalist Gary Webb's series of articles for the *San Jose Mercury News* in 1996, entitled 'Dark Alliance' (later a book, 1998), brought Freeway Rick Ross to national attention and, despite some aspects of his work being discredited, drew substantial and evidenced connections between the highly successful LA dealer and the Nicaraguan anti-communist militia known as the 'Contras', who were in turn backed by the CIA. For some, this confirmed existing suspicions about the drug supply into the US forming part of a governmental or racial conspiracy against Black people, notions which can be found in hip-hop tracks such as Gang Starr's 'Conspiracy' (1992) and Professor X's 'Close the Crackhouse' (1993), analysed in the following section. Webb's reporting, endorsed by reputable figures such as California congresswoman Maxine Waters,⁴² saw such views solidified and canonised in hip-hop culture.

This chapter will track hip-hop's responses to the crack crisis from early anti-drugs warnings through to the development of gangsta rap and its privileging of the dealer as narrator. Special attention will be paid to the conspiracy claims surrounding crack cocaine, the main species of which are:

- i) The state criminalised Black street drug dealers and consumers harshly whilst either ignoring or being involved with high-volume international imports.

⁴² She wrote the foreword to the *Dark Alliance* book edition (1998). Lyrics by rapper Freddie Gibbs show how she has been pulled into hip-hop's conspiratorial mythos in 'Palmolive' (2019):
 '2018, I'm finna reclaim my fucking time and cop the Rollie flooded
 Maxine Waters, fuck your poison, keep your vaccines off us
 We got a reality star in the goddamn office, quite like the Reagan days (yeah)
 Fernando said they used to move chickens in the Noriega days (yeah)'

ii) The state flooded ghettos with crack cocaine in order to suppress political consciousness and to imprison and/or kill significant numbers of African American population.

iii) Hip-hop was taken over by corporate or other influences and transformed from a socially conscious music into one which glorified drug dealing and violence as part of a plot to villainise and incarcerate African Americans.

Whilst I will argue it is crucial to separate the elements of truth arguably contained in i) from the more obviously problematic claims of ii), the final conspiracy theory iii) listed here draws our attention to just how intimately the drug is bound up with the music, with its own practitioners and fans likening the music itself to crack, perhaps partly an internalisation of criticisms made by hip-hop's detractors in the media and intelligentsia. Indeed, musical examples of this metaphor of rap-as-crack, rapper-as-pusher – often in practice a creative and flexible one – are common throughout hip-hop's history.

I begin with an account of early hip-hop tracks addressing the crack epidemic, before moving on to Gary Webb's reporting and its impact on hip-hop culture. This is followed by a section on responses to Webb's work in conscious hip-hop and gangsta rap respectively. The latter of these bloomed in popularity through the mid-1990s and 2000s, and frequently featured narratives written from the perspective of a crack dealer. This close identification with the crack trade sits uneasily alongside the propagation and development of crack conspiracy theories, and I will argue this contradiction eventually led to hip-hop's conspiracism turning

in on itself as an object of suspicion. This is reflected in a more recent conspiracy theory which describes a meeting in which music industry executives agreed to use hip-hop to glorify drug-dealing and violence (point iii) above).⁴³ I discuss this in relation to the persistent metaphors of music-as-crack, fans-as-addicts, which have featured throughout hip-hop's history.

3.1 Close the Crackhouse: Early Anti-Crack Hip-hop

Early hip-hop responses to the crack cocaine crisis tended to strike an adversarial tone against the drug and those dealing it, with explicit exhortations to attack and drive out 'pushers' and, in a small amount of cases, the development of a conspiratorial rhetoric which linked them to larger forces arrayed against affected neighbourhoods and their residents. Such rhetoric is largely absent in the most canonical examples of early anti-crack hip-hop, however, which tend to adopt more straightforward arguments and imagery focusing on its destructive social power, frequently through a focus on horror and monstrosity. The most famous example in this vein is probably Public Enemy's 'Night of the Living Baseheads' (1988).⁴⁴ Its music video puts into practice member and lead rapper Chuck D's notion of hip-hop as the 'Black CNN', with fellow rapper MC Lyte cast as one of the reporters, showing us scenes of zombified and criminalised Black users contrasted with a corporate boardroom, where cocaine is consumed with impunity. Also significant

⁴³ Rodney Carmichael claims this as originating in 2012 on the NPR podcast *Louder Than a Riot*, which he co-hosts alongside Sidney Madden (2020b).

⁴⁴ The pun on 'base' as in 'freebase' – another form of cocaine – and 'bass' also provides an early example of metaphors linking the drug to the music, a notion which will be explored in later sections. Whilst the titular focus on 'freebase' might seem to imply this track is not specifically about crack, its release well into the 'crack epidemic' means it is still applicable to the ongoing crisis.

in this regard is Kool Moe Dee's 'Monster Crack' (1985), one of the earliest hip-hop tracks to mention 'crack' by name. Its opening lines strike a similar tone: '1986, return of the horror flicks / More deadly than The Omen, a killer and a showman / Like the devil in The Exorcist.' Such imagery would continue in other forms for many years afterwards, such as in what would become known as 'horrorcore' in the mid-1990s. This hip-hop subgenre emphasises occult themes and violence; well-known proponents include the Geto Boys, the Gravediggaz and Eminem.

Other early responses to the crisis highlighted violent police responses, such as Toddy Tee's 'Batterram' (1985), which describes attempts to ram open crack-houses with armoured vehicles, apparently sometimes hitting the wrong addresses. Even earlier in the 1980s, there had been a popular hit advocating against cocaine in its powder form: Grandmaster Flash's straightforwardly titled 'White Lines (Don't Do It)' (1983). If Funkmaster Wizzard Wiz's 'Crack it Up' (1982-86) appears to be more vague in its orientation towards the drug, that is also reflected in its content: at first we hear the call-and-response hook 'Now everybody let's crack it up! (crack- crack it up!) / p-put it in a pipe (p-put it in a pipe!),' followed by a first verse that tells us exactly how to use this new drug, differentiating it from earlier variants. Subsequent verses then run thematically through various ill-effects of this drug, however. In 'Cracked Out' by Masters of Ceremony (1986), rapper Grand Puba spins a morality tale about crack consumption, with a focus the links between addiction and prostitution. He would later produce a perhaps better-known track with group Brand Nubian, 'Slow Down' (1990), which covers much of the same themes.

All of these tracks function as didactic warnings against using and dealing crack cocaine, outlining in a fairly direct manner the effects of this drug trade on poor urban communities. Other examples taking a similar approach include Too Short's 'The Ghetto' (1990), which focuses on the effects of the drug on family bonds and racial solidarity; MC Lyte's 'I Cram to Understand U (Sam)' (1987), which describes a romantic relationship with a dealer and user; and Kool G Rap's 'Road to the Riches' (1989), an early example of hip-hop written from the perspective of a crack dealer, whose final verse attempts to show how his profits turn to violence and paranoia. Such music had an immediate social utility for audiences throughout the US as the crack trade spread out from urban coastal areas to other cities, providing specific and practical warnings to listeners. Some tracks from this era address the issue of geographic spread directly, such as Ice Cube's 'My Summer Vacation' (1991), whose plot outlines the process of moving an LA drug operation into other states and the violence and destruction that follows.

A number of other notable examples take on the perspective of the dealer, and arguably form part of the basis of what would later be known as gangsta rap in the process. The difference in tone between these examples and stereotypical notions of later gangsta rap is stark, however, with highly explicit denunciations and warnings about dealer-protagonists largely forgoing any more thorough identification with such perspectives. N.W.A.'s 'Dopeman' (1988) show how this works in practice: whilst Ice Cube's verses outline the main narrative strands and arguments of the track, Dr Dre and Eazy-E occasionally butt in as the 'dopemen,'

with repeated threats of sexual violence, in doing so confirming the dangers that Ice Cube has been warning us about in the main body of the track.

One of the earliest tracks to draw some kind of link between crack and the government was Donald D's 'FBI (Free Base Institute)' (1989),⁴⁵ later followed up with his 'CIA (Crack in America)' (1992). Aside from the title, the earlier track does not make any claims about the FBI or other governmental agencies being involved in the crack trade. The follow-up, however, opens with the following lyrics (1992):

The CIA pushed the CIA
It will be like that until Judgment Day
I'm gonna sweat ya with true lectures
Criminals in action pushed crack in America.
...
It's not the ghetto people bringing in drugs,
It's the government y'all bringing in drugs,
On FBI I warned you in advance,
Second LP, you're still taking a chance!

The trajectory between these two tracks fits with a general historical pattern whereby conspiratorial claims about the drug would emerge mostly towards the latter end of the Golden Era (mid-1980s to early-1990s). Gang Starr's 'Conspiracy' (1991)⁴⁶ makes specific claims about both crack and AIDS as chemically engineered weapons aimed at Black people, contextualising this as part of an broader racial conspiracy. KRS One's well-known hit 'Sound of da Police' (1993), much sampled for its famous 'Woop! Woop!' vocal imitation of police sirens,

⁴⁵ Perhaps not as famous now as some of the other artists and tracks mentioned here, this track did reach number 8 on the Billboard Hip-hop chart. Donald D was a member of Ice-T's group Rhyme Syndicate and released his music through the associated record label.

⁴⁶ This track is analysed in more detail in chapter 1.

touches on the issue much more pithily with the single line reference: 'you claim I'm selling crack, but you be doing that!' Finally, Professor X's 'Close the Crackhouse' (1993) presents an extended 'posse cut' featuring a large number of artists who make a variety of claims about the crisis and who bears responsibility for it. This latter example will be analysed presently. It is notable that Professor X and Gang Starr, whose tracks make the most detailed conspiratorial claims about the crack crisis, are also the most explicit of all the artists mentioned here about their links to the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters in terms of their musical personas, rhetoric and imagery. Considering that these groups engage in conspiracy theory in other forms (discussed in chapter 1), it seems likely this connection had an influence on these themes appearing within the music.



Fig. 3.1 Screenshot from Professor X 'Close the Crackhouse' music video, featuring an Afrocentric outfit and a hat with an 'Ankh' symbol, associated with life force and knowledge of self in Nation of Islam and Five Percenter teachings.

In 'Close the Crackhouse', this influence is most clear in the music video, whose opening depicts an idealised ancient African civilisation rescuing a white man from the sea. Against this backdrop, Professor X raps dressed in Afrocentric-influenced clothing and wearing his trademark hat featuring an 'Ankh' symbol. Later, depictions of white scientists in lab-coats appearing to manufacture drugs and perform experiments on Black patients evokes the Nation of Islam Yakub

myth.⁴⁷ Two 'crack houses' are depicted: one is a manor house outside of which scenes of crack dealing and smoking take place, whilst the white scientists run their experiments within; the other appears right at the end, the White House. The narrative of the video culminates in the many guest rappers leading a torch-wielding mob to the manor crack house and driving out the scientists and dealers; with the final implication of closing the *other* crack house left to our imaginations.

Musically, the track is hugely varied, with quick stylistic transitions in the beat responding to the very different rapping styles of the artists involved, ranging from simple party styles to more complex flows and Jamaican 'toasting'. The artists include other members of the group X Clan (of whom Professor X is a member), Sister Souljah, Big Daddy Kane, and Chuck D (of Public Enemy), amongst many others. As such, it acts as something of a summary or compilation of previous hip-hop tracks addressing the crack crisis, with references to 'zombie stares', didactic warnings about the effects of crack (supplemented by medical information included in subtitles on the music video),⁴⁸ as well as more radical content which calls for violence against dealers and makes conspiratorial claims. Both of these latter aspects are voiced by multiple artists.

The opening verse by Professor X sets the tone early on (1993):

⁴⁷ In which an African scientist, Yakub, invents the white race through eugenics experiments with the intention of betraying the other 'Original Men' and pursuing world domination.

⁴⁸ At circa 3 mins in: [white text] 'From 1991 to the present date [1993], there were more than 100,000 babies born addicted to crack in the New York City area. Not to mention the unofficial numbers across the country. [red text] Close the crack house.'

At circa 5.30 mins: [white text] 'Doctors report crack causes respiratory and cardiovascular failure, also severe damage to the central nervous system, which causes strokes, seizures and hypothermia. [red text] Close the crack house.'

Finally, at circa 7.30 min: [white text] 'It's now time for the community to start being more responsible for self [sic]. [red text] Close the crack house.'

From the poppy an extraction
Called Criddacktonite
Conceived as a weapon backed by the Supremacy
Their mission: to strike in offense once again
At the state of the Original

Jamaican artist Mikey Jarrett takes up a similar theme, rapped in patois (1993):

Di white man are di distributor
Dem use crack blind to the future
A mek we live like we a vulture
Fight and a kill each other

Going beyond the more vague notions of the 'Supremacy' or the 'white man' as the true crack dealer is the final verse, by group Two Kings in a Cypher, which, aligning with the music video's imagery depicting the White House, concludes the track with the following (1993):

Yo check it, straight out the District called Columbia
Here to pursue and subdue every one of ya
...
Oh what you're man enough to kill in a drive-by?
Drive by the White House and all you do is wave hi
While the President sits and he signs bills
Imports the drugs and the guns that we use to kill
Collects the dough, six pack and a laugh
Because the biggest crackhouse is on Pennsylvania Ave.

This shifts the crack conspiracy theory into a more concrete political setting, something only seen previously in the more vague implications voiced in Donald D's two aforementioned tracks. Aside from implicating the US government, this

shift is also felt in the fact that Professor X references the countries from which cocaine is produced and imported, describing how the 'descendants of kings expected to whore / Peru, Bolivia, no more, no more.' Though little more than a passing reference, this introduces a hint of geopolitical and postcolonial context thus far mostly absent from hip-hop's discussions of cocaine.

Despite the emergence of conspiratorial articulations towards the tail-end of the Golden Era, however, it is fair to say that, generally, crack cocaine conspiracy theories were relatively uncommon in the hip-hop music of this period. Much more prevalent were lyrics which focused on didactic warnings about the effect of the new drug on health of individuals and the social health of their communities. This is especially interesting considering Patricia Turner's research on rumour culture (1993), mainly based on interviews with African Americans living in poor New York neighbourhoods in the late 80s, which shows that these theories were already in popular circulation before being expressed musically. Initially intending to investigate rumours surrounding historical assassinations, she quickly had to pivot her work since 'no single topic generated as much response as did illegal drugs' (1993, 180).

If crack conspiracy theories were fairly rare in Golden Era hip-hop, and existed at that period more so in the form of oral rumour culture, the question of how these theories became canonical in hip-hop culture remains. When Kanye West, for example, in 'Crack Music' (2005) asks 'how we stop the Black Panthers? Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer / You hear that? What Gil Scott was hearing?' he is drawing on the notion of radical hip-hop discourses from the Golden Era, using

the notion of the period as the height of hip-hop's social consciousness to help build his own early identity as a new kind of conscious artist. In doing so, however, he gestures to a form of conspiracism which didn't really exist in that era, at least not to this extent or level of detail. What aided immensely in this myth-making process in hip-hop culture was the reporting of investigative journalist Gary Webb, initially published in 1996, which arguably confirmed some aspects of crack conspiracy theories, namely the involvement of CIA-backed militias in cocaine imports from Central America. This reporting, which will be interrogated in the following section, has meant that, for those looking back at earlier hip-hop in retrospect, it became easy to claim that hip-hop culture knew about these conclusions all along, when in fact such claims were few and far between, and when they were made, were quite vague or else framed in a broadly expressive rather than literal context. Overall, the rhetoric of 'crack music' of this era was not primarily concerned with responsibility for the crack epidemic, but more so with limiting and warning against its immediate effects.

3.2 Gary Webb's 'Dark Alliance'

Whilst working as an investigative journalist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, Gary Webb was approached in 1995 about apparent irregularities surrounding the arrest and trial of a suspected drug dealer, having previously reported on controversial asset forfeitures by the LAPD. The paperwork relating to the case quickly led Webb onto a much bigger story, however. Having been arrested in 1992, one of the defendant's associates, Oscar Danilo Blandón, had become a government

informant, testifying to a grand jury in 1994 that he had sold large volumes of cocaine in California in order to raise funds for *Fuerze Democratica Nicaraguense* (FDN), one of the CIA-backed 'Contra' militias. I will below outline the claims made by Webb, criticisms of his work and, finally, its significance for hip-hop culture.

Blandón claimed to have sold almost a ton of cocaine in 1981, the first year of this operation, making it likely that the profits for that year alone went well into the multi-millions. A young African American cocaine dealer, Rick Ross ('Freeway Rick'), was key to this operation, although apparently ignorant of his supplier's connections, buying from Blandón at low prices and undercutting other distributors in LA and throughout California. Blandón claimed to have been supplied with cocaine by fellow FDN supporter Norwin Meneses, who had been recognised by various US law enforcement agencies as a major drug trafficker in the 1970s, but was nevertheless granted refugee status, a visa and work permit in 1979, settling in the San Francisco Bay Area following the Nicaraguan Revolution. Despite the efforts of various law enforcement agencies – the FBI, the DEA, the LA County Sheriff's office – to investigate the drug ring, its operations largely went unfettered throughout the 1980s, sometimes selling hundreds of kilograms a week according to Blandón's testimony. Ross and Blandón had been arrested by 1990, however, and Meneses in 1992 by the Nicaraguan police. By this point, the US Congress had passed a bill providing official funding to the Contras – in Webb's account it is implied that this had meant that the cocaine ring were no longer required as fundraisers, and therefore became vulnerable to legal repercussions (1996c).

Evidence of direct CIA involvement in the drug dealing is lacking in Webb's reports. He cites a trial testimony made against Meneses which refers to trips flying cocaine from Colombia to a Texas Air Force base, but this could not be corroborated. Webb also points to unsuccessful attempts to investigate the drug ring throughout the 1980s, with Blandón apparently aware of when raids would take place on his properties, and various investigators frustrated that they were blocked from building a case against Meneses.⁴⁹ These attempts highlight some of the problems with Webb's reporting: building guilt by association and drawing conclusions more firm than those warranted by the evidence. Nevertheless, the CIA (and the White House) were indeed crucially involved with setting up the FDN and other Contra organisations, and then in managing and funding them. Assuming it had any degree of knowledge of significant members and their roles, this would have quickly made it apparent how known-drug-trafficker Meneses and his associates were raising money in California. This is made more likely in Meneses' case since his family was influential in the US-backed dictatorship which had been overthrown in 1979, with two of his relatives holding the rank of general in its army. Furthermore, in a general sense, drug trafficking has frequently gone hand-in-hand with both revolutionary political activism and imperialist economic extraction, both of which the CIA has extensive experience with in Central and South America. In

⁴⁹ His final article provides his most substantial piece of evidence regarding the CIA. A 1986 search-warrant affidavit from LA county sheriff's office identifies a Contra drug ring with Blandón involved, 'selling mainly to blacks in the South Central Los Angeles area' (1996c). It claims the FBI and DEA had agents in Blandón's ring. One of the officers involved in executing the search warrants filed a motion in a 1990 case which alleged one of Blandón's ring identified himself as a CIA agent and asked them to call CIA HQ to confirm. It then alleges that CIA agents came to the sheriff's department within two days of the raid to confiscate files relating to the case. The officer behind the legal motion, Deputy Daniel Garner, was later convicted on corruption charges (ibid.)

other words, whilst it would be ridiculous to claim that the CIA controlled the crack cocaine trade in LA, it would be equally absurd to discount any possibility of their involvement with, or knowledge of, drug trafficking and its role in the political movements and *coups d'etat* they supported throughout the world in the 20th century. Moreover, the Iran-Contra scandal indicates a willingness at other levels of the US state to engage in a deep level of corruption in its attempt to secure funding to topple the Sandinistas and install an anti-communist government in Nicaragua.

Webb's articles prompted a deluge of criticism from major newspapers, especially *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *L.A. Times*.⁵⁰ Nick Schou, in his biography of Webb (Schou 2006a), identifies the latter's claim, made in his first article on the topic (Webb 1996a), that the Ross-Blandón-Meneses drug ring opened the first route for transporting cocaine from Colombia to the Black neighbourhoods of LA as the 'fatal error that would ultimately destroy Webb' (Schou 2006b). Another claim which correctly attracted criticism was the notion that this drug ring had in some sense initiated the sale of crack cocaine to Black Americans. Despite these sensationalist claims, which stretch the evidence presented well beyond what it could support, Webb's reporting nevertheless demonstrates that the sale of crack cocaine (predominantly to African Americans) was used to fund an army intimately linked to the CIA. The CIA's Inspector-

⁵⁰ Tim Golden's article for *The New York Times* (1996) downplayed the importance of the figures Webb had identified in the Contra network. Jesse Katz and the *Los Angeles Times* staff writers questioned the evidence presented by Webb and asserted that only a small amount of money was sent to the Contras (1996). A front-page article for *The Washington Post* (Suro and Pincus 1996) argued that Webb's evidence did not support his conclusions and drew attention to what they saw as problematic contact between Webb and Rick Ross's lawyer.

General's office report (Hitz and Cinquegrana 1998) into the allegations is revealing in this regard. Whilst making the headline claim that there was no evidence 'any past or present employee of CIA, or anyone acting on behalf of CIA, had any direct or indirect dealing' with Ross, Blandón, or Meneses, the report elsewhere admits that the CIA ordered the DEA to return \$36,800 to Meneses 'to protect an operational equity, i.e., a Contra support group in which it [CIA] had an operational interest.' The report also admits that the organisation was aware of a 1982 meeting in Costa Rica between a Contra drug ring and US arms dealers, with the drugs bound for the US's West Coast and the guns for Nicaragua, a deal which it did nothing to prevent (Cockburn & St Clair 1999).

Whilst the lack of specificity in Webb's claims has no doubt fuelled grander conspiratorial interpretations of the relationship between the drug trade, neo-imperialism, and racism in the US, the general contours of that relationship are evident outside of his work. The US state had such a great need to suppress socialism in Central America (through the CIA) that it was happy to turn a blind eye to the likely side-effects this would have on its own society and citizens. Whilst it may not have organised or participated in any drug deals itself, the FDN would not have existed – or else would have taken on a different, much less powerful form – without the CIA's conscious intervention. Meanwhile, what unites those most badly affected by these events is race. The primarily *mestizo* population of Nicaragua⁵¹ suffered through years of ruinous warfare, whilst Black and Latino residents of California had to deal not only with the effects of the crack epidemic,

⁵¹ 'Mestizo' refers to people of combined indigenous Americans and European descent.

but also with being blamed by the Reagan administration and much of the media for that very crisis. It perhaps makes sense, therefore, that the only person to have been held properly accountable for these crimes was Rick Ross. Blandón served 28 months in prison but was released as a DEA informant, with his first mission to set up his former associate, who was at the time already serving a 10 year sentence, but awaiting release on parole. The set-up was successful and Ross was then given a life sentence, though this was later shortened and he was released in 2009.

It is important to note the delay between Webb's articles and the events themselves, with 'Dark Alliance' appearing roughly a decade after crack cocaine had begun to spread around poor communities throughout the USA. The things he reported seemed to confirm suspicions which had been voiced through hip-hop in the early 1990s – as in the music of Donald D and Professor X referred to above, and earlier still in African American rumour culture in New York (Turner 1993). Where do such bottom-up suspicions come from? In chapter 1, I quote the character Furious Styles from the film *Boyz in the Hood* (Singleton 1991), where he asks how poor African Americans could control the drug trade given that they don't own any planes or ships. Congresswoman Maxine Waters expresses a similar sentiment in the foreword to Webb's *Dark Alliance* book:

I reflected on the many meetings I attended throughout South Central Los Angeles during the 1980s, when I constantly asked, "Where are all the drugs coming from?" I asked myself that night whether it was possible for such a vast amount of drugs to be smuggled into any district

under the noses of the community leaders, police, sheriff's department, FBI, DEA and other law enforcement agencies.⁵² (1998, ii))

In the face of a solidifying official narrative that aimed to frame the crack epidemic as a brutal example of 'Black-on-Black crime', requiring intervention from the Reagan administration in the form of harsh criminalisation and prison sentencing, it made sense to point out that African Americans in general lacked the power and resources to trade drugs at the level of international exports and large production volumes, and that groups or individuals with much more power and agency must be behind such processes. Given the prevailing negative attitudes amongst many African Americans Californians towards law enforcement and state authorities – the LA Riots took place in 1992 – it is unsurprising that such suspicions had already targeted law enforcement and the security services. Just as the officers involved in the Rodney King beating attempted to justify their actions through claiming they thought he was high on PCP, and just as many African Americans have had drugs planted on them by police officers (The Marshall Project 2022 provides extensive documentation of evidence planting by police in the US), this story appears to show the same thing operating at a larger scale: the government 'planting' the drug problem on African Americans, before using it as a pretext for punishment and harassment.

⁵² Later in the foreword she states that her personal investigations led her to the conclusion that these agencies 'were either a part of the trafficking or turned a blind eye to it, in an effort to fund the Contra war' (Webb 1998, ii).

3.3 The Canonisation of Crack Conspiracy Theories

3.3.1 'The infiltrator, tribe intoxicator, people incarcerator, liberation movement annihilator': Crack Conspiracies in Conscious Hip-hop Post-1996

As a consequences of Webb's reporting, hip-hop's crack conspiracy theories moved from being primarily conjectural or symbolic and instead tended to become both more literal and elaborate. Now having a fairly solid basis in evidenced reporting, which came along with highly significant endorsements from figures such as Congresswoman Maxine Waters and Reverend Jesse Jackson, these discourses were expanded in scope and popularity, over time becoming a canonical element of US hip-hop culture. Whereas both the earlier hip-hop addressing crack and Webb's reporting focused mainly on narratives of social neglect, with the crack epidemic seen as an side-effect of racism or geopolitical goals respectively, hip-hop from the late 1990s onwards would begin to present it as part of a larger effort designed to sedate, incarcerate and thin out the African American population. This expansion is partly a function of conspiracy theory as a discursive category, with extra information and connections being formed as the theory propagates. It is also in part the result of Webb's articles, however, since some of his more problematic and reaching claims – that the drug ring he was investigating was the first cocaine pipeline from Colombia to South Central LA, and that it invented crack as a marketing strategy aimed at African Americans – would require such grand motives to explain them.

This shift enabled hip-hop artists to more readily connect the crack cocaine issue to more substantial arguments about race, state power, and Black radical politics in the US. The historical precursors which are highlighted in chapter 1 of

the present study – especially the CoIntelPro programme of repression and assassinations aimed at Black radicals in the 1970s – and the popular cultural responses to them are crucially important in this context. With this period of intense state-led reaction following soon after the high watermark of the Civil Rights Era, the crack cocaine epidemic would come to be seen by some as an extension of these policies, with an apparent continued aim to disorient, divide, and kill Black people, especially those who might become involved in political activity. Such ideas were already in circulation prior to Webb's reporting but would afterwards become more ubiquitous, especially in conscious hip-hop. From here, these notions would become a commonplace part of hip-hop music, appearing through a variety of its sub-genres, from the more marginal to the most popular. What follows will show this process at play through a number of musical examples, firstly on the more 'conscious' side of hip-hop music and then, in the following section, on the 'gangsta' side. These sub-genres, already present to an extent in the earlier material discussed above, went through a bifurcation in the 1990s, with the latter becoming associated with the increasing commercial success of the music, and the former with an obverse 'underground' authenticity (discussed in chapter 2).

Mos Def's 'Mathematics' (1999) takes up a specific form in hip-hop music, where a particular set of elements such as natural numbers or the alphabet are used as the basis for a virtuosic display of rapping ability, focusing on a different letter or number each line. Examples include Notorious B.I.G.'s 'Ten Crack Commandments' (1997) and Phi Life Cypher's 'ABC' (2000). For Mos Def, whose father was a Nation of Islam member, there would presumably be resonances with

'supreme mathematics', a system whereby esoteric truths can be read into basic mathematical principles, and conversely, where religious and political edicts could take on arbitrary statistical elements, such as the 'enlightened 5%' of the global population referred to in the basic articles of the Nation of Islam offshoot, the Five Percent Nation (Miyakawa 2005). 'Mathematics' or, perhaps more commonly, 'science', can also refer in hip-hop culture to rapping or production skills, implying an understanding of the music at its most fundamental level, and the capacity to use it to reveal truths and promote the education of its audiences.

Sixty-nine billion in the last twenty years
Spent on national defense but folks still live in fear like
Nearly half of America's largest cities is one-quarter Black
That's why they gave Ricky Ross all the crack
Sixteen ounces to a pound, twenty more to a key
A five minute sentence hearing and you no longer free
Mos Def 'Mathematics' (1999)

The vocal performance utilises a complex and varied rhythmic flow set against a traditional 'boom-bap' style beat (a simple, repetitive kick and snare drum pattern usually complemented by jazz or funk samples). Along with the use of vinyl scratching in the choruses, these stylistic sonic choices all point towards fidelity to a tradition of East Coast hip-hop which emphasises skill and hip-hop 'realness'.

Ideologically, the Nation of Islam influence is felt here especially in the focus on population proportions and their relation to political outcomes. In this case, a 25% Black population in many US cities warrants apparent intervention to keep it in check. The specific reference to 'Ricky Ross' acts as an authenticating anchor for

this formulation of the crack cocaine conspiracy theory. It is worth noting that contemporary conspiracy theories have made similar arguments from a white supremacist perspective, for example the so-called 'great replacement' conspiracy theory in which Europe is being taken over by Muslims and Africans, which makes reference to the proportion of populations in major cities and differences in birth rates (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020). Thus, whilst these lines clearly go well beyond the scope of the actual content of Webb's reporting, they also serve to highlight a specific form of racial paranoia that is a demonstrable part of existing white supremacist ideology. They also demonstrate how Webb's reporting could be integrated into existing African American discourses surrounding white supremacy and genocide.

'CIA' by KRS One, Zach de la Rocha (of rap-rock band Rage Against the Machine), and *The Last Emperor* (1998) provides a more in-depth approach to the issue, taking on a more anti-imperialist or even anti-capitalist perspective in contrast to Mos Def's focus on racial consciousness. Already in 'Mathematics', the reference to the Ross-Contra drug ring is directly preceded by a criticism of the US's high defence spending, carrying some anti-imperialist implications. The fact that the central logic and motivations of the 'Dark Alliance' narrative revolve around a neo-imperial interventions in Central America meant that such themes and critiques would tend to follow the story. What emerges is a cross-continental solidarity (though perhaps more 'Black Pacific' than 'Black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993)) based on the perception of a shared experience of the dialectic of intervention and neglect at the hands of the US empire: it intervenes in Nicaragua with money and military

might, in Los Angeles with harsh laws and racialised police violence; in both cases, it neglects by pursuing an active strategy of underdevelopment, and by turning a blind eye to those criminal networks which might serve a useful function to the empire's core state. Once again, the effect of Webb's reporting in this context was in part to enable such modes of critique to be propagated and explored through hip-hop music. The progression from a brief couple of lines about Peru and Bolivia in 'Close the Crackhouse' to more or less the entire lyrical content of the present example, 'CIA' by KRS One et al, is demonstrative of this effect (1998):

[Zach de la Rocha]
The infiltrator, tribe intoxicator, people incarcerator
Liberation movement annihilator
We got you clocked pushing rocks and it fail
We got brothers trooping subways like the Ho Chi Minh trail
(1998)

In the first verse, de la Rocha quickly forms connections between the CIA's links to crack cocaine and their more conventional operations, attempting to oust left-wing governments in the global South, here by reference to the Vietnam War. By transporting a historical revolutionary situation into the subways of cities like New York (where the rappers are depicted in the music video), he effectively argues for the necessity of a political consciousness which links the Black and Latino residents of those cities to those fighting the US military or CIA abroad, both in contemporaneous terms and historically.

