

PERFORMING BLACK MALENESS? USING CULTURAL STUDIES TO QUESTION  
NARROW CONCEPTIONS OF BLACK MASCULINITY.

by

JAIRUS-JOAQUIN R. MATTHEWS

(Under the Direction of Donna Alvermann)

ABSTRACT

Black males are perceived to be a group “in crisis” both within popular culture and in the social sciences across a variety of fields including sociology, psychology, education, health, and criminology. Black maleness, the state or condition of being a (young) Black male in the United States, has become synonymous with being considered a problem. The construction of the “Black male problem” has occurred through the description of three cyclical discourses that I refer to as the discourse of disparity, the discourse of failure, and the discourse of endangerment. These discourses have been reified to the extent that the performance (cultural events and actions embedded in the flow of everyday life) of Black maleness, whether in popular culture or in the lived experiences of people, have consequences for how Black males are viewed and how they view themselves. The purpose of this research was to interrogate the discourses of Black maleness by engaging a group of urban adolescent male students and staff members at a local community center in a collaborative cultural critique of Black maleness and its performances in popular culture. Using the methodological tools of performance ethnography, I demonstrate how the participants performed as cultural critics in exploring the productions and meanings of culture within a critical media literacy program and inquiry project that I designed and

implemented. The ethnographic findings illustrate that despite major challenges to critical education, critical media literacy and cultural studies have the potential to help educators and youth collaboratively challenge narrow representations and performances of Black maleness and perhaps other identities presented within popular culture, the social sciences, and social life.

**INDEX WORDS:** Critical media literacy, Cultural studies, Black masculinity, Urban youth, Performance ethnography

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Although I've always considered my family to be small, I have a host of extended family including aunts, uncles, cousins, and dear friends who are like family. It's also dedicated to family members who I believe are smiling from heaven such as Pops, Nana, and Grandma Bea.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

From the moment that I began the process of applying for graduate school to the present time in which I steadily craft this book, I have constantly and perhaps obsessively questioned why I want to obtain a doctorate. Why do I want to complete a research project? What do I want to know? Doctoral students are frequently reminded that our project should fill a gap in the current research literature, that we should create new knowledge. But if I am honest with myself I realize that my desire to complete this project is motivated as much by a gap in my own past as it by a gap in the literature.

### **My Beginnings**

I grew up in a loving two-parent family on the almost all Black Westside of Detroit. Although the Westside may have been considered an urban oasis when my parents moved there in the mid 1970s, by the mid 90s the neighborhood was rapidly becoming a victim of economic depravity, violence, and urban decay. I don't wish to paint the picture of my West Seven Mile neighborhood as a destitute, crime-ridden sprawl of welfare and housing projects because that would be a lie. My neighborhood was filled with many concerned and thoughtful lower middle-class families who continued to maintain their homes with great care. Yet, there was still a general sense random acts of violence and crime did occur, and so one had to be careful.

I felt different growing up because I could sense that I was on a different path than most of my peers in my neighborhood. This was reinforced by the fact that I attended a

private school from kindergarten through eighth grade that none of my neighborhood friends attended although it was only about a mile away from our home. My parents probably believed that I would not receive an equitable education at our neighborhood school. I later attended Renaissance, a public magnet high school that required an entrance exam and middle grades transcripts prior to admission. Although Renaissance was only three blocks away from my neighborhood and was, in fact, far closer than our neighborhood high school, I only knew one person from my neighborhood that would be attending my magnet high school. I later found out that only four students from my neighborhood middle school attended my high school, despite the fact that the two were literally across the street from each other.

I was often teased about the schools that I attended. I remember one friend telling me “You went from that soft private school to being a Ren-a-nerd. You ain’t ever been to a real school in your life.” These comments never bothered me, because I felt that my education would probably set me up for a brighter future. Unfortunately, many of my peers did go on to face grim circumstances. I do have several close friends from my neighborhood that, like myself, would generally be considered successful in our careers and lives. Yet, the majority of my old friends have dealt with long-term incarceration, have become drug dealers, or are dead. By the time I was 22 years old, three young men on my small block alone were violently murdered.

Despite our differences, my peers and I were all truly engaged in a few similar interests during our adolescent years. These included sports, hip-hop, and of course the opposite sex. During high school the majority of my free time was spent fixating on any of these three intertwined interests. I say that these interests were intertwined because all three were in large part informed by the popular media that my friends and I consumed on a daily

basis. I realize now that what was also being constructed within our regular pastime pleasures were our perceptions of ourselves and of our Black<sup>1</sup> masculine identities. Popular media also informed our perceptions of our female counterparts and women in general. Although none of us knew much about the internet or had internet access during the mid and late 90s, we instead seized on to television, hood films, hip-hop magazines, urban radio, and our favorite hip-hop CDs. All of these pop culture artifacts contained representations and performances of Black masculinity that functioned as multimodal texts that we read as fervently as any “traditional” texts that we encountered during our adolescent years. These texts often contained distinctly narrow forms of Black masculinity and patriarchy including hyper-masculine toughness and violence, hyper-sexuality, misogynistic domination of women, and criminality as a means of survival. Although we favored hip-hop cultural texts as children of the hip-hop generation (Kitwana, 2002), these patriarchal themes are ingrained within American popular culture as a whole (Cox, Cobb, & Datcher, 2007). Therefore it is problematic to blame hip-hop as the primary culprit for the negative values and actions of children and adolescents, though this is a common practice (Dyson, 2009).

Adolescence is the time when people are most intently trying to construct their own identity, and we were no different. I believe that this identity work is informed by a variety of factors including family background, real-life models, popular media representations, and peer groups. I feel that the most important influences for me, and perhaps my saving grace, were the life models that strongly influenced my thinking.

Fortunately for me, some of these models were African American men. My father was a quiet

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Black and African American are used interchangeably throughout this book. Both terms are commonly acceptable and hold significant meanings for people of African descent living in America. For a further review of the history of these terms Segelman, Tuch, & Martin (2005).

man who led by his example in his support of his family through work in a corporate environment, his careful maintenance of his home, and the major church leadership positions he held. My older brother was also an influential example for me. During my high-school years, my brother achieved his undergraduate degree with honors, subsequently earned his MBA, got married, and supported his young child and wife while his wife attended a prestigious Ivy League law school. I had other role models at my church along with a few of my friend's fathers who also led what I considered successful lives. These models led me to believe that there are many different types of Black men and that I was not limited to the representations frequently portrayed in popular media.

I often wonder how my life would have been different if I did not have these powerful forces guiding me as an adolescent. These forces outweighed the representations that I constantly encountered. I knew that all Black men were not gangsters, rappers, athletes, or drug dealers. I knew that not all Black men were violent, lazy, careless, and self-gratifying. I knew that I was not necessarily bound for incarceration or premature death, and I knew that I was not inferior. Yet, that doesn't mean that these representations did not affect me and my ideas about Black masculinity as a whole. Like most adolescents, I wanted to fit in with my peers and so I consumed most of the same popular cultural representations that they did. But I didn't just consume them for social reasons, I also enjoyed them for myself. I relished these representations through the popular cultures that I consumed because they gave me pleasure. At the same time, I knew that I wanted my life and my story to be different than that of some of the people around me. And so, I compartmentalized my pleasures and intrinsically planned alternate routes beyond what I saw.

### **My Double Consciousness**

I feel both lucky and blessed to have escaped some of the circumstances that could have fallen upon me. I know that I was no smarter or better than any of my neighborhood peers. I think I was privileged to have a variety of factors that guided my decision-making and altered my course. Although I consumed and enjoyed many of the limited representations of Black masculinity represented in popular culture, I took the position that the negative representations were not a reflection of my current or future reality. In other words, I decided that the so-called problem or plight of Black males in America was someone else's, and not my own.

What I failed to realize was that the Black male problem would deeply affect me whether I wanted it to or not. In fact, the problematic construction of the troubled Black male identity affects me every day of my life. Most of my childhood and adolescence was spent in all-Black environments in a segregated urban city. When I left that environment to attend college, I realized that despite my best intentions, many people made presuppositions about me because of what I looked like. Many others' perceptions of me were molded by the fact that I was an African American male from an urban environment. This was evident in not only my phenotypical features, but also my language, style, and dress. My Black male identity was all the more amplified when I enrolled in my master's program immediately after my undergraduate years. I was one of two Black people in my entire master's program, and the only Black male. In fact, I believe I am the only Black male to have ever graduated from my master's program. These circumstances have helped me to learn to be comfortable in almost any social situation. Yet, they also influence my daily decisions and actions because

I've recognized that for some people I am often the only real life representation of Black males that they have.

At times the weight of this can be a bit of a burden. I feel as though I must conduct myself in a certain way in order to deflect negative stereotypes of young Black males. Also, the manifestation of certain aspects of Black masculinity by others can cause a great deal of shame and embarrassment. A couple of recent examples illustrate this burden: About a month ago when vacuuming my car at a local car wash there was a young Black man blasting his music way beyond an acceptable volume. And yes, his rap music was filled with the heavy bass and curse words of what is often called gangsta rap. I sensed that the other patrons, much like me, wondered why he felt the need to do this at the car wash. However, while they were likely annoyed, I was embarrassed. He and I were the only Black males at the car wash except the two young kids helping him who were approximately eleven or twelve years old. This is what bothered me about this situation the most. Whether he was their father or big brother I'm not sure. But I felt that he was implicitly teaching them that his behavior was not only acceptable, but *cool*.

The other situation has periodically been ongoing at my local gym. The gym where I exercise is very ethnically diverse as is the area in which I live. Recently, I've noticed a group of two or three young African American males who seem to exercise around the same time that I do. During their workouts they talk very loudly freely calling each other nigga, referencing bitches, and cursing without shame. I cringe in their presence and it has gotten to the point where I've considered asking them to at least stop saying nigga in front of all the White people, Asians, and Latinos. The only reason I haven't is because I fear that such a conversation could escalate into a physical altercation. Still, a part of me has thought

that it would still be worth if I could get them to reconsider how their actions unfortunately will represent all African American males.

African Americans generally believe that we are perceived by other ethnicities as a monolithic group, and not as individuals (Gilroy, 1993). This causes us to view ourselves through the lens of others, and consider how they view us based on who we are (DuBois, 1902/1995). This is the burden of double-consciousness attached to our shared identity. Because our sense of self is connected to other African Americans, negative representations and performances of (gendered) Blackness can invoke emotions of shame (Jefferson, 2011). African Americans often employ a variety of strategies to avoid this shame such as “shrinking away” from shame-inducing performances of gendered Blackness (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 120). A literal example of this can be found in a scene from the movie *I Think I Love My Wife* (Rock, 2007). The movie’s primary character Richard Cooper, played by the actor/comedian Chris Rock, is a successful African American Wall Street banker who lives a suburban middle-class life. In this particular scene he is riding on a crowded elevator on his way to work. The elevator is filled with White people except for Cooper and another young Black male dressed in very Afro-centric clothing. The young Black male is listening to music in his headphones and begins loudly rapping the lyrics of a vulgar and explicit rap song despite the quiet environment of the enclosed space. Everyone in the entire elevator looks at the young man in shock and annoyance. However, Cooper looks at him with shame. He drifts to the back of the elevator and literally shrinks away knowing that many Whites will judge him based on the performative actions of this Black male that he doesn’t even know. This is an example of how the troubled notion of Black maleness and its performance can cause a sense of shame.

Although I've reflected on representations and performances of Black masculinity quite a bit as an adult, I often wish that as an adolescent I had thought more critically about the representations of Black male identities in media and popular culture. I spent so much of my time consuming popular culture during those years, yet I rarely truly considered how popular media was affecting me. At least for a while I didn't. Then an incident from my teenage years stimulated my thinking.

### **A Critical Encounter**

As an adolescent I was always careful to only listen to my favorite hip-hop CDs when my parents were not around because of the very graphic language and content. On this one particular day I listened to the Ruff Ryders album "Ryde or Die Volume 1" (Dean, 1998). I was very tired as I popped in the CD in our living/den area. I decided that I would lie down on the sofa for brief snooze. I didn't intend to take a full-fledged nap because I had to attend a sports banquet in a few hours, and I did not want my parents to come downstairs and hear my music. Unfortunately, my body didn't cooperate with my plans. The next thing I remember was my parents angrily waking me up. "What is this garbage you are listening to in our house!?" they demanded to know. Shocked and confused I apologized to them as I tried to explain that I had accidentally fallen asleep. I wasn't sure what they had heard because my CD player was now off. What temporarily saved me was that they let me rush to get ready for my sports banquet for which I was in danger of being late for. My parents always stressed honoring commitments and punctuality. Still, I knew that I was going to be in trouble when I returned.

I could hardly enjoy my banquet because I was so anxious. What had my parents heard? It really didn't matter with this Ruff Ryder album because most of it contained pretty

bad language and themes. I estimated or perhaps imagined that they had heard the most popular song from the album at that time, “Down Bottom” (Smalls, Gray, & Dean, 1998). In this particular situation, the very thought of this song at this time made me shudder. The catchy chant-like chorus of the song contained the following graphic lyrics

Do y’all niggas bust y’all guns

Hell yeah we bust our guns!

Do y’all fuck em ‘til they cum?

Damn right we make them cum!

It’s for the North, South, East, West

Ruff Ryders gonna show y’all niggas who rides the best

When I returned home that night I changed clothes then met my parents in the kitchen where they were waiting. They talked about how disappointed they were that I would disrespect their home like this. I felt horrible that I had disappointed and disrespected them. I tried to explain that I had no intention of doing so and that I was usually always careful to never play my music when they were around. They didn’t see why I should be listening to this type of music at all at the age of seventeen or any age for that matter. They said that the gangster and misogynist language was not a reflection of the type of household or lifestyle in which they had raised me. They asked me why I would listen to music with this type of language, and I responded that it was only music for entertainment. Becoming angrier, they told me to retrieve my other CDs that contained this type of language so that they could throw them away.

I decided that it was probably best if I retrieved all of the CDs that contained the parental advisory sticker on the front. My parents were shocked as I returned with 15 to 20 CDs and placed them on the table. They could not believe that I had invested so much of my personal

money in this horrendous music. They were also puzzled. For the first time, they actually asked me why I felt that this music was meaningful or important. I began to tell them that some of the music wasn't very meaningful and that I only enjoyed it because of the beats, and because of the feel of the music. I also told them that much of the music contained deep inspirational messages that challenged my thinking. Providing an example, I picked up Nas' "I Am" (Jones, 1999) and talked about how it encouraged me to achieve despite negative influences, grow as an active citizen, and study history. Jay-Z's "Reasonable Doubt" (Carter, 1996), though on the surface was an ode to crime, violence, and material wealth, actually challenged me to think about the complications of the street life and the importance of making good life decisions. Even DMX's "It's Dark and Hell is Hot" (Simmons, 1998) demonstrated the multiple facets and identities that we all have, particularly those who are faced with difficult circumstances.

I was surprised that night because my parents did not make me throw away my CDs. They saw the passion that I had for hip-hop even if they did not agree with me about its value. I didn't previously realize that I had thought as much about my music as I had before I had to explain myself to my parents. But from that point on I have enjoyed talking to my friends and now my students and young people that I work with about the messages and content of hip-hop "with substance." But what about hip-hop with "no content," a term we used to refer to music that is mostly enjoyable because of the beats and the feel of the music and not the messages within it? How did the Ruff Ryders (Dean, 1998) album that my parents caught me listening to affect me and my peers? Did its messages position me as a violent person who merely identifies women as objects of sexual desire? Did it influence some of my peers' desire to choose a certain lifestyle? I don't know the answers to these questions, and I don't know that I ever will. What I

do know is that I wish that I had thought about these questions as an adolescent. This is the gap to which I refer, and the one that I am trying to fill by doing this study.

### **The Present and the Study**

Now as an adult I am a teacher and a researcher. My past experiences may seem to mirror those of the students that I teach and study because of our similar backgrounds. However, as a researcher I realize that the perceptions and experiences of the students whom I work with and study are totally different. Although the gap that I have in my past may have initially motivated me to do this research and write this book, this study cannot answer the questions that I have about my experiences. Instead, it can do something greater. It can help us learn something new about a new group of students who are living in a totally different generation and time. And yes it can also help me learn about myself. This is what I am excited to learn about and explore throughout this book.

This book details a project conducted at the Riverport Community Center (all names of people and places are pseudonyms), a neighborhood after-school facility in a Southern urban city. Within the book, I describe how collaborative cultural studies can be used to question narrow conceptions of Black masculinity. Within an after-school program for adolescent males that I designed, I collaboratively worked with students and staff to study how Black male identities are represented, performed, and analyzed in popular culture. These students helped me learn a great deal about the theories and ideas that I had taken up, and hopefully they have inspired new ones in this book.

I provide the context for this project by examining the problematic construction of the troubled Black male identity in Chapter 2. This project was grounded in critical education, cultural studies, and performance based identities. Therefore, I explore these theories in Chapter

3. I also introduce my primary participants through performative writing. In Chapter 4, I explore how the focal students in this study performed as cultural critics. Within this chapter, I describe how students often expressed conflicting and contradictory ideas about the common identities of Black people and Black males. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the students, staff, and I performed a cultural critique of Black popular music and its cultural implications. Our inquiry into Black music was relevant to our study of Black maleness given that much of contemporary urban Black popular music, such as hip-hop, is an expression of a particular form of Black masculinity (Green, 2008). Finally, in Chapter 6, I discuss the theoretical and pedagogical implications for critical education and cultural studies.

## CHAPTER 2

### Understanding the “Black Male Problem”

When I began my second year of my master’s program in speech pathology, I breathed a tremendous sigh of relief. I had made it through the toughest year of my two-year graduate program, and I had faced and countered many challenges during my first year. The academic standards in my classes were fierce, and the spirit of the unspoken competition amongst many of my classmates was intense. I also dealt with the psychological challenge of being the only African American in my class and the feelings of isolation and occasional inadequacy that I sometimes felt. However, I believed that my second year would be different. I was rounding towards home and I could literally feel the release of the pressure in my body. Whereas I had previously felt the burden of being the only Black male in my program, ironically I now looked at this as an advantage. I would soon be entering a field where there was an extreme dearth of Black males, and I felt that employers could only view my identity as a benefit. I felt comfortable with the direction that I was personally going in as a Black male. Yet, I felt uncomfortable with the overall status of Black males in America.

In my first year of graduate school, I attended a lecture given by poet and activist Haki Madhubuti in which he talked about creating exceptional Black men through a healing process of reflection, study, and action. This lecture was a catalyzing force as I began to ferociously read books by authors like Madhubuti, Cornell West, and Michael Eric Dyson on the uplifting of Black people and of Black males. I later attended a lecture by a mentor of mine, Arnell Brady, in which he talked about the negative images associated with Black males, and how these

images didn't fit the reality of so many Black men. Mr. Brady argued that we had to move beyond the idea of Black male surviving, and on to promote the idea of Black males thriving. And even though at this point I personally knew many Black males who were thriving, none of us could escape the Black male problem.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1902/1995) once famously questioned the precarious nature of being considered a "problem" as an African American. Black males dwell in the center of this dilemma in a perpetual state of problemhood. In fact, the word that most frequently describes the social issues that Black males face is not "problem" but the more grave and incendiary term "crisis." Perhaps this is because directly referring to a group of people as a "problem" might be considered offensive whereas describing them as "in crisis" or discussing their "plight" contains more of a tone of benevolence. Still, semantics aside, the crisis of Black males continues to be a problem for African American people and culture and American society in general, therefore I frequently reference it as such, despite being personally troubled to be considered a problem.

I describe the so-called Black male problem using three related and cyclical discourses that inform each other. I refer to these discourses as the discourse of disparity, the discourse of failure, and the discourse of endangerment. These three discourses are articulated within various communicative arenas including popular culture and media, political advocacy and public policy, and the academic community. Although there is research that suggests that Black male social issues have taken a tremendous toll on the American economy (Levin, Belfield, Muening, & Rouse, 2007). I argue that the Black male problem has been leveraged for immeasurable amounts of political and financial gain. It is necessary to examine the historical context on the peculiarity of Black males' existence in America before discussing each discourse of the Black male problem.