[KRS One]
Need I say the C.I.A. be Criminals In Action
Cocaine crack unpackin', high surveillance trackin'

Prominent Blacks and whites givin' orders for mass slaughters
I want all my daughters to be like Maxine Waters
When they flooded the streets with crack cocaine
I was like Noah, now they lower cause the whole Cold War is
over
Communism fell to the dollars you were grabbin' it
(1998)

KRS One extends the geopolitical content of the track in the final verse, zooming out to world-historical level of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet Union. In the context of 'Dark Alliance,' we can see that this likely refers to Webb's notion that the need for illegal fundraising for the Nicaraguan Contras was nullified by the end of the Cold War, for which the Nicaraguan War was a proxy conflict. Thus the hidden power structures operating behind every-day experiences of impoverishment and social addiction could be connected right up to the level of global geopolitics and the clash of competing economic modes and value systems. The theme of making connections between the local and global is also seen in Zach de la Rocha's passage above. His 'infiltrator, tribe intoxicicator, people incarcerator, liberation movement annihilator' could be identified either as a tiny bag of cocaine or as the sprawling global network formed by the US military and the CIA – they apparently both have the same ultimate functions.

The opening reference to the CIA as 'Criminals in Action' is reminiscent of Donald D's pair of tracks 'FBI' (1989) and 'CIA' (1992), referred to earlier in this chapter. The trio may have even meant this as a conscious reference: the chorus of the KRS One track samples his earlier 'Sound of the Police' (1993), taking and repeating its conspiratorial line 'you claim I'm selling crack, but you be doing that.'

Such allusions partly reflect the kind of bragging hip-hop music frequently involves, an 'I-told-you-so' that highlights the rapper's knowledge and perspicacity. The significance of these allusions, however, is in forming a link back to a pre-Webb context when the crack cocaine conspiracy theories were based on bottom-up suspicions alone. Such a gesture works to assert the legitimacy of hip-hop's penchant for suspicion and paranoia as tools for understanding social crises and racism.

These references show an important part of the canonisation of the hip-hop conspiracy theories in process. What in reality largely consisted of a few single-line references to popular rumours and suspicions in urban African American communities ('Close the Crackhouse' (1993) and a few other examples excepted) came to be recast as an enlightened period where corruption and conspiracy were seen with clear eyes, and were revealed and publicly discussed through the music. Although the amount of hip-hop music discussing crack conspiracy theories seems to have increased through the 1990s, becoming both more prevalent and more elaborate, the period in the late 80s and early 90s (the 'Golden Era') alluded to by KRS One et al. would come to be seen as the period when hip-hop was at its most radically conspiratorial. The music's recurrent discourses of suspicion and paranoia thus become ineluctably linked to the 'Golden Era', with its purportedly strong conspiratorial instincts adding to its already highly-mythologised status within hip-hop culture. This process took place in part through examples such as this one: a single line in a track that otherwise doesn't mention conspiracy theories ('Sound of the Police' (1993)) is sampled and repeated over and over in the chorus of a song

that is based entirely around a conspiracy theory ('CIA' (1998)). The end result is to create an inflated sense of the conspiracism of the Golden Era, and to use this, along with the general reverence for the period in hip-hop culture, to lend legitimacy and a sense of continuity to later tracks by linking them back to it.

In his track 'Crack Music' (2005), Kanye West reaches further back for an authenticating reference, by naming poet-singer Gil Scott-Heron, a Black radical activist and artist active mainly in the 1970s:

That's that crack music nigga!
That real Black music nigga!
...
How we stop the Black Panthers?
Ronald Reagan cooked up an answer.
You hear that? What Gil Scott was hearin'
When our heroes or heroines got hooked on heroin

Scott-Heron made what might be seen as the first conspiratorial rap recording with his 'King Alfred Plan' (1972), which reproduces a fictional plan to imprison African Americans in concentration camps, and is discussed in more detail in chapter 1. Here, the reference focuses on the heroin problem faced by Black communities in the 1970s, and the historical parallels with the later crack cocaine crisis. We are asked to hear as 'Gil Scott' heard, with intense suspicion of the authorities, and a commitment to radical Black liberation politics. The opening couplet of the first verse ('how we stop...') attempts to draw a strong connection between the two: that Reagan initiated the crack cocaine crisis in order to quell the Black radical movements of the 1970s. The notion builds on the themes already present in 'CIA,'

with its memorable formulation of crack as 'liberation movement annihilator,' but forms a connection that is more intense but also more ahistorical. Not only is a direct line of causality drawn between the crack cocaine crisis and the decline of Black radical politics, but we're no longer dealing directly with Rick Ross, the Contras, or even the CIA, but rather Reagan himself cooking up crack at the stove. This is partly an effect of the process of canonisation I am seeking to describe. As the notions tied up with crack cocaine conspiracy theories and 'Dark Alliance' become more embedded and more commonplace in hip-hop culture, it becomes possible to make more forthright arguments, or employ more powerful and arresting imagery, based on that shared knowledge and the political subjectivity bound up with it. What is fascinating is that this effect has resulted in the most popular artist discussed thus far employing the 'strongest' version of the crack conspiracy theory.

Appearing to run contrary to the more conventionally-conceived function of mainstream co-optation, where we might expect to see some softening of controversial political sentiments, this confluence means that striking conspiratorial imagery could be used to capture the attention of audiences at the mass level, moving far beyond hip-hop's historical predominantly Black and Latino working class audiences, towards global 'markets' which cut across race, class, and nationality. Furthermore, hip-hop music's structures of referentiality and sampling mean that the audiences being introduced to new ideas and historical perspectives through tracks like 'Crack Music' are not limited to that specific artist, but are often enabled to reach back into a broader (usually African American) cultural base, in this case in the form of Gil Scott-Heron. This is part of what is sometimes referred

to in hip-hop culture as 'doing your homework' as a listener, in order to better understand the music and the historical conditions from which it arose (Villegas 2010).

The process of canonisation and the subsequent intensification of conspiratorial content in the music is also potentially vulnerable to other forms of co-optation, however. As Kanye West distils hip-hop's conspiratorial perspective on the crack cocaine crisis and spreads it to new mass audiences, he also omits a some of the historical specificity found in earlier examples discussed in this section. We are no longer dealing with the specifics of the 'Dark Alliance' scandal, or even with the specifics of the historic living conditions of 1980s US ghettos, but a much more vague formulation which carries some risk of entering a more generalised paranoid mode – especially considering its success with large, mainstream, socio-economically and racially diverse audiences. I would link this to the track's central metaphor of hip-hop as 'crack music', a gesture which ambiguously reproduces some of the criticisms that dogged the music as it achieved mainstream popularity: that it was a music produced by criminals, and possessed an addictive appeal which encouraged criminal behaviour. Often, this functions as a way to ironically resignify those criticisms, pointing towards how white America can't live without Black music, despite the disapproval of some of its dominant cultural institutions, as in the closing spoken-word section of 'Crack Music' (2005):

This dark diction has become America's addiction.
Those who ain't even Black use it,
So we gon' keep bagging up this here crack music.

Such discursive gestures can also function more negatively, however, as in the emergence of what I will call the 'corrupted rap' conspiracy theory. This is the notion that the music was at some point captured by powerful interests and transformed from a socially conscious form into a socially degenerate one which encourages criminality, drug use and violence, manifesting the worst version of hip-hop culture imagined by its most vociferous critics. When the historically-informed discourses of racial suspicion that constitute hip-hop conspiracism reach a mainstream tipping-point and lose some of their specificity, as in Kanye West's music, I would argue that this creates the conditions for that suspicion to become more generalised and also to turn inward, with the musical culture eventually targeting itself as the object of conspiracy – a paranoid short-circuit. These issues will be discussed in more detail in the final section of this chapter, which focuses on crack-as-rap metaphors and the emergence of the 'corrupted rap' conspiracy theory. First, however, I will provide an overview of crack cocaine conspiracy theories in the hip-hop music which forms the closest, if most ambiguous, relationship with the drug and organised crime more generally: gangsta rap.

3.3.2 'Reagan era, I ran contraband': Crack Conspiracy Theories in Gangsta Rap Post-1996

The examples discussed so far fall largely within the 'conscious hip-hop' subgenre, with its emphasis on raising racial and political consciousness. A key part of crack conspiracy theories becoming canonical within hip-hop culture, however, was their presence also becoming apparent in 'gangsta rap,' which was arguably becoming the most popular form of hip-hop music as it gained mainstream popularity through

the 1990s and 2000s. In this section, I will discuss the work of the most influential gangsta rappers: 2pac, who had a formative impact on the subgenre; and Jay-Z, who would play a large part in pushing it into mainstream popularity, both as a rapper and, later on, a music industry mogul. Between them, these artists capture the trajectory from a form of gangsta rap that was closely linked to the conscious styles which predominated in the Golden Era, right up to gangsta rap as a mainstream popular form, and hip-hop as big business in the new millennium. What this reveals is the surprising continuities formed between these two poles, with conspiratorial narratives apparently a key referent in maintaining racialised discourses of suspicion with respect to the music's conception of race, politics, and power.

2pac himself is accorded a unique respect for his apparent ability to bridge the gangsta-conscious dichotomy. His relationship with figures such as Suge Knight, CEO of his label Death Row Records and alleged affiliate of the 'Bloods' gang, not to mention the large 'thug life' tattoo across his abdomen marked him out as part of the West Coast's early orientation towards gangsta rap, alongside artists such as Ice Cube and Snoop Dogg. This lineage is matched on the 'conscious' side, however, by his family ties to members of the Black Panthers and other radical organisations, most notably Assata Shakur, who was convicted for the murder of a state trooper in 1977, before escaping in 1979 and fleeing to Cuba,⁵³ where she claimed asylum. This sense of an inherited revolutionary racial politics is also found

⁵³ This fact would give rise to a highly popular conspiracy theory in hip-hop culture, that 2pac faked his own death and moved to Cuba. This conspiracy theory is referenced in Kendrick Lamar's 'ELEMENT.' (2017), which is covered in chapter 2.

in his stage name; '2pac' is, quite unusually,⁵⁴ a version of his given name, Tupac Amaru, which is taken from the indigenous Peruvian figure Tupac Amaru II, who led a rebellion against Spanish colonisers in 1780. His background and his affiliations in LA conspired to place 2pac in unusual position, a kind of overdetermined authentication as both iconic original 'gangsta' and rightful inheritor of Black radical politics. Combined with his untimely death, having been murdered in a 1996 shooting aged only 25, this set the ground for the notion of 2pac as a kind of prophet-figure in hip-hop culture, something which has been explored by Kendrick Lamar in an album dedicated to the rapper, 'To Pimp a Butterfly' (2015).

2pac's 'Changes,' recorded 1992 but released in 1998, after his death and after Gary Webb's 'Dark Alliance,' seems to transmute some of this prophetic aura into musical and conspiratorial form. Only a few lines into the first verse, rapped over material heavily based on Bruce Hornsby's upbeat class-conscious anthem 'The Way It Is' (1986), we hear the following:

Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares,
One less hungry mouth on the welfare.
First, ship them dope and let them deal to brothers,
Give them guns, step back, watch them kill each other.
It's time to fight back, that's what Huey said,
Two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead.
2pac 'Changes' (1992)

⁵⁴ A trait shared with two later rappers discussed in this chapter: Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar. The link between using given names and the movement towards creating a sense of interiority in hip-hop music is discussed in chapter 2.

Already in 1992, this brief excerpt captures many of the conspiratorial interpretations which would only develop years later in the work of others. The focus on structural economic factors and motivations ('one less hungry mouth on the welfare') and on passively thinning out the Black population ('step back, watch them kill each other') bear striking similarity to the themes in Mos Def's 'Mathematics,' recorded seven years later in 1999. Additionally, an implicit but strong connection is drawn between the crack epidemic and the quelling of Black radical politics ('now Huey's dead' – Huey Newton co-founded the Black Panther Party), something that it would take until 2005 for Kanye West to draw out in more explicit terms.

What does mark out the track as of its time, prior to Gary Webb's articles on the subject, is the more subtle mode of presentation in comparison to those later examples. Whereas Mos Def confidently points to Black American population levels as the reason why '[the CIA] gave Ricky Ross all the crack,' and Kanye, admittedly in tongue-in-cheek fashion, refers to Reagan himself 'cooking up an answer' to the problems posed by Black radicals, 2pac instead invokes a more abstract agent of domination in these lines. In a sense, this is more historically literate, with the drug and gun trades arising out of abstract economic and historical forces tied up with racism, rather than the notion of a more co-ordinated plot against African Americans that seems to animate the later examples. It is at the same time also a more properly paranoid conception, invoking mysterious forces whose actions, aside from entering 'dope' and 'guns' into circulation, are to 'step back' and 'watch them,' or to fire 'two shots in the dark...'. In a similar vein, the connection

between the crack epidemic and the fall of the Black Panther Party and decline of Black radical politics is left to us to flesh out and appreciate, despite that connection being the operative logic of the passage. The general paranoid mode which runs throughout 2pac's discography, in albums such as *All Eyez on Me* (1996), is discussed in Quinn (2002).

The end of the track contains another prophetic moment which, though thematically unrelated to his perspicacious views on the crack cocaine crisis, serves to reinforce the mystical allure and mythical status which lends his music such cultural weight:

And as long as I stay Black, I gotta stay strapped
And I never get to lay back
'Cause I always got to worry 'bout the pay backs
Some buck that I roughed up way back
Comin' back after all these years
Rat-a-tat, tat, tat, tat, that's the way it is.
2pac 'Changes' (1992)

Such musical premonitions have contributed to a variety of conspiracy theories relating to his death, amongst the most common are that he and fellow rapper Notorious B.I.G. were assassinated by the state because of their cultural influence and legitimization of hip-hop, or that 2pac faked his death to flee US authorities and retire in Cuba, like his Godmother Assata Shakur (Gosa 2011; Stroud 2016). What is perhaps most important in these musical premonitions, and in the fact that some of them reached mainstream pop audiences after his death ('Changes' reached 32 on the Billboard Hot 100, number 3 in the UK singles charts, and number 1 in Norway

and the Netherlands), is that he seemed to represent an advanced knowledge that was already present in the African American communities at large. His apparent perspicacity would act as a symbol for the cultural foresight of African Americans in general, some of whom would have heard this track a decade after they had heard similar notions circulating in their own communities, as per Turner's study (1993). Of course, it is crucial to point out that this is not really any kind of inexplicable foresight, but is historical knowledge centred on survival strategies derived from shared lived experiences of multi-generational racial hostility. The 'truth' of this knowledge is less important than its usefulness. Such usefulness is historically contingent, however: what might have been useful to those living through poverty in the ghettos of 1980s Los Angeles might serve entirely different functions to white audiences in the late 1990s. Putting a brake on this potential process of decontextualisation, however, is the pedagogic and dialogic tendencies of hip-hop (Alim 2007; Rose 1994). Texts tend to connect to each other, and sometimes attempt to educate their audiences, hopefully leading engaged listeners from any time or place to an appreciation of the historical context which produced the music. Such capacities would be stretched, however, as the distance between the conditions of production and reception grew rapidly as hip-hop music became more globally popular.

In two tracks by Jay-Z from the 2000s, we can see some examples of how the crack cocaine conspiracy theories surfaced in a surprisingly mainstream popular culture context. Jay-Z's 'Beware' (2003) is a remix of a 1997 Bhangra hit by British-Indian musician Panjabi MC, 'Mundian To Bach Ke,' a track which reached number

5 in the UK singles charts and number 1 in Greece, Hungary, and Belgium; the remix also charted in the US, reaching number 33 on the Billboard Top 100.

It's International Hov, been having a flow
Before Bin Laden got Manhattan to blow
Before Ronald Reagan got Manhattan the blow
Jay-Z 'Beware' (2003)

For a charting hit from an artist at the height of his mainstream popularity (Jay-Z had number 1 charting albums on the main Billboard 200 chart *each year* from 1998-2003, and two in 2004), the lyrical content of the track is somewhat surprising, featuring anti-war statements with respect to Iraq, and the controversial passage reproduced above. As in the Kanye West example above, there is a slippage here whereby Reagan is implicated directly. Clearly, poetic license plays some role here, in creating the irreverent implied comparison between Bin Laden and Reagan as malign political forces working against New York as the birthplace of hip-hop. More broadly, however, and as we will see in subsequent examples, the tendency to invoke Reagan himself could have more to do with tying crack cocaine conspiracy theories into broader critiques of Reaganism as a political ideology. The slippage to Manhattan rather than Los Angeles, the focus of the 'Dark Alliance' series, is perhaps of a more genuine kind. Black New Yorkers had voiced suspicions about state involvement in the crack epidemic back to the early 1990s and beyond, as demonstrated by Turner (1993), so by having some aspect of that suspicion apparently proven true, but nevertheless in another far away city, many would naturally believe other aspects of their initial suspicions could also plausibly be true.

Jay-Z's 2007 single 'Blue Magic' also addresses Reagan in the context of the Iran-Contra scandal and the 'Dark Alliance' allegations:

Blame Reagan for making me into a monster
Blame Oliver North and Iran-Contra
I ran contraband that they sponsored
Before this rhymin' stuff we was in concert

Two compelling narratives are pithily captured in this short lyrical excerpt: i) Jay-Z's 'origin story' as an alleged crack cocaine dealer in his youth ii) government corruption with respect to financing the Nicaraguan war, both in selling arms to Iran and in their alleged involvement with the domestic US crack cocaine trade. The Iran-Contra scandal involved the Reagan administration breaking its own embargo against Iran by facilitating arms sales to its government, eventually funnelling the profits to help fund the Nicaraguan Contra militias. This mainly occurred in the mid-1980s, at the same time as the Blandón-Ross drug ring was active and also raising funds for the Contras. There even appears to have been some level of popular suspicion about the links between Iran-Contra and cocaine dealing at the time: Oliver North's 1987 Iran-Contra testimony was interrupted in Baltimore by two activists who unfurled a banner which read 'Ask about cocaine smuggling'.⁵⁵ Most significant, however, is the fact that Iran-Contra is a bona fide *conspiracy* as opposed to a *conspiracy theory*; top government and security officials conspired to break international and domestic law and were investigated and convicted by judicial processes which, though they arguably failed to hold the administration to

⁵⁵ The article was published 9 years earlier than Webb's story, but states that the banner 'was a reference to drug smuggling by US-supported contras in Nicaragua' (Associated Press 1987).

account, at least demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt the legitimacy and veracity of the accusations.

An impressive piece of wordplay connects the scandal and the crack cocaine conspiracy theory, with the 'Dark Alliance' story forming an unspoken link between the two: 'Iran Contra' is literally placed inside Jay-Z's drug dealing ('I ran contraband...')⁵⁶ and, by extension, inside the crack conspiracy theory ('...that they sponsored'). The implication here is that the government's corruption is constitutive of his crack dealing and of crack dealing in general, of the economic history and reality which gave rise to the crack-dealing persona in hip-hop. The final line quoted above goes further, with Jay-Z claiming to have been 'in concert' with Reagan as a drug dealer. More than state corruption giving rise to social breakdown, he alleges state drug-dealing gives rise to private drug-dealing, in a quite literal sense. The ironic twist is that he claims it was his rapping, rather than his dealing, that put him at odds with the government. A further irony is felt in the reading of these lines which sees the 'monster' created by Reagan not as the crack dealer but as the gangsta rapper. Two feedback loops are formed: Reagan creates the conditions for both crack dealing and gangsta rap to thrive, but then implements harsh repressive policies for those involved, whether through drug laws or repression of live hip-hop events (Rose 1994). Ill-feeling from the experiences of Reagan's 'war on drugs'

⁵⁶ Rapper Pusha T uses the same formulation in 'Alone in Vegas' (2011): 'Reagan era, I ran contraband'.

policies has remained a persistent feature of US hip-hop – Killer Mike's 'Reagan' (2012) provides a more recent example.⁵⁷

The music discussed in this subsection forms a contrast with that discussed so far in the chapter, even if this isn't obvious from the short lyrical excerpts presented above. Rather than overt criticism of crack dealers as conventional antagonists, we now instead see through eyes of the crack dealer himself. Although the passages above are overtly critical and make concrete political references, Jay-Z's general output tends to be more deeply embedded in the gangsta persona, with any reflexive critique much more implicit. An early track 'D'Evils' (1996), for example, presents a narrative about the rapper kidnapping his friend's girlfriend for a ransom. Part of what marks out an aspect of implicit critique are the opening samples, which combine the religious themes already evident in the title with vague conspiratorial references. A Snoop Dogg sample,⁵⁸ 'Dear God, I wonder can you save me?' is intercut with two samples from rapper Prodigy of Mobb Deep,⁵⁹ first 'Illuminati want my mind, soul, and my body,' and second, 'secret society, tryna keep they eye on me'. The theme of social and spiritual disintegration being linked with the machinations of mysterious elite forces bears some resemblance to his later material discussed above. I would argue that, in this context, conspiracy theory discourses partly function in hip-hop to enable artists of all stripes to access specific

⁵⁷ The track makes reference to the Contra scandals: 'Just like Oliver North introduced us to cocaine / In the 80s when the bricks came on military planes.' It proceeds to discuss the effects of Reaganism, focusing on the war on drugs policies, the privatisation of the prison system, and argues that the two conspired to place young Blacks back into forced labour. The track also features other paranoid or conspiratorial elements: 'Ronald Reagan was an actor, not at all a factor / Just an employee of the country's real masters / Just like the Bushes, Clinton, and Obama'; 'If I say anymore they might be at my door / Shh... who the fuck is that staring in my window?'

⁵⁸ Snoop Dogg 'Murder was the Case' from the soundtrack of a film of the same name (1995).

⁵⁹ From his verse on LL Cool J 'I Shot Ya (Remix)' (1995).

modes of political and social critique. It serves as a common reference point for a shared suspicion of elites – racial, governmental, secret, or all of those combined – and thus serves as a common authenticating basis from which to make political or social arguments. Nevertheless, there are real tensions at play in the rise of popularity of gangsta rap, with the increasing popularity of drug-dealer protagonists and violent imagery on the one hand, and hip-hop culture's suspicions about the real powers behind the crack cocaine trade on the other. Could the 'Illuminati,' or whoever else, be trying to destroy 'minds' and 'souls' through a degenerated version of hip-hop music, just as they had allegedly destroyed 'bodies' through the crack cocaine crisis? Such notions are what I call the 'corrupted rap' conspiracy theory now popular amongst some hip-hop audiences, and will be explored in the following section.

3.4 'This dark diction has become America's addiction': Music-as-Crack Metaphors and the 'Corrupted Rap' Conspiracy Theory

The rise in popularity of gangsta rap threw into relief one of the central contradictions in hip-hop music, whereby it often strongly identifies with figures such as the crack dealer or the pimp, whilst at the same time seeking to criticise them and the conditions from which they were produced. Rapper Pusha T calls this the 'self righteous drug-dealer dichotomy' (2011). It can often be a fruitful and creative tension, from which complex, reflexive and contradictory meanings can potentially be signified and explored. One recurrent method for doing this is to draw a metaphorical link between hip-hop music and crack cocaine, a form of imagery which can serve a variety of purposes, from light-hearted bragging about the

addictiveness of a certain rhythm or rhyme pattern, to criticisms aimed at specific styles and subgenres as insubstantial or socially damaging – a charge that can even sometimes be levelled at the music as a whole. The latter, most properly negative sense also animates a related notion in hip-hop culture, what I call the 'corrupted rap' conspiracy theory: this argues that hip-hop was at some point captured by corporate influences and was transformed from a music of social consciousness and racial liberation into one which encourages criminality and works against the interests of ordinary African Americans.

He told us that since our employers had become silent investors in this prison business, it was now in their interest to make sure that these prisons remained filled. Our job would be to help make this happen by marketing music which promotes criminal behaviour, rap being the music of choice. He assured us that this would be a great situation for us because rap music was becoming an increasingly profitable market for our companies, and as employee, we'd also be able to buy personal stocks in these prisons. (Quoted in Madden and Carmichael 2020b)

From such a perspective, hip-hop becomes akin to crack cocaine: although many enjoy it or depend on it, it eats away at the fabric of African American communities and, as with crack, this could be the result of malign intentions from powerful outside groups.

The downfall of hip-hop music projected by this conspiracy theory is often linked to the period of commercialisation and popularisation of gangsta rap that took place from the mid-1990s into the 2000s, with proponents seeking to explain the newfound popularity of raps about drug dealing amongst larger, whiter audiences, and the relative decline in popularity of more conscious rapping styles.

As such, it projects a simple resolution of the contradictions inherent in gangsta rap, tending more towards a simplistic moralist perspective which sees this historical shift simply as 'good' hip-hop giving way to 'bad' – from inherent authenticity to co-optation and corruption, from liberation music to means of control. This conspiracy theory sees hip-hop's culture of discursive suspicion turned in on itself, the inherent cannibalizing trajectory of paranoid thought leading to a situation in which sections of the music's audiences, and indeed some artists, have ended up reproducing many of the criticisms more conventionally made by conservative media and politicians. I will now look at a variety of examples of music-as-crack metaphors, showing how this ubiquitous imagery, present in hip-hop music since crack cocaine was invented – and even before that, in references to another cocaine derivative 'freebase' – would eventually lay the groundwork for the 'corrupted rap' conspiracy theory.

A number of tracks already discussed in this chapter are based around such imagery. Ice T's 'I'm Your Pusher' (1988) provides a representative early example, showing various aspects of how music-as-crack metaphors often functioned in 'Golden Era' hip-hop:

The sound I've created on this wax is like a chemical
And the knowledge I give, makes me invincible
I'm your pusher
The cops don't know what to do, because my dope breaks thru
No matter what they do, my stuff gets to you

The term 'chemical' points first towards the music's synthetic, addictive qualities, chiming especially with the repetitive rhythmic samples and large bass and sub-bass frequency content, which is physically 'felt' as much as it is audibly heard. The

addictiveness and appeal of the music is irrepressible, easily circumventing police attempts to stop it. Rather than the consequences being social degradation, however, as is associated with the crack cocaine crisis, this substance instead spreads social enrichment, conveying knowledge and power to those who consume it. Elsewhere the track makes the notion of replacing crack cocaine with hip-hop music more explicit (1988):

Crack or smack will take you to a sure end
You don't need it, just throw that stuff away
You wanna get high? Let the record play.

A whiff of danger still accompanies the transactions involved in getting this music from producer to customer, however (1988):

I'll bring it to boil, Evil E rock it up
You want it? I don't think you got enough
Last suckers crossed, Syndicate shot 'em up
Cops found 'em in the lake bottom up.⁶⁰

Lurking beneath the surface of this apparently much more positive and affirming process of exchange and consumption is something darker; hip-hop carries some danger all on its own, and Ice T seems to suggest that as listeners we enter into a criminal conspiracy with him as our supplier, requiring secretiveness and loyalty under threat of violence. In later examples, we will see these darker implications of this contradiction drawn out further.

⁶⁰ Rhyme Syndicate was a hip-hop collective and associated record label formed by Ice T.

Jay-Z's 'Crack Game / Rap Game' (1997), released around a decade after 'I'm your Pusher,' provides a representative example of music-as-crack imagery from that era, in which gangsta rap was becoming increasingly popular. It samples a standalone line⁶¹ from Nas's 'Represent' (1994), 'somehow the rap game remind me of the crack game,' and builds the rest of the track around this notion. What is immediately obvious is the much closer identification with the drug trade and the figure of the dealer, as we might expect from music that had begun to frequently position that figure as a first-person protagonist. Along with this comes a parallel dis-identification with drug users and the music's audiences as their metaphoric representatives. Jay-Z, who cultivated an entrepreneurial image in his music (and indeed has become one of the richest people associated with hip-hop), turns the metaphor towards his ability to market his product and extract maximum value from his audience, who are referred to both as 'fiends' and 'clientele' (1997):

Let the fiends know hey, we got some dope shit
Gon' need a middle man, so we look to radio
Let 'em test the product, give 'em a promo show
Just a breeze, not enough to catch a real vibe
Then we drop a maxi single and charge 'em two for five
Ain't tryna kill 'em at first just, building clientele
So when the album drops the first weeks it's on sale
But when demand grows it's time to expand yo
You don't want no garbage papi, it's ten grand for blow fo sho.

⁶¹ By which I mean it is not preceded or followed by other lines exploring this idea, or referring to crack cocaine.

Under either name, it is the audience of this track that Jay-Z is bragging about his ability to exploit. In part, this is built upon the same tongue-in-cheek comparison as 'I'm your Pusher' (1988), in that the audiences are only addicted to the music, and thus exploitable, because they derive meaning and enjoyment from it. Rather than these musical addictions being explicitly contrasted with drug addiction, however, as in the previous example, they seem to come closer and closer together. Immediately following the passage quoted above is the line 'I got that uncut raw to make a fiend's body jerk'. The basic bodily pleasure of the music and the compunction to move and dance to it is here compared to an overdose, and the audience is once again a dehumanised 'fiend'. It is important to note that such violent imagery and a certain degree of shock-factor are a key part of the aesthetics of gangsta rap, and perhaps more specifically the 'horrorcore' subgenre, where it would be more fully developed. This example is not intended to write off these musics and their sensibilities whatsoever, but rather to point to a specific consequence of this discursive shift in the context of an increasingly popular form of music: here, a tendency to project an alienated image of its own audience.

This negativity also ends up aimed at the music itself, with the further extension of the central metaphor as follows (1997):

And my singles like gems, you know the treys
Get you high for a while, but the high don't stay
You need another fix, you better cop these last two bricks

Here, music-as-crack has come full circle, with many permutations of the imagery explored before coming round to position his own music as ultimately insubstantial

and unsatisfying. It is important not to over-emphasise this negativity, however; much of the above is not taken literally in context, namely a virtuosic display based on the sustained extension of a simple piece of imagery. Nevertheless, the manner in which a music represents itself and its audiences still carry weight, especially as such representations would become more and more commonplace through the late 1990s and 2000s. Whilst the more playful, light-hearted mode of Ice T would persevere through this period as well, the more troubling implications highlighted by gangsta rap's use of the imagery would inevitably now be carried along with it.

What often enables hip-hop music to pull off such discursive gestures is the close affinity of the form with Gates Jr.'s concept of 'signifyin(g)' (1988). This oral literary tradition, which Gates argues is influenced by Yoruba culture, foregrounds the 'trickster' figure. It places value on their ability to use wit and guile to subvert dominant modes of discourse, especially by creating hidden spaces within that discourse for forms of communication, meaning-creation, and language play which are largely unintelligible to the dominant culture. Thus, in 'Crack Game / Rap Game', it could be argued that its music-as-crack, fans-as-addicts imagery derives from – and in some sense subverts – similar pre-existing notions in dominant cultural discourse, such as criticism of hip-hop culture by politicians and mainstream media outlets. From this perspective, Jay-Z takes the notion of hip-hop music as harmful to its fans, and alters it through language play and musicality into something more complex and enjoyable, transforming negativity and reductiveness into pleasure and complexity. Whilst this might be a satisfying enough explanation at the level of a specific piece of music, it does not account for the broader historical

process at work, however. In the context of the subsequent development of the 'corrupted rap' conspiracy theory, the increasingly negative internal representations of the music, its audiences, and the nature of their consumption carry a degree of internalised prejudice which, though perhaps negated and subverted in specific instances by skilful rappers like Jay-Z, would go on to be reconstituted with its power still intact. The idea that hip-hop can actually act like a harmful drug, making addicts out of its audiences and wreaking havoc on broader society, ultimately survived such subversions. For those sections of hip-hop audiences who had internalised these notions, it would only be a small step to theorise that this harmful drug – hip-hop, or a subsection of it – was intentionally created and targeted at African Americans, as many already suspected had been done with crack cocaine. This conspiracy theory effectively collapses the discursive space opened up by signifyin(g) practices, and with it the capacity to explore the music-crack imagery in the multivalent, or even dialectical, sense seen throughout many of the examples provided in this chapter. Instead, we see the discursive suspicion of hip-hop, so key to its consistent critical orientation, especially with respect to social crises, aimed at its own cultural output and its audiences.

Where these suspicions are turned onto an external agent, the form of the 'corrupted rap' conspiracy theory requires one which could influence the work of a great number of increasingly rich celebrity musicians, as well as their record labels, distribution networks, not to mention their fans' sensibilities. The most frequently invoked agent in this context is the so-called 'Illuminati',⁶² in its contemporary form

⁶² The sample referencing the Illuminati in Jay-Z's 'D'Evils' (1996), from rapper Prodigy's verse on LL Cool J's 'I Shot Ya (Remix)' (1995), is one of the earliest mentions of the group in hip-hop music.

a fictitious construct built upon the model of the real secret societies of Enlightenment Europe, which did indeed have considerable appeal to the 'celebrities' of that era, pointing towards part of its present explanatory power.⁶³ I would argue that this continues a slippage discussed earlier in this chapter, whereby the specificity of Gary Webb's 'Dark Alliance' stories and before that, the specific contours of the crack cocaine crisis of the 1980s, gave way to more vague accounts which nevertheless maintained the capacity to express critical and historical perspectives. Here, however, the slippage continues, descending into a much more indeterminate mode of suspicion, no longer aimed at the CIA, Ronald Reagan, or even just the multinational conglomerates apparently responsible for corrupting hip-hop, but rather a generalised paranoia aimed either at the stereotypical fare of conspiracy theory – secret, powerful, internally-harmonious groups like the Illuminati – or else turned in on itself. The potential ramifications of this slippage are clear: African American people as whole are unlikely to gain anything from mainstream popular cultural production which targets chimeras like the Illuminati, whereas repeatedly reminding the world of specific injustices associated with the CIA – whether through a straight factual account or an exaggerated fantastical version – could conceivably serve to hold such organisations accountable, to an extent, and may therefore play some role in improving material conditions of African Americans and all others who are side-lined to the vicissitudes of imperial geopolitics.

⁶³ The limits of this power are set by a certain implausibility, captured well by rapper J Cole in his track 'Villuminati' (2013): 'Keep on asking me about the Illuminati / Is you stupid, nigga? Young Black millionaire, / Old white billionaires, I'm sure that they can do without me.'

Chapter 4. ‘And I know the government administer AIDS’: HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Theories in Hip-hop Music

The AIDS epidemic presents several difficulties in terms of definition and periodisation. Although it can often be associated with the 1980s and 90s, in reality it is still ongoing, with popular perception in Western media and culture distorted by a focus on its initial emergence and by a bias towards its effect on Western populations. The use of terms such as 'crisis' or 'epidemic' in Western public discourse and popular culture are in large part shaped by the threat posed by HIV/AIDS to dominant social groups and states. Thus the overall status of the virus and associated syndrome is shaped by hierarchies of power, in terms of race, sexuality, gender and geopolitics.

Sustained research has been carried out by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), which has produced annual reports since 1997, looking at both global and country-level data. *The Lancet's* ‘Global Burden of Disease’ studies have recently produced retrospective work to attempt to improve the estimates built upon the UNAIDS data. Their most recent research estimates global HIV incidence, the number of new cases, as having peaked in 1999 (2019, e831), whilst global deaths from HIV peaked in 2006 (e844). Global HIV mortality in 2017 (the most recent year covered by the 2019 study) is estimated at more than double that of 1990. In many senses, therefore, HIV/AIDS should be viewed as an ongoing crisis. Even taking into account the reduction of HIV mortality brought about by treatments such as antiretroviral therapy (2016, e361), lack of availability

and general economic imbalances mean that outcomes are still at crisis levels in many places, such as Sub-Saharan Africa (e361).

Musicologist Paul Attinello suggests 1983-1996 as a period which 'saw the creation of a great deal of AIDS-related work – many novels and memoirs,... various approaches to theater,... poetry,... and of course a vast array of visual arts,...' (2015, 624). The above period of cultural activity, mostly emerging from the USA, understandably corresponds to the US national context for HIV rather than the global situation outlined above. A 2001 Centre for Disease Control report 'HIV and AIDS – United States, 1981-2000' states that, by 1996, 'sharp declines were reported in AIDS incidence and deaths' (2001, 431). More recent work by non-profit Kaiser Family Foundation finds that this trend has continued: HIV-related mortality rates 'peaked in 1995, [and] have [since] declined significantly; the age-adjusted HIV death rate has dropped by more than 80% since its peak and by almost 50% since 2010.'

The hip-hop discussed in this chapter also falls neatly into the period suggested by Attinello. Further, it corresponds to some of the key features he describes in popular music about HIV/AIDS; in contrast to literary, dramatic and visual art addressing HIV/AIDS, musical responses were 'frequently more oblique and cautious in [their] presentation of strongly charged material' (2015, 624). This kind of approach can be seen in how HIV is discussed in RnB hit 'Waterfalls' by TLC (1995),⁶⁴ which spent seven weeks at number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. The

⁶⁴ The group have been very influential in hip-hop culture, especially member Left-Eye, who is frequently referenced in rap lyrics. For example, Kanye West's 'Never Let me Down' (2004): 'I can't complain what the accident did to my left eye, because look what an accident did to Left Eye.'

lyrics present a number of cautionary tales, some of which relate to HIV, reinforced by the music video which depicts these scenarios (Tift 2017, 140). HIV or AIDS are never referred to by name, however. The most direct reference is as 'three letters' taking one of the song's characters to his 'final resting place'. This kind of indirect or coded reference to HIV/AIDS is prevalent in hip-hop discussing the topic, as they are in musical responses more broadly, whose 'typical construction... often reflects a certain social or political timidity' (2015, 624).

In part, this timidity is shaped, somewhat paradoxically, by the function of the music as part of initiatives to raise awareness and money for HIV/AIDS. Music in this context is usually designed to generate, in Attinello's words, an 'uncontroversial empathy that encourages people to give money' (2015, 624). It is in US hip-hop music's intersection with such charitable and not-for-profit initiatives that the distinctiveness of its approach to HIV/AIDS becomes most apparent. The most prominent example of this is the album *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996), a collaboration between prominent hip-hop artists and the Red Hot Organisation, a not-for-profit group which had already produced a number of popular albums to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS. In this album, the cautiousness described above co-exists uneasily with hip-hop culture's penchant for irreverent speculation about the root causes of social crises, particularly those which have an outsized effect on African Americans. This work therefore represents a unique opportunity to understand how hip-hop's conspiratorial rhetoric co-exists alongside more generalised social and political initiatives. It will therefore form the primary case study for this chapter.

Even if the US cultural response to HIV/AIDS is concentrated around the period in which they affected the US population most severely, the emotional resonances and political implications of the rhetoric addressing it also invoke a more global context. Due to the role of race in this broader context, this is especially true for hip-hop music. If the crack conspiracy theories discussed in chapter 3 were located in a geopolitical context running through the Pacific Ocean and the Americas, AIDS conspiracy theories have a distinctively Black Atlantic framing. The racial politics of popular discourse surrounding HIV is most evident in discussions of its apparent African origin and spread across the Atlantic to the US, monkey-to-human transmission theories, and the broader history of white medical experimentation on Africans.

The conspiratorial elements of this discourse are present, unusually, at the most elevated strata of politics – between states – and even become entangled in late Cold War political discourse. Former South African President Thabo Mbeki, for example, disputed 'scientific claims that the virus originated in Africa and [accused] the US government of manufacturing the disease in military labs' (Time Magazine 2019). Similarly, Nobel Peace laureate Wangari Maathai, an ecologist from Kenya, was quoted as referring to 'evil-minded scientists' in the developed world developing a virus 'meant to wipe out the black race' (Gibbs, 2004).⁶⁵ Susan Sontag tracks how these notions 'received a crucial push from Soviet propaganda specialists':

⁶⁵ In the same article, Maathai claims that her words were taken out of context: 'She said she had meant only to pose alternative theories about the disease's origin to counter the belief by some Kenyans that AIDS was a curse from God' (Gibbs 2004).

In October 1985 the Soviet weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta* published an article alleging that the AIDS virus had been engineered by the US government during biological warfare research at Fort Derrick, Maryland, and was being spread abroad by US servicemen who had been used as guinea pigs. The source cited was an article in the Indian newspaper *Patriot*. Repeated on Moscow's "Radio Peace and Progress" in English, the story was taken up by newspapers and magazines throughout the world. A year later it was featured on the front page of London's conservative, mass-circulation Sunday Express. ("The killer AIDS virus was artificially created by American scientists during laboratory experiments which went disastrously wrong-and a massive cover-up has kept the secret from the world until today.") Though ignored by most American newspapers, the Sunday Express story was recycled in virtually every other country. As recently as the summer of 1987, it appeared in newspapers in Kenya, Peru, Sudan, Nigeria, Senegal, and Mexico. (1989, 52)

With such rhetoric already being circulated in global political and media channels, it would inevitably resonate in hip-hop culture, with its affinity for similar conspiracy theories and its connection with Black nationalism – of which Mbeki was a political proponent (Robins 2004, 653-4). Also highly significant was the recent historical experience of medical experimentation on African Americans. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1932-72), for example, was designed to observe the effects of leaving syphilis untreated. The participants, all African American, were not informed that they were part of the experiment. Since treatment was available at the time, many unnecessary deaths resulted from this deception. This experiment had only ended around a decade before the AIDS epidemic came to the US. There is an implied Black Atlantic solidarity at play here, in which African Americans

could plausibly believe that their government would experiment on Black people in Africa in the 1980s, just as it had on Alabama sharecroppers in the 1970s.⁶⁶

Whilst this racial and geo-political context is inescapable for hip-hop music addressing AIDS, the actual content of the music is much more overtly focused on sexuality and gender. As Susan Sontag points out in her essay 'AIDS as metaphor,' however:

The subliminal connection made to notions about a primitive past and the many hypotheses that have been fielded about possible transmission from animals (a disease of green monkeys? African swine fever?) cannot help but activate a familiar set of stereotypes about animality, sexual license, and blacks. (1989, 52)

The AIDS crisis thus arouses fears, prejudices, and narratives which intersect race and sexuality. This is further complicated by popular attitudes to homosexuality in contemporaneous African American culture, and by what Whitehead calls the 'Madonna-whore complex'⁶⁷ produced by chattel slavery (1997, 424-6). Adding to this, much of the music discussed below was written and released in a period in which hip-hop, already a male-dominated culture, was embracing new forms of hyper-masculine expression and identity. The early 1990s saw Snoop Dogg and Big

⁶⁶ An historical overview of medical racism in the US is provided by Harriet Washington's *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2006). The book also discusses recent experiments with HIV-positive children, who were mostly Black or Hispanic (2006, 330-46).

⁶⁷ This concept is used to describe the impact of plantation life on gender relations. It argues that the masculinity of the male slaves was challenged by their inability to provide a familial income and, further, by the slaveholder's control of sexual access to female slaves. This control means that Black femininity is subordinated to European and Judeo-Christian mores; white women are elevated to a saintly 'Madonna' status whilst the enslaved Black women are debased as 'whores'.

Daddy Kane popularising 'pimp' or 'mack' rap,⁶⁸ which foregrounded their own sexuality but also emphasised their ability to hold coercive control over women. Around the same time, figures such as Ice Cube and Jay-Z were popularising gangsta rap, which emphasised violence and wealth as prominent markers of masculinity.

The following section will discuss three male figures who became associated with HIV/AIDS in hip-hop culture: Big Daddy Kane, who faced false AIDS rumours which damaged his image and career; basketball player Magic Johnson, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1991 but survived, prompting conspiracy theories that elites had a secret cure; and rapper and Death Row Records figure Eazy-E, who died with AIDS in 1995. The media coverage and popular rumours surrounding these Black, male celebrities had a significant and lasting impact on how the crisis has been discussed in hip-hop culture. More broadly, it not only carved out a mode of speaking and thinking about HIV/AIDS in media and public discourse, but also acted as an introduction to the topic for many sports and music fans across the US. This will therefore be a useful starting point for discussion of hip-hop's later musical responses.

Such responses will be discussed and analysed in the next section, looking at a variety of music including some pop and RnB, but mostly centred on hip-hop. Special attention will be paid to the Red Hot Organisation and their collaborative hip-hop album *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996). Released shortly after Eazy-E's death in 1995, the album features some of the biggest hip-hop acts of the time: Wu-

⁶⁸ Adam Krims provides an explanation of this genre as part of his genre-system for rap music (2000, 46-92).

Tang Clan, Goodie Mob, Mobb Deep, and Coolio. Red Hot Organisation founder John Carlin saw Eazy-E's death as a turning point for HIV/AIDS activism amongst hip-hop artists.

Some [rap] artists were very into it; some were not. But after the death of Eazy-E, everybody wanted to do it. They said, "Oh, God, this is serious; this really affects our community." That really woke people up. (Nelson 1996, 27)

Interesting here is the appearance of the phrase 'woke people up.' Carlin uses the term here in the sense of waking up into a new awareness: this illness is serious and could affect me and my community. This notion of 'raising awareness' is familiar throughout the discursive world of charities and not-for-profits. It is also similar to some aspects of 'staying woke' in African American culture: keep wary of things which might threaten your survival or that of your community. The more conspiratorial aspect of this enters in the need for this awareness to extend to bigger questions of what causes the danger, why it affects Black people in particular, and if there is any intention behind it. This aspect of being 'woke' goes beyond the forms of 'awareness raising' associated with the charity sector, and instead into forms of political consciousness, which foreground basic us versus them questions (what Carl Schmitt (1932) would call the friend vs foe distinction): with whom do I struggle in common, and against whom are we struggling?

Following the analysis of *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996), this tension between 'raising awareness' and hip-hop's more typical mode of 'raising consciousness' will be elaborated. Finally, this chapter will conclude with the

question of how US hip-hop music has dealt with HIV/AIDS and other medical-social problems in the decades since 1996. I will show how some attitudes regarding HIV/AIDS have persisted, but also how responses to other medical threats, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have taken on a much different shape. The intersection of popular music, social initiatives and medicine remains an under-utilised resource in the struggle to understand popular suspicion and treatment-hesitancy in the context of epidemics and pandemics.

4.1 Black Male Celebrities and HIV Rumour Culture

This section discusses three famous African American men who became associated with HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s to mid-90s: Big Daddy Kane, a highly-regarded rapper who was subject to popular rumours that he was dying of AIDS (Lamont Hill 2009, 29); Magic Johnson, a legendary basketball player who announced his HIV-positive status in 1991; and Eazy-E, member of rap group NWA and founder of Ruthless Records, who died from AIDS-induced pneumonia in 1995. These examples will not only introduce the forms of rumour, suspicion, and paranoia brought about by the AIDS epidemic, but will also point to the interconnected politics of race, gender, and sexuality which work to sustain and complicate them.

Rumours about Big Daddy Kane having AIDS began to circulate in New York in 1989, with claims that the rapper had announced both his bisexuality and HIV-positive status on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (hampton 1996; Lamont Hill 2009, 29). Ironically, it is in part due to his carefully crafted playboy persona that Kane became a lightning rod for popular anxieties about AIDS in African American

communities. His duo of highly-regarded albums released in 1988 and 1989 include song titles such as 'The Day You're Mine', 'Smooth Operator', and 'To Be Your Man'. These releases not only cemented a status as a gifted technical rapper on par with the Golden Era's (mid-1980s to early-90s) most revered MCs, such as KRS One and Rakim, but also carved out a unique playboy persona built around a laid-back rhythmic flow, a deep baritone register, and unusually romantic lyrics. In Lamont Hill's words, the rumours seemed to represent '[h]ip-hop's Goliath of masculinity... [being] slain by a disease presumably preserved for 'punks,' 'fags,' and 'queens' (2009, 29).

Despite the general esteem held for Kane as a talented MC, the rumours proved to be almost fatal to his musical career. As dream hampton describes:⁶⁹

The streets of New York City were abuzz with news that Big Daddy Kane was dying of AIDS. That he'd been a closeted bisexual playing straight playboy all along. ... In a moment that was embarrassing for us all, Kane stood onstage at a free concert organised to register voters in Harlem and declared his negative status and his heterosexuality. His career never quite recovered from that moment.

Hip-hop artists learned two things from the Kane rumor. One was that if the implication of bisexuality or homosexuality could ruin a rapper's career, then what could the reality mean? The second was one AIDS activists learned a long time ago – that not only was there fear of the disease, but contempt for the person who was "immoral" enough to contract it. (hampton 1996)

⁶⁹ Big Daddy Kane also dismissed the rumours in the lyrics of a 1993 track 'Give it To Me':
'I paid the cost to be the boss
like with that HIV rumor they tried to toss
But I'm so good with the women that if I ever caught AIDS,
A woman doctor'd find a cure just so she could get laid,
So never fear my dear, just come on over here
I practice safe sex, with girls I lay next
In other words, the J-hat's on the head
Cause I'm too sexy for AIDS like Right Said Fred.'

In some senses, the rumours about Kane seem like a populist punishment meted out to an artist who leaned too far into the sexual aspects of his persona – a version of masculinity perhaps at odds with the increasingly popular gangsta rap style of N.W.A and others. He appeared, for example, in several nude photoshoots, for *Playgirl* magazine (June, 1991) and in pop singer Madonna's photography book *Sex* (1992), alongside model Naomi Campbell. This unusual association with the world of high fashion and the feminine, taboo-challenging sexuality of Madonna, itself embraced by gay club scenes and cultures, presumably worked to reinforce the rumours for hip-hop audiences. Whereas Kane was once regarded by the hip-hop community as an intelligent, original proponent of the music and culture, he was now linked with outsider groups themselves associated with HIV/AIDS: homosexuals and white people.

Tony Whitehead provides evidence of such attitudes amongst African American men in his essay on gender identity. He points out that whilst 'safe sex' social programs have 'had some impact on changing the risk behaviors of white middle-class homosexuals' (1997, 413), they have had:

...little if any impact... on African American men involved in homosexual activities. ... Moreover, as Hawkeswood (1993) found in his study of 156 uninfected black gay men, almost all (98%) of the sample believed that AIDS was mainly a gay men's illness. At the same time, one third of the men thought that it was a disease peculiar to "white" gay males. (1997, 413)

The rumours about Kane perhaps therefore represent the popular imagination of hip-hop culture speculating about how this illness, associated with white people and homosexuality, might come to affect heterosexual African Americans. Lamont Hill describes the Kane rumours as 'the first public 'outing' in hip-hop history' (2009, 29), whilst Sontag provides a more general formulation, whereby 'to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed... as a member of a certain "risk group," a community of pariahs' (1989, 24-5). It is Kane's particular performative masculine presentation, with its air of smoothness and sophistication, that seems to rub too close to implications of homosexuality and exotic associations with fashion icons and white pop stars. Further, the alleged deception of masquerading as a playboy whilst being privately homosexual perhaps led to notions that he was spreading the virus from white and homosexual communities to Black heterosexual women. In the context of general social anxieties about HIV/AIDS, this was sufficient to seriously dampen the career of an otherwise highly respected artist.

Sontag also describes how 'AIDS seems to foster ominous fantasies about a disease that is a marker of both individual and social vulnerabilities. The virus invades the body; the disease is described as invading the whole society' (65-6). Big Daddy Kane's ordeal with popular AIDS rumours shows an early example of these 'ominous fantasies' in action, a damaging attempt to speculate about how HIV might 'invade' urban African American communities. In the context of hip-hop culture in the early 1990s, this took on a masculinist and homophobic form.

If Kane's situation represented social anxieties finding a somewhat arbitrary target for popular expression, Magic Johnson's very real illness would provide a

more concrete foundation for such anxieties to build upon, developing into more properly conspiratorial narratives. Although his HIV-positive status was announced in 1991, it was his apparent good health in the years that followed that prompted the most conspiratorial speculation. Whilst he publicly retired immediately after the announcement of his illness, he went on to play in a 1992 NBA All-Star game in which he was awarded Most Valuable Player, and in the 1992 Olympics, in which the US team won the gold medal. This continued prowess on the court struck some as completely at odds with his HIV-positive status, especially at a time where treatments had limited success. This therefore led to speculation, especially amongst African American communities, that there was a secret cure for the illness being reserved for social and economic elites.

Sonja Mackenzie, in her monograph *Structural Intimacies: Sexual Stories in the Black AIDS Epidemic* (2013) relays 'an almost universal story' that came up in interviews she conducted, with this particular example coming from a middle-aged African American woman from the Bay Area:

They were saying that it was the army, they experimented and then they started usin' people for guinea pigs to test it.

And they had a cure. I really do think so. Just like Magic Johnson, he had it [HIV]; now he don't have it. He got money so he don't have it no more. I mean they have a cure for it but you have to have money in order to get cured. And they makin' a lot of money on these people by givin' them these drugs, which helps them because it's making them live longer you know. (2013, 72)

Whereas the case of Big Daddy Kane points towards race and sexuality as fissures around which paranoid speculation grew, Mackenzie argues that this popular

reaction to Magic Johnson is centred on class. Rather than pointing the finger towards, say, the white team-owners and financiers, motivated perhaps by the profits which Magic Johnson represented to them, popular suspicions in African American communities looked more towards Johnson's own wealth. In discussing Johnson's admirable attempts to provide public education about the illness, Mackenzie claims these often faltered with African American communities:

...the continued circulation of such certainty that Magic has been cured indicates that his efforts to humanise his HIV status are based on a false assumption that Blacks will in fact relate to this multimillionaire basketball hero as one of them. His efforts to ignore the profound role that his economic privilege holds in the minds of those in the Black community whom he hopes to reach out to, and to rely instead on messages based solely on race/ethnicity have, for better or worse, just not worked. To the contrary, the findings of these interviews suggest that Magic Johnson provides perhaps the ultimate embodied evidence for people's theories that HIV is, at its core, an epidemic based on economics. (2013, 73)

Whilst this sentiment seems slightly at odds with the broader picture of HIV/AIDS-related conspiracy narratives, which draw on notions of racial genocide and neo-colonial experimentation in Africa, the class-based aspect Mackenzie describes has a strong resonance in hip-hop culture. Kanye West provides an example of this many years later, rapping on his track 'Roses' (2005):

You know the best medicine go to people that's paid
If Magic Johnson got a cure for AIDS
And all the broke motherfuckers passed away
You telling me if my grandma's in the NBA
Right now she'd be okay? But since she
Was just a secretary, worked for the church for 35 years

Thing's supposed to stop right here.

This class-based aspect of conspiratorial HIV/AIDS narratives would also play a role in the first prominent case affecting a hip-hop artist: Eazy-E, former N.W.A member and co-founder of Death Row Records, who died in 1995 of AIDS-induced pneumonia. Although the gangsta rap movement, of which Eazy-E had been a crucial early proponent, often emphasised and flaunted wealth, it was understood as a wealth born of illicit hustling by people raised in impoverished environments. Thus, although he was buried in a gold-plated casket, it made sense to listeners that Eazy-E would not have had access to the supposed cure for AIDS.

Indeed, the conspiracy theories surrounding his death instead focused on his popular association with organised crime: fellow Death Row Records co-founder Suge Knight implied on a 2003 episode of talk-show *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* that Eazy-E had been intentionally injected with blood containing HIV. He argued that gun crime had become too identifiable due to new police technologies, and that using infected blood as a weapon had therefore become a viable alternative. In this vision, HIV/AIDS becomes just one amongst many dangers faced by those who pursue the 'gangsta' lifestyle, or find themselves in proximity to it due to their location and socio-economic status.

In each of these cases of famous African American men becoming associated with HIV/AIDS, a varied set of popular suspicions and paranoias emerge. The common thread of these popular reactions is that they build from existing and intersecting tensions around issues of race, sexuality, class, and gender. Hip-hop music about HIV/AIDS often reflects these tensions, such as the

homophobic content of 2 Live Crew's 'Do Wah Diddy' (1987) and Public Enemy's 'Meet the G that Killed Me' (1990), and the misogynistic themes that would emerge in the musical responses to Eazy-E's death – as will be discussed in the following section.

Many of early approaches to the subject in hip-hop music had been relatively unproblematic in these aspects, however, and were instead quite straightforwardly educational. One of the earliest, Kool Moe Dee's 'Go See the Doctor' (1986), unambiguously recommends condoms and sexual health checks to his audience. KRS One takes a similar approach in advocating safe sex in Boogie Down Production's 'Jimmy' (1988), which, unlike 'Go See the Doctor,' explicitly mentions AIDS. dream hampton claims that ever since this release, it's been considered 'extremely street chic and, more important, ghetto smart to "throw shields on the dick/to stop me from that HIV shit," as the Notorious B.I.G. rapped in 'The What' from *Ready to Die* (hampton 1996).⁷⁰

Of course, none of this is incompatible with conspiratorial perspectives. These too were present before HIV/AIDS (and HIV/AIDS rumours) began affecting prominent figures in the hip-hop scene. Matthew Tift, in his doctoral dissertation on AIDS in US music, cites *New York Times* journalist Peter Watrous' review of a 1990 Public Enemy concert in which member Professor Griff is said to have 'contended that the AIDS epidemic was propagated by the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union' (2007, 164-5). Whilst such narratives and suspicions preceded the damaging speculations about Big Daddy Kane, they would

⁷⁰ There is also a similar safe-sex/abstinence sentiment going on in 80s pop music around this time. A notable example is Jermaine Stewart's 'We Don't Have to Take Our Clothes Off' (1985).

then re-emerge in response to the sobering death of Eazy-E, along with a re-invigorated misogyny, which seemed to become difficult for many artists to separate from the urgently necessary endorsement of condoms and good sexual health practices. The following section explores these discursive entanglements in the context of the awareness-raising collaborative album *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996).

4.2 *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996)

4.2.1 Red Hot Organisation

The Red Hot Organisation was founded in 1989 by Leigh Blake and John Carlin, both of whom had witnessed the initial effects of HIV/AIDS on the early 80s art and music scenes in Manhattan. Carlin was working at the law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison and discovered that it represented the Cole Porter estate. He approached a partner in the entertainment division about releasing a benefit album featuring contemporary musicians singing Porter's songs, and was given the green light if the musicians involved were famous enough. Blake's involvement with the New York punk scene enabled her to convince Talking Heads singer David Byrne to help the group. This in turn led to the involvement of other well-known musicians including Annie Lennox, k.d. lang, and Bono. They and others would contribute to the first Red Hot album *Red Hot + Blue* (1990).

The organisation tread a fine line between operating as a charity and a record label; it went on to release twelve albums through the 1990s, whilst maintaining a legal status as a non-profit organisation. These albums spanned a range of genres,

and consistently attracted some of the most famous acts of the time: *Red Hot + Dance* (1992) featured George Michael and Madonna, *No Alternative* (1993) featured The Smashing Pumpkins and Sarah McLachlan, and *Red Hot + Country* (1994) Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, and Alison Krauss. Red Hot faced difficulties in putting together an album involving hip-hop and RnB musicians, however. Public health writer Stephen Hicks claims that 'Several well-known musicians – specifically, a popular male RnB artist of the era – said no because of the fear he would lose his fan base if assumed gay...' (2019). The situation faced by Big Daddy Kane with respect to HIV and homosexuality rumours – ongoing at the time of these releases – shows that such concerns were not unfounded.

Despite these initial difficulties with convincing popular African American musicians, the organisation clearly saw a lot of potential value in reaching the substantial Black, Hispanic, and youth audiences who listened to hip-hop and RnB. In fact, their persistence in this area is impressive, as evidenced by the participation of the group Jungle Brothers and rapper Neneh Cherry on *Red Hot + Blue* (1990), Beastie Boys ('It's the New Style') on the alternative rock album *No Alternative* (1993), and of both The Pharcyde ('The Rubbers Song') and The Roots ('Proceed II' with Roy Ayers) on *Stolen Moments: Red Hot + Cool* (1994), a mostly jazz-themed album predominantly featuring African American musicians. In 1996, they released *Offbeat: A Red Hot Soundtrip*, which explored the legacy of the Beat poetry movement alongside the contemporary 'trip-hop' style. Very few of the musicians involved could be described as hip-hop musicians, however. The closest is perhaps Amiri Baraka's reading of his poem 'Black Dada Nihilismus' (originally 1964) set

to music by DJ Spooky, an experimental producer drawing heavily on hip-hop influences.

There are two things to note with these initial efforts to incorporate contemporary urban music styles into the Red Hot releases. First, the organisation had more luck with convincing hip-hop artists at the more experimental end of the genre. These musicians were likely less concerned with the potential negative consequences of being associated with HIV/AIDS and homosexuality than their peers working in more commercially-viable styles.⁷¹ Second, the inclusion of Amiri Baraka's controversial poem, which includes some intense imagery of sexual violence against white women, showed that Red Hot were willing to risk reproducing misogynistic themes in their releases. This latter point will be important to the following discussion of Red Hot's first bona fide hip-hop release, *America is Dying Slowly* (1996).

The death of Eazy-E in 1995 played a prominent role in convincing more hip-hop artists to participate (Red Hot co-founder John Carlin is quoted on this point in the introduction to this chapter). The artists involved were some of the most prominent of the period: Mobb Deep, Wu-Tang Clan, De La Soul, and Coolio to name a few.

4.2.2 HIV/AIDS in Hip-hop Music of the Early to Mid-90s

⁷¹ Beastie Boys are an exception to this rule, which could be attributed to their generally exceptional status as a white hip-hop group from Jewish backgrounds, who nevertheless held credibility both within hip-hop culture and the more rock-oriented 'alternative' scenes of the early 90s.

Despite the apparent unwillingness of many hip-hop and RnB acts to get involved in an explicit AIDS-benefit type album, HIV/AIDS had begun to figure fairly prominently in the music and surrounding cultural discourse by the mid-1990s. The condom-promoting safe sex themes noted above as emerging in some late 80s hip-hop (Kool Moe Dee's 'Go See the Doctor' (1986) and Boogie Down Production's 'Jimmy' (1988), most notably) had maintained a certain popularity. Erick Sermon's 'Safe Sex' (1993) tells listeners to 'make sure you wear the latex' and invokes HIV/AIDS indirectly through references to Magic Johnson. Salt n Pepa's 'Let's Talk About AIDS' (1994) is significant for the fact it explicitly names the syndrome and also in adding female voices to this message. 'Waterfalls' by all-female RnB group TLC followed in 1995, bringing a feminine perspective on the issue to a mass audience after topping the Billboard Hot 100 charts for seven weeks (Billboard 1995). At the same time, the messaging of the song is much less direct, with 'three letters' being the most explicit reference to HIV/AIDS.

Of course, this form of messaging, which clearly advocated sensible solutions for minimising the spread of HIV/AIDS amongst African American and youth audiences, was not the only representation of HIV/AIDS discourse in hip-hop music. Rapper Big L took the directly contrarian approach for example, when he rapped in 'Danger Zone' (1995): 'I never wear rubbers, bitch, if I get AIDS, fuck it!' Different again was Public Enemy's 'Race Against Time' (1994), which is notable for its characteristically conspiratorial perspective on the issue.