### **A Historical Conflict**

Black males in the United States have always had a tension-filled existence because of their uneasy relationship with the economies where they have resided (Fultz & Brown, 2008). Beginning with the slave trade, the exploitation of Black male labor was the driving force in the American economy, particularly in the Southern states (Berlin & Morgan, 1993). The economic marginalization of Black males has been a key component of maintaining a prosperous way of life for White Americans (Lemelle, 1995). As Fultz and Brown (2008) pointed out, this has produced a competing dialectic struggle rooted in masculinist prerogatives. In other words there is a continuous push-and-pull battle based upon common dominant notions of masculinity. For White males of the state there has been an effort to control and regulate Black males through policies. Some even purposely attempted to portray African American males as savages and beasts that were potential rapists and murderers that needed to be controlled (for further historical analysis on this see Fredrickson, 1971). For Black males, there has been an ongoing fight for freedom and independence through self-determination and rebellion. Black males are frequently the object of scrutiny— perhaps because of traditional masculinist viewpoints that support the notion that males are the natural financial, social, and emotional leaders of a family, community, and society.

The volatile movements of the 1960s accelerated the discourse of Black males as volatile, dangerous, and trouble making. Although many women made very significant contributions to the Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, and Black Power movements, I believe these contributions often go unrecognized due to the majority of the more visible and recognizable leaders being Black males (see Gordon, 2000). These movements disrupted the peaceful and prosperous society that White Americans enjoyed following World War II. The boldness of the Black

Nationalist and Black Power movements in particular added to the belief that Black males were dangerous, unruly, and out of control (Estes, 2005). The violent and destructive riots of the 60s, which were mostly motivated by racial and economic oppression, may have been the final straw for many White Americans. Many Whites fled to suburban areas severely hindering the economic structure of urban cities. A growing Black middle class also flocked to suburban areas leaving many poor and working class Blacks in social isolation (Wilson, 1978).

The effects of urbanization on Blacks were exacerbated by the changing economic conditions of the 1970s. The extended economic recession took its toll as Blacks were routinely discriminated against in the work force. However, the dramatic change in the structure of the economy had the most crippling effects. A shift from a manufacturing economy to a service and information processing economy produced staggering increases in unemployment for Blacks in urban centers (Wilson, 1987). The large majority of Blacks who migrated to urban areas to obtain manufacturing positions throughout the nineteenth century were devastated by this shift. The loss of jobs occurred most frequently in industries with lower educational requirements whereas job growth was concentrated in industries that required higher levels of education (Kasarda, 1980). Meager retail and food service jobs that were added to the economy did little to absolve these issues (Wilson, 2007). These jobs paid nominal wages and typically did not offer health care insurance. Further, Black males faced stiff competition in a crowded workforce populated by women who had entered the workforce in increasing numbers since the middle of the century, and a new wave of Latino and Asian immigrants following a change in national immigration policies (Wilson 1987). A continuing trend developed in that as African Americans in general suffered within the American economy, Black males felt the brunt of this suffering

even more. As Wilson (1987) noted, Black males, the problem of joblessness for Black males, particularly young Black males, reached “catastrophic proportions” (1987, 43).

The conservative resurrection in the 1980s continued to marginalize poor Blacks in urban cities. This movement, led by the anti-welfare rhetoric and policies of President Reagan, was in many ways a covert attack against poor Black city dwellers. Reagan skillfully constructed public assistance recipients as “welfare queens,” “addicted,” “pretending disadvantaged” who sought to avert honest labor (Weiler 1992). Reagan argued that welfare crippled both its recipients and the economy, and that independence and economic autonomy could only be gained through individual attributes and hard work (Wilson, 2007). Although Reagan’s language contributed to the feminization of poverty while further cementing racist and sexist stereotypes of African American women (Gilliam, 1999; Hancock, 2004), his rhetoric also tacitly denigrated the status of Black males. Although Black women were the “face” of welfare, it was recognized that the economic failures of Black men as providers were the cause of the welfare state. Reagan eventually succeeded in his efforts to cut funds for public assistance perhaps sending a reported two million people below the poverty line (Wilson, 2007).

For conservatives, Black males were representative of the shortcomings of the liberal agenda. They were a group whom were frequently viewed as big part of the problem in the welfare debate because of their perceived absence as heads of their households. Whether it was statistically accurate or just popular perception, Black males were believed to be frequently unemployed, incarcerated, and involved in crime and drugs in the inner cities. All of this not only caused pain for American taxpayers but also made American citizens feel unsafe within the cities. Conservatives were able to exploit racial and cultural tensions for their political advantage (Watkins, 1998). They accomplished this by covertly arguing that Black American youth,

particularly African American males, were the cause of the country's social, economic, and moral decline. However, as many blamed America's problems on minority urban youth, especially Black males, emerging discourses attempted to define the social problems from the perspective that Black males were a victim of the social order, and not the other way around. One of these discourses is the discourse of disparity.

### **Black Males Left Behind: A Discourse of Disparity**

The Black male problem is wrought by disparities between African American males and other groups in basically every social indicator (Noguera, 2005). Although there are documented disparities in health, housing, and other social areas, I argue that the three areas that receive the most attention in most social circles, local communities, and popular media outlets are the areas of criminal delinquency, employment, and education. However, it is important to consider not only how disparities in specific social areas influence others, but also how each area is connected much like interlocking systems of oppression such as race, class, socio-economic status and so on (Collins, 1990). For example, it's been reported that people with lower literacy rates experience poorer health outcomes (Berkman, et al, 2004) and are also more likely to be incarcerated, under correctional supervision, and return to incarceration (Hendricks, Hendricks, & Kaufman, 2001). However, one must consider the connections and reciprocal relationships between literacy and education, health, employment, incarceration, and other social areas, and not just how one has an effect on another.

Despite the connectivity of social indicators, I suggest that employment, criminal delinquency, and education receive the most attention because they are closely tied to the politics of identity in which collective identities are defined, molded, and fashioned for political and social leverage and gain. First, in a patriarchal male-dominated American society, men are

commonly expected to assume the role of financial provider and leader. In today's tough economic times rates of unemployment for Black males are more than double that of the general population (US Department of Labor, 2011). Thusly, employment statistics reinforce a perceived inability of Black males to support themselves and their families.

Second, although they make up less than 10 percent of the general population, Black males make up over 35% of the jail and prison population, the most visible group of people under correctional supervision (US Department of Justice, 2011b). These dismal statistics contribute to the constructed identity of Black males as useless criminals and social malcontents. Finally, the educational disparities of African American males are frequently referenced because education is believed to be at the core of employment and incarceration. In a society that privileges the individual pursuit of structured knowledge and quantified capital (Althusser, 1971), education has long been touted as the "great equalizer" of inequality (Mann, 1848). Although it is certainly not the only factor, the fact that Black male students are underachieving academically and frequently not completing secondary school directly relates to the likelihood of them becoming incarcerated and their employability. Even federal agencies have recognized the so-called "school-to-prison pipeline" in which students who underperform or drop out of school have a good chance of ending up in the criminal justice system (Department of Justice, 2011a). In doing so, the federal government is implicitly acknowledging that the current educational system is not equitable for the Black males who frequently travel through this pipeline.

Politicians running for office have in the past used the Black male problem as an indictment of a corrupt educational system. An example of this in the past decade was when presidential candidates John Edwards and Barack Obama both alluded to the danger of the possibility of there eventually being more Black males in jail than in college (Young Black

Males, 2007). Edwards and Obama were certainly not the first to utter this long-standing myth. I have personally heard this for what seems like my entire life. However, their words reenergized the Black male problem.

The reemergence of the popularity of a reoccurring social problem usually causes a host of analysts and editorialists to offer solutions, though these solutions are usually recycled and redundant. There are a few common solutions that are frequently proposed for the Black male problem. The first is either an increased or renewed emphasis on education as the “magic potion” for Black males to avoid incarceration and death (Herbert, 2007, p. 19). Although education as empowerment is perhaps the most prevalent ideal of African American cultural life, some argue that in reality this ideal is not practiced. Another is the deployment of African American male mentors and teachers (Boston, 2007; Credar, 2007; Hu, 2007). This solution relates to the notion that Black boys don’t have positive Black male role models because they are often the product of household headed by single females and because Black males in their local communities are often mired in the same Black male social issues.

National media attention on the Black male educational “crisis” is also periodically catalyzed by something that alarms the general public and warns us of the seriousness of the Black male problem. More recent examples include released sociological reports released from the National Urban League (2007) and the Council of Great City Schools (Lewis et al, 2010). While the Urban League’s report cited grim data detailing Black male incarceration, joblessness, and educational attainment, the Council’s report focused on disparities in Black male educational achievement as measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress data while contextualizing the educational crisis within the larger comprehensive challenges of Black males in the United States. These incidents and reports elicited attention to Black male social issues

from national and local independent and popular press (AP, 2009; Chylde, 2007; Dyer, 2007; Wickham, 2010).

Popular press coverage of the Black male crisis such as the Council of Great City Schools report mostly follows a similar format that includes a reiteration of the grim statistics (AP, 2009) and a warning of the grave danger (Wickham, 2010). Others also offer solutions usually from one or more academic experts such as a university professor or professional organization advocate (Gabriel, 2010). Two such academic professors noted their frustration at the lack of sustained attention to Black male educational issues and how interest in these issues wanes and then resurfaces following a new report (National Public Radio, 2010). They argued that a concentrated, collective, and sustained effort is necessary to make true progress.

#### **An Inability to Lead and Achieve: Discourses of Failure**

A sociological report documenting the Black male problem and eliciting popular press and national attention is not a new phenomenon. A policy paper written originally written for President Lyndon Johnson and popularly known as the Moynihan Report was released to the public in 1965. The Moynihan Report argued that the primary cause of the social gap between Blacks and Whites was the deteriorating Black family structure, particularly in working-class urban neighborhoods (Moynihan, 1965). According to the report, Black males' difficulty in and inability to obtain steady employment in the United States were causing them to be alienated from their families. According to the report, the result was the frequent dissolution of Black marriages, the high prevalence of illegitimate Black children, a large percentage of Black households being led by Black women, and Black dependency on welfare and public assistance. Although the controversial document did describe the impact of slavery and racism in the sociological structure of Black families, popular media mostly ignored the systematic causes of

racism and focused on the manifestations of a poor urban Black population (Rainwater & Yancey, 1967). Politicians attempted to capitalize on the public's growing fear of crime in urban centers by implicitly blaming Black males and the deteriorating Black families for social violence (Loo & Grimes, 2004). This greatly added to the growing discourse that Black males are not only irresponsible fathers who contribute little to their own households, but also irresponsible and volatile citizens who contribute little to society.

When analyzing the perceived notion of Black male failure it is important to consider the manner in which failure is constructed. As Lemelle (1995) noted, research and science sanctions what is commonly accepted as fact by legitimizing the common notion of Black male deviance. The agents of criminality define crime, the agents of social welfare define illegitimacy, and the agents of the educational system define poor academic achievement. The public relies on the authority of these institutions to define the failure of Black males. Most academic research in this area has served the function of explaining why this failure occurs. Theories that explore the importance of culture in Black male failure have been amongst the most popular, therefore I briefly explore two of the most popular theories in the next section.

### **Academic Explanations For Why Black Males Fail**

Cool pose theory analyzes how the identities and cultural values of African American males have inhibited their academic success (Majors & Billson, 1992). Cultural-ecological theory, developed by the late anthropologist John Ogbu and his associates is often conflated with the theory of "acting White," an ambiguous yet ubiquitous term that gained even more mainstream coverage following the keynote address of then State Senator Barack Obama at the 2004 Democratic Convention (Fryer, 2006). Both of these theories analyzed how some aspects of minority groups' cultural identity and attitudes have contributed to their lack of academic

success in school. These theories are sociologically and psychologically based and can be applied to African American males' social viability in all social areas.

Majors and Billson (1992) argued that many African American males purposely adopt what they refer to as a *cool pose*, a strategy for dealing with their everyday lives. Cool pose is used to counter the oppression and subjugation Black males face during their existence in America. Being *cool* or having *coolness* is the presentation of specific behaviors, physical posturing, gait, linguistic style, dress, and other aspects of impression management that indicates and establishes a specific identity. Majors and Billson pointed out that although cool pose is a reactive coping mechanism for social marginalization, it is at the same time a contributor to their social stress due to the negative consequences associated with the donning of cool pose for African American males.

There have been varying arguments in the debate as to whether the donning of cool pose is therapeutic or simply harmful. In a *New York Times* article, sociologist Orlando Patterson (2006) argued that cool pose is the most influential factor in African American male failure because of its psychological and sociological pervasiveness. Patterson suggested coolness was the greatest detriment to African American males, more severe and harmful than systematic and societal limitations and restrictions. Some say that African American males become so wrapped up in the posture of coolness, they begin to enact and live out the negative stereotypes society associates with Black masculinity (Cose, 2002). They may only pursue activities and professions in which they have seen Black males be successful such as sports, hip-hop, and drug and sex trafficking). Others such as Wright (2009) have acknowledged the maladaptive behaviors that result from cool pose, yet argue that aspects of cool pose can be used to develop Black males socially and emotionally, and improve their academic achievement.

Majors and Billson (1992) suggested that in their attempt to compensate for their lack of financial independence and vitality, African American males have defined their masculinity through sexual promiscuity and fathering children. Their coolness is tied to their promiscuity and fertilization. Yet, because African American males often lack the resources and maturity required to provide for their children, they are often not a constant presence in their children's lives because of shame, frustration, and embarrassment. This is perhaps a reason why over half of African American families with children are headed by a single-parent mother (Lawson Bush, 2004). When African American males do decide to take on the responsibility to financially care for their children and families, they often find themselves in a situation where they do not have the skills or education to compete in a job market or society that does not necessarily value them. Therefore, many African American males decide to pursue illegal professions such as drug entrepreneurship in order support themselves and their families (Cox Edmonson, 2009). This has lead to African American males' overrepresentation in the criminal justice system and the potential devastation of life prospects for current and future generations (Mauer, 1994).

Much like cool pose, theories related to Black cultural attitudes are prominent within the research literature. The notion of "acting White" is an aspect of the late anthropologist John Ogbu's cultural ecological theory despite the frequent misrepresentation that "acting White" is a theory within itself (Ogbu, 2008). Although cultural-ecological theory does not specifically focus on African American males, the work of Jonathon Ogbu (1978, 1998, 2003) and that of his colleague Signithia Fordham (1986, 1996) indicated that the systematic, community, and social forces that impaired the academic achievement of minority students was exacerbated in the case of African American males. This specific group seemed to have a strong sense of oppositional

identity and cultural frame of reference that tended to affect their cultural values in a perhaps more unique and specific way.

In their study of student attitudes at a predominantly Black high school, the “burden of acting White” was identified as a formidable obstacle toward school success for Black students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). They found that school learning was often viewed as a subtractive process that diminished Black students’ cultural identity. This came from the belief that academic striving would acculturate students into a White cultural frame of reference. The pressure to reassure peers of their Black loyalty and identity, and to distinguish themselves as “real” caused some students to resist the appearance of doing well in school and engaging in certain types of behaviors that might be perceived as White. Many of the students employed various strategies to absolve the tension between what they believed to be two competing identities.

The notion of acting White has fueled intense debate within academic circles and within local communities. Many have endorsed the legitimacy of the notion of acting White while simultaneously arguing for the eradication of oppositional attitudes amongst Black youth (Buck, 2010; Phillips, 2006). Others have vehemently opposed the notion of acting White arguing that the theory sustains Black inferiority (Lee, 2006). Both critics and supporters have failed to account for the systematic forces of society described within the whole of cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 2008). However, there is not a lack of research on these systematic forces as there was a push from the academic community in the 1980s and 90s that attempted to locate the social deviance of Black males as a result of the structural inequality of the American capitalist system. This inspired a discourse of Black male endangerment that reciprocally flowed between academic scholarship and popular culture.

### **The Discourses of an Endangered Species**

In 1983 Ebony magazine published a special issue on “The Crisis of the Black Male” that covered various topics related to challenges and opportunities for African American males. One of the articles openly questioned whether Black males were at risk of endangerment due to their frequent removal from the civilian population as a result of alarming rates of Black male homicide, suicide, incarceration, unemployment, infant mortality, and inadequate health care (Leavy, 1983). The article surmised that Black male endangerment was a result of negative social experiences. Because Black males couldn’t fulfill their expected roles of provider and protector due to poor employment prospects, they often turned to negative behaviors such as alcohol, drugs, crime, and promiscuity. Although the article ultimately reasoned that Black males would survive these circumstances, it also forwarded that they would continue to be at risk of endangerment.

The question of endangerment was echoed in the academic literature. For example, Gibbs’ (1988) book *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species* suggested that the worsening social conditions of African American males could lead to their eventual social demise. The social conditions of other groups including women and immigrants had improved, but those of Black males had greatly declined. Gibbs argued that the economic system, inequitable public policy, and other mutually reinforcing factors led to this dire situation. In order to combat this situation, new public policy initiatives would need to be put in place that would specifically focus on Black males. Countering Black male endangerment was a topic in many academic social disciplines including counseling (Parham & McDavis, 1987) and education (Kunjufu, 1983). Although the academic literature has certainly played its part in

reinforcing the endangerment discourse, it is even more pervasive within the realm of popular culture.

### **Black Male Endangerment As Popular Culture**

The meaning of *popular culture* is frequently contested and debated because the ambiguous and ubiquitous term is very difficult to define. The practice of attempting to define what is popular culture is perhaps not as useful as examining what popular culture does, how it is practiced, and its ramifications. The notion of the popular is rooted in the everyday lived experiences and practices of people. Popular culture is popular because it is used to derive pleasure from its content (Watkins, 1998). Popular culture, like all cultures within the culture industry, is bought, sold, and exchanged for commercial profit and power (Adorno, 1991).

A website devoted to the study of popular culture, [culturalpolitics.net](http://culturalpolitics.net), lists a few of the various forms of popular culture including music, film, television, advertising, sports, fashion, toys, magazines, and comic books (Popular Culture, n.d.). These forms are part and parcel of popular culture as they facilitate the distribution and use of popular culture and the sharing of messages across other venues such as cyberspace. The Black male problem/crisis has become ingrained within the popular through a host of popular cultural forms, particularly popular news, music, fashion, film, and sports. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I describe the significance of hip-hop culture, which permeates many aspects of popular culture. I also discuss the importance of film in configuring contemporary Black male endangerment discourse.

**Hip-hop.** Hip-hop music and culture is a global phenomenon; a form of expression for people all over the world, and a multi-billion dollar industry. Yet, it is important to remember that the original creative innovators of hip-hop were mostly urban Black male youth. In the United States the consumers of hip-hop are a wide range of ethnic and racial backgrounds, and

the executives who control the mainstream industry are mostly White, yet the majority of the performers of hip-hop in the United States are still Black male youth from urban environments. Therefore, for many people hip-hop is their only lens into Black urban culture.

The creation of hip-hop culture was a response to the social oppression of urban youth in the post-industrial era of the 1970s (Keyes, 2002). Plagued by poverty, economic depression, police brutality, and other inequalities, Black urban youth used hip-hop as a means of self-expression and resistance. Historian Derrick Alridge (2005) argued that hip-hop was and is an articulation of the ongoing struggle for equality and freedom that defines the experience of most American Black people. In this way, the hip-hop movement is not only similar to, but a continuation of the civil rights movement. Alridge noted that, despite many shared ideas, members of the civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation have frequently disagreed and been in conflict with each other. This disconnect is rooted in a lack of understanding of the commonalities between the two groups as well as differences in the aesthetics and methods practiced by each movement causing each to question the others relevancy.

For example, in 2007 civil rights activist Jesse Jackson along with the NAACP expressed their discontent with rap artist Nas who had planned to title his 2007 Grammy nominated album "Nigga." Jackson issued a statement saying "The title using the 'N' word is morally offensive and socially distateful"... I wish he would use his talents to lift up and inspire, not degrade, making a mockery of racism." Nas later criticized Jesse Jackson in an interview stating "His time is up. All you old niggas time is up. We heard your voice, we saw your marching, we heard your sermons. We don't wanna hear that shit no more. It's a new day. It's a new voice" (MTV, 2008). This generational divide has been illustrated in specific incidents such as these, as well as general critiques of the other generation.

Conservative critic John McWhorter has suggested that hip-hop "holds back" Black male youth and the entire race. McWhorter said that "by reinforcing the stereotypes that long hindered blacks, and by teaching black youth that a thuggish adversarial stance is the proper 'authentic response to a presumptively racist society, rap retards black success" (McWhorter, 2003, para 4). Although McWhorter later attempted to suggest that "political" hip-hop could lead the genre in a new direction (McWhorter 2007), McWhorter has continued to argue that hip-hop is a tremendous detriment to Black youth and Black progress (McWhorter, 2008).

Scholars who have engaged in the study of hip-hop have retorted that the hip-hop-as-the-decline-of-youth argument is too simplistic. Michael Eric Dyson (2009) argued that because hip-hop is an art form that morphed into an industry, it is full of contradictions. Yet Dyson says that internal contradictions are an essential part of the human condition, and hip-hop, much like any art should be used to challenge people intellectually. Dyson suggested that by focusing so much on the negative aspects of hip-hop, we miss the opportunity to critically engage with the complexities of urban culture. However, Tricia Rose (2008) has argued that the core of hip-hop is the mainstream and that contemporary mainstream hip-hop for the most part prevents a progressive political perspective because the majority of youth consumers see hip-hop as what is being marketed to them. Rose has suggested that we must engage in an "enabling critique" of mainstream hip-hop as opposed to focusing on the exceptions. Rose argues that despite the many variances within hip-hop, many continue to perceive Blackness, Black masculinity, and Black femininity as what they interpret within hip-hop. Author Jasmin Green (2008) concurred with this sentiment in arguing that hip-hop shapes the cultural production of Black masculinity. In using anecdotal data with African American males, Green argued that Black men frequently internalize hip-hop practices of donning a cool pose, promiscuity and hyper-sexuality, misogyny

and objectification of women, flaunting of material wealth, and explicit drug use and drug sales as authentic practices of Black male authenticity.

Hip-hop is the most prevalent cultural expression of Black urban youth in the United States and thusly perhaps the most important representation of Black masculinity within popular culture. Film is also one of the most important sites of cultural production.

**Black, male, and troubled on film.** Film has historically been one of the most important and influential mediums of American popular culture. The true power of film lies in its ability to construct identities and messages for the interpretation of mass audiences. Film has incited national discourse surrounding the culturally coded images and narratives presented within cinematic stories (Harris, 2006). The constructions of Blackness in film throughout the greater portion of the twentieth century have more often than not led to limited conceptions of Blackness and the dehumanization of Black figures (Cripps, 1993). This process of dehumanization has led to public outcry from Black public figures and groups and calls for the production of Black films written, produced, and directed by African Americans with stories that center on African American issues (Cripps, 1977). Therefore, “black cinema emerges as a political and aesthetic response to racist imagery and a pedagogical and critical tool” (Harris, 2006, 37). It is a practice of exercising an affirming Blackness in the midst of a racist landscape. The study of Black cinema should be done in the context of its historical periods and evolution (for a more comprehensive and historical review of Black cinema see Cripps, 1978; Diawara, 1993; and Seiving, 2011). However, for the purpose of this project I have chosen to look more closely at one genre of Black cinema popularly known as “hood films” because of their relevance to the modern construction of the troubled young Black male.

The emergence of hood films in the late 1980s and early 1990s came within the context

of the American conservative resurgence articulated through Reaganism. Reaganism embodies the popularization of conservatism even more than it represents the rhetoric and policies of the popular American president (Watkins, 1998). A Conservative revolution had been escalating in response to the liberation movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Reaganism helped to restore conservative political thought to a position of normalcy that could be considered practical, and commonsense. While President Reagan himself called attention to the turmoil in the nation's inner cities caused by crime, drugs, self-apathy, and the welfare system; Reaganism successfully vilified the Black and Brown city dwellers as the causes for this turmoil (Weiler, 1992).

Reaganism was a revolutionary aspect of a conservative strategy that sought to delineate clear ideological borders. Its goal was to make clear the difference between "us" versus "them." *We* as Americans are no longer able to enjoy the fruits of economic dominance because of the redistribution of rights and wealth pushed for in the civil rights era. *They* are to blame because they are the reason that *you* are suffering economically, and also the reason why *we* are no longer the nation that we were in our golden past (Watkins, 1998).

African American males were chief purveyors in this urban political drama. Although politicians helped shape the construction of Black male problemhood, they were not necessarily the primary benefactors. That distinction belonged to the large business community who profited from the ideal of the troubled Black male. As Reed (1989) put it, "Black pathology is big business." The highly profitable network news shows frequently ran stories about the gang violence, drugs, and crime rampant taking over America's cities. The images within these stories blatantly told the American people that young Black males were responsible for these atrocities. Playing on public fear, the privatized prison construction industry leveraged statistics and images to become wealthy through the rapid building of prison industrial complexes

throughout the nation. Private security systems and arms sales went through the roof. And this does not even begin to cover the multitude of consumer goods that benefitted from the Black male image such as athletic apparel, fashion, and popular music (hip-hop). However, one of the most influential industries was the film industry.

The production of “hood films” in the early 1990s was a timely response to the social and politic climate of the times. The idea of the social and economic dislocation of inner city youth in the postindustrial ghetto combined with the voyeuristic pleasures derived from a fascination with urban culture sensationalized a lucrative “ghetto action film cycle” (Watkins, 1998, p. 175). These films reinforced the popular conception that Black urban life and the social pathologies of crime, violence, and drugs, and defined each other (Giroux, 1995). Further, as Watkins (1998) pointed out, the production of these films further exacerbated the notion that poor Black youth, especially the males, were the core of America’s social, economic, and moral crisis. This was because of their inability to serve as moral and financial patriarchs of their own families reproducing children who would continue in the same cycle of poverty, dependency, and violence.

The most popular and influential hood films in the early 1990s were mostly written and/or directed by African American filmmakers. These included *Boyz n the Hood* (Nicolades & Singleton, 1991), *New Jack City* (McHenry, Jackson, & Van Peebles, 1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Rich, 1991), *Juice* (Heyman & Dickerson, 1992), *South Central* (Steakley, Stone, Yang, & Anderson, 1992), and *Menace to Society* (Scott, Hughes, & Hughes, 1993). These films attempted to complicate the presentation of young Black males as ruthless apathetic animals with natural violent tendencies. They challenged some of the conventional notions of Black urban culture at the same time that they reinforced others.

Within these films is the re-presentation of the dysfunctional Black familial structure as the core of Black social pathology. Highlighted are the familiar tropes of the worthless, irresponsible, or absent father and the single lazy uncaring welfare mother. These movies seem to be a treatise on the importance of good fathering, and how a strong vigilant father figure is necessary to raise responsible young Black males. For example, the father of the main character in the independent yet critically successful *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Rich, 1991) is present in the home, yet is presented as worthless because of his inability to garner high wages and support his family. His disillusionment with his meager occupations leads him to alcohol abuse and domestic violence. However, in *South Central* (Steakley, Stone, Yang, & Anderson, 1992) we see how a caring Black father can make a difference regardless of his vocational position. The main character in *South Central*, Bobby, is a former convict and founder of a large Los Angeles gang known as the Deuces. While imprisoned for murder he vows to “save” his ten year-old son from the same ills of the streets that he faced growing up. Bobby’s son has already become active with the Deuces as a petty car thief and has recently been shot and placed in a juvenile home because of his delinquency. The state has also taken custody away from his mother who is a drug addict. Once Bobby is paroled he courageously rescues his son from committing murder for the Deuces. It is implied that, despite his lack of resources and his previous absence in his son’s life, his strong will is enough to overcome these challenges and save his son from the same negative life choices he made.

A strong father figure is also presented in *Boyz in the Hood* (Nicolades & Singleton, 1991) through the militant, strong, and thoughtful character, Furious Styles. Furious takes over as full-time guardian of his son Tre after Tre gets into trouble in school while living with his mother. Tre’s mother decides that this is best because as she tells Furious “I can’t teach him how

to be a man, only you can do that.” Furious imparts on Tre a sense of discipline and responsibility. This is shown in contrast to Tre’s two best friends who are brothers, Ricky and Doughboy. Ricky and Doughboy’s mother is presented as a callous welfare mother who has no desire to work and has had two children with two different men out of wedlock with neither boy having relationship with their father. We see how this contrast in parenting plays out when the movie shifts to ten years later when the boys are eighteen year olds. Tre has become a responsible young man headed for college, Doughboy is a juvenile delinquent in and out of correctional facilities, and Ricky is a teenage parent who has the potential to attend college mostly because of his athletic ability. Ricky is eventually murdered because of a disagreement with a gang member, thusly falling victim to the circumstances of the “hood.” Tre and Doughboy both initially decide to avenge Ricky’s death, however Tre decides against it due to the good judgment imparted on him by Furious. Doughboy, on the other hand, does retaliate and is also later murdered. The implication is that because of a responsible and strong willed Black father Tre is saved while Doughboy and Ricki perish from being raised by a welfare mother.

The consequences of a lack of good parenting are shown in *Menace to Society* (Scott, Hughes, & Hughes, 1993) in the life of the main character, Caine. Although Caine’s parents are only briefly shown in the beginning sequence, Cain narrates to the audience that his mother died of a heroin overdose and his father was also murdered. Cain then grew to be a drug dealer, thief, and eventually a murderer. Three different alternative Black male role models influence him. The first is Pernell, an older young man from Caine’s neighborhood who teaches Caine how to survive on the streets. Then there is Caine’s grandfather who tries to teach Caine moral responsibility after the death of Caine’s parents and his grandparents take him in. However, the combination of the generational divide and the grandfather’s religious approach leads to Caine

ignoring his grandfather's pleas for Cain to turn his life around. Finally, there is Mr. Butler, the father of one of Caine's friends. Mr. Butler is an educator who encourages Caine to learn to make positive life changes for his well being. This is observed in a powerful scene in which Mr. Butler tells Caine "Being a Black man in America isn't easy. The hunt is on, and you're the prey. All I'm saying is, survive." Despite Caine's eventual acceptance of Mr. Butler's advice it is too late as Caine is violently murdered in the last scene of the movie.

While some criticized the deleterious effects of the violence, vulgar language, and sexual situations presented in these movies, others felt that these movies served as critical critiques of the social system that is producing these "menaces to society." In one of the last lines of *Boyz n the Hood*, Doughboy tells Tre "either they don't know, don't show, or don't care about what's going on in the hood. These films did show the violence, gangs, drugs, and poverty endemic within urban environments. This exposure led to increased attention on the "plight" of Black males and catalyzed stakeholders to propose solutions. It also further cemented the young Black male crisis idea while sensationalizing the experiences of Black male youth.

The mainstream popularity of hood films decreased following the early 1990s with a few exceptions such as Singleton's *Baby Boy* (2001), and the cult classic *Paid in Full* (Stone, 2002). Some of the students in my study had seen portions of these hood films at some point, but they did not know these films backwards and forwards like myself and most of my peers (I discuss their reaction to these films in Chapter 4). However, the contribution of these films to the Black male crisis affects them just as much as it does me. The sensationalization of an endangered and corrupt Black masculinity became even more popular as hip-hop became more popular. However, it is unfair to blame hip-hop, hood films, or any one particular media outlet. We all

contribute to the Black male problem, even when we have the best of intentions to alleviate the problem.

### **Can't Escape the Problem**

The realization of how I might be personally contributing to the problematic discourses of Black maleness through my research and writing is a difficult situation that I have struggled with for many years. I demonstrate this by fast forwarding to the present and journaling a day in my life as a popular media consumer and researcher of Black males. The purpose of presenting this journal is to show the complexities of wanting to address issues of Black masculinity without continuing to further reify Black maleness as synonymous with being a problem. This is something that I have had to negotiate on a daily basis throughout the process of taking on this project and writing this book.

Personal Journal Entry: Circa October 2011

7:32 a.m.: As I rode to the library this morning, I turned on the radio and I heard radio personality Steve Harvey talk about his upcoming mentoring weekend for boys. Harvey describes how his program will train the boys to become “real men.” During this program they will be exposed to a variety of male role models, because as Harvey says “a boy without a role model is like an explorer without a map.” There is an age requirement for the program and it is also required that the mentee come from a single female head of household. Although Harvey doesn't directly say that this program is for young Black males, it is implied that this is so because he describes the high percentage of Black single households and refers to “our” boys. When I got to the library and looked at Harvey's webpage I find that my assumption was correct. The videos and pictures on the page reveal young Black faces being taught and mentored by Black men.

11:42 a.m.: This morning I received an email invitation to attend an African American male panel discussion being sponsored by a historically Black sorority. The event will take place at a local high school where students will have the opportunity to network with Black male leaders in various fields. I spend the day reading articles about African American males and I am amazed at the repetitiveness of the content. Black males aren't doing well in school, in the workforce, in life. The reasons? It is a racist society that doesn't love them or they don't have positive role models to show them. A quick search of blogs, webpages, and other internet chatter reveal the same themes when it comes to the topics of African American males. But many commenters frequently provide more of an agency argument, saying that they are tired of Black people and Black males making excuses and that they need to work hard like everyone else, and get off of welfare.

4:02 p.m.: While in the library I read the work of sociologist Anthony Lemelle who describes how the recycling of social problems and solutions is initiated and maintained because social problems are industries within themselves. Lemelle writes "Everyone knows that black masculinity is a major U.S. industry. When it comes to black males in U.S. society, service agents make money in immeasurable ways by working on them as a social problem (p. xii). This stings because I am one of the service agents who is recycling Black male problemhood. I am writing my dissertation on it, and for the past several years I have spent much of my time thinking about how I help Black males engage in literacy. And you had better believe that with the amount of money and time that I have invested in learning about Black male education issues I fully intend to make money off of it as well. I shudder at the thought of capitalizing on the Black male crisis and decide that I have done enough work for the day. As I leave the library, I walk

around the beautiful green campus of the well-endowed private liberal arts institution where I like to write. I see a Black male student talking and socializing with two White students, and an Asian student. Although this student's location and dress reveal that he is probably not one of the urban Black males that I write about, I wonder if he realizes that if he weren't at this university and his background were just a little different, he would likely be considered a problem too.

5:30 p.m.: On the way home I listened to what is typically referred to as the "grown folks" Black radio station. These days I can no longer tolerate hip-hop radio stations which play music that I don't really relate to anymore. I'm a child of the hip-hop generation and loved hip-hop for many years. However, I no longer care to listen to young Black males talking about how much money they have, the cars they drive, and how many bottles they pop at the club; how much sex they have with big booty "redbones;" or how they still make money off of drugs in the streets. Instead, I listen to several hits from Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, and the Elements-Earth, Wind, and Fire. These were Black men who were musical geniuses and contributed something meaningful to the world. A Rick James song comes on and I realize that, like the rappers, he sometimes sings about sex and drugs. I quickly justify this as different because when he sang about those things he did so with pure musical talent. ☺ Of course I'm kidding, because I know that many rappers have immense talent. As the music recedes, radio personality Michael Baisden is discussing his effort to recruit one million mentors to help "save" our youth. His topic of the day is how the absence of Black fathers is affecting young Black girls. Baisden interviews a psychologist who says that because these girls don't have fathers to give them affection and attention from a male figure, they are more

likely to have sex earlier because a young boy is very likely to provide them with this. This leads to higher cases of teenage pregnancy, sexual transmitted diseases, and children who more than likely don't have a father present in their home. Suddenly I decide to ride home in silence.

6:40 p.m.: After eating I watched a little TV and I notice that several of the commercials features Black males in non-stereotypical positions. Some of them feature Black men as doctors, businessmen, and as fathers. I flipped to the local news and watch a story about a Black urban academy that is beating the odds and is actually improving its academic achievement outcomes. The camera shows a classroom with Black children eagerly raising their hands as their teacher asks a question. They even interview a Black male student who talks about how his teachers care about him and how he works hard to make good grades. Although I see this story as a breath of fresh air, something about it troubles me. I realize that the producers of this story constructed it to be a breath of fresh air. Black student achievement in an urban school district is presented as an anomaly. Generally, these students are expected to fail and we, the viewers of this story, should be delighted that this group of Black students (including the Black males) are not failing. Lucky for me, the rest of the news brings me crashing back to Earth as it is filled with robberies, murders, crime stories and convictions--and yes the perpetrators are almost all Black males.

9:57 p.m.: Tonight before bed I prepared a few mental notes for a talk that I am scheduled to give for a group of Black male youth enrolled in a mentoring program sponsored by my fraternity. I am very personally invested in this program, as I have mostly been a regular volunteer and was once a literacy consultant within the program. I

recall how there were during which I was frustrated with the structure of the program because it felt like we talking at the students as opposed to talking with them. We often told them that “as young Black males there is a target on your back, so you have to be better than others to make it.” It seemed that as mentors we tried to fill them up with the information and attributes that had made us successful and helped us to beat the odds. And from my critical mindset, that approach was no longer sufficient.

My critiques of the structure of my fraternity mentoring program that I happen to be very proud of, or others like it are not an indictment on the people who organize them and participate within them. Nor are they an indictment on their missions or goals. I believe that the purpose of these programs are quite admirable and have positively affected the lives of countless numbers of Black youth in positive ways. However, whether it is Steve Harvey or Michael Baisden, Jesse Jackson or Barack Obama, Juwanza Kunjufu, or John Singleton, the message is the same: Young Black males are failing and need help. For some, the system is failing them and so we have to change the system in order to put Black males in a position to succeed. Others say that the community and the family structure must change and that we must help the young men to change. However, we all point the finger at Black male youth and say to them you are at-risk for failure simply because of who you are. We reify that identity for them. In this we are engaged in a politic in which goods and services are traded, borrowed, loaned, and sold so that those of us who have a certain level of knowledge, expertise, or skill to provide solutions to a frequently recycled problem can benefit even if we have the most benevolent intentions. As I think about how I can reconcile this, I think back to the earlier quote that I read from Lemelle--“Everyone knows that Black masculinity is a major U.S. industry” (2010, xxi).

I don't know how I missed it before, but there is a part of this quote that I strongly agree with. I don't believe that *everyone* does know this. More importantly, do most Black males know this? I don't have any scientific evidence to prove it, but my life experiences tell me the answer is no. Black males themselves are so busy living out our problemhood, avoiding problemhood, or providing solutions for it that we often neglect the system of capitalism and identity politics within it. I decide that this is what I have to base tomorrow's talk upon and that this is what my dissertation is about. Yes, I am a teacher who mentors Black male youth, but that doesn't mean I have to always accept the traditional model of mentoring. I want to engage them in a learning process in which we collaboratively investigate how Black male pathology is big business.

## CHAPTER 3

### Not Just Being Theoretical

#### **Coming To Theory**

When I began my first semester of doctoral studies at the University of Georgia, several of my professors asked me questions about theory that I hadn't really previously considered. What are the theories that speak to you? What are the theories that guide your life personally and professionally? What do your theories do for you and what are they protecting you from? The concept of theory seemed to be for people who lived in the clouds. As an educator and speech therapist I had little use for theory because I had to learn to do what worked with real people through practice. I wanted to pursue doctoral studies not to learn abstract theories, but to help people use literacy to become more equipped to deal with unfair circumstances and injustice.

I don't think I could have been more wrong. Everyone is theoretical. People live their lives based on certain theories, though they might not call them that. There are different levels of theories and different types of theories. Depending on your outlook, the idea that education is necessary for poor children to escape poverty may be considered a dogma, a myth, or a truth, but it is also a theory. It has been articulated, rationalized, researched, discussed, argued against, and applied in practice. Some might simply call it a principle or value, but it is based on a larger set of theoretical ideas. Nonetheless, I decided that if I was going to make it through graduate school, I was going to have to get me some theory.

And so I began to read and I paid attention to what others were reading. One of the people that all of my classmates talked about was Paulo Freire. I read several of his works

including his groundbreaking *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2008) as well as *Reading the Word and the World* (1987). I was blown away because it felt like Freire had taken so many of the underlying principles I believed and expressed them in such a clear, eloquent, and complete manner. I saw many parallels between his work and that of Malcolm X, whose autobiography had inspired me to pursue further studies in literacy and education. I then read others such as Antonio Gramsci, bell hooks, Franz Fanon, and W.E.B. DuBois deciding that I was what is referred to as a *critical* researcher and educator.