How did I catch this riddle, if I didn't crossover like a
Hardaway dribble?
They blamed it on some green African monkey

Now, ain't that funky?
...
Bigger damage than the trigger and glocks
Mass murder in mass from a
Blanket full a small pox
No guarantees gettin lesser fees
In Tuskegee Blacks got shot with disease

Through reference to well-documented historical-medical racial injustices – the intentional infection of Native Americans with smallpox, and the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment – they imply that HIV/AIDS is a new form of racially-motivated mass murder. Whilst clearly very distinct from TLC's big hit 'Waterfalls' (1995) in tone and content, there is actually some entanglement between the emerging dichotomy of 'responsible'/'mainstream' and 'conspiratorial'/'alternative' perspectives. Goodie Mob's Cee Lo Green was a backing singer on 'Waterfalls,' and a year later penned 'Cell Therapy' (1996) – an infamous track in the conspiratorial hip-hop canon inspired by iconic conspiracy theory text, Milton William Cooper's *Behold a Pale Horse* (1991). Whilst the track does not specifically discuss HIV/AIDS, it centres on the kind of genocide discourse found in 'Race Against Time,' and has a title that invokes racialised medical experimentation. In the same year, the group would contribute to Red Hot's *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996).

Even for radically different forms of rhetoric about the HIV/AIDS crisis and its effect on African American and other non-white US populations, this suggests that there is a shared social and artistic milieu for hip-hop artists which includes conspiratorial perspectives as a prominent element. It also might suggest that artists who more strongly identify with the conspiratorial perspective do not necessarily

feel that this precludes them from producing or performing in a more mainstream, public health warning song about HIV/AIDS. Indeed, they may not have seen the two as contradictory. This aspect appears to have been identified and accepted by the Red Hot Organisation as part of their communication strategy for hip-hop music and young non-white audiences, as will become clear in the following analysis.

Adding to the discursive confusion surrounding HIV/AIDS in hip-hop culture at this time were the positions of the Nation of Islam on the issue. The group's influence on *America is Dying Slowly* (1996), for example, is evident not just in the inclusion of Five-Percenter rapper Sadat X, but in the title itself, whose 'backronym' stylings are a consistent Nation of Islam motif. Having claimed in 1992 that HIV/AIDS had been created by the US government, by 1995, just a few weeks prior to Eazy-E's death, their minister Dr Abdul Alim Muhammad was touting a 'miracle cure' for the syndrome (Gaines et al. 1995).⁷² Although the drug in question, a form of interferon, has been used legitimately in treatments since (Oscar-winning film *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée 2013) dramatises the struggle to get the drug prescribed, amongst other treatments), it was lacking approval from the Food and Drug Administration at the time the Nation of Islam were advocating for it. In short, this was a time when legitimate and illegitimate claims about HIV/AIDS, its causes, treatments, and preventative measures, were difficult to parse, whether they came from the government, rappers, or populist religious figures.

⁷² Susan Sontag claimed in 1989 that 'AIDS is a favorite concern of those who translate their political agenda into questions of group psychology: of national self-esteem and self-confidence.' (63).

Part of what makes *America is Dying Slowly* (1996) so interesting is that it did not shy away from some of these areas of discursive entanglement and ambiguity, nor the more obviously problematic aspects of pre-existing discourse about HIV/AIDS in hip-hop and African American popular culture. I suggest that it offers a unique snapshot of how public health messaging and education were conceived of by hip-hop artists in this period. Solid practical advice about avoiding transmission intermingles fluidly with impressionistic socio-historical context about race and its relation to disease and genocide. Also frequently present is a conflation of good sexual health with misogynistic attitudes. The gamble of the Red Hot organisation was that these aspects would strengthen the core message of the album for hip-hop audiences – namely, to take HIV/AIDS seriously – rather than undermine it. In any case, by putting together the album, Red Hot amplified all of these themes in a significant way by creating a platform where lots of big name artists were making and releasing tracks at once, in contrast to hip-hop music's more sporadic and more coded approach to HIV/AIDS in preceding years.

4.2.3 The Music

Relatively few hip-hop albums have commanded the collective star power of *America is Dying Slowly* (1996): Wu Tang Clan, Coolio, Goodie Mob, Fat Joe, De La Soul, Pete Rock, and Mobb Deep were some of the most respected and well-known artists of the mid-90s hip-hop cultural scene. The inclusion of rappers from New York, Compton, the Bay Area, and Atlanta was also indicative of Red Hot's success in recruiting artists, considering that antipathy between the East and West

Coast was arguably at a high-point in hip-hop culture in 1996. Also impressive was the fact that this compilation album was comprised of almost entirely original material.⁷³ The album was preceded by an MTV special *Red Hot + Rap* (broadcast 20th June 1996, dir. Paley) hosted by Coolio and featuring live performances by Goodie Mob, De La Soul and the Wu-Tang Clan, as well as a section on Eazy-E involving interviews with a number of prominent artists.

Red Hot's website describes Wu-Tang Clan's contribution 'America' (1996) as receiving 'tremendous airplay' on hip-hop radio stations and being one the 'most effective public service announcements ever created during the AIDS crisis.' A contemporary review of the album, otherwise critical of many aspects of the record, similarly suggested that 'The Yearn' by the Lost Boyz and producer Pete Rock was 'already a hit' shortly after its release (Baxter, 1996). Despite these claims, neither the album nor any of the tracks reached a chart position; the all-male line-up got nowhere near the commercial success achieved by all-female group TLC with their 1995 track 'Waterfalls'. Whilst that track was more in the vein of an RnB-pop crossover hit with rapped elements by member Left Eye, however, this album was unambiguously a hip-hop record.

Red Hot co-founder John Carlin sets out the aims of the organisation with their albums in the MTV special *Red Hot + Rap* (dir. Paley 1996) preceding its release:

⁷³ An exception is Lost Boyz 'The Yearn', also released on their album *Legal Drug Money* (1996), which came out only a few weeks before the Red Hot album. Goodie Mob's track was reworked from a short 50 second interlude on their album *Soul Food* (1995) into a 6 minute epic for the Red Hot compilation.

...the hallmark of the organisation is trying to target specific audiences and having their pop stars stand up and say, you know, we have to talk about sex, we have to talk about safer sex, we have to talk about drugs, and we have to do it in a real way. We have to talk in the language of the people who are at risk. We provide education in a way that nobody else does about the issue of AIDS.

By this metric, the album can claim a significant cultural impact. Despite not achieving commercial chart success, the existence of the MTV special, the album, and the fame and profile of the musicians involved undeniably broke new ground in terms of appealing to African American youth audiences, especially young men. The practical impact and reach of the album and accompanying media is difficult to assess, but the mere knowledge amongst hip-hop audiences that a large number of esteemed rappers had endorsed an awareness initiative was a significant shift compared to earlier discourse about HIV/AIDS in hip-hop music.

The MTV special was particularly clear in outlining the overriding message of the project: Coolio, hosting the show, repeats a number of times '...the message in the music? Protect yourself. AIDS affects everyone.' Later, he says '...everyone is at risk, the disease does not discriminate by age, race or sexual preference.' Considering that research such as Whitehead (1997) suggests that Black men saw HIV/AIDS as something predominantly to do with white people, gay people, and drug users, this was a well-judged intervention in terms of its core messaging. The special also capitalised on popular awareness of Eazy-E's death, playing interviews with fellow former N.W.A. member Dr Dre, and a clip of Eazy-E's attorney reading a letter from the artist after his death: 'I would like to turn my own problem into something good that will reach out to all my homeboys and their kin because I want

to save their asses before it's too late' (Paley 1996). Further reinforcing this messaging with soundbites from Notorious B.I.G., Aaliyah, Rev. Run of Run D.M.C, and many others, the special succeeds in its difficult aim of producing a public health announcement aimed at young African Americans which still had some claim to cultural authenticity in the realm of hip-hop culture and music.

The album itself does less well at addressing young African Americans and people of colour as a whole, with its apparently exclusive targeting of the male part of this population. Whether this was intentional or more the result of only attracting male artists to the project is uncertain. Nevertheless, the content of the songs is highly varied, and this analysis will therefore benefit from a brief summary of all the tracks in the album, with a view towards drawing out a number of themes: social utility in terms of health advice, misogynist and homophobic themes, and conspiratorial content. What is surprising is how often these aspects are represented musically in a way that makes them difficult to separate from each other.

The album opens with a collaboration by rappers Biz Markie and Chubb Rock with producer Prince Paul. The title 'No Rubber, No Backstage Pass' (1996) sets a sexualised, macho tone from the beginning, with its implication of swooning female groupies. The first sounds we hear reinforce this: vague sounds of men joking around in the studio are interrupted by a lengthy roar from Biz Markie, before a ticking hi-hat leads into a sample-based beat with a heavy bass mix. The content of the verses seem to risk avoiding the topic of HIV/AIDS and even sex altogether, tending instead towards the virtuosic brag-raps and fanciful assortment of topics

common to collaborations where skilled rappers trade verses. Towards the end of the final verse, however, Chubb Rock finally addresses the topic (1996):

Girls buckwild, child, in the rub-a-dub style
Every girl love oh Chubb Rock profile, smile
At the camera point your glutimus to the man
At the movie star to smack out, with my rubber band
I can tell that, you need me, you don't want me to get paunchy
And me, I don't want to catch no HIV
So we'll protect you, and me - but mainly me
If you don't want no rubber then P-E-A-C-E

In order to set up the HIV messaging, Chubb Rock transitions from the bragging rap cypher tone of the rest of the track by rapping about his own sex appeal and a sexual encounter which depends, for him, on the use of a condom. Its presentation feels unusually impersonal and mechanical; little effort is put into painting any detail about the woman or a romantic or sexual encounter. This feeling is reinforced with the HIV message proper, with its emphasis on protecting 'me - but mainly me'. Whilst the health messaging here seems somewhat tacked on to the rest of the track, what is consistent is a projection of self-interested and self-assured male sexual identity. Building from the well-established basis of trading rap verses as a display of masculine confidence and appeal, the main message – wear a condom – is effectively integrated into the personas projected in the music. The fact that it is mean-spirited and objectifying in the way it does this is a trade-off for conveying this message in a way that feels more like a hip-hop track than it does a normal PSA produced by government agencies or health charities.

A new voice appears immediately after these final lines are delivered and the beat stops. It states, as if talking to itself, 'There's no way I'm just gonna be running around here doing shit without a condom on, you know what I'm saying? I mean you just asking for trouble.' Similar interjections appear throughout the album in between the tracks. These play the role of a projected inner-monologue for the (male) listener, suggesting ideal responses to the messaging of the tracks. This supports the notion that the album is aimed specifically at a male hip-hop audience and shapes its communicative strategy in a heavily gendered sense. Here, it attempts to capitalise on notions of Black male self-reliance and self-interest – a potentially effective strategy since these are common threads throughout hip-hop in terms of relaying advice for navigating life.

The following track, 'The Yearn' by The Lost Boyz (1996), follows this up with a much more prominent sexual theme, matched by a beat influenced by the West Coast G-funk style. Although the producer Pete Rock is a famous New York beatmaker, the bassline and wah-wah guitar are clear nods to the beats commonly associated with sexualised mack or pimp rap such as Snoop Dogg's 'Doggystyle' (1991). Lyrically, the song alternates verses about seduction, group sex, and later sexual health advice, with a chanted group hook which repeats: 'With my cheebas [cannabis], my liquors, my condoms, hit the ass' (1996). Condoms are listed along with recreational drugs and alcohol as just another essential ingredient for a good time. The spoken interlude after the track differs from the last – less a tone of internal monologue than of being given advice by someone in-the-know, with a specifically Nation-of-Islam inflection: 'Break down the word AIDS. See, you get

two definitions, you can get America is Dying, right? Then you can also flip it on Allah is Divine' (1996). By playing on the backronym style associated with the religious group, the interlude is used to imply an affinity or shared voice between them, the musicians, and Red Hot – one which was only latent in the album's title but realised properly in the reference to Allah. This is somewhat surprising given that the Nation of Islam were getting a lot of media attention at the time for various AIDS-related conspiracy theories and touting a 'miracle cure', not to mention the homophobia of the Nation of Islam in contrast to the previous work by Red Hot with many prominent gay musicians. There is once again a complex trade-off taking place between projected cultural identity, health messaging, and authenticity.

Wu-Tang Clan's 'America is Dying Slowly' (1996) is significant for its five and a half minute length and for serving as the inspiration for the album's title. Typically for the group, the track features a large number of short verses from different members, bridging a range of themes and approaches. Killah Priest's opening verse has one of the most direct implications yet of women as virus-carriers: 'Her garden sour, polluted with a dead flower / Months later, he's layin on a respirator' (1996). He even sets this up with a gendered reference to the Genesis myth 'You fall in a manhole, where the forbidden tree grow' (1996), implying the notion of women as a corrupting influence on men. Raekwon's verse following this is the first of the album to focus on intravenous drug use as a way to transmit HIV. Next comes a verse by founding member RZA, notable for its reference to AIDS

conspiracy theories. Unusually for hip-hop, and for this group perhaps especially,⁷⁴ it is framed as a warning against conspiracy theories (1996):

But nigga he forsake to grab the condom
Fuck it, he said, AIDS was government made
To keep niggas afraid so they won't get laid no babies be made
And the Black population will decrease within a decade
German warfare product against the dark shade.

The number of lines devoted to outlining this disavowed conspiracy theory, as well as the attractive internal-rhyme structure and their delivery, could carry some risk of them being misapprehended out of context and taken as an endorsement of the theory. This is largely avoided, however, as the track's hook follows immediately afterwards and is itself memorable and unambiguous: 'AIDS kills! Word up, respect this, yo / Coming from the Wu, it's real!'. Whilst conspiracy theories are sometimes used in hip-hop to add a racially-charged motivation for, say, avoiding crack cocaine or being safe from HIV transmission, here RZA suggests that they could be used to justify unprotected sex by seeing the whole thing as an illusion to stop Black reproduction, with reference to Black genocide and Nazism. The repeated hook is emphasised by a steadily detuning sample which gives the unsettling feeling of the ground moving from under the listener. Both musically and lyrically, RZA, who also produced the track, wants listeners to be clear about the disturbing reality of HIV transmission.

⁷⁴ Noted by conspiracy theory scholar Peter Knight as taking 'to new heights the use of conspiratorial rhetoric in a trickster aesthetic.' (2001, 167).

Goodie Mob's 'Blood' (1996) shares some similarities with Wu-Tang Clan's contribution, both in terms of the track's lengthiness and in the groups' known proclivity for conspiratorial narratives, most famously in 'Cell Therapy' (1995), which had reached number 1 on the Billboard Rap chart and 39 on the Hot 100 in the previous year. Such narratives are absent here, however, as is any direct reference to HIV/AIDS or indeed sex or intravenous drug use. The track is instead linked to the album's themes more indirectly by verses about personal and racial struggles and the notion of shared blood, as in the track's hook (1996):

It's a shame, when niggas gon' realise we're the same
Helpin' the enemy win the game
If you a player, use precision, don't make a decision in haste
Blood is a terrible thing to waste

'The enemy' in this context is presumably conceived of in racial terms, given the context of shared blood and racial struggle. It is expressed in a vague sense, however, as is the advice given to the listener – 'use precision, don't make a decision in haste'.

Coolio's 'I Breaks 'Em Off' (1996) is built on a West Coast G funk beat and similar to 'Blood' avoids addressing HIV/AIDS. Further, it is actually quite incongruous for its upbeat mood and lack of a link to the theme of the album. Nevertheless, Coolio had a prominent billing on the album and served as the host for the MTV special *Red Hot + Rap* (Paley 1996) which preceded it. In this, he was the main voice the special communicated statistics and health warnings about HIV/AIDS and also for its advertisement of the upcoming album and its fundraising

aims. This was partly to do with his fame at the time, built off his highly successful 1995 album *Gangsta's Paradise*, which charted in countries throughout the world. One of the singles, 'Too Hot', released October 1995, dealt with HIV/AIDS extensively and also climbed singles charts internationally. He was therefore not only a well-known artist in the mid-90s, but had recently had a hit single addressing the crisis. Interestingly, whilst the track is fairly straightforward in its warnings about transmission and advocacy of condoms, it also contains some potentially conspiratorial implications. Each verse ends with a similar hook. In the first verse: 'What started off as a plan ended up in the plot / Ya betta cool ya ass off cause it's too damn hot' (1995). Here, 'plot' could be taken as either potentially meaning burial plot or a conspiratorial plot, but the phrasing in the second verse seems to support the latter interpretation: 'Sometimes you ask for what you want and, get what you got / Don't get caught up in the plot, it's too damn hot' (1995). Whilst it is not a direct use of conspiracy theory, the linking of contracting HIV with getting 'caught up the plot' certainly carries the implication. This is especially notable given Coolio's prominent role and billing in Red Hot's efforts.

8ball and MJG's track 'Listen To Me Now' (1996) raps from the perspective of the virus itself, an effective and memorable tactic. The messaging is fairly simple and in-line with the rest of the album, with condom advocacy, arguments against casual sex, and some religiously-tinged sexist rhetoric: 'Never be thinking about the filthy hoes in which I've laid / Down deep in the dungeons next to the devil is where I stayed' (1996). Interesting here is the use of a sample from Goodie Mob's conspiratorial tour-de-force 'Cell Therapy' (1995), inspired in turn by the infamous

conspiracy theory book *Behold a Pale Horse* by Milton William Cooper (1991). It hits all the classic hip-hop conspiracy theory tropes, including race wars, United Nations experiments, concentration camps, and unmarked black helicopters. Although none of this is explicitly carried over into 8ball and MJG's contribution, they take their track title from a highly recognisable sampled snippet of the hook of 'Cell Therapy' which begins with a distinctive sound effect before the line 'listen to me now, believe me later on'. 8ball and MJG then rhyme this with 'I knew I should have had my jimmy hat on' (1996), thus forming the lines repeated for their own song's hook. In a way, it is as if Goodie Mob's conspiratorial rhetoric is domesticated for use in a charity-endorsed public health message. Considering that meaning in rap necessarily functions in a dialogic sense, in the references and re-appropriations between tracks rather than simply in lone tracks themselves, there is surely also a movement in the opposite direction, where a straightforward public health message becomes entangled in a chain-of-meaning saturated with paranoid and conspiratorial themes.

From here onwards, many of the tracks do not explicitly address HIV/AIDS or sexual health whatsoever. Presumably many of them were abandoned tracks from previous projects but were nevertheless useful to Red Hot for padding out the album and adding more influential artists' names to endorse the overall message. Mobb Deep's 'Street Life' (1996) is one such example and covers the usual street hustling themes the group is known for. The interlude speech following the song is noteworthy, however, as a voice claims (1996):

That's somebody's hustle. Somebody's sitting rich off of that. That one right there. Somebody's living lavish off of making this disease...

It is possible that this is Mobb Deep rapper Prodigy as he has promoted a variety of conspiracy theories elsewhere including Illuminati conspiracies – a sampled lyric of his 'Illuminati want my mind, soul and my body / secret society, tryna keep they eye on me' (originally from LL Cool J's 'I Shot Ya' (1995), featuring Prodigy) is used as a basis for Jay-Z's 'D'Evils' (1996), for example, and it is also referenced in Goodie Mob's 'Cell Therapy' (2005). It is notable that Red Hot would have included this, since these interludes would have been inserted at the mixing stage for the album, rather than the compositional process for the constituent tracks, where they would have little to no control. It suggests some intention on their part about endorsing a conventional conspiratorial narrative about HIV/AIDS as a man-made biological weapon. This is amplified by the fact it is inserted at the end of a track which itself has little to nothing to say about HIV/AIDS in general.

There is little to say about most of the remaining tracks, which either do not address HIV directly or do so in a very limited way. What is notable are the strongest misogynist narratives found in the album on 'Check Ya Self' by Spice 1, Celly Cel, 187 Fac and Ant Banks (1996), and '(Stay Away from the) Nasty Hoes' by Sadat X, Fat Jo and Diamond D (1996). Both of these contain narratives which make explicit the implication of some sexist rhetoric in the early tracks: not only are women seen as virus-carriers, but are accused of intentionally infecting men with HIV. Spice 1 raps (1996):

I'm peepin' that bitch out at the ho spot
Tryin' to throw that virus to my homie
Better watch these bitches cause they're fake and phony

In his track, Fat Joe presents a similar narrative in even stronger terms (1996):

Welcome to the world of AIDS is what she wrote
On the mirror with the red lipstick before I woke
Who would ever think that this would happen to me
Bitch hit me off with HIV, purposely

Though obviously highly offensive and sexist in its presentation, and in the implication that purposeful infection is a widespread practice specific to women, there is potentially some value to bringing up the topic. Musicologist Paul Attinello notes that purposeful infection does happen but is a taboo topic in music addressing HIV/AIDS (2015). More popular and palatable songs like TLC's 'Waterfalls' (1995), in contrast, tend to not even call the virus or disease by name, let alone broach such a taboo issue. So whilst the actual song and lyrics under discussion should be recognised as misogynistic and potentially harmful to public health messaging, it could be argued that it is better to have this topic represented in popular music in some way rather than not at all, especially as some listeners may have personal experience of it.

Also notable in these two tracks is the general intensity of the sexist language used and the faulty sexual health advice they give. Spice 1 combines both: 'You don't know that ho, man, that bitch can't be trusted / Better be strapped with about four condoms if you plan on keeping your life' (1996). Sadat X raps 'Helmet

wrapped tight sees no daylight / I roll two-ply duke and that's a must' (1996). Since condoms can more easily break if more than one is worn, it is worth noting that Red Hot did not censor or otherwise disinclude tracks with poor sexual health advice.

Once again the spoken interlude provides some interesting material, in this case at the end of 'Check Ya Self' (1996). We hear a voice, presumably one of the rappers featured in the song, discussing Eazy-E's death – quite likely the only direct mention of this on the record, despite the fact that it was a large part of what inspired it to be made. The interlude first expresses surprise that Eazy-E died to AIDS rather than in a more conventional way for a hustler. He then states that Black men are always 'three steps ahead of death' and lists the three main ways of dying for as 'smothered in the streets', 'they can lock you up forever', '...or [get] hit with that silent three strikes, that's that AIDS, that shit ain't no joke' (1996). By making AIDS part of this trinity, the speaker effectively elevates an AIDS death to be on par with a more traditional gangsta death, in some ways adding a dignity to a disease that would previously have been seen as undermining street credibility.

A final track worth mentioning is Domino's 'Sport That Raincoat' (1996), notable as the only track to address women directly. The hook of the is a call and response answered first by a group of men then by a group of women (1996):

What my homies gon' do when you're sexin' a freak?
(I'm gon' sport that raincoat!)
And what my ladies gon' do when you're getting' a piece?
(Make him sport that raincoat!)

This is followed up by a verse aimed at female listeners (1996):

Now to the ladies of the world, here's a tip for you
When you're with your homeboy and you're doin' your do
He be runnin' that trash, "You can trust me, baby"
Next time he say it, say "Fool, you're crazy"

Whilst this more even treatment of male and female listeners is refreshing towards the end of the album, that is only the case because it is very much the exception in terms of the overall audience targeting and tone of the album with respect to women.

4.3 Raising Awareness versus Raising Consciousness

Writer dream hampton provided a contemporary critique of the album in her review "AIDS Gets a Bad Rap" (1996). She describes the album as 'persistently misogynistic. Women are portrayed as preying on unsuspecting men; not only are they death traps, they're practically hunters who want to spread the disease.' Music critic Nicky Baxter similarly described how, in the album, 'females are seen as the bearers of viral fruit.' (1996) Red Hot co-founder John Carlin and co-producer of the album Grace Harry responded to hampton's queries about these issues that it was the 'organization's policy to "not censor anything the artists have to say"' (hampton 1996). hampton puts this down to hip-hop's role of continuing 'the modern autobiographical narrative of the Black male, an extension of the 50s tradition of James Baldwin and Chester Hines. ... white gay middle-class activists such as John Carlin... don't have the authority to question this misogynist narrative and are afraid

to even try. Hence the unchallenged theme of the Red Hot album: Boys warning other boys that pussies are on fire' (1996).

In his doctoral dissertation on HIV/AIDS in US music, Matthew Tift provides a thorough list of examples (2007, 142-3) of how the constituent tracks form a whole that demonstrates hampton's pithy characterisation of the album. He also provides an interesting quote from producer Grace Harry in defence of this aspect of the album, who claims that she 'reached out to every female artists and if they're not on, it's not my fault. I agree that a lot of the lyrics are misogynistic, but that's the way those guys feel' (142). It is notable that the album had a female producer and that they claim to have tried hard to recruit female artists, since this does add weight to the consistent position of Red Hot in terms of fidelity to the artists' uncensored perspectives – it was simply that they hoped to have had a more diverse range of perspectives present.

On the other hand, some aspects of the album's misogynist themes feel more intentional, in terms of forming a specific strategy for targeting male hip-hop listeners. As Tift says, 'America Is Dying Slowly forces the question of whether or not young rap audiences – males especially, but not exclusively – would be more or less likely to listen to safe sex messages if the musicians did not also convey a particular image of sexually active manhood' (2007, 142). This notion can be extended beyond the role of sexuality in this project, although that aspect is obviously central. Another important aspect, underdiscussed in the critical and academic response to this album, are the themes of conspiracy theory and racial genocide that form an important background layer to the arguments and

communicative strategies in the album. Building on Tift's formulation, we might also question if Red Hot's aims of raising awareness about HIV/AIDS would be believable if it did not also conform to deeply-embedded notions of raising *consciousness* in hip-hop. In other words, fitting in with the kinds of racially-charged rhetoric and argument which had figured so strongly throughout African American popular music in the 20th century, as opposed to sounding as though it reproduced the kind of political messaging associated with the white establishment, whether that be the US government or the increasingly powerful NGOs and international governance organisations such as the World Health Organisation. Unlike awareness, political consciousness implies a political subject of some kind; by going beyond raising awareness and into raising consciousness, Red Hot may have increased their reach and created a feeling of political and musical authenticity, but also brought with it the baggage of a specifically male Black radical subjectivity.

Red Hot's current webpage for the album features a short history, tid-bits, and an embedded video of the MTV special *Red Hot + Rap* (Paley 1996) released to help publicise the album and its message a week before it was released. It provides some indication of why the organisation might have been happy to release something with conspiratorial content, or at least how they might have attempted to turn it to their advantage. Their summary of the MTV special focuses entirely on the Wu-Tang Clan performance which closes the programme:

The last live performance of the entire original Wu-Tang Clan was for the MTV special called "Red Hot + Rap" produced for the album. Old Dirty Bastard was so late that MTV got frustrated and started filming

the song without him. He arrived in the middle, climbed on stage and did his verse, which appeared in the show and can be seen at the end of show, embedded here... (Red Hot Organisation n.d)

Their focus on Old Dirty Bastard, who was known for the kind of performative controversy and showmanship such as that described here, suggests that a certain amount of this kind of controversy was useful to their cause of spreading HIV/AIDS awareness amongst hip-hop audiences. They were probably correct; having someone as unfiltered, 'real' or 'authentic' as Old Dirty Bastard as part of their efforts not only generates 'buzz' but moves it as far as possible from the all but inevitably awkward, sanitised feel that a health-awareness charity pop music album is going to possess. Supporting the notion that this was something Red Hot strategically capitalised on is that their summary does not appear to be a particularly accurate reflection of the video. Old Dirty Bastard does indeed appear late in the song and starts his verse at the wrong time, whilst the rest of the group is still chanting the hook. There is no specific indication that he shows up late and climbs on the stage half-way through the song, however. In fact, he appears to be visible sitting at the back in the song's first half. The fact that they exaggerate, even now, what was undoubtedly a characteristically off-kilter performance from the rapper, and fail to mention much else about the 1-hour special, indicates that they see a particular value in it.

Also notable in this context is that Wu-Tang Clan's track features one of the most extended conspiratorial raps in the album. It is couched in negative terms, with RZA describing how seeing AIDS as 'government made' might lead to not taking it seriously. However, it requires careful listening to the energetic performance to

actually notice this negative couching of the conspiratorial ideas. Much easier to hear is his strongly delivered final line 'It's a war plot against the darker shade,' creating a reasonable risk of this being misapprehended, especially heard through the speakers found in 1990s televisions. The co-presence of conspiratorial themes with controversial hip-hop star-power brings to mind examples of HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories in hip-hop heard a decade later in Kanye West's music ('Roses' (2005) and 'Heard 'em Say' (2005), and the 2005 Live 8 concert tour in Philadelphia).⁷⁵ Clearly this combination remains one with a popular expressive power, continuing to bring conspiratorial ideas on medical topics into mainstream circulation a decade after Red Hot's release.

In some ways, Red Hot's approach of not sanitising what the hip-hop artists they recruited had to say was admirable. They had not, after all, done this with the other releases – that is to say, asked the artists to conform to a certain style of expression and a certain message about HIV/AIDS. Undoubtedly, this approach had some benefits. While the impact of the album is difficult to assess and evidence, the basic fact of having gathered these artists, produced this music, and have had it released is significant. Hip-hop's musical contributions up till this point, and after it, were sporadic and, like most popular music about HIV/AIDS, skirted around the topic with euphemism and implication. On the other hand, the reproduction and endorsement of misogynist and conspiratorial themes are themselves very serious

⁷⁵ A Time Magazine online article (2019) describes the following events at the concert: 'The 2005 Live 8 concert tour, intended to raise awareness of global poverty and AIDS, was a huge hit – drawing a worldwide audience of 3 billion people. But during the Philadelphia stop of the tour, Kanye raised awareness in his own unique way, shocking the crowd by espousing the widely debunked claim that AIDS was a "man-made disease" that was "placed in Africa just like crack was placed in the Black community to break up the Black Panthers."'

and potentially damaging in terms of sexual health and their broader impact on popular discourse.

4.4 Conclusion

'Raising consciousness' differs from 'raising awareness' in that it attempts to add a historical, political, and racial context to educational messaging. It suggests that it is not enough to be aware, but to be aware in a specific sense, a sceptical or even paranoiac form of awareness which maintains suspicion towards race and other structures of power. Whereas other chapters have tended towards arguments about aspects of social usefulness in hip-hop music's consistent imperatives to 'stay woke' and question established narratives, the paranoiac aspects of these discourses are probably at their most problematic in the context of a social crisis which is at its core a medical crisis.

The sections above demonstrate a number of ways in which this manifested in hip-hop music addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis. Initially, a rumour culture which turned suspicion inward in hip-hop's artistic community, damaging careers of respected artists and spreading a panicked homophobic discourse. Later, an intense expression of misogyny which projected women as the cause of the epidemic. Running through the long period covered by the crisis was also the risk of paranoiac or conspiratorial discourse causing people to misapprehend the seriousness of HIV/AIDS, how it is spread, and how it could be treated – an effect intensified by the racially-charged interventions of the Nation of Islam.

And this in a context where, otherwise, hip-hop's musical contributions had been remarkably useful without any particular need for government, charity, or other external intervention. The condom advocacy found in The Jungle Brothers' 'Jimbrowski' (1987) and Boogie Down Productions 'Jimmy' (1988) was genuinely and organically popular music which carried what was probably the most useful possible advice for navigating the epidemic. What's more it was done in a way that was funny, relatable, and authentic to African American popular culture, youth culture, and party music – something which feels somewhat miraculous in retrospect.