But what does it mean to be critical, or to come from a critical perspective? To be critical means first to believe that there is not equal access to power and privilege in our society and that many people suffer as a result of these unfair relationships. To be critical also means that you are willing to work against human oppression. This comes through teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and political activism.

Popular conservative theory, which is deeply embedded within the very fabric of American society, argues that people who are poor had the choice to pursue education and become successful just like everyone else (Marietta, 2012). However, this theory tends to be too simplistic, and is often based on selfishness and a lack of compassion or intellectual inquiry. I pay attention to conservative thought, have read some very scholarly conservative theorists (e.g. McWhorter, 2006; Sowell, 2006) and can even support some of the principles of conservatism such as raising educational standards and reviving traditional Black values shaped by a sense of community (Tate & Randolph, 2002). Yet, I cannot ignore the larger picture of what I have experienced and what I feel. There are many poor or oppressed people who have not made good choices and have contributed to their own social demise and disenfranchisement. And, there are others who have had little control of their circumstances. I believe what my mother has always

told me to be true: “once you are poor, it is really hard to get unpoor.” So in reading theory, I decided to question why this statement is true.

Reading Antonio Gramsci’s work helped me to think about the multiple ways that privileged people subjugate poor people. The most important methods in today’s society are the tactics of ideological domination. The cultural values of the elite class become commonsense for all people. In accepting these values, poor people consent to and participate in their own domination (Gramsci, 1987).

Poor people learn their role in society through two of the most important sites of ideological reproduction and transmission: media/popular culture, and school. In our nation’s woefully inadequate public schools, children and adolescents are taught how to think, how they should act, and what they should to aspire to. Many children reject schooling and its doctrines (Ogbu, 2008), often being left without the skills to support themselves or ending up as fodder for the big business of the modern prison industrial complex (Coley & Barton, 2006). Others try their hardest to implement the ideological values of the elite, and end up producing enough labor power to maintain the way of life for elite classes while they themselves struggle within the working class or lower middle class (Althusser, 1971).

Media and popular culture prey on human desires to make greater profits for the privileged while showing most people what they should want. Material wealth, comfort, convenience, sexual stimulation, and instant gratification are sold to us 24/7/365 through the many technological apparatuses to which we are constantly connected (West, 2004). Identities and cultures are purchased, borrowed, transmitted, and reproduced. People act out their lives based on these identities, and very often their actions lead to the preservation of the current social structure of domination (Adorno, 1991).

As I worked my way through my doctoral studies I was feeling pretty comfortable within my critical perspective. Then, in one of my classes, my professor asked us to critique the theory that spoke to us the most. One of the critiques of a critical perspective of which I was aware was the issue of the privilege of the critical theorist or critical educator to speak for the oppressed (Ellsworth, 1989). When I call a group of people oppressed, I inscribe a particular identity onto them. Who am I to call someone else oppressed? What gives me that authority or that right? Do I think I have the right to do that because I am an African American male from the Westside of Detroit, and therefore I come from a place of oppression? Or is it because I have a certain level of academic status and I can write articles and books as some kind of supposed expert? Also, a critical perspective assumes that through my actions I can somehow teach, research, or empower groups from under their so-called oppression. I can teach them to “see the light” of what is really going on, and how they should view their circumstances and the world. But again, what gives me the right to do so? And what would possibly make me think that I have the ability to do so?

The second critique that I developed of a critical perspective was that it began to seem too static, and too structured for me. It felt as though some theorists suggested that the evil elite sit at a secret meeting table and decide how to dominate others like the Wizard of Oz behind the hidden curtain. The idea that the privileged have all the power and use it to oppress others felt limited, as did the idea that we can empower them through agency.

I began to read the work of Michel Foucault who had some different ideas about power, privilege, and politics. Foucault argued that power is not always repressive, and that it does not always flow from top to bottom. Power is exercised everyday, minute to minute, by all different kinds of people of varying levels in a “net like organization” (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). Power is

realized through the construction of identities, truths, and knowledges, and manifested through the actions of people. Take for example an “academic expert” or politician going on a national media show and proclaiming that African American males are in-crisis. This is an act of power. It causes people throughout the country and even the world to feel a certain way about Black males that they know or encounter. African American males may hear this and resist in different ways also exercising their power. Some may exercise power and resistance by choosing to do well in school or start a mentoring program for Black boys. Others may decide to resist by becoming rappers so that they can earn material wealth and avoid living the crisis they describe in their own rap songs. The point is that power circulates all around us, and all of us have power or the potential to exercise power. Although Foucault’s analysis helped me to think about power differently, it is not beyond critique. Foucault did not adequately address the revolutionary potential for resistance and change within a capitalist system of desire (Vighi & Heiko, 2007). Further, Foucault’s work does not adequately take into account the importance of human social relations and the centrality of human agency within these social relationships (West, 1989). This limits the pragmatic value of his work for social change.

Despite my critiques of critical thought and what is referred to as post-structural thought, I bring a critical perspective to my teaching projects, research, and writing. However, I am skeptical of not only forms of knowledge but reason and rationality, and individual subjectivities that inform how knowledge is critiqued. I am willing to wrestle with the ramifications of these two perspectives. I realize that by writing about African American males I am exercising power. I am contributing to the well-known discourse about them while positioning myself as someone who has the right to do so. I also realize that within my teaching projects, I cannot change my students’ thinking nor help them “see the light” of how they are being dominated. My goal is not

to change their thinking, but rather to encourage them to actively question assumptions and what is believed to be commonsense. Some of the youth that I describe in this chapter did wrestle with some of their own theories, just as I have had to do with my own. Nothing exemplifies this more than my own struggle with the theory of the performance of identities.

### **People Performing Everyday**

Often when we think about performing or a performance, we think about something that is an act or is in some way inauthentic. An actor may perform in a play or a movie, but that is not who that person really is. It was an artistic performance of someone else. But what about the roles that we perform in everyday life? A physician who performs surgery is known as a surgeon. The surgeon performs a specific act at a specific time, but a surgeon can perform other acts at different times, for different purposes, and in different spaces. The same physician who performs as a surgeon can be a mother, a dancer, an athlete, or a minister. We can acknowledge that a person can perform these various roles with authenticity. These are performances.

Why then would it make me uncomfortable to acknowledge that culture is performed? Do we assume that culture is something more natural? Something more real? Culture is built through social interactions, rules, and guidelines. Culture is learned and performed simultaneously (Alexander, 2005). In this case the meaning of African American male is created through performances of Black maleness. I perform Black maleness everyday in many different ways. When I'm casually dressed in a T-shirt, hoodie, and jeans and I walk into a gas station in my neighborhood I perform a certain style of Black maleness. I speak to the attendant in a certain way, I gesture in a certain way, and I probably even walk in a certain way. When I'm giving a talk or a presentation I'm dressed in a suit and I perform a different style of Black maleness. I articulate in a different way, and I smile and gesture in a different way to make my

audience feel receptive to my message, even if the content could make them feel slightly uncomfortable. I perform educated Black male. Both of these performances authentically express different aspects of my identities.

Many other Black men also perform different identities at different times within a realm of double consciousness. However, most performances of Black maleness in popular culture and media are too narrow, too static, and too limited. Through culture performances, Black males are stereotyped as criminal, endangered, lazy, and hypersexual. More often than not, we hear or see Black males that don't provide for their children and usually aren't active in their children's lives. Even the examples of successful Black males are limited. These include performances of the athlete, the hip-hop artist entertainer, or the successful conservative Black man.

In the performance of the Black male athlete, he uses his athletic ability to escape the dire circumstances of his youth. We often see this performed in sports media, but this performance has shifted into everyday aspects of popular culture. LeBron James was an example of the performance of Black male athlete that my students brought to my attention. Believing that professional sports was the "way out," the Black male athlete rises above his impoverished neighborhood and is able to obtain wealth for himself and his single-mother led family. The performance of the hip-hop entertainer is usually fairly similar with some slight variations. The hip-hop entertainer is usually a rapper who raps/speaks the lyrics of a hip-hop song. However, this role can be performed by a singer whose music is within the hip-hop/R&B genre, or a hip-hop producer such as Sean "Diddy" Combs who started as a producer, but has also been an artist, executive, and wildly successful entrepreneur. The hip-hop artist performs a grandiose hip-hop lifestyle through his music that mirrors the performances of his life. This includes wild parties, grand consumerism, promiscuity, drugs, and alcohol. The students in my project suggested Lil

Wayne as an artist who performs this role. Many other artists also emphasize their proclivity for violence and drug entrepreneurship.

Finally there is the performance of the successful Black conservative male. He may have come from an “underprivileged” background or a middle class family, but what distinguishes him is the attitude that has gotten him to where he is now. He has supposedly become successful because of his dedication to hard work and his acceptance of American values. His success is based on his own merit, and not because he is Black. In fact, he denounces any form of preferential treatment. He is articulate and speaks “proper English” without any traces of a Black dialect. Some people may call him an Uncle Tom, the ultimate insult. Or they may say that he is trying to act White. Although these insults may anger or embarrass him, they don’t deter him. An example that we encountered in our project was the actor and author Joseph C. Phillips, who starred in *The Cosby Show* and wrote the book *He Talk Like A White Boy* (2006). Another example from an earlier time might be the actor Sidney Poitier.

I argue that these performances, redundantly played out over and over in popular culture, may cause many young Black males to feel that their options are limited. So many of the young men that I have known have only expressed their interest in wanting to be rappers, producers or professional athletes. These are the examples of success that they encounter. For many of them, the performance of the successful Black professional can be a disavowment of their Blackness and their identity. They may not connect with that performance because it has been portrayed in a limited way.

Obviously there are exceptions to these performances. The president of the United States is an African American male. The actor Will Smith usually plays lead roles in which he is not only charismatic, but also intelligent and benevolent. There are other examples across and

within media and popular culture. However, from my viewpoint, these examples are far and few amongst the parade of stereotypical African American male performances. This is so much so that other performances are still considered an anomaly.

The heart of this book, and my work with students, is to critique the performances of Black masculinity in popular culture. With much respect to the intellectual labor of cultural studies theorists who write sole-authored textual analyses, this is not a task that I could do alone. I needed the help of a group of people who are not typically considered intellectuals. Yet, their input is essential to this intellectual pursuit. The field of cultural studies has to move beyond singular textual analyses and venture into the realm of a performative pedagogy (Conquergood, 1998; Denzin, 2003; Diawara, 1996). We perform multiple identities each day, but it is vital to learn how identities are produced through power. This book details how we performed an exploration of Black maleness.

### **The Backstage and the Performers**

The information presented in this book is based on research data collected within an after-school program that I designed and implemented at the Riverport Community Center (RCC). Riverport was located an urban area of a major city in the Southeastern United States (see Appendix A for data collection and analysis procedures). Riverport was an increasingly gentrified mixed-income neighborhood. Many of the students who attended the RCC were poor despite its location in an upscale area. Passport to Research was the name of the critical media literacy program that I designed for teenage male students at the RCC. Passport to Research met bi-weekly for 60 to 90 minutes for 16 weeks over the course of a four-month period.

I volunteered at the RCC for several months prior to initiating my program and study. I hung around and assisted the program director (Ron) and teenage activities director (Moe) in

whatever tasks they needed me to do. These activities from participating in meetings for a college preparatory program to playing basketball with students and staff. Through my volunteer experiences I began to interact with students and tell them about the upcoming Passport to Research program. Although at least 10 students expressed interest in Passport to Research, six primary students expressed a commitment and returned their permissions signed. Four of these six students attended Passport to Research throughout the duration of the 16 week program.

I'd now like to introduce the four primary student participants, a primary staff participant, and the location of the research through my own performative writing. Performative writing attempts to present performances in new and creative ways. This performative writing is based on data and data analyses from my work with this group of students and adults (See Appendix A for a more detailed description). These writings are aesthetic representations, and should not be taken literally. For example, in one of the writings it appears that the different performers are talking to each other. In reality, this conversation didn't happen, as these segments of talk were data taken from different time periods. The participants I introduce here are the Riverport Community Center (RCC) and its surrounding neighborhood where I have conducted this project; student participants Dante, Carlos, Glen, and Rob; and a staff participant named Moe (all names of people and places are pseudonyms).

Riverport

Riverport, A mystery, can't get a grip on it

certain expectations, but not what I expected

driving up I see young white people jogging and feeling safe

even passed a park on the right where they were playing beach volleyball

elm tree lined streets, luxury townhomes, and cocker spaniels

but...

up the street hang a left and I see Mexicanos everywhere

Dominicans, Columbians, San Salvadorian

waiting at the bus stop, and just waiting. On hope?

So. I decide to get out and wait too

And I hear

different languages spoken, many native tongues

And the Black kids pants hanging, things are still the same

But...

down the street to the right lives a totally different life

a life of exclusivity

*Opulence, Grandeur,*

*Bentley coupes and Italian suits*

*The finest hotels, restaurants and shopping*

Riverport lies in between

A comfy neighborhood, cozy and free

from the dangers on the left sidestreets of pain

The Riverport Community Center is a safe place for the children

Filled with young Black and Brown children craving my attention

Hey! What's your name? they say, running up to me and slappin five

while the older kids look at me with hesitancy and suspicion

They no longer possess the burden of innocence

They've seen too many things while living on the left

They say that 6<sup>th</sup> grade is where it starts  
Gangs and drugs, crackpipes, initiations, and limitations  
Sex trafficking and a longing to belong  
Girls raped to join gangs, and boys nearly beat senseless  
These are Black and Brown from the left  
They come to the RCC because it's a safe place  
Most of the government projects are gone,  
And they live in the scattered low income apartments left on the left  
In the place of the projects are high rise condos  
with White people playing beach volleyball  
On the left there lives violence, crime and graffiti  
And there lives fear  
fear of the police, fear of abandonment  
fear of deportation, fear of rejection  
fear of looking afraid, and fear of not belonging  
These on the left face their fears daily  
And the RCC helps them  
It offers them choices  
adults with sound advice and a listening ear  
a place to play, socialize, and be safe  
a place to escape from fear

Dante

Dante: I'm 14, I'm mixed. My mom is White and my dad and stepdad are Black. I mean, I'm more, to be real, I'm more Conservative. People survived before government. I think there should be a government to lay down the laws, and to enforce the laws. But I also think the individual should be able to fend for themselves. Or to be able to take care of their own family. I decided to join Mr. Jairus' program because it seemed interesting to me. I love learning about stuff like that, about the media and how they portray certain things.

Jairus: This kid is so smart. It's amazing to me some of the things he says and the things he is talking about.

Dante: I mean I like to seek knowledge. I feel that if you know something and somebody else doesn't, I can either help that person if I want to, or I can use it against them if I need to.

Moe: Yeah he's super smart man. But he's not doing his work. And he is so girl crazy right now.

Dante: I'm a funny person all around, if I can put a joke in there without getting in trouble, I'm gonna do it.

Dante's mom: Show them your progress report. You need to get it together.

Moe: You're not going to be playing basketball for me at this club with these grades. You have to take care of your business first.

Dante's mom: Show Jairus too. This man talked to me about how intelligent you were in his program. But you're not acting like it, and you're going to suffer the consequences.

Jairus: You're smarter than this Dante.

Dante: I mean I do my work, but I don't always do it to my full potential. I feel I've improved a lot, but I still have more room for improvement.

Moe: Yeah man, messing up. He's in danger of failing the eighth grade.

Jairus: I don't understand it. He's so smart, and he's got the family support.

Dante: I mean my parents are strict. They believe education is a strong factor in my life. When I'm in trouble, I think they're too strict. But, I believe in the end, I think that in the end they're doing what they can to help me improve my potential.

Carlos

Inquisitive, questioning, curious,

Spanish-speaking Dominican. Easy going Hawaiian?

Moe: Carlos is really curious man. He's always asking questions about something. He's always trying to figure something out.

Carlos: So why is it like that? How do you do that? How come?

What's your program about? I'd like to be in it.

Carlos' father: Sure Carlos can be in your program. I want Carlos to do as much as much a he can.

Moe: Carlos is just a little too trusting. He doesn't know that many kids up here. He thought this one kid was his friend, but the kid was really just taking advantage of him.

Carlos: I think they'll outlaw that. I mean it's harmful to people, and people care about others. well maybe, probably,

Carlos: I didn't know it was like that. Like how they said on CNN and the articles we read. well maybe, probably, but

Carlos: This country is still kind of racist. There are some racist people. They're always trying to deport people. Like the lady my sister worked for cleaning houses, she threatened to call immigration on my sister, so she had to quit. Blacks and Latinos are mistreated, and it causes conflict between each other.

Glen (bodily performance, interpreted by Jairus)

6 foot 2” in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Intimidating size, but a timid persona.

I’ve played against you on the basketball court. You can play, but you don’t know it.

Talented and athletic, but not a leader on the court.

You love to play, and you’re good. But would rather fit in and do well, than stand out...

and risk failing

Always aiming to be a good student. Completing all your work.

You like to be a good friend and a good son. You aim to please other people.

You’re nice, respectful, hardworking and grateful.

But I wish that you would take a risk...

Yell back at the kid who yells at you

Take the shot that you’re afraid to take

Answer the question that you don’t know

And step outside to grow even taller

Rob

I’m one of the few White kids up here

And one of the few White kids in my neighborhood

I come from where it was all Black and now a lot of Latinos

And most people don’t have that much money.

But to me that doesn’t matter that much. Everybody has problems, struggles, and successes.

In elementary school I absolutely hated school

When I was in elementary school I was bullied really bad

In middle school I was always in trouble

I was hanging around bad people  
Smokin' weed, people graffitiing walls  
Even got into a gang  
My plan was to drop out of school.  
Then I came up here  
And it was like a whole different world  
And coming up here gave me a whole positive outlook on things outside the club  
I got into music and joined the band. I ran track.  
When I started getting involved, school wasn't so bad.  
I started to learn more, and doing better.  
Everybody needs an outlet, something to help them escape.  
The RCC was my outlet. It helped me stay in school.  
Now I'm about to graduate from high school.  
I'm going to try to get a job, save up some money and try and get a car.  
Maybe even go to college in a year or so.  
I think that everybody is in control of their own destiny.  
The attitude you have and the decisions that you make control your own destiny.

Moe

I came from here, I grew up here.  
Things have changed a lot but sometimes it's still the same  
I came up here as a teen because there was a lack of other activities around here  
We're one of the few community centers around here

The RCC showed me to set goals  
They showed me a different way  
I was only into sports  
They helped me see the bigger picture  
And they gave me a job as a teenager  
I was supposed to go away to college after high school  
But it didn't work out  
So I stayed here and worked  
Now at 22 I'm still in school  
But I am still going to get it done  
Working here has given me a different perspective  
It's amazing the impact that you can have working with these kids  
And some of my kids work here now  
And they still look up to me  
A lot of my kids miss the bigger picture  
And so I try to teach them  
It's not about your friends, or what the media says,  
They get caught up in that stuff  
It's about you  
and your life

### **Theory For Practice**

The challenge for me is to use theory to explore the real-life practices that occurred in my work with the students. This does not always unfold in a neat manner. Even though I brought a

critical perspective to this project doesn't mean that my students did. And it also doesn't mean that I could teach them this perspective. My goal was to use my own perspective to try and understand theirs. What I learned through this process is presented in the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER 4

## Performing as Cultural Critics

Can you see what's underneath?

Underlying and in between

It's not always so simple

Not always right in front of you

It's hard to focus with so much going on

Important thoughts that linger until dawn

Here for now, but suddenly gone

You see some things but others not

You don't agree? Or do you care?

Girls on the brain

An image to maintain

Kicking it, Fitting in

Things of much importance

My only beckoning request is that you don't trust

Don't trust what they say

Don't trust what I say

Don't trust what CNN says

Dig deeper, question why

It could be because of who you are

who they are

who we are

The poem above is a reflection of my thoughts throughout the course of my project with the students at the RCC. It is also a self-reflection of my youth. I often think back to my teenage years and the time I spent with the popular cultures I consumed. In some ways I was critical within my consumption of hip-hop, TV, movies, and the like. Thinking back to that night when my parents uncovered my hidden hip-hop proclivities, I realized that hip-hop was more than something that I enjoyed for pleasure. I was concerned about the stories being told and the meanings within. Yet, there were many times that I did not pay attention to the messages that were being sent. Nor was I paying attention to how those messages might affect me.

This is a part of my motivation for forming this critical media literacy group. I am concerned about how young people are reading and interpreting the many popular culture texts in their lives, and the messages that are contained within these texts. In some ways, the opening poem is directed at the students in the project, yet it is also directed at myself as a researcher and interpreter of the project data. It is a reminder that even though this book is partly motivated by my own past as an adolescent, it will not answer the questions of my past. Despite some similarities, these students and I are very different. Our different backgrounds and our perspectives shape our thinking. There is no denying that my perspective influences how I interpret the data from this project. Yet, I must be willing to engage with their perspectives and how *they* performed as critical critics; not what I think critical performance should look like.

In this chapter, I show how the students in the Passport to Research program performed as cultural critics of popular culture and media. In presenting these performances, I argue for the potential of critical education and expose some of the challenges and dilemmas. I also document

how critical media literacy and cultural studies stimulated the students' critiques of performances of Black maleness, and the limitations of these cultural critiques. I begin by providing further context for my work with the students by describing the Passport to Research program.

### **Passport to Research**

I designed and implemented the Passport to Research program with these students because of my belief that critical media literacy can help students analyze power relations that are exercised within the production of knowledge and information in media (Kellner & Share, 2007). Through critical media literacy, students can study how the public texts of everyday life construct our understandings of the world, and position our social, political, and cultural identities (Luke, 1997). My perspective of critical media literacy was informed by Luke's (1999) description. This is a program that hopes to help students become "(a) critical and selective viewers and consumers of popular culture; (b) able to reflect critically on media messages, their own selections, and pleasures from media and texts; and (c) able to use those critical skills in the production of their own multimedia or audiovisual texts" (Luke, 1999, p. 626). Within the Passport to Research program we focused much of our time on texts that captured performances of Black maleness in media. However, we also discussed and analyzed a variety of texts in this process (see Appendix B for initial proposed plans and texts).

The curriculum for Passport To Research was heavily grounded within the Center for Media Literacy's (Center For Media Literacy, n.d.) framework for the five core concepts and five key questions for text analysis. We spent a considerable amount of time in the early sessions of the program learning and reviewing these concepts and questions, which are as follows:

### Center for Media Literacy's Five Core Concepts

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

### Center for Media Literacy's Five Key Questions

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently?
4. What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

We used these questions and concepts to engage in the study of popular culture texts. Our primary focus was the performances, identities, and representations of Black males in popular culture and media (For the initial proposed schedule of weekly activities, lesson plans, and key texts see Appendix B). In the first half of Passport to Research, we analyzed Black male performances and other popular culture texts through reading, writing, viewing, and discussing. In the second half of Passport to Research, we completed a research project based on our previous studies of Black maleness. The details of this project are discussed in depth in the next chapter. This chapter focuses on critical literacy performances of the students within the first half of the program.

### **Critical Literacy Performances**

Critical literacy differs from a traditional notion of literacy as competence in reading, writing, and comprehension. Critical literacy is the practice of reading texts reflectively in order to better understand issues of power, inequality, and justice, while taking social action by writing counter-texts against inequality (Coffey, n.d.). During *Passport to Research* the students performed as cultural critics who critiqued the tactics of media texts and the messages that were communicated. Critical thought is not about uncovering the “hidden meanings.” It is about questioning assumptions. These can be the assumptions of renowned scholars, researchers, of each other, and of me as their teacher. It is about being willing to disagree with common-sense perspectives. In this chapter, I show how the students performed as critical critics of popular culture. This includes examinations of powerful corporate industries, the role of gender in our society, and the representations and performances of Black males. And while it is beneficial to discuss the potential that critical literacy and cultural studies holds, it is also necessary to examine some of the potential limitations and challenges.

The students’ critical performances and critical literacies were contained within their own personal ideologies and subjectivities. Critical literacy is not only a critique of society, but also a questioning of the social construction of the self (Shor, 1999). Critical literacy offers the opportunity to critique cultural formations including texts, institutions, and social relationships that define one’s identity. The students’ points of view were embedded within the meta-narrative of Black social struggle and overcoming. This narrative is couched within the American ideology of equal opportunity and rising above circumstances (Marietta, 2012). This is perhaps the most dominant ethos in the African American community given its unique history of slavery and segregation. I argue that their personal ideologies were so deeply embedded that

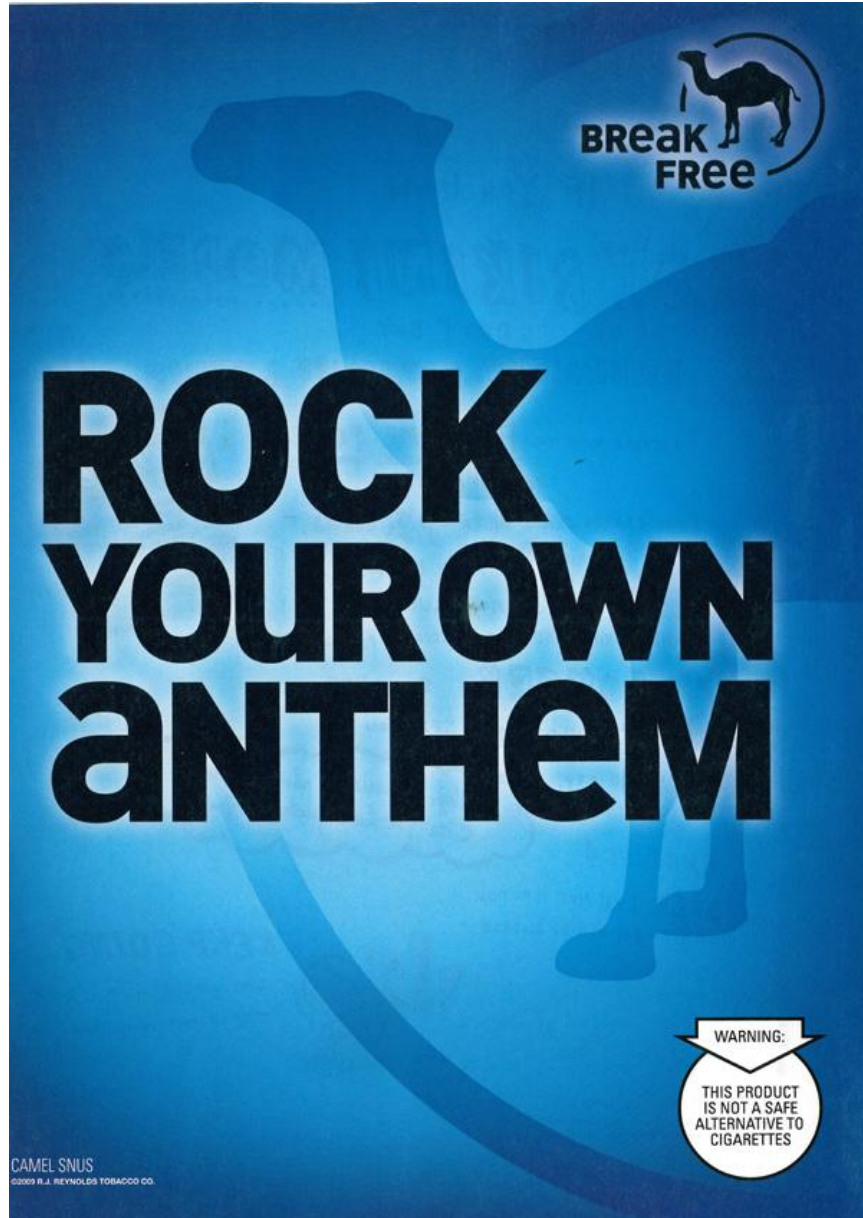
it was extremely difficult for the students in the project to reach a level of critical analysis that critiques even the social construction of self. I discuss this as well as other limitations in the study of corporate advertising, power within gender relations, and Black masculinity performances.

### **Profits, Politics, and Power**

The students in this project quickly latched on to some of the methods that corporations use to sell products and gain profit. In the beginning of the Passport to Research program we focused our discussions on descriptions of key concepts of critical media literacy including text, literacy, identity. After that, we discussed the tenets of critical media literacy and the tools for “breaking down” a text (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.). We subsequently practiced textual analysis using a variety of texts. Both the students and I brought these texts into our program. One of the first texts that we looked at was an advertisement for Snus tobacco, which I located in a magazine (See Figure 4.1). I brought this text to our class because of tacit messages that were being sent within the advertisement. Using the Center for Media Literacy questions and guidelines, the students demonstrated their awareness that this advertisement was constructed for the purpose of selling chewing tobacco, and that based on the Camel outline it was constructed by Camel Tobacco products. When I asked what else the ad might be selling Dante explained that the ad was not only selling the tobacco, it was selling a certain lifestyle or perspective.

The ad means that you can make your own decisions, that’s why you can rock your own anthem. You don’t have to listen to everybody about what you can do. You can do what you want. Be your own person. You don’t have to listen to everybody who tells you what you can or cannot do. You can pick Snus and make your own choices. It says you can break free. So that’s the language part.

Figure 4.1 Snus Tobacco Advertisement



Dante was aware of the use of language, and the embedded values and lifestyles used to sell the product. When discussing other tactics the ad used, Carlos then talked about the visual imagery that would attract people. This also helped Dante expound on the notion of breaking free.

Carlos: The camel gets your attention. And the colors. The blue, it's the sky, the sea.

Dante: Getting away. Since it's saying break free. The ocean is blue. So when you're doing the Snus you're not going to be around all that stuff. If it does get you high I'm not sure, but it's saying it can make you feel high. Feel like you're on top of the world.

These students were critical readers of the Snus ad. I am not talking about reading in the traditional sense of being able to decode orthographic symbols and demonstrate reading Comprehension. The critical reading that they demonstrated was much more valuable. They discussed how different readers might interpret the ad differently because of different perspectives. The students were also aware of the obligatory health warning in the advertisement.

Jairus: Why is the warning that says this product is not a safe alternative to cigarettes there?

Dante: They have to put that out there, they have to tell you that it's not good for you. They put it on the package so you can't come back and blame them for anything that happens after you do it.

Carlos: A warning, if you get cancer don't blame us.

Jairus: Yeah they have to put that on there now. And while a certain lifestyle or value is being sold, what value isn't here about smoking and tobacco?

Dante: That you gonna get sick. Like someone with the voicebox thing.

Jairus: Exactly, I mean the warning is there and it is required. But there are conflicting messages between the warning and the rest of the entire message of breaking free.

Carlos: Yeah

Jairus: Yeah, breaking free, doing your own thing. But what's missing?

Dante: The idea that smoking is not good for you.

Carlos: That someone that is around you can get cancer too.

Dante: It's telling you to do whatever, to get you to want to do your own thing. To get you to buy it.

The critical questioning of a key value or perspective that was omitted within a text is an important aspect of critical reading. The students were aware of the sole purpose of the advertisement: to entice people to purchase tobacco products in order to make a profit. Carlos and Dante acknowledged the obvious health risks that were referenced in a small warning within the ad, but was not a premier aspect of it. Although it is important to understand how these students performed as critical interrogators, it is also necessary to understand some of the barriers that may have prevented a deeper level of critical analysis.

The two students who were present during this session in which the Snus advertisement was discussed both had somewhat unique backgrounds. Carlos was born in the Dominican Republic but had spent most of his time in Hawaii. He had been living in this urban area of a major metropolitan area for less than three years. He spoke Spanish at home and English at school and at the RCC. He was very inquisitive and very trusting. He seemed to genuinely believe that most people were good and did not have malicious intentions. I suggest that this aspect of his background sometimes limited the depth of his critical critiques, particularly earlier in the program. For example, he expressed that he thought that cigarettes would eventually become illegal because they were harmful and gave people cancer. When I told him that it's been known that cigarettes can cause cancer for a long time, he defended the tobacco companies' use of obligatory warning.

Carlos: Well they give you the warning. The warning is there to show the other side.

Some people may not have known that smoking causes cancer.

Carlos was simply too trusting at times. He was trusting of companies, of people, of sources, and of information. Although, it has been argued that critical performance learning is about changing participation over time (Morrell, 2004), sustained critical growth was not an expectation of the Passport to Research program. Instead, the purpose was to facilitate and encourage the active questioning popular culture performances and texts. Although, Carlos was probably less critical than some of the other students in the project, I argue that he did demonstrate growth in terms of his ability to engage with issues of power and privilege. This is illustrated more in chapter 5, which focuses on our participatory critical investigation project. Again, although not necessarily a goal of the program or this research, it was something that was captured in the data as a potential benefit of critical education, media literacy, and cultural critique.

Dante was a very intelligent student and he demonstrated a level of critical engagement throughout the program. By his own admission, Dante considered himself conservative and also of “mixed” racial background. His conservative thought was reflected in how he could be highly critical of Black culture and Black people, and Black males. This is not to say that he did not identify with them. He sometimes referred to Black people or Black males as “us” or “we” and sometimes he referred to “them” or “they.” Dante felt that Black people often took what he described as “the easy route.” He recognized the difficult circumstances faced by Black people, however he felt that it was their responsibility to overcome them. Dante was aware of the power that corporations and government exercised. However, he tended to focus on the power and agency within the Black community that perhaps was not being exercised.

As we continued to discuss the exercise of power within the Snus ad that I had brought in, Dante recognized the connection between corporations, industries, and politics as demonstrated within this exchange.

Jairus: How do companies such as RJ Reynolds use and exercise power?

Dante: They can depend on the people who they've already hooked into it, who are addicted to their products.

Jairus: These companies have made so much money, they can and do sell their image and their product. And they have political power. How do they have political power?

Dante: For like the stock market and the politicians who study stock markets and can tell people about the stock market. They know they can depend on them (tobacco companies). And money can buy power. A person or company with money can have power because he uses money to influence politicians to get things that he wants.

Somebody over here has a lot of money. Somebody over here just became governor. So the dude with money says to the governor 'I'll keep you in the office for 20 years. But you have to do what I say, when I say it, how I say it, where I say it. That's power because he's saying I have more money than you. I'll make sure that you stay here as long as you do whatever I say.'

Dante reasoned that power was being exercised in a variety of ways. First, he noted the power that tobacco companies have through the sales of a highly addictive drug. He realized that the addictive nature of nicotine would lead to tobacco companies continuously making a profit. Moreover, he added that a consistent profit would lead to a beneficial relationship between companies and shareholders including politicians. Dante recognized the cronyism within politics where money can purchase political favors and beneficial legislation eventually leading to more profits.

As we continued to discuss the tobacco industry, I directed our discussion toward an inquiry of recent legislation banning flavored cigarettes because I thought this could lead us

toward a critical discussion. I had heard about a year prior to this Passport to Research session that the federal government had banned all flavored cigarettes except menthol flavored ones. I took issue with this given that the majority of African American smokers used menthols, and that menthols have been heavily marketed in Black communities (Giovin et al, 2003). What I didn't know at the time that I was leading Passport to Research was that there has been much debate between African American organizations and other groups about whether the Food and Drug Administration should proceed to also ban menthol cigarettes. Whereas some groups such as the NAACP pushed for a menthol ban, others such as the Congress of Racial Equality, National Black Chamber of Commerce, and National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives argued that such a ban would lead to an illicit menthol economy in minority communities (Healy, 2010). Although I was not aware of this debate at the time, I still thought the flavored cigarette ban would lead to some interesting discussion.

By doing a quick search the students located information on the Federal Drug Administration website about the banning of flavored cigarettes via the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Act (HR 1256, 2009). The students read portions of the legislation that stated that the majority of flavored cigarettes would be banned except for those containing menthol. I questioned the students regarding the motivations for this act.

Jairus: So all flavored cigarettes were banned except menthol. Who smokes flavored cigarettes?

Dante: Young people

Jairus: And who smokes mostly menthol?

Dante: Black people

Jairus: Black people smoke more menthol than anybody else. What does that tell y'all?

Dante: They gonna take it away from White people but they gonna let the Black people stay stupid by doing it.

Jairus: So why didn't they just ban all of it?

Carlos: They wanted to protect kids

Dante: Because they knew if they let Black people do it they could still have more power over them.

Jairus: And continue to profit

Carlos in his trusting manner continued to focus on how politicians were working to protect children and therefore didn't reach beyond a surface level of critical analysis. Dante analyzed the exercise of power through federal legislation that would benefit key shareholders such as corporations and politicians. He felt that this was an effort to control the health and habits of Black people by keeping them as consumers of tobacco products. What I found interesting was Dante's remark that "they gonna let the Black people stay stupid." This is consistent with his assertion that the government exerts control over Black people. His tone suggested that he acknowledged the government's complicity, yet he blamed Black people themselves for allowing this to happen. He likely believes that Black people should exercise more of their own power and agency by refusing to purchase tobacco. Ultimately he held Black people accountable for their actions despite what I would view as systematic racism through the exercise of power. In this circumstance Dante does not view Blacks as oppressed but rather as stupid, or perhaps unwilling to exercise their own power. This is the structure of his critical performance. This pattern was identified in his admonitions that Black people and Black males were not living up to their potential or embracing the "hard route" within struggle. It is contained within a framework that privileges the agency of people over the power and oppression that they encounter. Through

other discussions of texts, the students also taught me a lesson about how they viewed power in our discussions related to gender.

### **Gender Trouble?**

Sexism, like capitalism is deeply embedded within the fabric of American social relationships and society at large. Although the primary goal within the Passport to Research program was the study of Black male performances, I felt it necessary to also include representations of women in media for several reasons. First, I ascribe to the position that sexual oppression is a form of discrimination that most people experience, be it from a position of privilege or as one who is exploited (hooks, 1989). Second, the othering of specific groups is only possible through the construction of binary oppositions e.g. Black/White, male/female, wealthy/poor (Derrida, 1966/1978). Third, just as Black male failure is presented and performed for the purpose of profit, the exploitation of women and their performance as objects of sexual desire has historically been central to capitalism (Rubin, 1975).

Although I don't claim to be a feminist, these are issues that are important to me. I wish that I had thought more about them when I was the age of the students in this project. Yet I realize that by making women a subject within this project, I am exercising power, which puts me in danger of reifying gender relationships (Butler, 1990). However, this is well worth the risk for me because I believe critical education must engage important issues such as the interlocking factors of racism, sexism, and classism (hooks, 1994). Within critical engagement lies the potential to trouble the existing structure. Although discussions related to gender and race were a brief portion of this project, they were not gratuitous, but an important aspect of Passport to Research.

During one particular session, I asked the students if they had ever considered the difference between gender and sex. I have to admit that I was somewhat surprised that their responses indicated they had.

Glen: I think gender is like, you know how a person can physically change from male to female, that's their sex. Gender is like the person that they are, how they act.

Dante: Yeah, like your sex is how you were born naturally, and gender is who you become.

They were also somewhat aware of the history of sexual discrimination in the United States, and how dominant attitudes about women have continued to prevail. For example, Carlos noted, "some people interpret women as less than males." The students also discussed how women could not vote at one time, were expected to perform certain roles in a household, and are still generally discriminated against in society.

We examined several texts related to the use of women to sell consumer products. One was an advertisement for Curve cologne that I located in a GQ magazine. The students demonstrated their understanding that sex was being used to sell a consumer product. They talked about how the writers were attempting to convince men that if they purchased Curve they could entice beautiful women such as the one in the ad. Glen also suggested that that the writers of the text also targeted women in the advertisement. The visual performance of a sexually beguiling woman might elicit a feeling of envy for other women. Glen reasoned that women would desire for men to feel this way about them, and thusly would want to purchase the cologne for men. There were other critical points made that are represented in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 Aesthetic Representation of Curve Ad Dialogue

**Dante: They've Got Power. Carlos: Yeah. The girl gets paid for it. She has power.**

**Glen: Her boyfriend might not like this or her parents. They're giving a bad image to themselves.**

**Dante: Other women may may emotionally feel bad that they won't look like that or don't look like that. And then they'll mentally be mad that they can't get like that or they may not be able to reach that level of beautification.**

**CARS, GIRLS AND GIRLS ON CARS**

**GIRLS CARS SPORTS GIRLS SPORTS CARS**

**GIRLS SPORTS GIRLS CARS**

**GIRLS CARS SPORTS GIRLS SPORTS CARS**

**Who's Taking You**

**CURVE FRAGRANCES FOR MEN HOT PICS AT GETCURVE.COM**

Available at fine department stores.