As a counterpoint, it is worth noting that hip-hop music which has addressed the HIV/AIDS epidemic in more recent years has tended to be conspiratorial. The most prominent examples are provided by Kanye West, such as 'Roses' (2005) and 'Heard 'em Say' (2005), the latter of which achieved widespread popularity and featured pop singer Adam Levine. As ever, conspiratorial themes in hip-hop music have an expressive and communicative power which is able to bring attention to past racial injustices, often drawing out convincing and historically salient narratives such as the pattern of state medical experimentation on African Americans. Thus, a quick line such as that in 'Heard 'em Say,' '...and I know the government administer AIDS' (2005) might help to introduce a new generation of popular music audiences to a history of racial state medical experimentation and injustice, even if it does very little to educate them about the HIV/AIDS epidemic itself.

In this context it is also notable that the misogynist dimension of HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories in hip-hop has not lived on in its more contemporary articulations. A recent controversy involving rappers DaBaby and Lil Nas X might be seen to demonstrate that homophobic attitudes surrounding HIV are still present in hip-hop culture. I would argue that the strong backlash against this demonstrates the opposite, however, showing that such attitudes are no longer treated as acceptable (Silva 2021; Chan 2022). This shift in attitudes and acceptability in US hip-hop culture is presumably a large part of why *America is Dying Slowly* (1996) has faded into relative obscurity despite its contemporary cultural significance and the calibre of the artists involved. Nevertheless, the HIV/AIDS crisis highlights more than the other case studies presented in this thesis how much conspiracy theory in hip-hop culture is largely a male phenomenon, as it seems to be in the cultural landscape more broadly, and demonstrates some of the consequences of this in terms of reproducing and intensifying pre-existing prejudices such as homophobia and misogyny, just as it has reproduced racist and antisemitic narratives in other contexts.

Conspiratorial rhetoric is perhaps at its most problematic when dealing with medical issues and the social crises relating to them. Even accepting that not all conspiracy theories should be treated as de facto false or unevidenced – some conspiracy theories are potentially true and are only named as such due to external pressure and power imbalances, and others reflect aspects of an underlying truth in a way that is compelling and meaningful – the blurring of these lines and general uncertainty that ensues is still undeniably problematic in situations involving

profound medical risks. Then again, given that responses to social crises in hip-hop music often appeal to conspiratorial rhetorics and narratives, should we not have expected to see such a response in the context of the coronavirus pandemic? With early reports suggesting that deaths were more prevalent amongst Black people (Ro 2020), it is reasonable to have suspected that this might develop along the same lines as the response to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Such a response was seemingly all but absent from hip-hop artists and in broader hip-hop cultural discourse, however. I believe the explanation for this is that hip-hop's conspiratorial impulses do not emerge from a vacuum but are deeply informed by a *longue durée* view of racial struggle – indeed, one of the most frequently cited corollary events in conspiratorial hip-hop music in the context of HIV/AIDS was the 'smallpox blankets' used as a biological weapon against Native Americans in the country's colonial era. It is perfectly logical, therefore, that the George Floyd protests, and the long history of police violence going back to the chattel slavery era, were in mid-2020 the more obvious focus of the suspicion of state and racial power which runs through hip-hop's history and present sonic articulations.

Chapter 5. ‘Bush knocked down the towers’: Conspiracy Theory in Hip-hop Responses to the September 11th Attacks

Events as unexpected and impactful as the September 11th attacks can have a profound effect on the shape and limits of public discourse. Within the USA itself, this was manifest chiefly by a virtual paralysis of critical impulses in the public sphere towards both the meaning of the attacks and the responses to them. The coverage provided by the US news media provides the clearest evidence of this tendency and was furthermore key in attempting to propagate such an attitude throughout US society. Abandoning some of its key civic functions of providing a platform for some level of debate and dissent, both television and print journalism instead mostly retreated into a state of all but complete consensus with the government and the state. Although this was especially evident in the immediate fallout of the attacks, these conditions broadly persisted through to the declaration of the war against Iraq 18 months later, enabling the easy dissemination and legitimization of the weapons-of-mass-destruction propaganda so crucial to the attempt to build popular consent and international support.

Such conditions add weight to the importance of the political and social functions of popular culture, and also serve to test their capacities in this regard. Hip-hop music, with its persistent tendencies to voice dissent and social criticism, its extensive experience of state and media censorship, and also as a form native to New York City, would seem to be a natural vehicle to push the boundaries of this profoundly narrowed sphere of public discourse. Indeed, hip-hop's responses to the

attacks reflect a startling variety of expression and opinion regarding the attacks, in stark contrast to the narrowness of public discourse and much contemporaneous popular culture, such as the often jingoistic country music responses to the attack. Despite this variety, it is notable that expressions of support for military action or the government's general response are all but absent from the music.

A restricted public discourse also creates the conditions for conspiracy theories to thrive, especially in a situation where the state is able to maintain a monopoly on information due to concerns over national security. When 'official' explanations fall so far short of making events such as the September 11 attacks intelligible, then it is inevitable that there will follow a popular drive to search for answers elsewhere, perhaps especially from sources that are as far from traditional discursive authority as possible. Drawing on traditions of critical consciousness and 'staying woke' in hip-hop culture, conspiratorial perspectives play a prominent role in the responses to the attacks, and I hope to analyse specifically the role and function of these articulations within the music, and their potential broader social significance.

More broadly, I argue that the manner in which hip-hop music engaged with the attacks set important precedents for how it would respond to future crises in a post-9/11 world. Understanding the basis and function of such responses, and the role of conspiratorial articulations within them, will be crucial in assessing both the potential capacities and limitations of hip-hop music with respect to future social crises, whether to do with climate change, resource scarcity or epidemics. Attempting to determine the role which various aspects of popular culture might

play in such contexts is now of central importance in popular musicology and cultural studies. The persistent emphasis on raising consciousness – racial, social, political – in hip-hop music, along with its enormous cultural reach, make it a prime case-study in this regard. What is required is an approach that goes beyond the uncritical championing of 'resistant culture' and impressionistic assertions about its 'counter-hegemonic' articulations, but also avoids the defeatism of dismissing this altogether and, instead, attempts to understand how exactly notions such as hip-hop's 'consciousness' persist and the specific impact they might have in a given cultural moment or situation.

Firstly, I will review the extant body of academic work concerning 9/11 and post-9/11 culture in order to situate hip-hop's responses to the attacks within the broader consequences they have had in popular culture and academic discourses. Following this, I will provide a survey of hip-hop music referencing 9/11, looking especially at the variety of responses produced in the first year or so following the attacks before offering a close reading of two related tracks: Jadakiss's 'Why?' (2004) and Immortal Technique's 'Bin Laden' (2005). Jadakiss's track is perhaps the only hip-hop response to 9/11 that achieved breakthrough, mainstream popularity,⁷⁶ having attracted controversy with its prominent endorsement of 9/11 conspiracy theories. This bombastic intervention highlights the reactive relationship these articulations can have with the sensationalism and culture wars which so often dominate the discursive world of the US media and public sphere. Immortal

⁷⁶ It was one of the highest-charting hip-hop tracks of 2004, peaking at no. 11 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart (Billboard 2004). Although there are limitations to what official charts can tell us, especially given the thriving hip-hop mixtape economy of the time, this reflects a clear difference with respect to much of the other music referenced in this chapter.

Technique's 'Bin Laden', built around a sample from the former track, re-contextualises the conspiratorial articulations of Jadakiss and others, raising most directly the question of how conspiratorial discourses relate to notions of social and political consciousness in hip-hop

Addressing these issues requires a methodological approach which pays close attention to the often complex sonic worlds of hip-hop music, and as such I will be focusing on providing as much musical analysis of my case studies as possible, and in a way which attempts to approach the music on its own terms. Due in part to the need for this study to fit into the necessarily inter-disciplinary work of understanding an historic event as seismic as the September 11th attacks, diagrams and graphs are intended where possible to be intelligible to those who do not read Western classical music notation. These analyses will also pay attention to the numerous ways these sounds are articulated and received in practice. This will involve looking variously at i) visual material such as music videos, album artwork, and promotional material, ii) statements made by rappers outside of the music, such as in interviews, and iii) how a given track fits into hip-hop culture, whether in terms of genre, ideology, style, or regional affiliation. This approach is intended emphasise the conditions in which hip-hop's responses were articulated, as well as the impact they themselves might have had on the conditions for expression, dissent, and raising consciousness in post-9/11 popular culture.

Roughly two decades on, the wars begun in response to the September 11 attacks are still ongoing despite the various official announcements of their completion. There have also been profound consequences for life within the US

itself, with a permanent 'state of exception' providing justification for widespread surveillance, indefinite detainment, and a general erosion of human rights and civil liberties – all of which are enacted principally along racial lines, helping in turn to create the conditions for a widespread and mainstream Islamophobia. Despite this, it seems perfectly possible that the population of the US, (as indeed the UK and its other allies) would still be vulnerable to the exact same problems which arose from the September 11 attacks, that false pretences and secretive documents could once again be used to lead the march into war. Would they recognise the next 'dodgy dossier'? Or panicked moralism morphing into runaway militarism? If they did, how could they resist it? Better understanding the cultural output of this period will not only add to our knowledge of the conditions that led up to these wars but will also shed light on current conditions for expressing dissent and raising consciousness in popular culture.

5.1 Academic Responses to 9/11 and Post-9/11 Culture

In order to better contextualise hip-hop's responses to September 11th attacks, it is necessary to look at a range of academic perspectives, ranging from the general theoretical responses to those which to study specific aspects of the popular culture of this period. First, it might be helpful to briefly summarise the major actions taken by the US government, whose response is surely the most influential and significant. Mobilisation for the War in Afghanistan was rapid, with the conflict officially beginning with airstrikes on October 7th, 2001. This month also saw the establishment of the Office of Strategic Influence, set up to disseminate war

propaganda through non-US media. Guantanamo Bay had been opened by January 2002, and the policy of 'extraordinary rendition' also came into effect, enabling the US to kidnap and torture citizens of other countries by transporting them to a global network of prisons and 'black-sites,' where they could be detained indefinitely without trial. Whilst much of this network was secret, Guantanamo Bay seemed to fulfil a different function, producing and disseminating widely (via the press) images of torture and spectacularised dehumanisation, with detainees (not classified as 'prisoners' or even 'prisoners-of-war') depicted with bound feet and hands, wearing mitts, large blacked-out goggles, ear-muffs, and face-masks over their mouths, blocking out all sensory input.

The political momentum behind the government's response continued to grow with the passing of the Patriot Act in October 2002, which eased restrictions on both domestic and foreign surveillance, increased the authority of law enforcement in detaining and deporting immigrants, and expanded the definition of terrorism to include domestic terrorism. Relatedly, the powers of the National Security Agency (NSA) were expanded, enabling the warrantless surveillance of communications. A large-scale re-organisation of a number of governmental organisations with remits related to defence and surveillance was put in effect in November 2002, creating the Department of Homeland Security. During this time, the Bush administration had been effective in cultivating the rhetoric of a 'clash of civilisations', animating ideas of good versus evil and Christianity versus Islam to justify and expand the goals of the War on Terror. The Iraq War began on March 2003, and eventually the War on Terror would see various levels of deployment and

combat in many places around the world, including the Philippines, Somalia and Yemen, amongst others. Whilst numerous attempts have been made to end these wars, if only symbolically, they continue today in various forms, recently in engagements with ISIS throughout the Middle East and Africa, and in ongoing occupations and interventions in Iraq and Syria, for example.

Whilst these extensive and consequential reforms were being effected, the US government received an unusual level of support from mainstream media outlets, even from those which would normally function as political adversaries to the Republican Party. In the words of historian Eric Foner (2001), despite being 'lambasted by conservatives as hotbeds of liberalism, the major networks have bent over backwards to present the President as being 'in charge,'... repeatedly telling the public that he had miraculously become a mature statesman.' In terms of party politics, Bush was also able to rely on Democrat legislators for support on a number of the actions outlined above, including the Afghanistan invasion and the Patriot Act, although their votes were split regarding the Iraq War.

The most general theoretical responses to these developments attempt to grapple with the ideological motivations and consequences of the actions outlined above. Giorgio Agamben took an approach which sought to embed this response within historical approaches to the idea of a 'state of exception' in political theory and jurisprudence. Defined as a 'transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government,' (2005, 2) Agamben traces the history of the usage of states of exception from World War One up to the 2000s, by which point it 'tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in

contemporary politics' (3). By effecting a 'provisional abolition of the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers,' (7) which can then be extended indefinitely, the 'state of exception' not only undermines democratic and constitutional norms but can also have profound biopolitical implications, with the production of 'legally unnameable and unclassifiable being[s]' (3) echoing both in form and justification the 'legal situation of Jews in the Nazi *lager* [camps], who... lost every legal identity' (4). Given that, roughly two decades later, there are still US troops in Iraq, Guantanamo still contains detainees without trial, and the Patriot Act is arguably still in effect, Agamben's warnings seem to be highly apposite.

Judith Butler draws upon some of the ideas that have animated much of Agamben's work in her *Precarious Life* (2004), arguing that Guantanamo detainees exemplify his notions of *Homo Sacer* and 'bare life', whereby 'subjects undergo a suspension of their ontological status as subjects when states of emergency are invoked... neither living in the sense that a political animal lives, in community and bound by law, nor dead and, therefore, outside the constituting condition of the rule of law' (67). Dehumanisation is also a focus of international relations scholar James Der Derian in his work *Virtuous War* (2009). Focusing on military history and tactics, he tracks the development of the idea of 'virtuous war', in which technological developments are combined with 'just-war' rhetoric to enable a strategy focusing on remote forms of engagement and low casualties, at least from the US perspective. In practice, this largely meant ignoring the casualties of the other side, sanitising the development and use of more remote and more deadly weaponry. He argues that this project was dependent on the development of an ever-

closer relationship between the military and the media and entertainment industries, which he calls the 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network'. He documents, for example, the use of prominent Hollywood scriptwriters to workshop possible terrorist attacks, and simulations and video-games used to train soldiers and pilots whilst simultaneously being used for special effects in mainstream films (xxxvi, 240).

Baudrillard and Žižek also draw attention to cultural aspects relating to the attacks, in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2003, trans. Turner) and *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) respectively. Both emphasise the apparent prefiguration of the attacks in Hollywood disaster movies, which frequently depict shadowy terrorist networks, attacks on New York, and fires in iconic buildings. Žižek presents a psychoanalytic perspective in which 'the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy', (18) and therefore argues that 'the image entered and shattered our reality', (19) in opposition to the conventional reading that the attacks represented the 'Real' shattering an illusory peaceful Western existence. Baudrillard ascribes these fantasies to a universal 'allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power,' of which 'the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments' (2003, 7). He therefore notes the canon of Hollywood disaster movies as evidence of a suicidal tendency in the West (7) in which people possess an '(unwittingly) terroristic imagination', (5) and therefore analyses the War on Terror as a civil war within globalisation itself.

Such prefigurations are not limited to mainstream Hollywood films, but also in various other more marginal cultural spheres. Garofalo (2007, 20) notes the lyrics

of 'Propaganda' by Dead Prez (2000): 'Sign of the times, terrorism on the rise / Commercial airplanes, falling out the sky like flies.' Rap group The Coup provide another example with the album cover of *Party Music*, which originally featured the rappers standing in front of an image of the twin towers exploding. This was changed after the attacks took place with the album being released in November 2001. In a game called *Trade Center Defender*, released 2001, players would defend the towers from attacking planes. The pilot episode of conspiracy-centric *The Lone Gunmen* (Carter 2001), a short-lived spin-off of *The X-Files* (Carter 1993), was broadcast in March 2001 and featured a plot in which rogue US government officials organised a remote attack on the World Trade Center, before allowing a foreign terrorist group to take credit in order to build support for new wars – almost exactly anticipating the false-flag 9/11 conspiracy theories which would later follow the attacks. Finally, television series *The Agency* – which had official backing from the CIA, with chief George Tenet hosting a red carpet premier (Campbell 2001) – featured a plot in which the 'CIA was to thwart a plan that was hatched by Osama Bin Laden to bomb Harrods department store in London' (Schack 2009, 75). This example therefore sums up much of what has been outlined above, both in terms of a symbiotic, propagandist relationship between the military and entertainment industry, and in the prefiguration of the attacks throughout US popular culture.

Todd Schack (2009) uses this example as part of a comparison between cinema surrounding the War on Drugs and the War on Terror, arguing that the former developed propaganda tactics which would become central to the latter. Both contexts, he argues, posit a decentralised enemy and the need for open-ended

warfare, which then justifies the expansion of policing and surveillance. He employs Maurizio Viano's notion of 'wartime epistemology,' which 'foregrounds only those [questions] that aim to verify the object's relationship to the war effort,' thus constraining all cultural productions to an 'either/or regime of signification' (Viano 2002, 152). After cataloguing examples of pro-war and (the few) anti-war films produced after the attacks – some pro-war films being given state premieres attended by figures such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld (74) – Schack makes the interesting point that, even if there had been a greater variety of critical films, their overall impact would still have been minimal. He argues that such texts would form 'only momentary interruptions to a discursive condition that absorbs them with ease and continues hegemonic control over the sphere of what it is possible to say, to write, or even to think,' (83) stating that this degree of influence sets a 'context of reception' that 'ensures the limited resonance of alternative messages and interpretations' (83).

Aside from film – with which the US government has a well-documented symbiotic relationship going back decades (Doherty 1999; Robb 2011; Springer 1986; Slocum 2006) – a number of studies locate a propagandist function at play in a variety of media. For instance, Katie Sciurba analyses a number of picture-books produced to help children cope with the attacks and their aftermath, concluding that the main tactic at play is to draw upon patriotic imagery to instil a 'therapeutic nationalism' (2009, 201). Samuel Dwinell looks at the role of video games in direct army recruitment, discussing the game *America's Army*, a free-to-play game developed by the army and released on the first Independence Day after 9/11, which

features hyperlinks to the US Army recruitment website (2016). Dwinell also discusses the use of music in this context, focusing on 'Citizen/Soldier' by rock group 3 Doors Down, whose music and video were produced in direct collaboration with the US Army National Guard. The track rose to 19 on the Hot Mainstream Rock chart, and 96 on the Billboard Hot 100, and its music video for the track was placed before a range of films in cinemas, with a final frame showing the National Guard recruitment website URL (23).

5.2 Music after 9/11

Music was used in a variety of ways to help build support for the US government's response to the attacks. James Deaville (2007) presents a fascinating analysis of the music used in newsreels on September 11th, undoubtedly representing the very first mass-distributed musical responses to the attacks. He notes that, initially, reports on CNN featured no music, with images and the sounds of the attacks 'intended to evoke feelings of shock, horror, and tragedy' (50). Hours later, however, 'at 2:00 am on September 12, CNN added music to the package, we hear the sounds of military attack and tones of fear and anger introduced through the aggressive musical theme,' (50) something which, as he points out, is all the more pernicious when music is playing its background role as what Nicholas Cook calls the 'ultimate hidden persuader' (2000, 122).

Reebee Garofalo (2007) discusses the political role of the various memorial concerts held for the attacks. Despite the explicitly nonviolent concert organised by the Beastie Boys, 'New Yorkers Against Violence,' and the 'understated, reverential'

(6) 'America: A Tribute to Heroes,' the larger 'Concert for New York City' undoubtedly promoted support for the War on Terror. Held at Madison Square Garden, with many prominent politicians such as Hillary Clinton and Rudy Giuliani attending, Garofalo describes the concert as 'a tribute to white, male, guitar-based rock' (7). With a number of famous British rock stars performing, amongst intermixed US flags and Union Jacks, 'the press treated the show as if it was another British Invasion, which resonated well with Britain's support for US policy over the next few years' (7).

Country music produced many of the most prominent initial musical responses to the September 11th attacks in the US. Alan Jackson's 'Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),' (written Oct 28, 2001), for example, reached no.1 on country singles chart and the top 30 on pop charts. Despite being released late in the year, Lee Greenwood's 'God Bless the USA' and Aaron Tippin's 'Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly' were the sixth and ninth most popular songs of 2001 in the US (Garofalo 2007, 10). Whilst the tone of these responses is characterised by as one of 'somewhat restrained and reflective patriotism' (10), later responses became more aggressive and jingoistic. Garofalo cites Toby Keith's 'Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)' (2002) as best reflecting 'the new vengeful attitude' (2007, 10), as well as Darryl Worley's 'Have You Forgotten?' (2002). The former was part of a number 1 album that had gone double platinum by the end of 2002, whilst the latter was at the top of the country chart in the five weeks leading up to the Iraq War. Garofalo notes that Worley's song, along with Pat Garrett's 'Saddam Stomp,' (2002) made explicit

(and false) connections between Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, thus providing Bush 'with a sorely needed, if symbolic, link between Iraq and bin Laden, which he was having great difficulty demonstrating in reality' (2007, 11), and thus playing a potentially significant propagandist role in building consent for the Iraq War.

This is not to imply that country music produced a homogeneous response: indeed, a number of acts, most notably the Dixie Chicks, were critical of the Bush administration and the build-up to the War on Terror. In March, 2003, the month the Iraq War began, their singer Natalie Maines told a London audience that they were 'ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas'. The opprobrium this earned the group speaks volumes about the political environment for country musicians: they were banned from seventy-four country radio stations in the US (Garofalo 2007, 12), and the South Carolina State House passed a resolution to request them to apologise to South Carolinians and offer a free concert for military families (Scherzinger 2007, 99). Additionally, two DJs at the KKCS radio station in Colorado were suspended and threatened with sacking for playing the group's music (99).

These reactions were not just the by-products of a genre and musical scene with strong historic traditions of conservatism and patriotism, however, but were also indicative of a broader pattern of censorship that rocked the popular music world after 9/11 (Cloonan 2004; Garofalo 2007; Nuzum 2004). One of the most notable (and well-cited) examples of this is the list of songs circulated by the Clear Channel corporation to its radio stations, asking that they be avoided in the wake of

the attacks.⁷⁷ Although many of the songs included simply reflected an appeal to sensitivity – those with frequent references to aeroplanes, explosions and so on – the list also had a decidedly political aspect, with the inclusion of John Lennon's 'Imagine' (1971) and the entire back-catalogue of Rage Against the Machine⁷⁸ being less easy to justify. What lent this act particular significance was the monopolistic momentum Clear Channel had enjoyed since the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which had relaxed the rules regarding ownership of media corporations; the corporation went from owning only a handful of stations in the mid-1990s to around 1200 at the time of the attacks, taking in 20% of the industry dollar volume (Garofalo 2007, 14). Furthermore, they had also gained ownership of 700,000 billboards in the US, and controlled a staggering 65% of the US concert business (14). It is therefore clear that any kind of black-listing from this corporation could be devastating to recording and touring musicians. Aside from the troubling implications of this example, it is worth reflecting on how many other such lists might have escaped the attention of media and academic commentators. Perhaps more significantly, the effects of self-censorship, whether brought about by commercial concerns or the perceived or real threat of intimidation (addressed in Scherzinger 2007), would only be augmented under conditions of monopolisation.

Drawing on links drawn by Paul Krugman in *The New York Times* (2003), Garofalo also argues that there is also evidence of political corruption involving

⁷⁷ It is worth noting that the songs on the list were not completely banned from Clear Channel stations, and that some may have been played. However, although the list may not have had the status of an official directive, it was circulated throughout the company's stations and undoubtedly had a censorious effect.

⁷⁸ The group, whose activist and dissident stance is well-known, also allegedly had its official website message-boards shut down after the Internet Service Provider received calls from federal agents (Cloonan 2004, 14).

Clear Channel. Krugman shows that the chairman and vice-chairman of the organisation had previously played a significant role in managing the endowment of the University of Texas when George Bush had been the state's governor, and had channelled a much of the funds into companies with strong links to the Bush family and the Republican Party. Garofalo links this to the covert role Clear Channel played in sponsoring and organising pro-war, pro-government events around the country entitled 'Rally for America' (2007, 16). Additionally, the Federal Communications Commission, responsible for regulating radio communications, was chaired in 2003 by Michael Powell, son of the then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, who was concurrently playing a significant role in building consent for the invasion of Iraq. Such connections feed into a general background of corruption that hung over the whole US response to the attacks, most prominently seen in then vice-president Dick Cheney's connection to oil company Halliburton, having served as its CEO until 2000, and the links between by private military forces used in the conflicts, such as Blackwater (now Academi), and the Republican party, through funding and lobbying.

All of these aspects – the popularity of jingoistic country music, monopolisation in the media and entertainment industries, the censorship of certain kinds of critical and political music, and an intersecting and pervasive atmosphere of political corruption – set out the contexts in which hip-hop responses to 9/11 were produced, and it is in light of these that their expressions and critiques must be interpreted. Indeed, the general apparent lack of 'protest music' in this period (Amenta 2016; Garofalo 2007; Staggers 2016), especially when compared to that

of the Vietnam War, is explained at least in part by shifting material conditions for the distribution and reception of popular music in the US, rather than being determined by some innate generational characteristic (such as the idea of 'Gen X apathy'). Whilst conditions seemed to conspire to produce a difficult environment for critical musical expression, hip-hop music was able to maintain this tendency because of its strong reputation for political critique and the expectation of this from audiences, the development of the mixtape as a cultural back-channel free from commercial influence, and its tendency to produce and reproduce conspiratorial narratives.

5.3 Surveying Hip-hop Responses to 9/11

5.3.1 Initial Responses: 'They wasn't aiming at us, not at my house'

Hip-hop responses to 9/11 encompass a huge range of reactions, variously working to historicise, instrumentalise, commemorate, or desecrate the attacks and their potential meanings. In the interests of coherence and brevity, this survey is limited to Anglophone US hip-hop, with the caveat that this would be complemented by future work on contemporaneous hip-hop produced elsewhere, especially in the Middle East and Europe.⁷⁹ For the same reasons, analysis is largely focused on lyrical content, unless another aspect is of particular interest. Hip-hop music production is quite uniquely suited to respond quickly to events: an artist merely has to write their verses, find a beat (either ready-made or quickly produced), record the rap, and then mix, master and release the track. With the help of an established

⁷⁹ There are a few contributions in this area, such as Swedenburg's essay on Arab music after 9/11 (2002), and Drury on Arab hip-hop's role in resisting the war on terror (2017).

infrastructure of DIY production, digital samplers, mixtape culture and hip-hop radio, artists can often avoid the conventional commercial routes of production if necessary, and can therefore produce material more quickly than usual in the popular music industry. It should be no surprise, therefore, that a variety of hip-hop responses appeared in the weeks and months immediately following the attacks.

Jay-Z might be credited with the very first response with his '9/11 freestyle', performed at a concert on September 14th 2001, following the release of his landmark album *The Blueprint* on the date of the attacks themselves. He does not address events directly, apart from the reference to his charitable donations ('I dropped the same day as the twin towers, I show power / Still I show compassion for others, sent money and flowers'). Though the freestyle doesn't seem to say much of interest regarding the attacks, it is worth noting that it avoids the prevalent message of 'coming together' after the attacks, instead invoking African American racial solidarity, with lyrics which focus on imprisonment and Christianity before closing with 'you might hear Christ's words in my scriptures but I only write it for my niggas.'

Canibus's track 'Draft Me,' another early response to the attacks, released October 2001, also strikes an odd note. Whilst the hook 'Draft me, I wanna fight for my country, jump in a Humvee and murder these monkeys' seems to reflect a particularly reactionary and racist articulation of the desire for revenge, the first verse ends with 'I'll crash into your tour bus with a plane nigga,' shifting not only the track's target but also its tone with respect to the attacks. What might have been assumed to be a response emerging purely from a sense of vengeful anger is instead

revealed as part of a framing for a diss track in a long-running feud with Eminem. He closes the track with a verse rapped in the voice of an Eminem character 'Stan', before a sample of George Bush ('The only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it...') closes the track. Despite this, there is no denying that it reflects sentiments – pro-war, desire for vengeance, anti-Arab racism – which were by this point being encouraged and channelled by the Bush administration and mainstream news media on a mass scale.

On Wu-Tang Clan's 'Rules', released December 2001, Ghostface Killah opens with outrage at the attack on his hometown: 'Who the fuck knocked our buildings down? ... Where the four planes at? Is you insane bitch? Fly that shit over my hood and get blown to bits.' The follow-up lines, however, take on a slightly different tone: 'No disrespect, that's where I rest my head, I understand you gotta rest yours, true, nigga my people's dead.' Reflecting on the feeling of having his home attacked seems to lead Ghostface to flip the script, and instead think about the homelands of the attackers. This tendency, here perhaps reflecting an influence from the Wu-Tang Clan's longstanding connections to Islam via the Five-Percent Nation (and their presumed awareness of historical conflicts in the Middle East), sets a precedent that will be borne out in much of the music that follows: namely, various attempts to understand, empathise with, and humanise Arabs, muslims, and even the attackers themselves.

Jay-Z's 'Ballad of a Fallen Soldier' (November 2002) sets another precedent which would go on to be utilised by a number of rappers, namely the idea that African Americans have already had extensive experience of terrorism at the hands

of the police and White America. The track opens by asking us to 'picture split-screen', on one side a street hustler and, on the other, a soldier at bootcamp, 'both at war'. The point is driven home by the memorable closing lines of the first verse (2002):

Bin Laden been happening in Manhattan
Crack was anthrax back then, back when
Police was Al-Qaeda to Black men⁸⁰

Marc Lamont Hill (2006) notes that, when using this track as a talking point for a (predominantly African American) high-school class, 15 out of 20 of the students picked these lines for discussion. As he points this out to them, a student interrupts: 'That's 'cause we all got the same problem!' (25). Aside from its resonance with people who have experienced racialised policing, this rhetorical strategy also has the benefit of productively channelling the widely-felt sense of pain and panic brought on by a singular, ruptural event by using it to highlight the violence integral to the 'ordinary', day-to-day functioning of US society. As such, this not only forms a potentially quite powerful expression of the experience of racial terror to a diverse American audience (many of whom would have little or no direct experience of it themselves), it also does so by re-framing fears and anxieties which would otherwise, more often than not, be fodder for war-mongering and Islamophobia.

In the same month, political duo Dead Prez released their first mixtape *Turn off the radio Vol. 1* (2002), which featured the track 'Know Your Enemy'. The group also address the racial issues thrown up by the attacks, though whilst Jay-Z uses a

⁸⁰ This is a reference to the anthrax scare in the US shortly after the attacks.

shared experience to reflect on specific mechanisms of oppression, Dead Prez deny that the 9/11 attacks were a 'shared experience' altogether (2002):

They wasn't aiming at us, not at my house,
They hit the world trade, the pentagon, and almost got the
white house,
Now everybody walkin' round patriotic,
How we gon' fight to keep freedom when we ain't got it?

As in Jay-Z's earlier '9/11 Freestyle' (2001), the concern is primarily with African American racial solidarity, contradicting – and, in this case, actively rebelling against – the prevalent discourse of 'coming together' propounded by public figures and the news media. Whilst he was responding to the threat posed by the attacks themselves, however, Dead Prez are more concerned with the threat to African American identity posed by a resurgent US nationalism. The group also (like Jay-Z) seek to redeploy the idea of terrorism in their track, but, reflecting their affinity with socialist and pan-African politics, do so in order to highlight international, rather than domestic, contradictions (2002):

You wanna stop terrorists? Start with the US imperialists
Ain't no track record like America's, see Bin Laden was trained
by the CIA
But I guess if you a terrorist for the US then it's okay

The second verse moves onto warnings of an expanding surveillance society, enumerating the large variety of ways the government can keep track of poor and Black people. This list is couched at either end by references to a recurrent conspiracy theory in African American culture, that of a clandestine return to

slavery in the US.⁸¹ Whether we hear this literally or figuratively, the gesture is the same: to remind their audience of the centrality of racism in US society, to warn of the dangers of subsuming the African American struggle into nationalist reaction, and instead to draw attention to how this crisis is being used to reinscribe and intensify racist politics – something amply demonstrated by the use of the Patriot Act to increase police surveillance of African Americans. As the track's provocative hook puts it: 'know your enemy, know yourself, that's the politic / George Bush is way worse than Bin Laden is'.