The students analyzed multiple perspectives from the text. They realized that this text may have been mostly written for men, yet it could have a strong effect on women. They were aware of the body image images and how this can affect women socially, emotionally, and in relationships. They also argued for the power women exercise through sexuality. They reasoned that even though a woman may be objectified, she can harness that power for her own benefit. They performed critically in their analysis, yet their analysis was truncated when I attempted to prompt their critical performances to a deeper level.

I asked the students to discuss the relationship between girls and cars that is highlighted in bold letters within the ad. Initially, they were completely stumped and had no answer. After some prompting, Dante responded that girls like men with nice cars, and that men like to see women sexually posturing on cars--“flexing.” I noted the critical observation but encouraged and prompted them to question the relationship a little deeper. I wanted them to see that cars and girls were both being constructed as objects of desire for men, despite the fact that cars are pieces of machinery and women are human. From my perspective, this seemed so obvious. Yet, the notion of women as objects of desire was a common everyday part of their world as cultural consumers. Thusly, this was a perspective that I could not force on them.

As we broadened our discussion to the winners and losers in the construction of this text, the students noted that the woman in the ad, and women in general, could either gain or lose through this text. The obvious winner they said was Curve, because they would profit from sales. I questioned them deeper, yet they could not think of any other winners beside the men who would gain pleasure from this ad. I wanted them to see how this ad would not only benefit the Curve company, but other proprietors such as GQ magazine, department stores, purchasers, shippers, photographers, real estate executives, and so on. I wanted them to recognize how this

one text is emblematic of the manufacturing of sexual pleasure within the political economy in the production of advanced capitalism (Rubin, 1975). But again this was not something that I could force them to see.

This example illustrated one of the major challenges of critical education. Often, we hold conflicting intellectual and emotional positions simultaneously (Bishop, n.d.). As a critical teacher and researcher I knew that my role was to open the space for critical dialogue, not to force this upon my student participants. Yet, I was personally invested in the students' critical participation. Although I did not expect them to make some of the same critical assumptions that I made from our classroom texts, there is no denying that at times I wanted them to. This is a highly problematic aspect of critical education, and something that I could not ignore in this chapter. This issue points to the necessity of self-reflexivity in teaching, a point that I further discuss in chapter 6.

As I suggested in the opening poem in this chapter, I am more highly critical of the scholarly analyses that I don't make, than I am of those of my students. An example of this was occurred during a session in which we discussed representations of women, particularly Black women.

In this session I asked the students to write within our Wiki a response to the following questions: 1.) Media has taught me that women... 2.) Media has taught me that Black women... I gave the students 10 minutes to write a response, and I wrote a response during this time as well. Table 4.1 shows their written responses slightly edited for spelling, grammar, and clarity.

Table 4.1 Students Written Responses To Question About Media and Women

Dante	Media has taught me that women have built a sense of independence. Also they are able to be used as an advertisement for sales.	Media has taught me that Black women have built immunity to having a male in the household while raising a child. Black females have shown that they are not usually involved in violence, but take the route to success.
Glen	Media has taught me that women make smarter decisions than males and most of the time are not dangerous criminals. Women are used in commercials and they want to look very attractive. This can be in a good way and a bad way.	Media has taught me that Black women are smarter than Black males, more responsible, and make better decisions with their children than males. Black females are very strong. I don't mean physically, but mentally. Because it takes power to take care of one child or many children while going to work/school.
Carlos	Media has taught me that some people interpret women as sex objects. Commercials use women by enticing males to products so they can attract women.	Media has taught me that most Black women are dancing in hip-hop videos with rappers.

What was the most striking to me was that, aside from Carlos, the other two students emphasized the strength and independence of women, particularly Black women. Carlos' writing on Black women was an honest description of the representations of Black women that he sees in popular culture. Although I have to admit that this problematic and narrow description in his writing was somewhat disturbing to me, I realized that this is symptomatic of the limited performances of Black women in popular culture. I was more surprised by the manner in which Dante and Glen described Black women in their writing and in the discussion.

They latched onto the idea that Black women are strong and independent. In my own response I too noted that media has traditionally constructed Black women as leaders and breadwinners in Black families. However, I also wrote that in conjunction with this single-Black mother performance, Black women are usually portrayed as welfare queens who are poor, uneducated, and promiscuous. Dante and Glen instead focused on the strength that comes from being a single parent. They also made some serious critiques of Black males in the process. They explicitly aligned the strengths of Black women with the failures of Black men. They argued that Black females make good decisions and do not follow the violent destructive paths that Black males do. As Dante wrote, they followed the “route of success” as opposed to the “easy route” that he always brought back to Black males.

Again, on a personal level I was quite ambivalent about their responses. This was another example of how my own biases can complicate the goals of my teaching and research. I was somewhat disappointed in how they characterized Black males. It seemed that the stereotypical Black male representations and performances that we had been examining were becoming nothing more than truths to them. Also these were the two students in the project who were Black males. I worried that they were perhaps internalizing these stereotypes about themselves (Steele, 2003). On the other hand, I was quite happy that they had attached such positive associations with Black women. Black women as a group have continually been historically and constantly denigrated, marginalized, and exploited (hooks, 1981). This continues to be true in many of the popular cultures of today’s youth, particularly hip-hop (Morgan, 2000). But I, the critical scholar, was missing the significance of their characterizations of strong Black women.

The notion of the strong Black woman is one of the most powerful ideals in African American culture. The strong Black woman persona is a response to the repeated performances of the hypersexual Jezebel, the docile Mammy domestic, and the angry Black woman (Harris-Perry, 2011). Although the myth of the strong Black woman can be a source of pride and strength, it can also have some serious consequences. The strong Black woman myth can lead to negative health outcomes such as depression (Boyd, 1999; Randolph, 1999; Smith, 1995). This is because the strong Black woman is perceived as someone who does not require help and is in fact superhuman. Women who feel that they cannot measure up to this persona may also suffer from low self-esteem (Boyd, 1995). Also, the strong Black woman myth has political consequences in how it influences political attitudes (Harris-Lacewell, 2001).

The performance of the strong Black woman also contributes to the stereotypes of the Black man. Harkening back to the Moynihan Report in the 1960s, the Black family structure was considered in peril due to the failure of the Black man (Moynihan, 1965). In popular culture, the strong Black woman is generally a response to the failure of a Black man who has either left her and their children, mistreated her, or abused her. A few examples might be the movies *What's Love Got to Do with It* (Chapin, Krost, & Gibson, 1993), and *Waiting to Exhale* (Bass, McMillan, Schindler, Swerflow, & Whitaker, 1995). Phylicia Rashad's role as Claire Huxtable on the *Cosby* show and Michelle Obama's real lived performance are exceptions, but there are few others. The students' analysis of the strong Black woman revealed the obvious binary opposition of the troubled Black male that is constantly performed in popular culture.

### **Black Males Are Not Like Everybody Else**

(Students Verbal Performance, a combination of their actual words with my interpretation of their writings and our interactions together)

We're not like everybody else  
We're good and we're bad  
Intelligent yes, but do we live up to our potential?  
Others feel they're better when they see us, when they hear us  
Violent, lazy, crime, jail,  
Lack of education, lack of motivation  
Ignorance, callousness, and negative representations  
We need help, we need change.  
But that's not me, that's not you, is it them? Is it us?  
Is it TV or is it real?  
We've got pride, dignity, and strength.  
We've got hustle, we've got struggle.  
And a long way to go.  
We take the easy route, instead of the road less traveled  
Bad hoods, bad examples, bad cards that are dealt  
But everybody plays their hand  
We sell goods, we sell us, but who profits?  
From the bottom to the top  
More bottom than top  
But there is hope  
A change can come

This poem is a performative representation of how students in the Passport to Research program analyzed the representations of Black males not only in popular culture, but also in life.

Although I attempted to position popular media representations as performances, for the students these performances were only representations of a mostly dark reality. The poem is an amalgamation of their different perspectives. Yet, the multilayered voices within our group integrated themselves in a process of hybridization (Bakhtin, 1981). That is, their voices were not necessarily unified but they performed at a certain level of coherency. The multiple voices within the group gelled, clashed, meshed, and resisted in way that I thought was typical of the human experience. In this section, just as I did in the poem, I attempt to represent this same gelling, clashing, meshing, and resisting. Their voices resisted being monolithic, yet there was not an attempt for one voice to dominate others (Bakhtin, 1981).

Despite the diversity within the group, the students' performances were anchored within a sense of consonance. This is the reason that I use the pronoun "we" in the poem. Glen, like myself, was an African American male. Dante vacillated between identifying himself as "mixed" and using the "we" pronoun himself to describe Black males and Black people. Rob was White, yet his status as a working class male that sometimes struggled financially, academically, and socially helped him to identify with the African American experience that he analyzed during the program. Almost all of the associates and friends that he socialized with at school and at the RCC were Black. Even though his attendance in our program was sporadic, he enhanced our conversations whenever he was present. At 18, he was older than the other students and offered a certain level of knowledge and perspective. He was almost like that family member who randomly pops up at family events, yet it seems as though they always fit right in. Carlos' voice was the one that stood out the most. He was a Spanish-speaking Dominican Hawaiian. And admittedly, his knowledge and experience of many of the ideas that we discussed were somewhat limited. He was often unsure of himself and he usually agreed

with the current perspective being offered, then changed his mind when another was presented. Yet, Carlos also identified with the Black male position because he recognized the racism symptomatic of the minority experience in the United States. Carlos argued that Blacks and Latinos were similarly profiled, mistreated, and stereotyped. He would sometimes mention this connection in our sessions and during my interviews with him. Carlos' voice contributed to the students' analytic performances even though he stood out in our group.

The students recognized that Black males in popular culture and in society were frequently subjected and othered. Yet, they experienced this otherness in different ways. Dante suggested that "we are not like everybody else" when summarizing how Black maleness was performed in media and popular culture. During a session in which we watched a CNN program describing the so-called "crisis of Black males," Dante said texts like the CNN program made him feel bad because when other people in the United States and globally viewed these texts they would "think that we aren't as good as everybody else." Not everyone in our group personally felt this sense of shame.

Glen had a different response to being othered. He said that the CNN text made him feel "neutral" because he recognized that "not all Black people or Black males are like that." Similarly, when we discussed hood films, Glen argued that "they were only representations of certain Black neighborhoods, not all." Glen seemed to key into the idea of representations, performances, and discourses in opposition to an objective reality of Black male failure. Glen did not feel the burden of shame that accompanies most Black male performances. Perhaps this was because Glen expressed gratefulness for having a Black father in his home, and because Glen placed an emphasis on doing well in school. This is not to say that he did not harbor beliefs and stereotypes about Black males based on popular culture performances, because data from

this project suggests that he did. However, Glen argued that many of the negative stereotypes were limited representations, and that this simply was not the case in many instances.

The other students concurred with Glen's assertion. They recognized that alternative perspectives were missing from much of the popular culture texts that we viewed. Yet, they argued that there are benefits and drawbacks to the limited representations of Black males. An example would be this exchange when I asked the students what were some of the positive aspects of hood films.

Carlos: They sent a message to the Black community that the Black community needs to change.

Glen: Yeah, they sent a message to the people who watched it that that's how they are, and that they needed to change. And that what happened in the movie can continue to happen. Black people killing others and killing each other for no reason.

Glen and Carlos argued that hood films could be used for educational and motivational purposes. They felt that these movies could stimulate change within poor Black communities prone to violence and destruction. Rob also felt that the hood films had educational value. However, he focused in on the societal conditions that can lead to violence in poor communities.

Jairus: What else, what were positive aspects of these films?

Rob: Well for instance, *Boyz in the Hood* showed what South Central was like in the 80s. How the cops were really dirty.

Dante: Oh yeah

Rob: How the cops would

Glen: Turn on that person

Rob: Turn on that person and showed what their conditions were like. The police were dirty.

Dante: They were racist

Dante: Even to their own color

Rob: I remember there was one scene in the movie. They were in the house and about to be robbed. And I remember Tre's dad came out of the house with a gun. And he did call the cops, but it literally took them like an hour to respond to the call. And he's like what took y'all so long? And it wasn't just all White cops, there was a Black cop with him too. And the cop was getting smart with him like, what do you expect type of attitude. But at the same time it showed other people what the conditions were when you have the projects right here, and there's absolutely nothing. And then you have upper class neighborhoods right down the street, right down the street.

This segment of talk demonstrates Rob's critical analysis through his description of police brutality, negligence, and unfair economic structuring that occurs in poor neighborhoods. Rob recognized the administration of inept public services and dearth of economic vitality in these communities. Instead of focusing on the people who needed to change within poor Black communities as the other students had, Rob pointed to the conditions that required change. In doing so, he helped the other students to identify with this position and perhaps expanded their critical perspectives. A part of this is the recognition that texts contain certain values and perspectives that the author or producer of the text wants to present, as well as other values and perspectives that are omitted. Both of these tenets of text deconstruction were elicited when I asked the students about some of the negative aspects of hood films.

Dante: Because Black communities, not all of them are into the violent life or selling drugs or into gangs or whatever. But some of them, they feel that to be a part of a certain group or to live around that. That influences them to think that that's the only way to be successful, in the way they want to be successful. What I'm saying is that that's the way Black males are being shown to be successful. The easy route for example.

Glen: In most of the movies it put a bad picture of how Black people are, but it's not really how they are in a lot of areas.

Carlos: They're actually being stereotyped. They're showing a bad image of Black people.

All three students suggested that hood films reinforced negative stereotypes of Black people and Black communities. They felt that other representations of Black people were usually excluded from popular culture. Dante also suggested that these exclusions were resulting in negative consequences for Black male youth. He argued that the lack of models of success for Black males outside of the drug trade and other illegal activities has caused some Black male youth to believe that this is the only way that they can be successful. Once again, he uses the metaphor of the easy route to describe the path of troubled Black males. In order to further illustrate his points, Dante independently located two quotes from the internet without my prompting him. He brought the first of these quotes to our attention.

Dante: Mr. Jairus, Albert Camus said that it is easier to go down the social ladder than to climb it. So that's like saying it would be easier to sell dope than to actually stay in school and do work.

Later following more discussion of Dante's quote and the complexities presented within hood films, Dante suggested another quote along with an explanation:

Dante: It also says that it's better to endure hardship in your youth than poverty in your old age. Because if you endure hardship that means you're going to school, you're doing everything you've got to do. You're staying up late. Doing homework. But if you do the opposite of that and end up selling drugs, getting caught going to jail. When you get out you're going to either go back to school, and they're not gonna take you in or not graduate because you missed so much, or you're gonna go back to the life you used to and get caught again.

Dante and the other students in the group stressed the importance of internal fortitude, hard work, and determination to overcome obstacles. These values were extremely important to them, and were deeply embedded within them. Although they were willing to consider the difficult circumstances that Black people or Black males might encounter, ultimately they believed in the mantra that hard work and perseverance will trump obstacles. I tried to complicate this position through questioning and offering alternative viewpoints from other texts. This questioning also came from within the group. An example occurred during one session in which Dante and Rob discussed the notion that Black males are so used to struggle that they've been conditioned for failure.

Jairus: I agree and see your point about equal opportunity. But sometimes I wonder why it's always talked about how Black males struggle. And if the statistics that we read are correct why are there so many Black males who are struggling in education, who are poor, and who are in jail?

Dante: Because they figure we've been in struggle so long, we might as well take the easy route, keep on struggling, and just forget about taking the hard route, and just do what we need to do to get to the top.

Rob: I think that influence has a lot to do with it. And family and the people that surround them. For instance, if they see their daddy or brother is selling weed on the corner, and that brother or daddy making hot money doing that, why wouldn't he go out and sell weed on the corner? And risk getting in trouble if you can make thousands of dollars every night? Off of weed? Why wouldn't you do that?

Rob and Dante both asserted points that recognize the adverse conditions of Black males in society. These included racism, poor neighborhoods, and negative influences. For them and the other students Blackness and Black maleness were defined by struggle. The variability was in how Black males operated within an existential struggle.

This struggle was explored in discussions about a group of pictures. On the home page of our group Wiki site were pictures of Black males that I had chosen at the beginning of the program to show different performances of Black maleness (see figure 4.3 for a duplication of the page). The pictures included a group of Black men in prison, Barack Obama, LeBron James, Lil Wayne, and Cornel West. For the students in Passport to Research, all of these pictures exemplified struggle in one way or another. Rob suggested that the picture of Barack Obama represented pride, dignity, and strength. He said that despite obstacles faced by Black people he still managed to become president. The other students expressed similar feelings about LeBron James. They argued that "it was because of his intelligence that he used his basketball skills to get from the bottom to the top." For the students, Black males may face some obstacles, however we all have equal opportunity.


Equal opportunity despite challenges and individuality were the key tenets these students supported. They believed in the potential for anyone, regardless of race or circumstance to escape troubled areas, get an education, and become successful. This very American ideology


was ingrained within them (Marietta, 2012). Regardless of how they considered the complications to this ideology, they always came back to it. This was a part of their identity performance.


Figure 4.3 Passport to Research Wetpaint Homepage

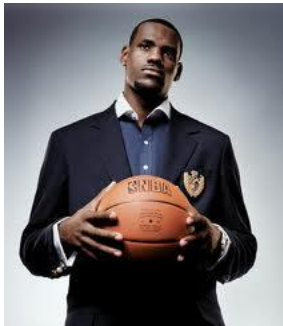
Passport to Research

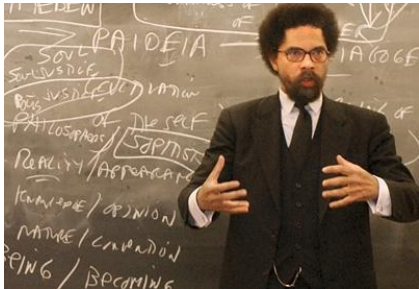
Passport to Research is a media literacy program in which students examine representations of masculinity and men (especially Black men) in popular media.  
Monday 4:30-6:00    Thursday 5:30-7:00











For the students, the performance of Black maleness was exemplified through struggle, failure, overcoming, and hope for change. These included performances of all types including musical performances. Within our program some questions surfaced regarding the performance of Black maleness in the musical arena. These questions would become the subject of a critical inquiry project about Black male musical performances, as well as the subject of the next chapter.

### **Looking Downstage: The Promise and Problems of Critical Media Education**

Through my work with the students in the Passport to Research program and a view of their lived performances, there is much to learn about the enormous potential and challenges of integrating critical media literacy and cultural studies as a form of critical education. The potential lies in the opening up of a *critical space* (Terry, 2009). This space is the opportunity to explore topics that are personal and sensitive through dialogue. Within this space, the Passport to Research students engaged in critical dialogue related to the relationship between performed identities in popular culture and the circulation of profit, politics, and power. This points to the promise of critical education, yet it also indicates some of the difficulties.

Despite the emphasis of dialogical engagement in critical education (Shor & Freire, 1987), there still remain issues related to unequal power relationships, privilege, trust, and desire (Ellsworth, 1989). As the adult leader of our group, I exercised an inequitable amount of power despite my attempts for power to be circulated. The mere fact that I advocated for power to be circulated within our group through dialogue from the onset of the program points to the privilege that I held as the leader. Even though I wanted to facilitate critical dialogue and not force it upon the students, it is obvious that I was personally invested in promoting their critical analyses. Further, it can become problematic to privilege dialogue and writing as authentic

expressions of the students' critical performances given the highly complex strategizing that occurs when people disclose understandings of themselves and others (Ellsworth, 1989).

However, from my theoretical viewpoint, the students' performances presented in this book are not authentic expressions, but instead are aesthetic representations (Denzin, 2003). The presentation of the students' performances as cultural critics is the staged re-enactment of my ethnographically derived notes and analyses (see Appendix A) for an audience (you, my readers). The purpose of presenting these performances is for the audience to interact with the performances in the production of cultural meaning (Alexander, 2005). Further potential lies in how the audience interacts with the performances and how the audience positions themselves in relation to the social expressions of meaning.

In the next chapter, I continue to explore how the integration of cultural studies and critical media literacy positions students as performers of cultural critique as we ventured into a collaborative inquiry into Black popular music. Within this inquiry, we also examined the relationship between the performance of Black popular music and the performance of Black maleness.

## CHAPTER 5

### Black Music Is

#### **An Expression of Blackness and Black Maleness**

Black popular music has historically been an expression of African American struggle, joy, power, politics, and pleasure. In the book *What the Music Said*, cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal deftly analyzes how the “black popular music tradition has served as a primary vehicle for communally derived critiques of the African American experience” (Neal, 1999, xi). For example, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were anchored in soul music. Hip-hop was a response to postindustrial frustration, and perhaps a continuation of previous freedom movements (Alridge, 2005). Gospel, blues, bebop, and swing were an expression of the sorrow, pain, and optimism of the Jim Crow era.

When I was growing up, I strongly identified with the Black popular music of the present and of the past. I could feel Stevie Wonder, Donny Hathaway, and Marvin Gaye as much as I could Nas, Jay-Z, and DMX. I could vibe with the Elements (Earth, Wind, & Fire) or with the Wu-Tang Clan. The first two tapes that I bought with my own money at the age of 11 were both greatest hits albums. One was of LL Cool J and the other was Al Green. All of these artists spoke to me in different ways, yet I could sense the same outpouring of deep and conflicting emotions based on their lived experiences as Black males in America.

For today’s youth, hip-hop is the most important expression of Black youth culture. For this reason, hip-hop has become increasingly relevant for the field of education as many educators and scholars have used hip-hop in a variety of ways (Petchauer, 2009). Some have

advocated for hip-hop based education in order to facilitate critical literacies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Joaquin, 2010; Stovall, 2006) and academic literacies (Kirkland, 2007, 2008; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Others have studied how hip-hop contributes to identity formation for youth (Dimitradis, 2001, 2003; Hill, 2009; Kirkland 2006; Love, 2009). The design of the Passport to Research continued in this tradition through the implementation of critical media literacy and the study of popular culture texts that take into account urban youth culture (Irizarry, 2009).

The use of hip-hop texts in this project was particularly relevant given that Passport to Research centered on the study of the performances of Black maleness in popular culture. Despite the emergence of Nicki Minaj as a major force within hip-hop and popular music, Black males continue to dominate as the most visible group in the industry: the artists. Because of this, hip-hop texts and performances are in many ways performances of Black maleness. In Passport to Research, we read and discussed a variety of hip-hop texts. These texts ranged from Jay-Z and Rick Ross music videos to scholarly lectures and writings from Tricia Rose and Michael Eric Dyson. My intent was to lead our discussions into a questioning of how hip-hop artists perform a limited and narrow version of Black maleness and how corporate executives, consumers, and the general public are complicit in this process (Rose, 2008). Although there were some valid and critical discussions in this area, I noticed some different questions arising from within the group.

### **The Black Music Inquiry Project**

During one session, the always inquisitive Carlos questioned why there were so few White rappers and why few Black people played or listened to rock music. The students suggested that many White people probably thought that hip-hop was ignorant music, and that

many Black people probably thought that rock was just screaming. Dante even argued that some Black people would be “disgusted” by some types of rock such as hardcore. He played some examples of hard rock songs from the group Slipnot. He also played softer rock from artists such as Bjork and Blink 182 saying that most Black people still would not enjoy this type of music.

There were also some objections to the Black music/White music binary from within the group. In another session we listened to a lecture from scholar Tricia Rose in which she argued that corporate marketing pressure stifles the creativity of Black artists and limits them to the performing of Blackness as opposed to other artists who can perform themselves as individuals (Rose, 2009). Rob adamantly disagreed with this point.

Rob: No, I disagree. From what I got what she said that White people can just perform anything and Black people can only perform hip-hop. You have a history of Black people that, like Jimmy Hendrix, that’s a perfect example. And there was a country music star in the 90s. And there has to be a lot more.

Although Rob could only name a few artists, his words really stuck with me. I wondered why I could barely name many more Black artists who performed “nontraditional Black music” than the students. This personal inquiry continued to be driven through other interactions and conversations that I had.

One of these conversations occurred when I met with my academic advisor to discuss the progress in my research project. As usual, when we met we would often discuss other matters outside of my research alone. My advisor (who is White) had recently attended what she described as a wonderful concert given by the Carolina Chocolate Drops and she found herself wondering why there were no Black people there. Unfortunately, I had no idea who the Carolina Chocolate Drops were. She informed me that the Carolina Chocolate Drops were a Grammy

award winning Black bluegrass band. She provided me with more information about the group and about bluegrass music. I reasoned that most Black people today had little exposure to bluegrass music. Yet, I knew this explanation was not sufficient. I borrowed “the Drops” CD from her and told her that I believed that my students and I could probably offer a more thorough answer with some investigation.

In our next session of Passport to Research we were at the point when we would be learning more about research and deciding what we wanted to investigate. We decided that we would complete a participatory action research project (McTaggart, 1997) in the form of a participatory performance action inquiry (Denzin, 2007). This is a way of doing cultural studies in which we would work collaboratively together and with community members on an inquiry project by tapping into local knowledge. This method makes use of human dialogue and positions people as performers of cultural critique as opposed to some traditional models in which the sole cultural theorist is the author of the text. The students and I mutually decided that based on our past conversations it would be interesting for us to learn more about what is and isn't considered Black music and why. We also decided that since Passport to Research had mostly focused on the performance of Black maleness, we would limit our investigation to Black male performances. We hoped that this inquiry into Black music would help us to further analyze performances of Black maleness in popular culture. As we started to work on formulating our questions, we began by learning more about alternative Black musical performances outside of hip-hop and R&B.

This was a mutual learning process, as I admittedly did not have a lot of expertise in this area. Within the space of this mutual inquiry I began to notice increased critical participation from Carlos. I argue that Carlos' performance was a function of increased critical participation

over time as a result of the process of critical inquiry (Morrell, 2004). Carlos was always very inquisitive, yet he was not confident in his opinions and too trusting of sources. As is demonstrated in this chapter, Carlos began to assert himself more within the process of participatory investigation during our group's inquiry about Black music. A part of this may have been that Dante, who was the most vocal and critical student, was not present during a couple of these sessions. Yet, Carlos continued to assert himself more even when Dante returned. The mutual learning process began with us reading a variety of texts about music including newspaper and magazine articles, academic arguments, internet entries, satires, and musical performances (for a list of texts see Appendix B). Initially, the students said that Black music was composed of hip-hop, R&B, jazz, and gospel. However, they felt that R&B and hip-hop were contemporary Black music, while jazz was the contemporary music of the past that older generations still enjoyed. They suggested that jazz was similar to hip-hop in how it was viewed by its critics.

Jairus: Who listens to jazz now?

Glen: Older people. At this time now, but back then it was more for everyone.

Carlos: So it was like hip-hop. Like everybody could listen to it. Back then jazz was as popular as hip-hop.

Jairus: How else was it similar?

Carlos: They thought it was bad for kids. It talked about sex and sexual stuff. It was like hip-hop, but in a different way.

Carlos argued that hip-hop and jazz suffered similar criticism for their negative influence on youth. This is ironic given jazz's current status as a form of high culture or the students'

characterizations of it as a genre for older people. Carlos' analysis of the parallels between jazz and hip-hop is also one that is shared by other cultural critics (Dyson, 2009; Neal, 1999).

Many of the texts that we read pointed to the heavy influence of Black artists in genres such as rock, bluegrass, and country. We learned how rock and roll was developed by Black musicians playing a mixture of jazz, blues, country, and gospel (Horse, 2004). However, rock and roll did not gain widespread popularity until White musicians played it. The students were quite surprised by this. Carlos summed up their thoughts in saying "I didn't know that African Americans started rock and roll. But then White people sold it. They commercialized it."

Even as we learned more about the influence of Black artists in different genres of music, the question of what Black is was still debated within our group. Glen recognized the influence of Blacks in genres like rock and country, yet he still expressed doubt that at the current time, they are forms of Black music. For example, in some of his notes about country music Glen wrote, "I think country music is Black music overall, but not right now." He felt that if few Blacks were performing a certain type of music, it couldn't be considered Black. Glen suggested that the commercialization of rock by White people led to it being considered White music, and as the years progressed, fewer Blacks decided to perform rock. Therefore, culturally it couldn't currently be considered Black music, even if it was a form of Black music at its core. Glen expressed this when I questioned him:

Glen: You know how we learned that Blacks performed rock, and then Whites made it popular. And sometimes Blacks would perform a song and Whites would take credit for it. But if Blacks could have done that (gotten the credit), then it would be like how hip-hop is today.

The struggle over deciding what genres were and weren't considered Black music was reoccurring within our group. Carlos would sometimes broadly state that Black people were not into rock and White people were not into rap. From Carlos' perception, the majority of musical preferences were based on racial/cultural preferences. However, he would acknowledge that there were exceptions. More than his idea about racial musical preferences, Carlos believed that people had the freedom to choose whatever type of music they enjoyed. This was rooted in his belief of the notion of equal opportunity. He expressed this after we watched a satirical sketch from the comedian Dave Chapelle that showed how different cultural groups reacted to different instruments (Chapelle, 2004). Within the sketch, White people in a corporate environment helplessly dance at the playing of the electric guitar, whereas Black and Latino people cringe at the playing of the electric guitar in an urban barbershop. However, when drums are played both the Black and Latino people bob their heads and some of the Black males even begin rapping along with the beat. Although Carlos acknowledged that there were elements of truth within the satire, he ultimately rejected the notion that ethnicity or race predetermined musical preferences.

Carlos: That's what people say, that this kind of music is for Black people. This kind of music is for White people. That's what they say and he (Chapelle) is selling the idea of what people are saying.

Jairus: Do you believe in this idea?

Carlos: No. Everybody has style and everybody has the opportunity to be in all kinds of music.

Although Carlos felt that country, bluegrass, and rock could be considered forms of Black music, he resisted the idea that any type of music was exclusive to a particular ethnic group.

This sentiment was also shared by Dante, who after watching a country video from Black country singer Darius Rucker labeled it as “uni-race” because it could be enjoyed by either Black or White people and others. In his writing Dante talked about Black contributions to country music. He wrote about how Black people had greatly contributed to country music in various ways ranging from musical performance, to promotion, to the use of the banjo and steel guitar. However, he also resisted the labeling of music. He explained this when I asked him about his notion of music being “uni-race” and what that meant.

Jairus: So what do you mean by uni-race?

Dante: Because I don't think you can label music. I think that in some way shape or form we can all relate to country music. You wouldn't catch like a Black person just banging country music in their car. But what I'm saying is that when they hear it they might not always be so quick to turn it off.

Dante felt that because of some of the universal themes within country music Black people could relate to it in some way. However, Dante cautioned that this could only occur with people who were open-minded.

The concept of being open-minded was reiterated throughout this inquiry project, and an important factor that the students recognized early on. They felt that some of their peers who were open-minded could probably enjoy some alternative types of music outside of hip-hop and R&B. However, they said that it was likely that many of their peers would not. Music, they reasoned, was a cultural identifier. Hip-hop and R&B were the music of Black urban youth. Jazz was the music of an older generation of Blacks and Whites. Rock music and country music would be considered White music by most people, particularly their peers. The location and

musical style of country music would be a cultural mismatch. Dante explained why many Black youth wouldn't enjoy country.

Dante: Black people, just like everybody else, they stereotype that as being music for White people. Cuz the name is country music so they think it's sort of like country White people. And they're like oh I live in the city so that kind of music isn't for me.

The students further analyzed the concept of a cultural mismatch when we read a newspaper article that contained a quote from Black country singer Charlie Pride who said that if you were Black and loved country music it created a "pigmentation situation" (Wiltz, 2009). I asked the students what this might mean.

Glen: If you liked country music, you wouldn't show it.

Dante: You wouldn't blast it in your car.

Carlos: You'd keep it to yourself.

Jairus: Why?

Dante: Cuz it's like you'd be considered not as Black as everybody else.

Glen: Yeah like we saw on that (CNN) video. The kid had good grades, and he didn't listen to rap. And some people considered him to be acting White.

The students drew upon aspects of cultural ecological theory (Ogbu, 2008) in identifying the cultural mismatch between country music and urban Black youth. The mismatch lies between a group's cultural frame of reference and specific cultural phenomena. A cultural frame of reference is an ethnic group's shared sense of how people should behave within a collective identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The students argued that country music was outside the cultural frame of reference for Black youth. Therefore, association with it could lead to shame

and embarrassment. Black people interested in country music could be blatantly accused of “acting White” or socially ostracized.

In reflecting upon their analysis I realized that in order to interpret the Black cultural frame of reference in terms of music, we would need to ground our work within a Black musical philosophy. I then guided our group toward the study of Banfield’s (2010) concept of cultural codes. This theory suggests that within music there are certain principles, representations, practices, and conventions that are understood and embraced by a cultural community. The task of the cultural critic is to interpret who is writing these cultural codes, what is contained within these codes, and how are the codes carried and disseminated.

As we studied the concept of cultural codes through reading and discussion, we knew that we could not solely rely on our own interpretation of the cultural codes of Black music. We would engage in a performative and collaborative model of cultural studies. We would perform as cultural critics, but we would also need to seek answers through joint dialogue outside of our small group. Within a collaborative process, we decided how we would structure our project. The purpose of our action inquiry project was to determine how a group of Black males interpret and make sense of what Black music is. Moreover, we were concerned with the ways that they understood Black musical performances as performances of Black maleness. We would conduct individual interviews with Black male staff members and group interviews with staff and students. The group interviews would take place following a presentation of Black male musical performances in several genres of music. Our suggested interview questions for the individual and group interviews are listed within Appendix D (we also provided a worksheet and asked the staff and students participants to take notes during their viewing of the musical performances-see Appendix E). Table 5.1 shows the Black male performances that we selected.

Table 5.1 Black Music Inquiry Texts

Artist	Performance	Suggested Genre
Carolina Chocolate Drops (2010)	Snowden's Jig <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nliiRDmBbEQ">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nliiRDmBbEQ</a>	Bluegrass
Darius Rucker (2009)	Alright <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etr7UtnUfIM">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etr7UtnUfIM</a>	Country
Trombone Shorty & Orleans Avenue (2009)	St. James Infirmary <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kq8ZqVTrOFI">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kq8ZqVTrOFI</a>	Jazz
Lenny Kravitz (2010).	Come On and Get It <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0uOqbjw8TE">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0uOqbjw8TE</a>	Rock
Fishbone (2009)	Sunless Saturday <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyQzYRrupXA">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyQzYRrupXA</a>	(Hard) Rock
YC (2010)	Racks on Racks <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLvUfGZgQmE">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLvUfGZgQmE</a>	Hip-hop

Table 5.2 shows the student and staff participants within our project inquiry. The Passport to Research focal students are also listed because they participated in the group viewing of the performances and interview. I led the individual interviews with the staff members, but a Passport to Research student was usually present at this time. The presentation of the musical performances and subsequent group interviews were led by myself with the help of the Passport to Research students who filmed the group interviews, organized and played the videos, and initiated portions of the discussions.

Table 5.2 Black Music Inquiry Participants

Participant Name	Position at Riverport	Age	Group Interview Section
Glen	Student	14	Passport to Research
Dante	Student	13	Passport to Research
Carlos	Student	14	Passport to Research
Moe	Staff (former student)	23	Group A
Manny	Staff	26	Group A
Ron	Staff	34	Group A
Don	Staff (former student)	22	Group B
Tony	Staff (former student)	21	Group B
Nate	Staff (former student)	20	Group B
Miguel	Student	14	Group C
Chris	Student	14	Group C
Troy	Student	14	Group C
Eddie	Student	14	Group C

The Passport to Research students assisted in the design and collection of data for our inquiry project. Unfortunately they did not have the opportunity to participate in the analysis portion as much as we had planned. The primary reason is that the school year and operational season of Riverport Community Center as an after-school program concluded just as we finished collecting our data. Two of the students in the Passport to Research program (Glen and Dante) participated in the Riverport day camp summer program that began several weeks after the after-school program ended. I asked them both if they would be willing to meet with me once a week

for a few weeks to complete portions of the analysis and they agreed. However, our time and resources were very limited because of the logistics of the day camp. We no longer had internet access or the privacy of the room we had before. Also the group dynamic and motivation to complete this project had changed. Time had passed, and the students were more interested in participating in the daily activities of the day camp than in coding and analyzing long segments of talk. Therefore, I completed the majority of the following analysis (see Appendix A). However, we did have the opportunity to discuss the individual interviews and group interviews on several occasions. In the totality of this inquiry project, the Passport to Research students made a commendable contribution.

### **Black Music Is Something You Can Feel (The Pleasure and the Pain)**

We decided that we should question a small sample of Black males' perceptions of Black music prior to the showing of Black male performances because the viewing of these performances would introduce a different dynamic to their perceptions and our questions. Therefore, we first conducted individual interviews with six staff members at Riverport (one staff member identified as being a colored Mexican, and another as being Black and Hispanic). The ways that the staff members talked about Black music in its totality seemed to be divided based on age and experiences. The staff members who were between 20 and 23 years of age (Moe, Don, Tony, and Nate) mostly talked about Black music within the vein of contemporary hip-hop. These staff members were also former students at Riverport and had grown up in this same neighborhood. Manny and Ron were a bit older (26 and 34). What was also a very important factor was that Manny and Ron were both hip-hop artists themselves. This greatly affected how they viewed Black music generally, yet they also had a lot to say about contemporary hip-hop.

The staff members believed that hip-hop (or from the perspective of some staff members Black music) was all about the feel of the music. Hip-hop could be felt through “the beat” of the music or within the heavy repetitive yet rhythmic percussions. Hip-hop would always make you want to make you dance, or least bob your head. The feel didn’t just come from the percussion, it also came from the artist who was rapping. The beat combined with the words inspired this feel of hip-hop. Don described it as a certain “persona you get from listening to it.” The feel of hip-hop was a sense of aggression as Tony told me: “Hip-hop is more aggressive. It’s like pounding. You should get it. Like a teacher trying to teach you something.” The aggressiveness and persona were something that could be felt immediately. Tony reasoned that “If I start feeling it, I know immediately it’s gotta be Black music.”

But what was it that the artist wanted the listener to feel? Don described Black music as music that comes from an urban perspective. The urban perspective could be based on a variety of experiences, but in some way or form, the urban perspective was an expression of struggle. The Black space of the urban experience is not only representative of a physical space, but a social space of cultural struggle in opposition to a space of White privilege (Haymes, 1995). Hip-hop to them was a voice for inner city youth (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). For the most part, neither the staff nor the students expressed awareness or acknowledgement of Black struggle outside of the urban space in suburban or rural areas. For them, the urban experience was a reflection of past or present struggles or of celebrating no longer having to struggle.

The celebratory aspect of hip-hop was about freedom from struggle and pain realized within the vices of pleasure and self-gratification. Ron called it the big three: violence, drugs, and sex. Tony suggested that within hip-hop you had to have “lots of flash, flashy this, flashy that.” The staff members argued that the presentation and celebration of material wealth,

violence, sex, and drugs, were key ingredients of contemporary hip-hop. Although hip-hop played on the carnal desires of all people, it targeted the urban population and Black males in a specific way. Hip-hop artists are usually Black males who perform a particular version of Black maleness in which carnal desires can be fulfilled. Within these performances, Black males, who are generally a marginalized group in society, can receive respect, adulation, gratification, and fulfillment.

Despite the presentation of rampant hedonism within hip-hop, several of the staff members insisted that hip-hop was “more than just hood music.” Several of them expressed their concern that many people had a misguided perception of hip-hop. This was based on generational and cultural differences. These generalizations were based on the perceived conflict between the hip-hop generation and the civil rights generation (Alridge, 2005; Kitwana, 2002). Don said that the older generation felt that hip-hop was “gibberish,” while Tony noted that the older generation and people of a different race felt like all hip-hop was “degrading.” They argued that this was not always the case. Nate described how he had to dispute this within his own family. He described himself as the only “colored person” in his Mexican family and household.

Nate: When I listen to Black music, all they think about is that they're talking about sex, drugs, and violence. And I'm like no they're not, they're talking about what's going on with them. My dad's like no they're talking about drugs, and I'm like no they're talking about what they went through and how they got through in life.