Talib Kweli, another emerging conscious rapper, makes a similar point in 'The Proud', again released on November 2002. He takes a more measured approach in voicing his concerns about African Americans embracing US nationalism, however (2002):

My heart go out to everybody at Ground Zero
Red, Black, yellow, white and brown heroes
...
But it's hard for me to walk down the block
Seeing rats and roaches, crack vials and 40 ounce posters
People broken down from years of oppression
Become patriots when they way of life is threatened

Kweli structures the track around three dates, a verse for each, with September 11th being the last. The first two dates work to re-contextualise the September 11th attacks in surprising ways, addressing the execution of white domestic terrorist

⁸¹ Herb Boyd, writing about conspiracy theory literature popular with his African American students, documents a publicity stunt for a 1967 novel 'The Man Who Cried I Am' in which passages were left on the New York subway, leading to panic about 'King Alfred Plan,' a fictitious scheme in which the CIA would put all African Americans into concentration camps (Boyd 2002).

Timothy McVeigh (June 21st, 2001), and a Black Brooklyn family being killed by a drunk-driving police officer (August 4th, 2001). It is notable that even in a track characterised by a quiet, dignified tone, Kweli references another prominent hip-hop conspiracy theory, performatively breaking his rhetorical cool to rap: 'Fuck the pigs! I think the pigs killed Big and 'Pac too / If they didn't they know who did, they got to!'

This tendency to employ conspiracy theories, seen already serving various functions – whether as a throwaway aside, as a way of framing or intensifying an argument, as a way to provoke a reaction – comes to an extreme in Non Phixion's debut album *The Future is Now* (released May 2002), featuring tracks such as 'Black Helicopter' and 'The C.I.A. is Trying to Kill Me'. The most sustained commentary on the September 11 attacks is found on the track 'Suicide Bomb' (2002):

Represent your clique and your jihad, bangin' from God to
Enron,
Bin Laden is still CIA, John Walker captured in Kandahar,
Afghanistan with shit stains on his face
I seen the planes hit the world trade then I seen the world change
Ideological earthquake, people explodin'
Explodin' on the same streets where the profits increase
Walking on water, now I be throwin' rocks at police

Whilst many of the tracks discussed so far, particularly Dead Prez, Talib Kweli, and Jay-Z's 'Ballad...' (2002), construct narratives and make explicit arguments as a means to raise (racial, political) consciousness, Non Phixion tend to construct lurid, surreal streams of consciousness which mix conspiracy theory with afro-futurism and five percenter mysticism. I would argue that they are still working within a

'conscious' style, in a way that is similar to predecessor groups such as Hieroglyphics and Jedi Mind Tricks. Though Non Phixion's mode of expression differs from the tracks discussed above, it fulfils similar functions in terms of attempting to raise consciousness through disseminating information (the influence of oil trade, the Bin Laden CIA connection) and in encouraging a radical, dissident attitude.

Cam'ron's 'Welcome to New York City' (May 2002, featuring Jay-Z and Juelz Santana), approaches the September 11 attacks from a completely different perspective than the examples outlined above. Whilst the verses are full of the classic tropes of gangsta rap, with drug dealing references and shout-outs to specific boroughs, blocks and buildings, the repeated hook conjures the 'lost towers' (2002):

It's the home of 9/11, the place of the lost towers,
We still banging we never lost power, tell em.
Welcome to New York City,
Welcome to New York City

In contrast with the often critical perspectives discussed above, tonally this reflects more the collective mourning of a city and an expression of resilience. It also draws upon hip-hop's tradition of civic and localist pride and competition in representing the city, area, or block you come from. In this sense, the September 11th attacks are made intelligible by being subsumed as a marker of authenticity and distinction for New York as the birthplace of hip-hop.

Overall, the first year or so of US hip-hop responses to the September 11th attacks reflect a varied set of reactions, with a general pattern moving from

uncertain early responses which had relatively little to say about the events to the crystallisation of a number of tendencies, ranging from collective mourning to full-throated critique. Generally, they have in common an appeal to African American solidarity, and a sceptical and critical outlook, with a few invoking conspiratorial language, though generally stopping short of theorising about the attacks themselves. Though the music overall sets a very different tone to that generally found in contemporaneous popular and public discourse in the USA, and carries some value on that basis alone, it is worth noting that many of the above tracks did not enjoy any particular large-scale popularity, and therefore that their general impact is relatively limited.

5.3.2 Later Hip-hop Responses

The Beastie Boys *To The Five Boroughs*, released 2004, in some ways represents an album-length response to the attacks. Its title and cover art – a pencil-drawing of the Manhattan skyline, still featuring the twin towers – suggest that the work is meant as a dedication to New York in the wake of the attacks. The track 'An Open Letter to NYC' articulates this most directly (2004):

Since 9/11, we're still living
And loving life we've been given
Ain't nothing gonna take that away from us
We're looking pretty and gritty cause in the city we trust
Dear New York, I know a lot has changed
Two towers down but you're still in the game
Home to the many, rejecting no one
Accepting peoples of all places, wherever they're from

Their response here champions various aspects of an ideal New York sensibility: firstly, through notions of realness and cool ('pretty and gritty'), and, secondly, through tolerance and multi-culturalism. It could also be said that these same aspects could be seen as championing an ideal hip-hop sensibility. Indeed, the album can also be heard as a celebration of hip-hop itself, with heavy use of throwback golden-era type production styles, recognisable classic samples, and the group's signature party raps – all intermixed with less characteristic, political 'call-to-arms' tracks. Sometimes these two aspects are even heard in the same track, as in 'It Takes Time to Build', which features anti-war and environmentalist lyrics alongside samples from golden-era group EPMD and a vinyl-scratching solo (or dance break), which, unusually for this time period, are found throughout the album. Of course, this celebration of hip-hop's origins is also itself a celebration of New York as its birthplace and spiritual home; the central gesture of the album is call for New Yorkers and hip-hop heads to come together, to rhyme, party, and rebel against a politics which, according to the Beastie Boys, is antithetical to the values of the city and its music.

Whereas the Beastie Boys were hip-hop veterans, having released their first album in 1986, another iconic New York crew, The Diplomats, more commonly known as Dipset, released their debut *Diplomatic Immunity* in March 2003, just days after the advent of the Iraq War. Whilst this album does not respond explicitly to the attacks, it is nevertheless saturated with references to the the World Trade Center, the Taliban, and Al-Qaeda, many of which strike a surprising and highly provocative tone. The first track, 'Un Casa', features the following lyrics (2003):

I'm a Taliban lyrical monster
They'll shout the city I conquer
White ice cinnamon Parker
Al Qaeda's most vividest author

In part, this reflects a prominent tendency in hip-hop music to lionise and identify with villains, such as mafia figures and comic book villains – and there is a connection to be drawn with the prevalent depictions of these groups as representing a total, cartoonish sort of evil. However, despite referring to themselves as 'Dipset Taliban',⁸² the Harlem-based group also seem to ascribe the attacks a formative role in their music, rapping on 'Ground Zero' (2003):

It's that 9/11 music right now man...
Yo, yo I speak pain, I spit power, talk courage, breathe flowers
Follow me through the debris of these towers,
The rain, the sleet, the street showers

For Dipset, I would argue, producing a '9/11 music' means subordinating the attacks – and the attackers – as just another aspect of the street struggle. In order to guide listeners 'through the debris' and to make these events understandable and interpretable, they are incorporated as just another marker of musical hardness and street realness. The attacks even become a signifier of New York superiority, as on group leader's Cam'ron's earlier track 'Welcome to New York City' (2002). In this sense, the album is not dissimilar to that of the Beastie Boys: both attempt to make sense of a post-9/11 New York City, and a post-9/11 hip-hop culture. None of this

⁸² The Diplomats are not the only group to appropriate Islamic terrorist imagery, New York rapper Jadakiss released a mixtape called *Al Qaeda Jada* in 2008.

necessarily explains the group's direct identifications with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda,⁸³ but I would suggest that this is ultimately to do with the seductive appeal of illicit appropriation, which is after all central to hip-hop culture, as well as a general propensity for dark humour.

In *Sonic Jihad* (2003), rapper Paris also forms a provocative response to the attacks. The album cover depicts an aeroplane flying towards the White House, alongside Black Panther iconography, tracing out a lineage back to the revolutionary group and the hardcore conscious style of groups they influenced such as Public Enemy, who are themselves featured on the album. Lyrically, the album is saturated with militant political statements and a plethora of conspiracy theory references. 'Evil' (2003) is a conspiratorial tour-de-force: written from the perspective of 'the man behind the plan', the track outlines a strategy for total political control through cultural manipulation, referencing the government producing and selling crack cocaine, using diseases such as AIDS as biological weapons, and 'false flag' strategies.

'What Would You Do?' (2003) goes yet further, and is perhaps the first hip-hop track to explicitly endorse 9/11 conspiracy theories. It begins with a number of samples, including a one taken from the conspiracy-theory centric show *The X-Files* ('Federal agents! We're armed!'), and a Bush speech in which each reference to 'terrorists' is seamlessly replaced with 'Americans', producing the opening: 'Good

⁸³ There is a similarity with television show *The Wire* (Simon 2002), which deals with drug dealing in Baltimore: at a certain point, the heroin capsules go from being called 'red-tops' or 'yellow-tops' to 'Bin Laden' and 'WMD'. Overall, *The Wire* is itself an iconic article of 'post-9/11' culture, capturing a lot of the political and technological shifts of the period and their bearing on street drug-trade, policing, and urban life in general.

evening, I would like to report on our war against the American people...'. After various conspiratorial references, including engineered AIDS and the Illuminati, Paris sets forth his take on the September 11th attacks (2003):

Ain't no terror threat unless approval ratings slumping
So I'mma say it for the record we the ones that planned it
Ain't no other country took a part or had they hand in
Just a way to keep ya scary so you think you need 'em
Praising Bush while that killer take away ya freedom
...
And while the Reichstag burns see the public buy it
I see the profiling I see the media's compliance

Paris's perspective here reflects a serious endorsement of the most prominent 9/11 conspiracy theory, that they were a 'false flag' operation co-ordinated by the US government or intelligence services in order to justify wars abroad and the curtailment of freedom domestically.⁸⁴

5.4 Jadakiss - 'Why?' (2004)

'Atrocity' is the word Fox News broadcaster Bill O'Reilly chose to describe Jadakiss's 'Why?' (2004), before suggesting the then-president sue him for slander for the line 'why did Bush knock down the towers?' (Heim 2004). Released as part of his second album *Kiss of Death* on 22nd June 2004 – which debuted at number 1 in the Billboard 200 charts, the single reaching 11 on the Hot 100, 4 on the RnB/Hip-hop chart – the track was a surprise political hit for a rapper associated

⁸⁴ A version of this is outlined in the conspiracy theory film *Zeitgeist: The Movie* (Joseph 2007), for example.

mainly with uncompromising gangsta rap, and in a period often dismissed for its apparent commercialisation, contrasted with the more socially-engaged music of the 80s and 90s.⁸⁵ An early interview suggests that O'Reilly was not far off the mark with his literal reading of the line, with the rapper telling *Billboard* (2004): "I just felt [Bush] had something to do with it. That's why I put it in there like that. A lot of my people felt he had something to do with it." Jadakiss struck a more moderated tone in an interview with the *Washington Post* (Heim 2004) that followed shortly afterwards, however: "Obviously it's only a metaphor, but on the same note I think that before 9/11 the intelligence agencies weren't communicating a lot of the important information. And ultimately, at the end of the day, he's the boss. The buck stops with him."

Whether Jadakiss is endorsing the prevalent 9/11 conspiracy theories of the time or simply employing them as a bombastic way of pointing out the failings of the president and the state, the track was clearly designed in part to spark such outrage. In fact, this ambiguity between literal accusation and metaphor is crucial to understanding the track, both in terms of its aesthetic and formal aspects and also as a discursive and political intervention into the mainstream. With just a passing mention of the popular 9/11 'truthier' theories, Jadakiss demonstrates the incendiary, double-edged nature of conspiratorial hip-hop, showing both its inherent sensationalism – feeding the need for new outrageous topics and culture-war fodder, and potentially generated some sales in the process – whilst also demonstrating its potential political significance, bringing alternative and dissenting ideas into

⁸⁵ Such a perspective is popular in hip-hop fandom and is also sometimes referred to in rap lyrics. A number of academics studying hip-hop also reproduce this notion: see Perry (2004) in particular.

mainstream discourse. Of course, such an intervention has no inherent positive value, but what is important to recognise is that this relatively minor current within hip-hop music contributed to conditions from which the prevailing discursive deadlock could be meaningfully challenged. This challenge was apparently significant enough to warrant comment from an official White House spokesperson (Heim 2004): 'The White House doesn't do music reviews. We are confident that the heart and soul of American knows that the terrorists are responsible for the horrors of 9/11. '

The track's beat,⁸⁶ produced by Havoc of Mobb Deep, sets out a standard structure of three 16-measure verses broken up by a repeating 8-measure chorus sung by Anthony Hamilton. The only deviation from this pattern is a 2-measure lead-up to the first verse, which features an attention-grabbing high-pitched synth. The most prominent layers of the beat are, quite unusually, almost entirely percussive in character: the drums, a separate cowbell layer, and a vibraphone sample sped up by roughly double and pitched up an octave, also providing the main melodic material of the track.⁸⁷ The only exception to this are the vocalist's layers, both in the chorus and in ad libs interspersed through the verses. This percussive backdrop remains virtually unchanging throughout the track, with only the vocal ad libs and cowbell loop brought strategically in and out of the mix, and occasional drum fill to lead into a new section.

Altogether this creates a backdrop which feels uncompromising, even militant, in its consistent rhythmic drive, but which also uses its small number of

⁸⁶ The sum total of the non-rapped layers of the track.

⁸⁷ From an instrumental track called 'Mandrake' (1975) by prog rock band Gong.

layers to – with impressive economy – effect a harmonic and melodic pallet rich enough to support the soulful sung chorus material. This provides some clue to the break-out popularity of the track in a period where conscious or political hip-hop, especially its more 'hardcore' incarnations, popular in the late-80s to early 90s (the so-called 'Golden Era'), had largely been sidelined in favour of the more pop and RnB influenced styles of producers Timbaland, Just Blaze, and Kanye West.

Havoc's clever synthesis of these styles provides an appropriate back-drop for Jadakiss's flow, which also attempts to combine elements in a novel way, with the rapper's classical gangsta persona butting up against the need to ask pressing political questions. The outcome is a list of 'why' questions which, broadly speaking, alternate between the personal and political, between street braggadocio and righteous political anger. The lyrics are hereafter printed and numbered by measure, starting at 0; any word which runs over two measures is put in the latter measure. Each line of lyrics corresponds to a row in the chart above it, with each cell representing 1/16th of a measure, each 4 cell sub-group representing a beat, and an 'x' representing a single syllable in the lyrics.¹¹¹ The following passages are taken from the opening and closing of the first verse, with 'x' representing a rhythmic emphasis:

<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>			x	x	x	x	x	x
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>			x			x	x	x

[from previous line:] ...Yo, why is

¹¹¹ This method was developed by musicologist Adam Krims in his monograph *Rap Music* (2000).

2 Jadakiss as hard as it gets? Why's the industry
 3 designed to keep the artist in debt? And why them dudes ain't
 4 ridin if they part of your set? And why they never get it
 5 popping but they party to death? Yeah, and why they...

Fig. 5.1 Jadakiss 'Why?' rhythmic chart measures 2-6.

<u>x</u>		x		<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>		x	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	x
<u>x</u>		x		<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>			x	x
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x		<u>x</u>			x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	x
<u>x</u>	x	<u>x</u>				x	x	<u>x</u>	x	<u>x</u>				<u>x</u>	

[from previous line:] ...why they
 14 kill 2pac and Chris? Why, at the bar, you ain't
 15 take straight shots instead of poppin Cris? Why them
 16 bullets have to hit that door? Why did Kobe have to
 17 hit that raw? Why'd he kiss that whore? Why?

Fig. 5.2 Jadakiss 'Why?' rhythmic chart measures 14-17.

These excerpts show how the rhythmic pattern {1 2 3 4, 1 2 3 4} is developed through the first verse. Introduced with a consistent placement on the first beat of the measure through lines 2-5, by the end of the verse the pattern is used more freely. Though the pattern still falls on the first beat in measure 14 and 16, it comes in a beat late in measure 15 and a beat early before measure 17, where the triplets extend the polyrhythmic, 3-against-4 feel of the basic pattern. The effect of this development is that the questions are no longer always one per measure, but start 'wrapping around' the underlying 4-beat pattern, building up rhythmic and rhetorical intensity at the end of the verse. This also creates a fruitful tension against the underlying beat whilst also, through contrast, reinforcing its unwavering,

High synth	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x		x		x		
Vibes sample	<u>x</u>				<u>x</u>		<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>			x	x	x									
Cowbell	<u>x</u>			x	<u>x</u>	x	<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>			x	x	x									
Snare					x								x					x				x		x
Kick	<u>x</u>					<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>			<u>x</u>	x	<u>x</u>				<u>x</u>						

Whilst in general terms, Jadakiss switches his flow between the more steady (fig. 5.1) and more shifted, 'wrapped around' patterns (fig. 5.2) throughout the track, I would also argue that he exploits the latter in order emphasise some of the track's more controversial lyrics, many of which also carry a conspiratorial edge. Line 14, 'why they kill Tupac and Chris?' carries such an implication for many hip-hop fans, who will be well aware of the various conspiracy theories associated with the murders – Tupac's death especially. For the uninitiated, the potentially mysterious 'they' might serve as a signpost towards such explanations. Jadakiss references the theories in a video comment left on the RapGenius webpage for the track: 'both of their deaths are very controversial, conspiracy theories, both of 'em, so, y'know, a

lot of people think the government, the CIA, or whoever, did it, that's just like, I wanna know why is that?' (Jadakiss 2015). Also heard amidst the 'wrapped around' effect is the track's infamous 9/11 lyric, which follows straight on from lines quoted in fig. 5.2, following a chorus, with the rhythmic momentum intact:

<u>x</u>	x	x		<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>		x	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	
<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>	x	x	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>		x	x	x
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x		<u>x</u>			x	x	x	x	x	x
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x		<u>x</u>			x	x

[from previous line:] why do
 26 niggas push pounds and powder? Why did Bush knock
 27 down the towers? Why you around them cowards? Why
 28 Aaliyah have to take that flight? Why my nigga D ain't
 29 pull out his Ferrari? Why he take that bike? Why they

Fig. 5.4 Jadakiss 'Why?' rhythmic chart measures 26-30.

By crowding in a larger number of questions around these more controversial moments, this rhythmic effect also has the consequence of implying, in a way both surreal and darkly comical, a sense of equivalence and continuity between them. In other words, Jadakiss's flow here would seem to suggest that it makes as much sense to ask why people deal drugs, or why his friend died, as it does to ask why Bush did 9/11 – and that all of these questions have an equal, widely-accepted basis in truth. This ironic gesture draws attention to the extremity of the gap between how 9/11 and the war on terror were being discussed in much of public life and how they were being discussed in private, where even direct governmental involvement in the attacks might not be seen as unreasonable or off-limits. Indeed, Jadakiss indicates that this is the case amongst his own circle in his

aforementioned interview with Billboard (2004). This rhetorical crowding and 'wrapping around' also implies a logic of overdetermination: there are so many serious problems, pressures, and unanswered questions facing African Americans that the 9/11 attacks are merely one amongst many. This sense of equivalence inverts the dominant response to the attacks which sought to present them as singular and inexplicable, implying instead that explanations might be sought by connecting the attacks to the broader social structures (such as race) which govern our experiences. This point, quite radical at the time, should not be dismissed because of the sense of irony and flippancy with which it is expressed, rather, it seems that these modes of expression helped Jadakiss to break the discursive deadlock surrounding the attacks, at least in a limited sense.

Given the consistency of most of the beat, with a good proportion of the layers playing almost completely throughout whole track, it is worth paying attention to how the few prominent variable elements – the cowbell loop and the vocalist ad libs – are used. Figure 5.5 sets out the most prominent layers of the track:

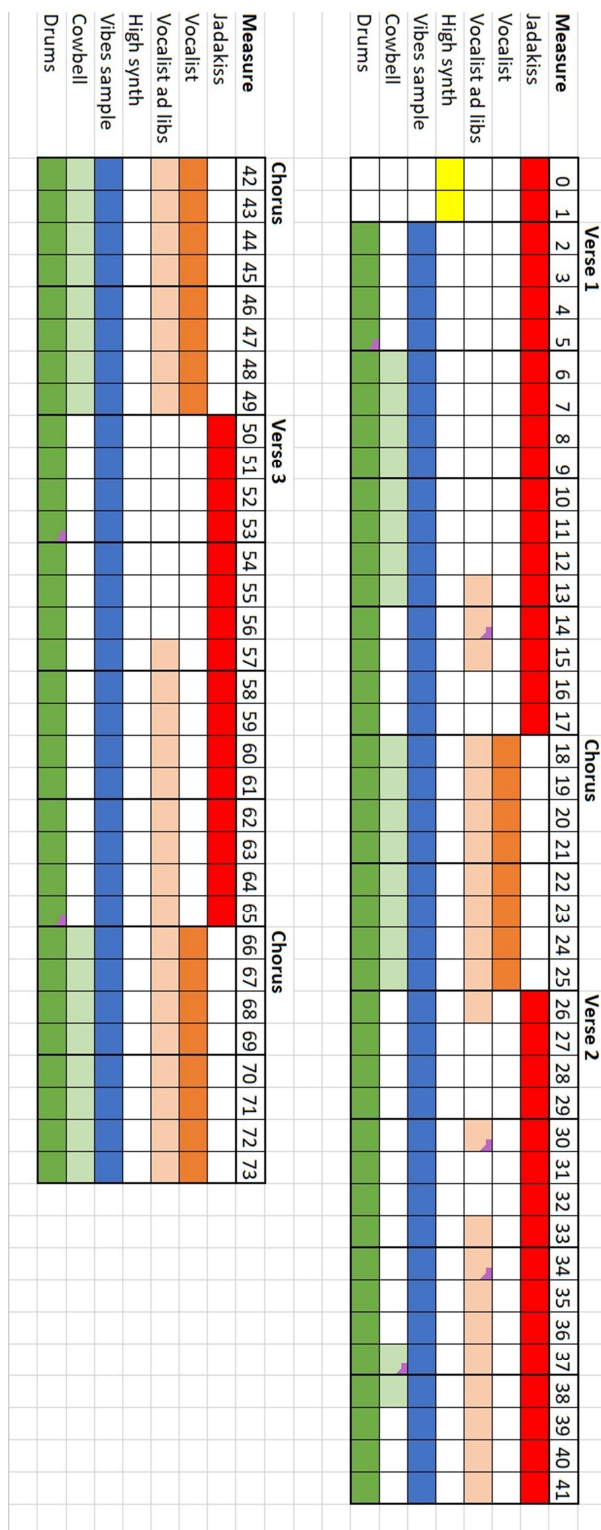


Fig. 5.5 Jadakiss ‘Why?’ track layer chart.

From this it can be seen how vocalist ad libs coincide with and give weight to a number of lyrics with a conspiratorial implication (Jadakiss 2004):

- line 14: 'Why they kill Tupac and Chris?'
- line 30: 'Why they open your package and read your mail?'
- line 58: 'Why they ain't give us a cure for AIDS?'

Similarly, a two-measure instance of the cowbell sample at measure 37 underlines the lyrics 'why did crack have to hit so hard?' which precedes it, and 'why they let The Terminator win the election? Come on pay attention', which follows it. Although much of the lyrics referred to here are not explicitly conspiratorial, a good portion of their audience will understand the associations they carry for African Americans and in hip-hop culture. For example, the idea that both AIDS and crack were both in some way engineered in order to oppress African Americans are likely the most frequently referenced conspiracy theories in hip-hop music. Given this assumed knowledge, the emphases outlined above might suggest an extra significance to these lyrics which Jadakiss is free to leave unsaid – a subtle signal to those in-the-know.

The only prominent element left unaccounted for is the introductory synth sound which is heard in the first two measures and which, curiously, does not return for the rest of the track. I would suggest that this is not meant to function like the other elements of the track, to be looped, brought in and out of the mix and so on, but rather is meant to grab the audience's attention, imitating the high-pitched

percussive beeps often used to open a news programme.⁸⁸ Combined with Jadakiss's throat-clearance (one of his signature ad libs) in the first measure, the first sound he makes, this sets up the pedagogic, 'come on pay attention' attitude which runs through the track. It also brings to mind Chuck D's formulation of hip-hop as the Black CNN, a news source that reflects more accurately the realities of life for African Americans than mainstream new sources. The music video also supports this: it opens with Jadakiss flicking through TV channels and turning it off in exasperation, we then cut to a diverse variety of other people doing the same thing, before the rapper then appears in place of the news anchor. Reminiscent of the iconic scene from *Network* (Lumet 1976), a film itself not shy of broaching conspiratorial themes, he sits with his tie loose and raps expressively to the audience, now riveted to their TV sets.

Although the music video confirms the sense that 'Why?' was written in part as an attempt to raise consciousness, Jadakiss would find out that 'catching the ear of White America' also has its dangers (again commenting on the track's RapGenius webpage):

I started getting nervous, looking over my shoulders, thinking they were going to start clipping my brake line or something once it reached Bill O'Reilly. I knew if it did reach Bill O'Reilly and the masses like that, that I did the right thing. I love that more than actually being nominated for a Grammy – someone on Bush's team knew about that. (Jadakiss 2015)

⁸⁸ Interestingly, news music was probably the most rapid musical responses to the attacks. As James Deaville's excellent essay on the music used in CNN's coverage suggests, it also may have been one of the most influential, framing the shocking footage with tones of anger, vengeance, and militarism (2007).

Though Jadakiss is admittedly in a rather unique position here, this expresses, as 'Why?' (2004) does so effectively, a sense of generalised paranoia which is a necessary fact of existence and survival for many African Americans, and indeed many poor and oppressed people the world over, whether it is paranoia about what you say in public, about being terrorised by the police, or being imprisoned or murdered. With the media and the government effectively speaking in concert, with incessant warnings about Saddam Hussein's purported weapons of mass destruction, 'staying woke' means still casting an eye in the other direction, maintaining a critical gaze so that the increases in surveillance and incarceration rates that would follow on from the Patriot Act might be anticipated. Such a perspective, if more widely shared, might even have frustrated the otherwise largely unimpeded drive towards unnecessary and protracted wars in the Middle East.

It perhaps makes sense, therefore, that the break-through hip-hop track addressing 9/11 barely discusses the event itself, or indeed its wide-ranging consequences, but instead couches an incendiary conspiratorial reference amongst a long list of problems, questions and grievances that Jadakiss faces as an individual, a hip-hop artist and an African American.

5.5 Immortal Technique - 'Bin Laden' (2005)

Whereas Jadakiss takes the kind of theory propounded by Paris and distils it into a pithy phrase ('Why did Bush knock down the towers?' (2004)) largely devoid of context, Immortal Technique samples this line as his chorus, drawing on its appeal as a catchy mantra whilst simultaneously altering its meaning (2005):

Bin Laden didn't blow up the projects
It was you, nigga, tell the truth nigga!
Bush knocked down the towers, tell the truth nigga!
Bush knocked down the towers, tell the truth nigga!

'The towers' are cast as a double-voiced signifier⁸⁹ which mediates between the immediate struggle of poor, urban African Americans, represented by the destruction of social housing (or 'projects'), and the broader political systems involved in shaping those experiences, in this case the military-industrial complex, here viewed through a specifically conspiratorial lens. Whether the towers in question are the housing projects or the World Trade Center, the critique rests on the common question of how far an oppressive government would go in using violence against its own citizens in order to pursue its political goals. The 9/11 false-flag conspiracy theory is therefore used in a way that, whilst capitalising on its sensationalist appeal, re-directs that attention towards the experiences of his (imagined) audience, whilst at the same time suggesting a link between them and the unfolding wars in the Middle East.

Though the verses mainly focus on the War on Terror, there is a persistent theme of relating things back to the day-to-day African American experiences (2005):

And if you speak about the evil that the government does
The Patriot Act'll track you to the type of your blood
They try to frame you, and say you was tryna sell drugs

⁸⁹ This rhetorical flourish chimes with Gates Jr.'s notion of 'signifyin(g)' (1988).

Whilst showing how policies introduced in response to the September 11th attacks are used to surveil African Americans, he also indicates that dissent over foreign policy can be stifled by police racism, making clear some of the material connections at play. The second verse is mainly formed of an appeal to empathise with the situation of ordinary Iraqis, asking us to picture the occupation taking place in the 'hood' instead. Immortal Technique's flow in this section sheds light on his expressive strategy in general (2005):

x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x		x	x	
x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	x		x	x	x
<u>x</u>		x	x	<u>x</u>		x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	<u>x</u>	x

[They say the]
rebels in Iraq still fight for Saddam, but that's
bullshit, I'll show you why it's totally wrong, 'cause if
another country invaded the hood tonight, it'd be
warfare through Harlem, and Washington Heights I wouldn't

x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>				x	x
x	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	x
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	x	x		x	x
<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>		x	x	x	x	x	x

be fightin' for Bush or White America's dream I'd be
fightin' for my people's survival and self-esteem I wouldn't
fight for racist churches from the south, my nigga I'd be
fightin' to keep the occupation out, my nigga

Fig. 5.6 Immortal Technique 'Bin Laden' rhythmic chart 1.

The opening four measures of the verse establish a fairly regular, declarative rhythm which contrasts with the generally effusive style heard so far, and the following four place 'fight' on the downbeat of each measure (with the first just a 16th-note off). What is being established, through this musical marker and rhetorical technique, is a didactic, revolutionary persona typical of conscious hip-hop.⁹⁰

The declarative rhythm is also heard at several other points in the track, adding emphasis to the lyrics by lending them a clear and hard-hitting sound, especially when contrasting with more effusive material. These include the lines referring to the Patriot Act, and the following: 'And of course Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons / we sold him that shit after Ronald Reagan's election' (2005). All of the instances noted so far share the theme of attempting to express an anti-imperialist perspective on the War on Terror. It is heard in a more conspiratorial context in the following passage, which mixes a declarative rhythm with the effusive polyrhythmic style in close succession, reacting to the internal rhyme scheme (2005):

x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
<u>x</u>	x	<u>x</u>		<u>x</u>	x	x	x	<u>x</u>	x	x	<u>x</u>			x	x

[They]
 controllin' the ghetto with the fear of attack, Tryin' to
 [tryin = 1 syllable]
 distract the fact that they engineering the crack, so I'm

⁹⁰ See chapter 3 'The musical poetics of a revolutionary identity' in Krims' *Rap Music* (2000), which presents an in depth analysis of how Ice Cube constructs a Black revolutionary identity in his music.

Fig. 5.7 Immortal Technique 'Bin Laden' rhythmic chart 2. The first syllable of 'controllin'' is in the previous measure.

Immortal Technique's final lines enigmatically sum up the ambiguous role played by conspiracy theory in the track: 'this ain't no alien conspiracy theory this shit is real / written on the dollar underneath the masonic seal' (2005). Whilst seeking to downplay the more frivolous or damaging effects of conspiratorial discourses, as in the track's hook, he also indicates the necessity of maintaining a sceptical outlook, especially towards US institutions and the state. He seems to suggest that beneath the spectacular surface of most conspiracy theories there often lies a kernel of truth, reflecting real processes of violence, exploitation and corruption. In the context of 9/11 and the War on Terror, this is reflected in the fact that, regardless of who organised the original attacks, propaganda and misinformation led to destructive and prolonged warfare in the Middle East. The harshest consequences of this 'conspiracy actuality', to borrow a phrase from UK rapper Lowkey, are often experienced by people of colour, in this case the millions of Iraqis and Afghans who were killed, injured or displaced in the course of the War on Terror and the ongoing occupations and interventions.

The highly sceptical, even paranoid, critical tendency in African American thought that Immortal Technique is drawing upon here was borne out of necessity from generations of experience of organised racial terror. Events such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, or the political espionage and assassinations known as CoIntelPro – both of which would doubtless be called 'conspiracy theories' were there not enough evidence to prove their existence – demonstrate what is at stake in terms of maintaining this cultural current and general outlook, captured in the

phrase 'stay woke'. Confronted with a situation in which, because it concerns national security, the state holds a monopoly on information, it is inevitable that conspiracy theories will rush to fill the void left by unsatisfactory official explanations. What is remarkable is that, unlike the theories being propounded by radio host Alex Jones or the *Zeitgeist* (Joseph 2007) documentary films, the hip-hop versions of the 9/11 conspiracy theory do not seem to reproduce reactionary politics and antisemitic tropes. Instead, the use of conspiracy theories is often contextualised by reference back to the lived experience of many African Americans, with the result of sometimes being able to draw material and structural links between everyday life and the ruptural event represented by the September 11th attacks – something which much of the rest of the entertainment industry and media were failing to cope with, often resorting to Islamophobia and political acquiescence. Rather than representing the antithesis of structural critique, it would seem that the performative use of conspiracy theory in hip-hop can actually work to encourage it, at least to some extent. Something similar is at play in the anti-imperialist thread running through these responses. The total distrust of the Bush administration expressed by phrases like 'Bush knocked down the towers' is fruitfully re-directed towards a greater awareness of corruption and exploitation at the both the global and local level.

It is worth considering why the use of conspiracy theory works for both conscious, political rappers like Immortal Technique, Paris and Dead Prez, as well as for gangsta rapper Jadakiss. For the revolutionary persona in hip-hop, performed in exemplary fashion in 'Bin Laden,' the notion chimes well with the idea of ruling

class conspiracies, such as the fascination with the Illuminati or the Bilderburg Group found in certain strains of left and right-wing political discourse. It also brings to mind the racial conspiracy theories propounded by some Islamic groups in the US, many of which have deep connections with the conscious hip-hop scene, such as the notion of Yakub in the Nation of Islam – a scientist who accidentally created the white race around 6000 years ago. For the gangsta persona, the notion instead brings to mind the intrigue of a criminal conspiracy, the idea of participating in a conspiracy-from-below perhaps functioning as a dark reflection of perceived conspiracies organised from above. The commonality between both of these idealised figures, so prominent throughout the history of hip-hop music, is ultimately their need to maintain a paranoid outlook in order to survive. Although the revolutionary has an explicitly didactic function, in contrast to the more ambiguous responses of gangsta rap, both serve to teach of the necessity of keeping one's eyes open, of 'staying woke,' at all times. In doing so, they hark back to traditions of Black thought and knowledge forged and passed down through generations of slavery and racial terror. Such a function might hold immense value in times when scepticism is at once so necessary and so lacking in both popular discourse and the public sphere.

Overall, hip-hop music produced a varied set of responses to the September 11th attacks, with many criticising the government and broader social trends at a time when censorship and patriotism otherwise dominated popular music expressions about the attacks. A number of tracks, especially the more critical ones, promote or draw upon 9/11 conspiracy theories. Some even use these references as

ways to structure the music, positioning them as points of interest or climax using the density of musical layers or the rapper's flow to draw attention and place emphasis. Whilst there are certainly downsides to contributing to its popularity, the use of the 9/11 conspiracy theory in hip-hop seems to have played a significant role as part of the music's critical function. In differing contexts, it has variously served to intensify, complicate, and popularise the criticisms being propounded by hip-hop artists in the wake of the attacks. Often, it is used as part of a strategy which seems designed to warn people, African Americans in particular, of the dangers of any kind of accommodation to patriotism and support of the government's war efforts by reminding listeners of the historical necessity of African American scepticism, and of the persistence and centrality of the racial struggle in general.

Hip-hop music, and politically-oriented hip-hop music especially, was facing a variety of (potentially existential) threats at this time. On the one hand the 9/11 attacks posed some very serious problems for the music, especially in its more explicitly political manifestations: the general increase in censorship threatened a music that had long experience of this from the police and the state, even in more permissive contexts; the general throttling of public discourse, effected by the acquiescence of the media and much of the popular arts to the government line; and finally, the strong link between conscious hip-hop and groups such as the Nation of Islam, with overt expressions of faith and affiliation threatened by Islamophobia after 9/11. On the other hand was the creeping threat of commercialisation, with hip-hop being incorporated into mainstream pop and RnB in new and significant ways. I want to suggest that this paranoid thread in hip-hop, which had been

present from its early years, helped to keep alive the music's notions of racial, political, and social consciousness during this difficult period, and afterwards in a persistent post-9/11 cultural milieu.

5.6 Conclusion

Hip-hop responses to 9/11 were highly varied but nevertheless generally expressed important continuities in terms of historicising the attacks, criticising the rush to war, and humanising Muslims, Afghans and Iraqis. Conspiracy theory played a prominent and important role in this music, serving to intensify and popularise critiques through the false-flag 9/11 theories, and drawing traditions of African American scepticism and paranoia regarding the state and White America, especially by frequent invocations of conspiracy theories regarding crack cocaine. Conspiracy theory sometimes even played a central role in structuring the music, harking back to an aesthetic of paranoia that often figured in the earlier hip-hop of Tupac and the Geto Boys, for example. It is worth noting that it managed this without reproducing the reactionary or racist perspectives and tropes commonly associated with conspiratorial discourse, probably because its specific discourses arose primarily from an anti-racist struggle.

Although the value of this presence is debatable, with these conspiratorial references potentially mis-directing audience's critical energies, this was doubtless a period in which scepticism was sorely needed – and in short supply from a popular-cultural sphere severely hobbled by censorship and governmental influence. Going further, it could be argued that a paranoid, even conspiratorial

attitude was warranted by the situation surrounding the start of the Iraq War. With the US government enforcing and expanding the monopoly on information that any state holds in matters of national security, it was impossible for ordinary citizens to know what the precise motivation for the attacks were, and to assess the legitimacy of the various reasons given to justify the War on Terror. The Bush administration capitalised upon this situation, and alongside US and UK intelligence agencies, not to mention mainstream media outlets, purposefully spread falsehoods in order to engineer support for the war, especially regarding Iraq's capacity to carry out '45 minute strikes' on the West, and its possession of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'.

With a number of future crises forming part of our historical horizon, including global warming, resource scarcity, and epidemics, it is incumbent on cultural theorists of all persuasions and disciplines to assess the potential roles that various aspects of popular culture and communications might play as these future crises unfold. I would suggest that hip-hop deserves special attention in this regard; despite the music's enormously varied expressions (Tricia Rose characterises the music in terms of its 'contradictory articulations' (1994, 2)), there is also an unusual persistence of notions of raising consciousness which could give it a special relevance. Many genres of popular music have been animated by similar ideological forces in their formative years, including certain strains of folk music, rock, punk, and techno, but none have retained their political, racial and class character to the same extent as hip-hop.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to demonstrate the importance of conspiracy theory in US hip-hop music, particularly in the context of responding to social crises. A theme of conspiratorial and paranoid perspectives runs through US hip-hop culture, ranging from popular suspicions about clothing brands and fast food chains being allied with white supremacist interests, right up to notions of wealthy rappers being part of the global manipulation of culture and politics through membership of secret societies such as the Illuminati. Conspiratorial ideas are also informed by and have an influence upon related discursive modes, including popular rumour culture, such as those that damagingly claimed Big Daddy Kane was HIV-positive, and religious parable and mythology, most prominently the founding 'Yakub' myth promoted by the Nation of Islam.

The most significant musical examples of conspiratorial narratives, however, respond to serious social crises in US culture, especially those which have disproportionately affected African Americans. The two that have been demonstrated as the most prominent responded to the crises present in the 1980s, a crucial decade for the development and popularisation of hip-hop, namely the crack cocaine crisis and the emergence of HIV/AIDS. Conspiratorial hip-hop linked these crises to notions of racial genocide which had arisen in the 1950s at the dawn of the Civil Rights Era.

Conspiracy theory in hip-hop became a way of arguing for the necessity of cultivating a sense of heightened awareness of racial injustice and the structures

supporting it. The phrase 'stay woke' formed a persistent shorthand for this idea throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. This cultural imperative can be broken down into two aspects: first, a survivalist strategy that argues for the necessity of paranoia and suspicion as a way to recognise racism and white supremacy, and second, the need to cultivate a sense of political consciousness which can propagate such warnings and begin building towards alternative anti-racist social frameworks. Through its affinity with the suspicious, sceptical and paranoid structure of feeling epitomised by the 'stay woke' imperative, hip-hop music has built a popular conception of power, politics and knowledge which are deeply informed by conspiracy theories.

Chapter 1 tracks the history of the phrase 'stay woke' through the 20th century, showing how a slang term whose first usage was tracked back the late 1930s in a Lead Belly recording ('Scottsboro Boys' (1938)) would develop through the post-war period before becoming a watch-word for the intense scepticism surround the state and purported racial genocide plans in the 1970s recordings of Gil Scott-Heron. His spoken-word style and willingness to engage with conspiratorial literature, namely taking the notion of the 'King Alfred Plan,' an alleged plan to put Black radicals in concentration camps, taken from novelist John A Williams' *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), foreshadowed the prominent presence of conspiratorial narratives in hip-hop music. I show how such discourse found in hip-hop a complementary expressive form, whose developing expressive conventions and modes of performance and delivery would emphasise and dramatise that nascent conspiratorial rhetoric.

Examples by prominent artists of hip-hop's Golden Era (running from the mid-80s to early 90s) show conspiratorial hip-hop in its 'classical' form, using the racial genocide discourse of earlier generations as a way to interpret and respond to the crack cocaine and HIV/AIDS crises blighting many poor African American communities. These narratives, which purport government involvement in engineering the crises as a means of white supremacist population control, would become the canonical conspiracy theories of hip-hop culture, and maintain a presence in contemporary music. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how conspiratorial themes in hip-hop developed into distinct forms aligned with the diverging sub-genres of conscious and gangsta rap. Paranoia and suspicion suited both as expressive modes but in different ways; gangsta rap emphasised total suspicion at the interpersonal level, between friends and relatives just as with the police and state, whilst conscious rap looked towards broader structures of racism and grander conspiratorial narratives, drawing on Nation of Islam mysticism and conspiracy literature such as Milton William Cooper's *Behold a Pale Horse* (1991).

Chapter 2 continues this historical narrative into the new millennium, a time at which hip-hop was facing rapidly shifting conditions for its production, distribution and reception. An apparent crisis of commercialisation identified by many commentators provided a test for the kinds of starkly oppositional and critical perspectives often voiced by conspiratorial hip-hop. This was coincident with a period of intense consolidation and monopolisation in the media and entertainment industries following the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which removed many anti-trust laws in these industries, and engendered the potential for a popular culture

with increased corporate influence and censorship. I argue that hip-hop's affinity with conspiracy theory provided one of the ways for it to maintain its oppositional perspectives in this new context.

I discuss how mixtapes gained a new importance in this period, bypassing the major labels, publishers, and conventional distribution channels by taking advantage of the new mp3 file format and free online filesharing. This freedom meant that highly popular artists such as Lil Wayne continued to use conspiratorial narratives as a way to challenge the dominant media and political discourse responding to social crises, in this case Hurricane Katrina. The chapter concludes by discussing how conspiracy theory remains a prominent thread in the music of two of the most prominent hip-hop artists active in recent years, Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar. These artists continue the development of conspiracy theory in hip-hop by accessing the topic in a mode of nostalgia and revivalism. Whilst references to the classical HIV/AIDS and crack cocaine remain a shorthand for profound suspicion of authority and racial-political consciousness, they also now emerge as authenticating gestures towards that discursive lineage, and are cast in a new expressive mode which emphasises interiority. This is perhaps the logical conclusion of all forms of 'paranoid reading,' the paranoia becoming completely generalised and eventually turning inward, having exhausted all external avenues.

In this context, I use Raymond Williams' concept of a 'structure of feeling' (first introduced 1954) to help explain the more abstract way that the 'stay woke' imperative and suspicious and paranoid discursive modes permeate contemporary hip-hop music. This emphasises an historical understanding of the 'affective

elements of consciousness and relationships' (1977b, 132) in cultural production, and the shared modes of representation, expression, and emoting shaped by a specific set of historical conditions. I argue that conspiratorial hip-hop is the exemplary expressive manifestation of 'staying woke' as a structure of feeling. Further, I point towards the surprising persistence of this structure over the course of nearly a century in African American popular music. This in turn is shaped by the persistence of a set of historical conditions which continue to segregate, impoverish, and criminalise young African Americans.

The main case studies presented in the remainder of the chapters look in detail at conspiratorial narratives in hip-hop music responding to the crack cocaine crisis, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the September 11th Attacks. These focus more on the detail of the rhetorical and musical content than previous chapters, and also take a more critical perspective on the cultural impact and social utility of these interventions.

Crack cocaine conspiracy theories usually allege that the drug was engineered under government authority with the intent to disrupt and depopulate African American communities. After Gary Webb's *Dark Alliance* investigative journalism, originally published in 1996, the notion that the CIA were facilitating the importing of the drug from Nicaragua also became a popular theme. As such it provides an example of a conspiratorial hip-hop narrative which builds off earlier discourses of Black genocide and Nation of Islam mythology (via the notion of chemical engineering as a central technology of race), whilst also interacting with contemporary public discourse in Gary Webb's journalism and the strong reaction

against it. Aspects of these discourses were then combined and reproduced in a way that built a bottom-up critique of crack cocaine dealing and usage which shifted the blame away from the affected communities and street level dealers and up to the more abstract level of the international drug trade, US state apparatuses, and structural notions of race and racism.

In this, we can see a social utility in positioning the drug as something fundamentally to do with state authorities such as the police, security services, and Ronald Reagan himself, rather than something endemic to African American communities, users, and dealers. Arguments that involvement with the drug represented a betrayal of African American communities in terms of disrupting their health and social cohesion could thus be complemented by suggesting that it also meant working for the interests of White America and white supremacy. Leaving aside the question of the veracity of Webb's claims, we can see that this was convincing because it was built on a core of truth: the crack cocaine crisis depended not on street-level dealers but on large organised crime networks, the destabilisation of central American promoted by the CIA, and the structural impoverishment of African American communities.

This topic is unique amongst hip-hop conspiracy theories in that the crack cocaine crisis was otherwise a very common general topic in the music, with the focus often being nothing to do with conspiratorial narratives and rather focusing on narratives about dealing the drug and the commentary on its social effects. The centrality of the drug in hip-hop lyrics also led to widespread use of imagery which compared crack cocaine to rap, playing off the paradox of the music's appeal and

its allegedly damaging social impact, at least as claimed by mainstream conservative reaction to the music. I have shown how this influenced the formation of a kind of meta-conspiracy-theory borne out of hip-hop culture but aimed at hip-hop music itself, alleging that the music had been captured by corporate interests with the intent of increasing drug use and violence.

HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories also saw an interaction between hip-hop music and Nation of Islam discourse, this time the contemporaneous claims that the disease was not African in origin, but that this was a lie to cover the fact it had been engineered by the US state, who were then suppressing cures promoted by Nation doctors. The promotion of alternative treatments by rhetoric strongly related to conspiratorial hip-hop raises new issues in terms of the social impact of the music, namely it enabled me to assess the potential problems of this music in terms of affecting its audiences understanding of serious medical issues. In such a situation, the potential risks associated with misinformation and deviations from official narratives are heightened.

On the other hand, this context also engendered the unique marriage of conspiratorial hip-hop with public health messaging, working hand-in-hand with charities and TV channels with mainstream credibility. The most prominent example was the *America is Dying Slowly* (1996) album produced by the Red Hot Organisation and promoted via MTV. This indicates that, despite the risks noted above, there was still an external acknowledgment that this kind of music carried a special cultural impact and communicative and persuasive potential with some of the groups most affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Despite this, the album also threw into relief some other negative effects associated with conspiratorial discourse, namely the tendency to reproduce narratives which play off and intensify pre-existing prejudices. *America is Dying Slowly* (1996) is notable for the amount and degree of misogynistic sentiment it expresses. Although the conspiratorial content and misogynist themes are not explicitly connected in the way that, say, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1920) connects financial conspiracy theories to Jewish people, the misogyny clearly emerges from place of fear and suspicion. Women are treated as vectors of transmission and are even presented a number of times as intentionally infecting men – the paranoid structure of feeling which usefully connected local drug use to global structures of power and racism here turned instead on African American women, reproducing and intensifying misogyny in a way that obscured the real dynamics of the crisis.

Music responding to the September 11 Attacks occurred in a very different environment to the two 'classical' hip-hop conspiracy theory topics discussed above. The unexpectedness of an serious attack on New York City created a climate of nationalism and discourses of unity and militarism that was exacerbated by the corporate consolidation of the media and entertainment industries. Also unexpected, potentially, was that hip-hop music would still in this context produce a substantial number of highly oppositional conspiratorial narratives and critique. In fact, the situation seemed to generally inspire some of the most oppositional and controversial rhetoric, with hip-hop groups such as The Diplomats taking on aliases inspired by terrorist groups and the attackers themselves. Paradoxically, this was

also an era in which hip-hop was becoming more commercially dominant in terms of its sales and impact on other forms of popular music. In terms of specifically conspiratorial responses, rappers focused on the notion of the Bush administration being complicit in the attacks, whether indirectly as a result of neo-imperial foreign policy, or directly as a 'false flag' attack on American citizens.

This context differs from most hip-hop conspiracy theories in that the attacks were not something that disproportionately affected African Americans, although it can be argued that measures responding to it, such as the Patriot Act, did do this in some ways. It is also distinct in that it foregrounds the international context which, although it is an important part of the crack cocaine and HIV/AIDS crises, is not often addressed in the music. In reference to the September 11 attacks, conversely, there is frequent reference to historical US foreign policy and the contemporary issues associated with the 'War on Terror'. Conspiratorial rhetoric thus combines with critiques of imperialism and US military and cultural hegemony in this context. Overall, the responses to the September 11th Attacks demonstrates the generalised nature of conspiratorial-oppositional expression in hip-hop: it was no longer just a question of attempting to provide an explanation for a social crisis affecting African American communities, but rather expressed a call for total scepticism with respect to the media, the government, and world events. In this we see a shift from the 'stay woke' structure of feeling acting as a racial survival response to specific historical conditions to being a constitutive background element of hip-hop music and culture, inculcating a default perspective of suspicion with respect to major social and historical events.

This shift towards a totalising scepticism which is increasingly unmoored from historical experiences of oppression foreshadows in some ways the conspiratorial threads most prominent in contemporary US politics and culture. Two conspiracy theories have dominated US popular culture in recent years and have had an unusually large impact on US media and politics: “QAnon”, which posits that a powerful cabal with paedophilic and Satanic tendencies conspired against Donald Trump; and, secondly, conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic, which argued that the pandemic was a planned event and that vaccinations were intended to harm and/or control their recipients.

But what is the connection between hip-hop’s paranoid structure of feeling and use of conspiracy theories and the prominent role played by conspiracy theory in contemporary US culture? One parallel is immediately obvious regarding the presence of medical conspiracy theories in US hip-hop culture in the late 1980s and 1990s regarding HIV/AIDS and the significance of coronavirus pandemic conspiracy theories in recent years. We might question what happens when Public Enemy’s promotion of HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories in ‘Race Against Time’ (1994) reaches audiences who do not share any experience or knowledge of racialised medical experimentation. Or if *America Is Dying Slowly* (1996) might have contributed to the acceptability of medical conspiracy theories in popular culture and public discourse. Further, chapter 2 argues that Kendrick Lamar and Kanye West have propagated some of these notions to large international audiences which far eclipse those reached by most hip-hop artists in the 1980s and 90s. It could be argued, therefore, that hip-hop music’s use of conspiracy theories

contributed in some way towards the present popularity of conspiracy theory in US culture and politics.

It is important not to overstate this, however, since there are a multiplicity of factors involved in this popularity, of which hip-hop music's influence is probably fairly minor when viewed as a whole. One could just as easily point to the popularity of the X Files, or countless political thrillers which take up conspiratorial elements. Further, it is notable that covid conspiracy theories did not seem to figure in US hip-hop culture in any kind of popular or visible way. The same is largely speaking true for the QAnon conspiracy theory and hip-hop culture, which have little visible crossover.

What they might have in common, however, is an approach towards conspiracy theory which seeks to leverage it as a rhetorical device to help bring fringe ideas into mainstream discourse. Whilst the conspiracy theory in hip-hop music most often positions itself as emerging from a position of racial consciousness, however, these contemporary conspiracy theories emerge from a plurality of right wing and far right political tendencies in US culture, including grassroots support for Donald Trump, right-wing internet forums and organisations, and some aspects of the Republican Party. Given that these discourses lack a basis which positions them strongly as emerging from, say, a race or class-based perspective, there is also a substantial difference in how these theories relate to the historical experiences of their proponents. I would argue that this presents a much more dangerous situation in terms of the potential negative impact of conspiracy theories in popular discourse. This is because this lack of a strong mooring to

historical experience makes these conspiracy theories at once more destructive, because they are not inextricably linked to a longstanding social division or hierarchy, but also –crucially– easier to spread to a large number of people. Without the requirement to have shared in a set of historical experience of oppression, such ideas, given the right conditions, could propagate without limit, and without fidelity to a tradition of liberatory politics.

6.1 Future Research

There are several aspects touched upon in this study which could benefit from more focused and sustained research. The relationship between conspiratorial hip-hop and conspiracy theory literature is one area which could be potentially fruitful for better understanding the music in a broader discursive context. Books such as Cooper's *Behold a Pale Horse* (1991) or the works of 'Valdamar Valerian' were not explicitly targeted at African American audiences but seemed to resonate strongly with some prominent hip-hop musicians. Herb Boyd (2002) and Travis Gosa (2011) also suggest that there was a broader popularity of conspiracy theory literature with African American readerships in general. This relationship could be examined through a methodology of close reading of both the conspiracy literature and hip-hop tracks influenced by them, or through interviews with artists who have explicitly cited them. An understanding of conspiracy theory in hip-hop culture could be enhanced by a clearer perspective on how these books were consumed, whether as plausible sociological and historical theory or more for their aesthetic and expressive artistic qualities.

A study focusing more on musical analysis than the present study could be a useful area of complementary research. Whilst this study has pointed to aspects of musical structure and content when especially relevant, the nature of the research as a historical survey covering a large amount of music has largely meant that in-depth analysis was avoided. This has the unfortunate side-effect of reproducing the tendency in academic writing about hip-hop to focus on lyrics at the expense of sonic aspects and musical structure – which is problematic considering that these are clearly important aspects of hip-hop music. A study of one of the most explicitly conspiratorial hip-hop albums, such as those by Jedi Mind Tricks or Non Phixion's *The Future is Now* (2002), could be illuminating for the question of how conspiratorial themes are represented and communicated in sonic terms. Such a study might also throw light on the issue of a more generalised suspicious or paranoid structure of feeling running through hip-hop music in general, including that which does not explicitly reference conspiracy theory.

An important further area for enquiry would be to expand upon the themes of this study in the context of hip-hop produced outside of the US. The 2017 Grenfell Tower Fire in the UK, for example, presented a situation where rappers (such as Lowkey) criticising the cause of the fire and the government response were labelled as conspiracy theorists by the state broadcaster the BBC. The use of 'conspiracy theory' and related terms as an explicitly pejorative label against hip-hop artists and audiences would also be a useful area for further attention. Since this fire disproportionately affected migrants, this context could also shed light on these discourse in migrant communities and diasporas more generally. This would also

address the interesting question of how national contexts shape what is delineated as conspiratorial or not, and could also provide a new perspective on the paradox of hip-hop as simultaneously an aspect of US cultural hegemony and a means for expressing resistance against it (Mitchell 2001; Rollefson 2017).

Another area of interest would be the role of hip-hop music in the Arab Spring (Almeida 2017; El Zein 2016; Isherwood 2014; Qi 2019), and the potential importance of conspiratorial hip-hop in the context of social upheaval within a variety of different state and political systems, ranging from absolute monarchies such as that in Morocco to religious political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood which gained power in Egypt in 2011. Whilst the present study has focused on conspiracy theories popular in Anglophone countries, this could address conspiracy theories specific to popular discourse in Arabic and Islamic contexts, for example (Al-Azm 2019; Gray 2010; Silverstein 2000; Zonis and Joseph 1994).

Finally, I believe that the notion of using Raymond Williams 'structure of feeling' to build a distinctive long historical perspective on a musical form could have a broad range in studies of popular music. Whereas this study has often emphasised the continuities that conspiratorial structures of feeling denote in hip-hop music and African American popular culture, a study of notions of rebelliousness and freedom in country music could shed light on how these concepts and their attendant structures of feeling have changed over time, from anti-authority sentiment in the mid-20th century to more nationalistic tendencies in contemporary country music.

A study in this vein would also be useful in updating and adapting 'structure of feeling' as an academic concept and mode of historical enquiry, making it better able to account for how patterns of emoting and expression change over time. This seems especially necessary considering that the concept places a special emphasis on material historical conditions as the shaping forces of such structures. A similar attempt could be made in the context of recent and contemporary hip-hop music. I have pointed towards the longevity and continuity of conspiratorial and paranoid themes in hip-hop, and argued that recent music by Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar demonstrates that they have become an embedded, essential part of the music's means of expression and communication. The turn towards revivalism and interiority in their music might however represent a kind of end-point for these discourses. What remains to be understood is in what manner the 'stay woke' structure of feeling might be sublated, modified, or transformed in the music to come, and the new ways that this will impact on popular music and cultural life.

Bibliography

Films and Television

- Carter, Chris. 1993. *The X-Files*. 20th Century Fox Television.
- Carter, Chris. 2001. *The Lone Gunmen*. 20th Century Fox Television.
- Curtis, Adam. 2021. *Can't Get You Out Of My Head – 1. Bloodshed on Wolf Mountain*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p093wp6h>.
- De Palma, Brian. 1983. *Scarface*. Universal Pictures.
- De Palma, Brian. 1993. *Carlito's Way*. Universal Pictures.
- Dixon, Ivan. 1973. *The Spook who Sat by the Door*. United Artists.
- Joseph, Peter. 2007. *Zeitgeist: The Movie*. GMP LLC.
- Lowe, Richard, and Martin Torgoff. 2011. *Planet Rock: The Story of Hip-Hop and the Crack Generation*. VH1.
- Lumet, Sidney. 1976. *Network*. United Artists.
- Pakula, Alan. 1971. *Klute*. Warner Bros.
- Pakula, Alan. 1974. *Parallax View*. Paramount Pictures.
- Pakula, Alan. 1976. *All the President's Men*. Warner Bros.
- Paley, Steve. 1996. *Red Hot + Rap*. MTV Productions.
- Simon, David. 2002. *The Wire*. Warner Bros. Television.
- Singleton, John. 1991. *Boyz n the Hood*. Columbia Pictures.
- Stanton, Andrew. 2008. *WALL-E*. Walt Disney Studios.
- Stone, Oliver. 1991. *JFK*. Warner Bros.
- Vallée, Jean-Marc. 2013. *Dallas Buyers Club*. Focus Features.

Theatre

- Beckham, Barry. 1972. *Garvey Lives!* First production in Providence, Rhode Island.

Books and Articles

- Abalakina-Paap, Marina, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, and W. Larry Gregory. 1999. "Beliefs in Conspiracies." *Political Psychology* 20, no. 3: 637-647. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00160>.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Al-Azm, Sadik J. 2019. *Occidentalism, Conspiracy and Taboo: Collected Essays on Islam and Politics Volume 4*. Berlin: Gerlach Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvq4bzhx>.
- Alim, H. Samy. 2007. "Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies: Combat, Consciousness, and the Cultural Politics of Communication." *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 6 no. 2: 161-176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348450701341378>.
- Almeida, Cristina Moreno. 2017. *Rap Beyond Resistance: Staging Power in Contemporary Morocco*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Althusser, Louis. 2014. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. London: Verso Books.
- Amenta, Conrad. 2016. "Why Protest Albums Can't Teach Dissent: The Emergent Complexity of Post-9/11 Protest." In *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma, and the Music Industry in the Time of Terror*, edited by Joseph P. Fisher and Brian Flota, 57-68. London: Routledge.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso books.
- Anon. 1920. *The Jewish Peril: Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Asante Jr., M. K. 2008. *It's Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Associated Press. 1987. "Protesters Interrupt North With Contra Allegations." *L.A. Times*, July 9, 1987. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-09-mn-3196-story.html>.
- Attinello, Paul. 2015, "Deaths and Silences: Coding and Defiance in Music about AIDS" In *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, edited by Patricia Hall, 623-36. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bagdikian, Ben H. 2004. *The New Media Monopoly: A Completely Revised and Updated Edition with Seven New Chapters*. 20th edition. Beacon Press.
- Bailyn, Bernard. 1967. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Ball, Jared A. 2011. *I Mix What I Like!: A Mixtape Manifesto*. Oakland: AK Press.
- Barkun, Michael. 2013. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Barron, David, Kevin Morgan, Tony Towell, Boris Altemeyer, and Viren Swami. 2014. "Associations Between Schizotypy and Belief in Conspiracist Ideation." *Personality and Individual Differences*, 70: 156–59.
- Barry, John M. 1997. *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*. London: Simon and Schuster.

- Bathrick, David, Andreas Huyssen, and Anson Rabinbach, eds. 2008. *New German Critique: Dark Powers: Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in History and Literature* 35, no. 1. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 2003. *The Spirit of Terrorism And Requiem for the Twin Towers*. Translated by Chris Turner, London: Verso, 2003.
- Baxter, Nicky. 1996. "Rapping Down AIDS: Hip-hop Superstars Collaborate with a Purpose on 'American [sic] Is Dying Slowly'." *Metro, Silicon Valley's Weekly Newspaper*.
<https://www.metro silicon valley.com/papers/metro/09.12.96/rap-9637.html>
- Billboard. 2004. "Billboard Hot 100 – Week of September 25, 2004. Accessed online August 29, 2022. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/2004-09-25/>.
- Billboard. 2005. "Billboard Hot 100 – Week of August 19, 1995. Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1995-08-19/>.
- Billboard. 2006. "Billboard Hot 100 – Week of January 14th 2006." Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/2006-01-14/>.
- Billboard Staff. 2004. "Jadakiss Single Courts Controversy." September 7, 2004. Accessed August 23, 2022.
<https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/67403/jadakiss-single-courts-controversy>.
- Blaskiewicz, Robert. 2013. "Nope, It Was Always Already Wrong." August 8, 2013, *Skeptical Inquirer*. Accessed August 23, 2022.
<https://skepticalinquirer.org/exclusive/nope-it-was-always-already-wrong/>.
- Bost, Preston R. 2015. "Crazy beliefs, Sane Believers: Toward a Cognitive Psychology of Conspiracy Ideation." Accessed August 23, 2022. *Skeptical Inquirer* 39, no. 1: 44-49. <https://skepticalinquirer.org/2015/01/crazy-beliefs-sane-believers-toward-a-cognitive-psychology-of-conspiracy-id/>.
- Boyd, Herbert. 2002. "The Man and the Plan: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in Our Culture." *Black Issues Book Review* 4, no. 2: 38-40.
- Bracke, Sarah, and Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar. 2020. "They Love Death as We Love Life": The "Muslim Question" and the Biopolitics of Replacement." *The British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 4: 680-701.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12742>.
- Buchanan, Kyle. 2018. "With One Strong Word, 'The Hate U Give' Couldn't Hold Its Tongue." *New York Times*, October 18, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/movies/the-hate-u-give-expletive.html>.
- Bull, Michael. 2007. *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203496220>.

- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Butler, Patrick. 2013. "Benefit Loans: Cock-up or Conspiracy?" *The Guardian*, April 30, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/patrick-butler-cuts-blog/2013/apr/30/benefit-loans-cockup-or-conspiracy-dwp-food-parcels>.
- Butter, Michael, and Peter Knight. 2015. "Bridging the Great Divide: Conspiracy theory research in the 21st century." *Diogenes*, 62 no. 3-4: 17-29.
- Butter, Michael and Peter Knight, eds. 2020. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, Duncan. 2001. "Hollywood Helps CIA Come in from the Cold." *The Guardian*, September 6, 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/06/media.filmnews>.
- Carter, Dan T. 2007. *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South: Revised Edition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana.
- Centre for Disease Control. 2001. "HIV and AIDS – United States, 1981—2000." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 50, no. 21: 430-4. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm>.
- Chan, Anna. 2022. "A Timeline of DaBaby's Homophobic Comments Controversy." *Billboard*, March 2, 2022. <https://www.billboard.com/photos/dababy-rolling-loud-homophobic-comments-controversy-timeline-9608086/>.
- Ciccariello-Maher, George. 2005. "Brechtian Hip-Hop: Didactics and Self-Production in Post-Gangsta Political Mixtapes." *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1: 129–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40027326>.
- Clarke, Steve. 2019. "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing." In *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady, 77-92. London: Routledge.
- Cloonan, Martin. 2004. "Musical Responses to September 11th: From Conservative Patriotism to Radicalism." Accessed online 01/09/2019 <https://freemuse.org/news/musical-responses-to-911-from-conservative-patriotism-to-radicalism/>.
- Coady, David, ed. 2007. *Episteme: Special Issue: Conspiracy Theories*. Vol. 4 no. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cockburn, Alexander, and Jeffrey St. Clair. 1998. *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs, and the Press*. London: Verso.
- Cohn, Norman. 1957. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. London: Secker and Warburg.

- Coleman II, C. Vernon. 2019. "60 of the Best Mixtapes Since 2000." *XXL*. Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://www.xxlmag.com/best-hip-hop-mixtapes-since-2000/>.
- Cone, James H. 2003. "Integrationism and Nationalism in African-American Intellectual History" In *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* edited by Cornel West, and Eddie S Glaude Jr., 746-764. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Cook, Nicholas. 2000. *Music: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooper, William. 1991. *Behold a Pale Horse*. Flagstaff: Light Technology Publishing.
- Coward, Barry, and Julian Swann. 2004. *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution*. London: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew." *Boston Review*. Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://bostonreview.net/articles/kimberle-w-crenshaw-beyond-racism-and-misogyny/>.
- Cubitt, Geoffrey. 2009. "Denouncing Conspiracy in the French Revolution." *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 33, no. 1: 144-158.
- Cusic, Don, Gregory K. Faulk, and Robert P. Lambert. 2005. "Technology and Music Piracy: Has the Recording Industry Lost Sales?" *Studies in Popular Culture* 28, no. 1: 15-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416211>.
- Dagbovie, Pero Gaglo. 2015. "Obama, Hip Hop, African American History, and 'Historical Revivalism'" In *The Hip Hop & Obama Reader*, edited by Travis L. Gosa, and Eric Nielson, 109-33. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Darwin, Hannah, Nick Neave, and Joni Holmes. 2011. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Role of Paranormal Beliefs, Paranoid Ideation and Schizotypy." *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 8: 1289-1293.
- Davis, David Brion. 1969. *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Davis, David Brion, ed. 1971. *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- de Paor-Evans, Adam. 2020. *Provincial Headz: British Hip Hop and Critical Regionalism*. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Dean, Jodi. 1999. *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Deaville, James. 2007. "The Sounds of American and Canadian Television News after 9/11: Entoning Horror and Grief, Fear and Anger" In *Music in the Post-9/11 World*, edited by Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry, 43-70. London: Routledge.
- deHaven-Smith, Lance. 2013. *Conspiracy Theory in America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Der Derian, James. 2009. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network*. London: Routledge.
- Doherty, Thomas. 1999. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Drury, Meghan. 2017. "Counterorienting the War on Terror: Arab Hip Hop and Diasporic Resistance." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 2: e12210.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. 1997. *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams. Boston: Bedford Books
- Dwinell, Samuel. 2016. "Rock, Enroll: Music and Militarization since 9/11" In *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma, and the Music Industry in the Time of Terror*, edited by Joseph P. Fisher and Brian Flota, London: Routledge.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. 2007. *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on Hip-Hop*. London: Civitas Books.
- El Zein, Rayya. 2016. "From 'Hip Hop Revolutionaries' to 'Terrorist-Thugs': 'Blackwashing' between the Arab Spring and the War on Terror." *Lateral* 5, no. 1. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48671426>.
- Emre, Merve. 2017a. "How a Fictional Racist Plot made the Headlines and Revealed an American Truth." *The New Yorker*, December 31, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/how-a-fictional-racist-plot-made-the-headlines-and-revealed-an-american-truth>.
- Emre, Merve. 2017b. *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eriksson, Maria, Rasmus Fleischer, Anna Johansson, Pelle Snickars, and Patrick Vonderau. 2019. *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Eshun, Kodwo. 1998. *More brilliant than the sun: Adventures in sonic fiction*. London: Verso.
- Ettelson, Robbie. 2015. "Afrika Islam – The Unkut Interview." *Unkut*. Accessed online August 27, 2022. <http://www.unkut.com/2015/10/afrika-islam-the-unkut-interview/>.
- Fenster, Mark. 2008. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* London: Zero Books.
- Fiske, John. 1994. *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foner, Eric. 2001. "11 September." *London Review of Books* 23, no. 19. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n19/nine-eleven-writers/11-september>.
- Forman, Murray. 2010. "Conscious Hip-Hop, Change, and the Obama Era." *American Studies Journal* 54. <http://www.asjournal.org/54-2010/conscious-hip-hop/>.
- Freedman, Carl. 1984. "Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick." *Science Fiction Studies* 11, no. 1: 15-24.
- Gaines, William, David Jackson, and Tribune Staff Writers. 1995. "AIDS Hope or Hoax in a Bottle?" *Chicago Tribune*, March 14, 1995. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1995-03-14-9503140170-story.html>.
- Garofalo, Reebee. 1999. "From Music Publishing to MP3: Music and Industry in the Twentieth Century." *American Music*, 17, no. 3: 318–54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052666>.
- Garofalo, Reebee. 2007. "Pop Goes to War, 2001-2004: U.S. Popular Music after 9/11" In *Music in the Post-9/11 World*, edited by Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry, 3-27. London: Routledge.
- Garvey, Amy Jacques, ed. 1967. *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*. 2nd Ed. London: Cass.
- Gates Jr, Henry Louis. 1988. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gibbs, Walter. 2004. "Nobel Peace Laureate Seeks to Explain Remarks About AIDS." *The New York Times*, December 10, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/10/world/nobel-peace-laureate-seeks-to-explain-remarks-about-aids.html>.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1991. "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At... The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification." *Third text* 5, no.13: 3-16.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2000. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Global Burden of Disease Collaborators. 2017. "Global Burden of Disease Report 2016." *The Lancet* 390, no. 10100: 1083-1464.

- Global Burden of Disease Collaborators. 2020. "Global Burden of Disease Report 2019." *The Lancet* 396, no. 10258: 1129-1306.
- Goertzel, Ted. 1994. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 15, no. 4: 731–742.
- Golden, Tim. 1996. "Pivotal Figures of Newspaper Series May Be Only Bit Players." *The New York Times*, October 21, 1996.
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/ci-a-pivotal.html>.
- Goreis, Andreas, and Martin Voracek. 2019. "A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Psychological Research on Conspiracy Beliefs: Field Characteristics, Measurement Instruments, and Associations With Personality Traits." *Frontiers in Psychology*, February 11, 2019.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00205>.
- Gosa, Travis. 2011. "Counterknowledge, Racial Paranoia, and the Cultic Milieu: Decoding Hip Hop Conspiracy Theory." *Poetics* 39, no. 3.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2011.03.003>.
- Gray, Matthew. 2010. *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Grier, William H., and Price M. Cobbs. 1968. *Black Rage*. New York: Bantam.
- hampton, d. 1996. "AIDS Gets a Bad Rap." *POZ*, October 1, 1996. Accessed online August 24, 2022. <https://www.poz.com/article/AIDS-Gets-a-Bad-Rap-1816-9610>.
- Harvey, David. 2006. *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London: Verso.
- Haupt, Jon. 2012. "Spotify." *Notes* 69, no. 1: 132–38.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23271778>.
- Heim, Joe. 2004. "Rapper Ups the Anti [sic] on Bush and 9/11." *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2004.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2004/07/17/rapper-ups-the-anti-on-bush-and-911/4cb73b6f-36a9-4858-9192-75b5c31b4182/>.
- Hicks, Stephen. 2016. "20 Years Ago, Coolio, De La Soul, and the Rest of Rap Chipped in to Raise HIV/AIDS Awareness." *Vice Magazine*, December 1, 2016. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8gxb3b/20-years-ago-coolio-de-la-soul-and-the-rest-of-rap-chipped-in-to-raise-hiv-aids-awareness>.
- Hicks, Stephen. 2019. "Red Hot + 30 Years Old: How a Group of Activists made an HIV Charity a Musical Iconoclast." *The Body: The HIV/AIDS Resource*. <https://www.thebody.com/article/red-hot-30-years-activists-hiv-charity-musical>.
- Hitz, F. P., and Cinquegrana, A. R. 1998. *Report of Investigation: Allegations of connections between CIA and the Contras in cocaine trafficking to the*

- United States (96-0143-IG): Volume I: The California story*. Accessed online August 23, 2022. <https://irp.fas.org/cia/product/cocaine/index.html>.
- Hodapp, Cristopher and Alice Von Kannon. 2008. *Conspiracy Theories and Secret Societies for Dummies*. Hoboken: Wiley Publishing.
- Hofstadter, Richard. 1955. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*. New York: Knopf.
- Hofstadter, Richard. 1964. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine* November 1964 issue. Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.
- Horowitz, Steven. 2011. "Kendrick Lamar Speaks on the Meaning behind 'HiiiPower,' Working with J Cole." *Hiphopdx.com*. Accessed online 31 August, 2022. <https://hiphopdx.com/news/id.15795/title.kendrick-lamar-speaks-on-the-meaning-behind-hiiipower-working-with-j-cole#signup>.
- Isherwood, Gustav. 2014. "The Hip-Hop Resistance: Forging Unity in the Arab Diaspora." *Review of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 1/2 (2014): 24–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24331327>.
- Jackson, Jamie. 2010. "Conspiracy or Cock-up, Portsmouth Plot Thickens." *The Guardian*, January 6, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2010/jan/06/portsmouth-al-faraj-fahim>.
- Jadakiss. 2015. "Why? – Jadakiss." *RapGenius*. Accessed online August 29, 2022. <https://genius.com/3043>.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1990. "Cognitive Mapping." In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson, and Lawrence Grossberg, 347–60. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1992. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Johansson, Sofia, Ann Werner, Patrik Åker, and Greg Goldenzwaig. 2017. *Streaming Music: Practices, Media, Cultures*. London: Routledge.
- Judy, Ronald A.T. 1994. "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity." *Boundary* 21, no. 3: 211–230.
- Katz, Jesse, and Times Staff Writers. 1996. "Tracking the Genesis of the Crack Trade." *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1996. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-10-20-mn-59169-story.html>.
- Kelley, William Melvin. 1962. "If You're Woke You Dig It: No Mickey Mouse can be Expected to Follow Today's Negro Idiom without a Hip Assist." *The New York Times*, May 20, 1962.

- <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/05/20/archives/if-youre-woke-you-dig-it-no-mickey-mouse-can-be-expected-to-follow.html>.
- Kermode, Mark. 2006. "Chaos and Cock-up Always Trump Conspiracy." *The Guardian*, April 9, 2006.
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/apr/09/features.review2>
- Knight, Michael Muhammad. 2013. *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop and the Gods of New York*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Knight, Peter. 2001. *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*. London: Routledge.
- Konda, Thomas M. 2019. *Conspiracy of Conspiracies: How Delusions have Overrun America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Krims, Adam. 2000. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krims, Adam. 2007. *Music and Urban Geography*. London: Routledge.
- Krugman, Paul. 2003. "Channels Of Influence." *The New York Times*, March 25, 2003. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/25/opinion/channels-of-influence.html>.
- Lamont Hill, Marc. 2006. "Using Jay Z to Reflect on Post-9/11 Race Relations." *The English Journal* 96, no. 2.
- Lamont Hill, Marc. 2009. "Scared Straight: Hip-hop, Outing, and the Pedagogy of Queerness." *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 31: 29–54.
- Lappas, Sarah Ford. 2013. *Hood, Prison, Body: Lil Wayne and the Spaces of Gangsta Signification*. PhD diss., UC Davis.
- Liebowitz, Stan J. 2006. "File Sharing: Creative Destruction or Just Plain Destruction?" *The Journal of Law & Economics* 49, no. 1: 1–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/503518>.
- Mackenzie, Sonja. 2013. *Structural Intimacies: Sexual Stories in the Black AIDS Epidemic*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Madden, Sidney, and Rodney Carmichael. 2020a. "Louder Than a Riot: The Raid That Changed Rap." *NPR*, Oct 29 2020.
<https://www.npr.org/2020/10/29/928625419/dj-drama-mixtape-raid-that-changed-rap?t=1657789905963>.
- Madden, Sidney, and Rodney Carmichael. 2020b. "Louder Than a Riot: The Conspiracy Against Hip-Hop." *NPR*, October 8, 2020. Accessed online August 29, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/921111245>.
- Madonna. 1992. *Sex*. New York: Warner Books.
- Marcus, Griel. 1999. *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- McConnachie, James, and Robin Tudge. 2005. *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories*. London: Rough Guides UK.
- McKenzie-McHarg, Andrew. 2019. "Conspiracy Theory: The Nineteenth-Century Prehistory of a Twentieth-Century Concept." In *Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them*, edited by Joseph E. Uscinski, 62-82. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meacher, Michael. 2003. "Cock-up not conspiracy." *The Guardian*, September 13, 2003.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/sep/13/usa.guardianletters>.
- Melley, Timothy. 2000. *Empire of Conspiracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Melley, Timothy. 2008. "Brainwashed! Conspiracy Theory and Ideology in the Postwar United States." *New German Critique* 35, no. 1: 145-164.
- Melley, Timothy. 2012. *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mitchell, Tony. 2001. *Global Noise: Rap and hip-hop outside the USA*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Miyakawa, Felicia M. 2005. *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Moore, Thurston. 2005. *Mixtape: The Art of Cassette Culture*. New York: Universe Publishing.
- Moyer, Melinda Wenner. 2019. "People Drawn to Conspiracy Theories Share a Cluster of Psychological Features". March 1, 2019, Scientific American.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-drawn-to-conspiracy-theories-share-a-cluster-of-psychological-features/>.
- Myers, Lisa. 2005. "Were the Levees Bombed in New Orleans?" *NBC News*.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna10370145>.
- NBC News. 2005. "Looters Take Advantage of New Orleans Mess." Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna9131493>.
- Negus, Keith. 1999. "The Music Business and Rap: Between the Street and the Executive Suite." *Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3: 488-508.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1080/095023899335194>
- Nelson, Havelock. 1996. "Elektra Rap Compilation Targets AIDS." *Billboard*, July 13, 1996.
- Nooshin, Laudan. 2017. "Whose Liberation? Iranian Popular Music and the Fetishization of Resistance." *Popular Communication* 15 no. 3: 163-191.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1328601>.
- Nuzum, Eric. 2004. "Crash into Me Baby: America's Implicit Music Censorship since September 11." In *Shoot the Singer!: Music Censorship Today*, edited by Marie Korpe, 149-60.

- Olmsted, Kathryn. 2009. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary. 2022. "Conspiracy." Accessed online August 24, 2022.
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39766?redirectedFrom=conspiracy+theory#eid8383475>.
- Pagán, Victoria E. 2008. "Toward a Model of Conspiracy Theory for Ancient Rome." *New German Critique* 103 (Winter): 27-49.
- Patterson, William L., Paul Robeson, and W.E.B DuBois. 1952. 'We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro People'. New York: Civil Rights Congress.
- Penman, Danny. 2002. "Cherigate 'A Cock-up Not a Conspiracy'." December 13, 2002, *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/dec/13/pressandpublishing.cheriblair1>.
- Perry, Imani. 2004. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pitchfork. 2016. "The 50 Best Rap Mixtapes of the Millennium." Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9908-the-50-best-rap-mixtapes-of-the-millennium/?page=5>.
- Popper, Karl. 2013. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pummerer, Lotte, Robert Böhm, Lau Lilleholt, Kevin Winter, Ingo Zettler, and Kai Sassenberg. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories and Their Societal Effects During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 13, no. 1: 49-59.
- Qi, Justin. 2019. "Rap & Revolution: From the Arab Spring to ISIL and Beyond." *Harvard International Review* 40, no. 2: 22-23.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26617404>.
- Quinn, Eithne. 2002. "All Eyez on Me: The Paranoid Style of Tupac Shakur." In: *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, edited by Peter Knight. New York: NYU Press.
- Red Hot Organisation. n.d. "America Is Dying Slowly." Accessed online August 24, 2022. <https://redhot.org/project/america-is-dying-slowly/>.
- Reed, Ishmael. 1972. *Mumbo Jumbo*. New York: Doubleday.
- Reid, Shaheem. 2005. "Can He Do It Again?" Kanye West Says New LP Backs Up His Bragging" Accessed August 24, 2022.
<https://www.mtv.com/news/5bjkzj/can-he-do-it-again-kanye-west-says-new-lp-backs-up-his-bragging>.

- Reinarman, Craig, and Harry G. Levine, eds. 1997. *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Ro, Christine. 2020. "Coronavirus: Why Some Racial Groups Are More Vulnerable." *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200420-coronavirus-why-some-racial-groups-are-more-vulnerable>.
- Robb, David L. 2011. *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
- Robeson, Paul. 1952. "Genocide Stalks the USA." *New World Review* 20, no. 2: 26–29.
- Robins, Steven. 2004. "'Long Live Zackie, Long Live': AIDS Activism, Science and Citizenship after Apartheid." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30 no. 3: 651–672. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4133913>.
- Roisman, Joseph. 2006. *The Rhetoric of Conspiracy in Ancient Athens*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rollefson, J. Griffith. 2008. "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith." *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1: 83–109.
- Rollefson, J. Griffith. 2017. *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Rose, Tricia. 2008. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop – and Why it Matters*. London: Civitas Books.
- Sawyer, Wendy. 2020. "Visualizing the Racial Disparities in Mass Incarceration." *Prison Policy Initiative*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27319>.
- Schack, Todd. 2009. "Perpetual Media Wars: The Cultural Front in the Wars on Terror and Drugs." In *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*, edited by Andrew Schopp and Matthew B. Hill. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Scheer, Robert. 1991. "Oliver Stone Builds His Own Myths." *LA Times*, December 29, 1991. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-12-29-ca-1743-story.html>.
- Scherzinger, Martin. 2007. "Double Voices of Musical Censorship after 9/11." In *Music in the Post-9/11 World*, edited by Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry, 91–122. New York: Routledge.
- Schloss, Joseph G. 2004. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Schmitt, Carl. 1932. *The Concept of the Political*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

- Schou, Nick. 2006a. *Kill The Messenger: How the CIA's Crack-Cocaine Controversy Destroyed Journalist Gary Webb*. New York: Nation Books.
- Schou, Nick. 2006b. "The Truth in 'Dark Alliance'." *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 2006. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-aug-18-oe-schou18-story.html>.
- Schröder, Wilhelm H. 2013. *Historical Social Research. Special Issue: Security and Conspiracy in History, 16th to 21st Century* 38, no. 1. Cologne: GESIS - Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences.
- Sciurba, K. 2009. "Deal With It, Sort Of: The Picture Book Treatment of September 11." In *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture: September 11 and Beyond*, edited by Andrew Schopp and Matthew B. Hill. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Shapiro, Peter. 2001. *The Rough Guide to Hip-Hop*. London: Rough Guides Ltd.
- Shapiro, Samantha M. 2007. "Hip-Hop Outlaw (Industry Version)." *The New York Times Magazine*, February 18, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/magazine/18djdrama.t.html>.
- Silva, Cynthia. 2021. "Celebrities, Activist Condemn Rapper DaBaby's Homophobic Comments." *NBC News*, July 28, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/celebrities-activists-condemn-rapper-dababys-homophobic-comments-rcna1535>.
- Silverstein, Paul A. 2000. "Regimes of (Un)Truth: Conspiracy Theory and the Transnationalization of the Algerian Civil War." *Middle East Report*, no. 214: 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1520185>.
- Slocum, J. David. ed. 2006. *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Sontag, Susan. 1989. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Springer, Claudia. 1986. "Military Propaganda: Defense Department Films from World War II and Vietnam." *Cultural Critique*, no. 3: 151-167.
- Staggers, Aisha. 2016. "Casualties of War: Hip-hop and the Old Racial Politics of the Post-9/11 Era." In *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma, and the Music Industry in the Time of Terror*, edited by Joseph P. Fisher and Brian Flota, 107-14. London: Routledge.
- Sterne, Jonathan. 2012. *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Stillwell, Robynn F. 2003. "The Sound is 'Out There': Score, Sound Design, and Exoticism in the X-Files." In *Analysing Popular Music*, edited by Alan F. Moore, 60-79.

- Stojanov, Ana and Jamin Halberstadt. 2020. "Does Lack of Control Lead to Conspiracy Beliefs? A Meta-Analysis." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 50, no. 5: 955–968. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2690>.
- Strauss, Neil. 1996. "Walmart's CD Standards are Changing Pop Music." *The New York Times*, November 12, 1996. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/12/arts/wal-mart-s-cd-standards-are-changing-pop-music.html>.
- Stroud, Joe. 2016. "The Paranoid Style and Popular Music: The Case of the Vigilant Citizen." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28, no. 1: 75-100.
- Suro, Roberto, and Walter Pincus. 1996. "The CIA and Crack: Evidence is Lacking of Alleged Plot." *The Washington Post*, October 4, 1996. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/10/04/the-cia-and-crack-evidence-is-lacking-of-alleged-plot/5b026731-c5de-4234-b3bd-9e0fd2e21225/>.
- Swedenburg, Ted. 2002. "The Post-September 11 Arab Wave in World Music." *Middle East Report* 224 (Fall). Accessed online August 24, 2022. <https://merip.org/2002/09/the-post-september-11-arab-wave-in-world-music/>.
- The Marshall Project. 2022. "Cops Planting Evidence." Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/records/4692-cops-planting-evidence>.
- The Nation of Islam. 1991. *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*. Chicago: Latimer Associates.
- Tift, Matthew. 2007. *Musical AIDS: Music, Musicians, and the Cultural Construction of HIV/AIDS in the United States*. PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Time Magazine. 2019. "Separating Fact from Fiction: The CIA and AIDS." Accessed online August 24, 2022. http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1860871_1860876_1861031,00.html.
- Time Magazine. 2019. "Top 10 Outrageous Kanye West Moments: AIDS Awareness?" Accessed online August 24, 2022. http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1922188_1922187_1923051,00.html.
- Tisdall, Simon. 2005. "Oligarch's Prosecution may be More Cock-Up than Conspiracy." May 18, 2005, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/may/18/russia.tisdallbriefing>.
- Turner, Patricia. 1993. *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Uffelman, Minoa D. 2009. "Scottsboro Boys." In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, edited by Nancy Bercaw and Ted Ownby, 346–47. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469616728_bercaw.109.
- Valerian, Valdamar. 1992. *The Matrix III: The Psycho-social, Chemical, Biological, and Electronic Manipulation of Human Consciousness*. Yelm, WA: Leading Edge Research Group.
- van Prooijen, Jan-Willem, and Nils B. Jostmann. 2013. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Uncertainty and Perceived Morality." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43, no. 1: 109–115.
- Viano, Maurizio. 2002. "An Intoxicated Screen: Reflections on Film and Drugs." In *High anxieties: Cultural studies in addiction*, edited by Janet Brodie and Marc Redfield: 134–58.
- Villegas, Mark Redondo. 2010. "Hip-Hop over Homework: Filipino Americans 'Failing'?" *Hip Hop Lives: Traditions of Filipino Performance*. Accessed online August 27, 2022. <http://filamfunk.blogspot.com/2010/12/hip-hop-over-homework-filipino.html>.
- Washington, Harriet A. 2006. *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. New York: Doubleday.
- Waters, Anita M. 1997. "Conspiracy Theories as Ethnosociologies: Explanation and Intention in African American Political Culture." *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 1: 112–125.
- Webb, G. 1996a. "America's 'Crack' Plague has Roots in Nicaragua War." *San Jose Mercury News*, August 18, 1996.
<https://web.archive.org/web/19961220020751/http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs/day1main.htm>.
- Webb, Gary. 1996b. "Shadowy Origins of 'Crack' Epidemic." *San Jose Mercury News*, August 19, 1996.
<https://web.archive.org/web/19961220020811/http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs/day2main.htm>.
- Webb, Gary. 1996c. "War on Drugs has Unequal Impact on Black Americans." *San Jose Mercury News*, August 20, 1996.
<https://web.archive.org/web/19961220020830/http://www.sjmercury.com/drugs/day3main.htm>.
- Webb, Gary. 1998. *Dark Alliance: The CIA, The Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- West, Harry G., and Todd Sanders, eds. 2003. *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- White, Michael. 2009. "Iraq War Minutes would Just Show Cock-Up, Not Conspiracy." *The Guardian*, February 25, 2009.
https://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/feb/25/michael-white-iraq?CMP=gu_com.
- Whitehead, Tony L. 1997. "Urban Low-Income African American Men, HIV/AIDS, and Gender Identity." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 11, no. 4: 411-447.
- Williams, John A. 1967. *The Man Who Cried I Am*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Williams, Justin A. 2013. *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop*. Chicago: University of Michigan Press.
- Williams, Justin A. 2018. "'We Get the Job Done': Immigrant Discourse and Mixtape Authenticity in The Hamilton Mixtape." *American Music* 36, no. 4: 487–506. <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.36.4.0487>.
- Williams, Raymond, and Michael Orrom. 1954. *Preface to Film*. London: Film Drama Limited.
- Williams, Raymond. 1961. *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Williams, Raymond. 1973. "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." *New Left Review*. Accessed online August 24, 2022.
<https://newleftreview.org/issues/i82/articles/raymond-williams-base-and-superstructure-in-marxist-cultural-theory>.
- Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977a. *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: Verso Books.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977b. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Raymond. 1981. "Marxism, Structuralism and Literary Analysis." *New Left Review* 129: 51–66.
- Wood, Gordon S. 1982. "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 3: 402–441.
- YouGov. 2021. "Where Do People Believe in Conspiracy Theories?" Accessed online August 27, 2022. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2021/01/18/global-where-believe-conspiracy-theories-true>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2002. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso.
- Zonis, Marvin, and Craig M. Joseph. 1994. "Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East." *Political Psychology* 15, no. 3: 443–59.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3791566>.

Appendix to Chapter 5

Jadakiss - Why (2004)

FIRST VERSE

0 Ughaa!
1 It's dead real, yo, why is
2 Jadakiss as hard as it gets? Why is the industry
3 designed to keep the artist in debt? And why them dudes ain't
4 ridin' if they part of your set? And why they never get it
5 popping but they party to death? Yeah, and why they
6 gon' give you life for a murder? Turn around only
7 give you eight months for a burner? It's going down. Why they
8 selling niggas CD's for under a dime? And if it's
9 all love, daddy, why you come with your 9? Why my
10 niggas ain't get that cake? Why is a brother up north
11 better than Jordan that ain't get that break? Why you don't
12 stack instead of trying to be fly? Why is ratting at an
13 all time high? Why are you even alive? Why they
14 kill 2pac and Chris? Why at the bar you ain't
15 take straight shots instead of poppin Crys? Why them
16 bullets have to hit that door? Why did Kobe have to
17 hit that raw? Why'd he kiss that whore? Why?

CHORUS

18 All that I've been given
19 is this pain that I've been
20 living, they got me in the system
21 Why they gotta do me like that?
22 Tried to make it my way
23 But got sent up on the highway
24 Why? (ugha!) oh
25 Why they gotta do me like that? [overlap last two syllables:] Why do

VERSE 2

26 niggas push pounds and powder? Why did Bush knock
27 down the towers? Why you around them cowards? Why
28 Aaliyah have to take that flight? Why my nigga D ain't
29 pull out his Ferrari? Why he take that bike? Why they
30 gotta open your package and read your mail? Why they

31 stop letting niggas get degrees in jail? Why you
32 gotta do 85% of your time? And why do
33 niggas lie in 85% of they rhymes? Why a
34 nigga always want what he can't have? Why I
35 can't come through in the pecan Jag? Why did
36 crack have to hit so hard? Even though it's
37 almost over why niggas can't get no jobs? Why they
38 come up with the witness protection? Why they let the
39 Terminator win the election? Come on, pay attention! Why I
40 sell in the stores what you could sell in the streets? Why I
41 say the hottest shit but we selling the least? Why?

VERSE 3

(49 Why Halle) [from chorus]
50 have to let a white man pop her to get a Oscar? Why
51 Denzel have to be crooked before he took it? Why they
52 didn't make the CL6 with a clutch? And if you
53 don't smoke why the hell you reaching for my dutch? Why
54 rap? Cause I need air time. Why be on the
55 curb with a "Why lie? I need a beer" sign? Why
56 all the young niggas is dying? Cause they moms at work,
57 they pops is gone, they living with iron. Why they
58 ain't give us a cure for AIDS? Why my diesel have
59 fiends in the spot on the floor for days? Why you
60 screaming like it's a slug? It's only the hawk. Why my
61 buzz in L.A. ain't like it is in New York? Why they
62 forcing you to be hard? Why ain't you a thug by choice?
63 Why the whole world love my voice? Why?
64 Try to tell 'em that it's the flow son, and you know why they
65 made the new twenties? Cause I got all the old ones, that's
66 why. [another chorus after this]