Nate felt like Black music was an expression of Black culture. Black culture was about struggle and progress, and thusly Nate could identify with it (feel it) musically and thematically. Nate further described how he could identify Black music when he heard it.

Nate: I can tell by the way they express themselves. They talk about what's been going on through their lives, through the past. Black culture, like I said before. They're probably talking about how they didn't make it and how people treated them when they were young and stuff like that.

Although Nate suggested that Black music was emblematic of the struggles of Black culture, several of the staff members cautioned that you did not necessarily have to be Black to understand the struggles of the urban perspective. For example, Eminem made real hip-hop music and he was White. In fact, they argued the urban perspective was not even limited to Americans. As Don told me:

Don: You've got to understand that an urban area is an urban area. If it's here or Japan. They might be able to rap about the same things that's going on over there, it's just in a different language.

Manny, who felt very strongly that Black music was broader than hip-hop, corroborated the notion that urban music did not necessarily have to be Black.

Manny: Hip-hop, if you go to Norway or Sweden or somewhere like that where it is predominantly Caucasians, they don't see hip-hop as Black music. They see it as urban music.

Although the staff members suggested that you didn't necessarily always have to be Black to make hip-hop music, you did need to have lived the urban experience of struggle. In fact, if you didn't live this experience you could enjoy hip-hop but you wouldn't interpret it in the same way. This came up when I asked Don if someone outside that urban perspective would have a different notion of what Black music is.

Don: They could have a different idea about it. But they couldn't rap about it. You can't

sit here and get spoon-fed and be like oh I came from this. No you didn't. That wouldn't be real music to me then.

Jairus: So they would have difficulty being that type of artist. But do you think they would have different ideas about what Black music is?

Don: Listening, yeah they could. What that idea would be, I wouldn't know. But it wouldn't be the same thing as me listening to it.

The idea of realness or authenticity was a key aspect of Black music (Hill, 2009). The realness, like the beat or aggressiveness, was something that the listener could feel. The realness of Black music, as Ron told me, was something that people could relate to. It was something that people can "put their hands on and be like I did that before, or I want to do that." This was what attracted people to hip-hop as a form of Black music. Hip-hop was about the reflection of painful experiences and the basking in the pleasures of voyeurism, materialism, and violence. However, the interpretive experience differed if you did not come from the urban space of struggle. You could celebrate the pleasures, but you could not engage with the pain in the same way, even if you tried. Ron argued this point when I asked him if someone of a different race might have a different view of Black music than Black people themselves:

Ron: Yes. Because nine times out of ten, they didn't come up the same way a Black person came up. Sometimes people just have silver spoons in their mouth. I know some straight hip-hop heads that just listen to hip-hop all day long. I'm not saying they don't know what they're talking about, but they're still dark on a lot of these aspects. So they listen to these songs and they dissect these songs, and they can tell about these songs better than I can. But at the same time they haven't lived it.

Ron described people with “silver spoons” in their mouth in same way that Don described people who have been “spoon fed.” Both implied people who had been privileged throughout their lives. These people can enjoy hip-hop, know hip-hop, and engage with hip-hop. However from the perspective of the staff members, they cannot *feel* hip-hop in the same way as someone who comes from a place of struggle. Although the idea of Black people in a perpetual state of struggle has been a constant in Black culture, the staff members argued that Black music itself has changed.

### **It Ain’t How It Used To Be**

All of the staff members talked about a shift in Black music in terms of how it is now, and how it used to be. The shift was in the purpose and content of the music. However, Manny and Ron, and to a lesser extent Moe, spoke more about Black music in its totality and not just within the context of hip-hop. As I mentioned before Manny and Ron were both hip-hop artists, and Moe noted that he also had some contacts with people involved in the music industry. These and other factors may have broadened their perspectives.

Manny and Ron argued that all music was Black music because Black people directly or indirectly influenced basically every genre of music. As artists they felt it was their responsibility to study and know the history of music. Ron felt that this factor as well as well as age difference helped him to have a different perspective.

Ron: I think that music starts with Black people. All genres of music. Not just what the young people think today- that Black music is just hip-hop. I look at all aspects of music as being Black because somewhere down through time Black people did it and they did it well. We can look at Latin music, country music, R&B, soul, classical music, rock and

roll, rap or whatever. I think all of that is Black music. Because we touched or we molded the way music is today or has been in the past.

Ron and Manny both felt that unless you proactively educated yourself about music, you would make erred assumptions. For example, Manny dismissed the idea that for a certain type of music to be considered Black person there had to be Black people playing within that style.

Manny: A lot of people have this misconception that if you don't see a Black person, it's not Black music. So, if you have Avenged Sevenfold, who I'm a huge fan of, and they are all White. And the music they do is hard core heavy metal music. But because of the fact that a lot of people don't see that some of the guitarists in that group were influenced by B.B. King or Muddy Waters. They don't see the reference so they're like okay, that's not Black music, it's White people. Pretty much it's any genre that a lot of uneducated people -that they don't see a prevalent person doing it, they would not consider it Black music.

Although Ron and Manny may have disagreed with some of the other staff members about what is considered Black music based on their experiences and knowledge, they all agreed that Black music had changed. Earlier Black music placed more of an emphasis on its message and on the community. Now, the emphasis was on money and fame instead of the means of expression. Music in the past, they said, had the intent of showing, educating, and uplifting. Their assertions were the result of a socially constructed "generational memory" and "generational identity" in which people perceive their current generation and its popular cultures as worse than those of previous generations (Hill, 2009, p.105). Manny described how previous generations of Black artists used their environments as a tool and a means to educate.

Manny: A lot of Black artists tapped into their surroundings and their environments and the situations they were placed into. Everything from R &B and soul music from back in the 50s and 60s, they used the oppression they had, they used it as a voice.

Manny and Ron talked about how soul artists like Marvin Gaye, Billy Paul, and Nina Simone painted a vivid picture of Black struggle and oppression while also serving as symbols of cultural pride. In a similar fashion, Moe and Nate described how hip-hop groups in the 80s such as the Sugar Hill Gang and NWA exposed the harsh realities of the inner cities. The shift from then to now was rooted in the artists' intentions for their art.

According to the staff, today's artists cared more about personal wealth and fame than they did community. Some hip-hop artists engaged with the community on a cursory level, but generally not within their art. As Tony told me: "Back then it was more as I'm working for my fans, and the community. But now it's like they say it but they're not really doing it." They did not work to improve their community or their culture in their music. Instead, the focus was on producing music that could bring them wealth. Ron argued that the shift away from community was not endemic to musical artists, but was also a trait of today's youth in general.

Ron: When I was raised it was all about community. Now it's all about what can the community do for me. And if the community can't do nothing for me, f that community. I'll do it myself. It's not team anymore, it's me me me.

The staff felt that that most of the youth were focused on self-gratification, and achieving personal success. Many of the models of success that youth witnessed were hip-hop artists. Therefore, many young people emulated these artists.

The staff members expressed concerned about how many of the youth that they worked with viewed hip-hop artists. They felt that the images of rappers living a lifestyle filled with women, cars, jewelry, and fame promoted an image of success that enticed Black youth, particularly Black male youth. Don explained these images inspire many young Black males to want to be rappers themselves.

Don: Everybody wants to be successful. And you're sitting there and you're having money and fun videos and all that. A younger man would want to be a rapper to pursue that and live that life.

The staff felt that too many of the youth believed that illegal activities or hip-hop were the only ways that they could achieve the type of success that they aspired to. The staff tried to sell students on the idea that there are many routes to success, and obtaining an education was the most effective way. This, they said, was often a tough sell. Many of the youth did not place the emphasis on education that the staff felt that they needed to.

Manny and Ron also suggested that young aspiring artists did not educate themselves on the music industry or about music itself. Ron talked about how youth did not care to learn about the nature of business contracts, how income is generated, and how the industry is structured. Instead, he said that their focus was on the glory and the fame. Manny expressed concern that this focus on glory and fame led to a lack of true love for the art. Many kids wanted to be rappers, but did not hone their craft or know their musical history.

Manny: A lot of people have gotten to the point where they've gotten too lazy to get a job and they feel that certain forms of music are their means of a career. They don't see the type of hard work that was put in by past artists to use that as a stepping stone. They don't go about it in the same way they did back in the day. Nowadays it's just like

I just want a dollar.

A shallow view and knowledge of music they said was rooted in corporate greed. The staff members felt that Black radio stations, TV, and other media outlets only promoted hip-hop about violence, sex, drugs, and partying. These outlets also catered to a youth market. These sorts of themes had previously been present in Black music. However, there was no longer any balance. These themes were totally dominant as Moe explained:

Moe: Back in the 60s, 70s, and 80s you had conscious R&B. You had conscious rappers later. But back then you still had sexual music. You still had music you could dance to. But kids today's like 90 percent of the music they listen to is dance, dance, dance. Or it's drugs, drugs, drugs. That's basically what you get.

Manny described how radio and TV had turned the hip-hop into what he called a “really big minstrel show.” Media outlets purposely marketed music that promoted negative aspects of Black culture in order to cater to youthful consumers. Other industries picked up on this and used these representations to market their products. He, and other staff members talked about how corporations used negative images of Black culture and Black males in particular to sell everything from cell phones and chicken to cigarette wrappings and liquor.

The staff suggested that the selling of these images is very intentional. Corporate executives in the music and other industries know that these images sell very well. Moe talked to me about some of his past encounters with people who market these representations.

Moe: I've been in places where I've been around A&Rs— like people who go out and they go and get artists for their labels, like new talent. So I'm out at like an open mic and

the guy was like I just want young hood guys. So I was thinking like damn you want kids from the projects rapping about drugs and talking about stuff they ain't never did before? It's like that? And they're selling it.

Despite their disappointment with some aspect of today's hip-hop, all of the staff members were fans of it on some level. They enjoyed the pleasure and the pain that were presented and performed. Although Manny and Ron felt that hip-hop was only one link in the chain of the diverse history of Black music, they all could agree that hip-hop was an integral piece. In order to further elicit the thoughts of the staff about other Black musical performances, as well as the thoughts of some of their students, we decided to show both groups a few examples.

### **This Is Black Music?**

We showed musical performances in several diverse genres (bluegrass, rock, country, heavy metal, jazz, and hip-hop) to two groups of staff members and one group of students that Moe indicated would be willing and interested in participating (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2). All of the musical artists were Black males except for one Black female in the Carolina Chocolate Drops. Many of the staff and students were shocked that all of the performers were Black. Most of them did not believe that these performances were Black music. Interestingly, the reasons the staff and students felt this way were very similar. They are as follows: 1) Alternative genres outside of hip-hop and R&B are not marketed to Blacks. 2) Blacks are not exposed to these alternative genres. 3) Blacks are generally not open to alternative genres because the cultural codes contained within them don't fit within the Black collective identity.

Although these group interviews took place at different times, it was almost as though they were talking to each other. Whereas the older staff group (Group A-Manny, Ron, and Moe)

rationalized their arguments about music, culture, and the perceptions of today's youth, the other staff group and the student group seemingly agreed with them based on their experiences.

Therefore, I present the data as a continuous oral performance. These are the exact words from individual members of the three groups presented as though they were in one big group talking to each other (refer back to Table 5.2 to see the actual divisions of staff and student groups).

#### Group Oral Performance

Glen: From your opinion, were all of these performances considered Black music?

Ron: No. Well, all of it was Black music because it was by all Black artists. But will Black America buy the albums? That's a different story.

Manny: The reason I say it was Black music was because every genre that we saw had roots in Black culture.

Troy: They're all Black people, but it wasn't all Black music or Black culture.

Chris: Not all Black people have the same distinct culture. It can vary from person to person. Not all Black people listen to just rap and hip-hop. People listen and watch different types and genres.

Dante: Which ones weren't Black music?

Eddie: All of them, except YC.

Tony: Darius Rucker, Trombone Shorty, and Fishbone

Ron: Chocolate Drop

Manny: Well naw because

Don: It's that Black country though. It's like you'd be sitting here and you ride down to Louisiana or something, and you might see something like that. Like you got people in the neighborhood. Or like an urban area. That's just making music.

Ron: What Black person that you know listens to that? Come on cuz. It's Black music to me but let somebody like Glen see it and they're not gonna

Troy: Like the Carolina Chocolate Drops, that was just weird.

Moe: They haven't been exposed to it.

Don: Me being a Black person I don't hear that type of music enough to consider it Black music.

Ron: It doesn't appeal to Black people

Moe: It appeals to a White market

Eddie: It doesn't come on 103 or it don't come on 107.9. It's not on the mixtapes.

Chris: You don't hear it everyday.

Moe: They're (young people) not provided the resources to step outside of it. If you listen to the radio stations, it's 103 and 107.9. All they play is hip-hop and R&B. They're not stepping out.

Manny: The household doesn't necessarily cultivate them into anything else.

Tony: It's not the type of music that you would hear in your parent's household.

Chris: You probably weren't brought up to that type of music.

Don: Maybe because Black people don't try to reach to different music.

Tony: Some people just get stuck on one thing and stick with it for a long time.

Manny: For lack of a better term they're close-minded. They want what they know already and anything that's different from that, some of them are scared of it and don't want to venture out.

Ron: A lot of these kids listen to what their friends listen to. That's the way of them being acceptable in their crowd. If I listen to listen to YC, and he listen to Gucci Man, and he

listen to Carolina Chocolate Drops- you know who is not going to be accepted. Cuz we gonna be clowning him everyday.

Chris: They'd probably think that other people wouldn't really accept them if they listen to a certain type of music. They might think that another type of genre other than rap or hip hip is kinda boring.

Eddie: Like our environment, and our friends at school.

Troy: What they listen to, like, what's on your Ipod?

Jairus: What codes did y'all see in terms of the big differences that stood out?

Manny: The biggest thing I saw from the Carolina Chocolate Drops down to Fishbone was their dress wasn't extravagant. They didn't need overly designer clothes they were fine with whatever.

Eddie: I'm just saying. This is weird. This is gay. Look at how he (a member from Fishbone) is dressed.

Troy: The biggest thing I noticed was dress. Like Darius Rucker, he dressed like a modern cowboy.

Don: Dress-wise, you can tell they from different areas, you can tell they had different upbringings. Just on the way they dressed.

Jairus: But what about Trombone Shorty? Didn't he have on a beater and some jeans?

Don: Yeah, a beater, some jeans, and some shades. But still, there's a difference.

Troy: He dressed as if he was a hip-hop related type of person. But his method of music was totally different.

Glen: He had on jeans and a beater. But it wasn't extravagant.

Manny: He kept it simple. He had on the flea market shades, the wifebeater, and some jeans. And went out and killed it.

Eddie: That was weird (Trombone Shorty performance)

Troy: Yeah, it was weird. But you wouldn't expect it.

Eddie: Well to be truthful, it was actually good. But the way he looked and stuff you wouldn't think that he would do that kind of music

Troy: I don't know, it was just something I couldn't relate to really. I wouldn't say weird, but different.

Ron: That's the difference, a lot of rappers of today are not real talented. They didn't grow up in the band. They didn't grow up with the mama teaching piano or guitar lessons. They're like I'm a rapper cuz I'm from the hood and I can make words rhyme.

Moe: But you know what, the difference between them and other Black artists for real for real is that you can just see the love for just the music. They're not doing it for anything else. Look at how they're dressed. It's organic.

Manny: But then you get down to the last one (YC, Racks) it showed even in the song. All they talked about was clothes, drugs, and in the performance they had on overly expensive clothes. Because they felt they had to live up to the song they were talking about. They felt like oh I've gotta keep what I said. I've gotta make it real.

Chris: That's why hip-hop now is about drugs or booty cuz that's what we like listening to. Personally I like a mixed majority of songs. I don't want to hear the same thing everything. But they want to hear about the good life. Like what it's like to be famous, to live like you're a king. They would rather listen to what someone has done to be successful.

Eddie: Like Big Sean, I like Big Sean

Troy: Yeah Big Sean talks about booty and clubbing and all that. I like that kind of thing.

Don: I was looking at the performances and one that stood out to me was Lenny Kravitz.

Like he's a Black male, and he's sitting here doing a commercial for the NBA.

Everybody else wasn't doing it. So he's sitting here making more money, more successful than pretty much anybody else that we were looking at. But still people aren't going to like him or consider it urban music.

Ron: He wasn't a straight hood guy. He grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth. That's what I'm telling you. If you grew up with a silver spoon in your mouth, you can do any kind of music you want. There's nothing wrong with that though.

Jairus: Representations of Black males in media, popular culture, TV, news, commercials, movies, do you see it as narrow or diverse?

Tony: Narrow, real narrow.

Don: I say it's diverse. Because you can sit here and have it on one channel and it's strictly about an urban type Black male. Or you could switch it to another channel and you could have a celebrity, such as Will Smith, who is not always in the hood when he does his movies.

Tony: That's why I'm saying it's narrow. They don't talk about people like this (Carolina Chocolate Drops) or Trombone Shorty. You hear about people like YC all the time, in our community.

Chris: The media portrays Black people as bad, don't wanna listen, do whatever they want to do type of people.

Ron: But people around the world respect the Blackness of our color because of the struggle that we've been through.

Manny: And that could be a really good reason why some people try to emulate.

Moe: And try and get a piece of that Blackness

Manny: Because they see the strength that comes out of it.

### **A Black Musical Cultural Critique**

Black popular culture is a productive cultural space that emphasizes style, music, and the use of the body (Hall, 1993). The students and staff of the Riverport Community Center provided a cultural critique of Black music, a central aspect of Black popular culture. Black popular culture is a hybridized form of American popular culture. It is circulated, celebrated, and taken up by people all over the world. Yet, it is something that many Black people cling to and honor as their own.

Black music is a celebration of marginality. Given the history of Black people's struggle in the United States, this is not surprising. Yet, in an ironic twist, certain factions of Black music have been further marginalized within Black culture to the point where they are no longer considered Black music. At the same time hip-hop, a Black musical phenomenon based upon marginality, has migrated to the center of American popular culture where it sits alongside and seemingly in opposition to some forms of Black music of the past. Within this space it functions as a multi-billion dollar global industry that sells music, along with an innumerable number of material goods, culture, and identities.

Hip-hop (along with its now adjacent partner R&B) contains the cultural codes that Black urban youth identify with. Other genres do not. Some of these codes are musical such as the

importance of the rhythmic and repetitive percussion “beat” transmitted through African music of the past. Others are about style. Dress was implicated as one of the most important cultural codes that distinguished hip-hop from other genres. Yet, the most important aspect of hip-hop was in the performance of cultural identity. Hip-hop, for the most part, is the performance of Black male sensibilities. It is an expression of their experiences and desires. Few have been as marginalized as the American Black male. Hip-hop is an outlet for that frustration, and a means for Black males to experience a sense of success, even if this success is presented in narrow and sometimes damaging ways.

The writing of the codes of Black music and Black maleness is a cyclical process. The staff of Riverport were more in-tune with this cyclical nature than were the students, who viewed it as more of a vertical process. The dynamic cultural codes of dress, posturing, and other tactics of identity management are circulated amongst Black males in an effort to build self-esteem and earn respect (Majors & Billson, 1992). Certain models of success are also circulated. These include the ability to obtain material wealth, purchase expensive and extravagant material possessions, and living a lifestyle of partying, sexual debauchery/domination, and in some cases violence. As several of the staff members explained, these cultural codes are not only circulated amongst the population, they are taken up by corporations of all sorts, who use these codes to sell music and many other material goods. In the process they are also selling and producing cultural identities.

These cultural identities are performed and disseminated across various media outlets. The students and staff identified TV, urban radio, and the internet as the key outlets. These performances sell a certain image and a certain model of success. These images and representations are refracted to urban youth in a constant cyclical process. Urban youth are

exposed to these outlets through their peers as well as their parents. Other genres of music that do not contain the familiar cultural codes are essentially ignored. In fact, if a Black male is not fluent in these codes or tries to step outside of them, he may risk ridicule from his peers.

From these cultural studies, I still noted a sense of optimism. Several of the students and staff suggested a broadening in the images and performances of Black maleness in music and in other aspects of popular culture. Others expressed hope in the opportunity for youth to learn about other genres of music no longer considered Black through intentional exposure and learning. Some argued the belief that, for many youth, their positive personal encounters and experiences would truncate the narrow representations of Black maleness performed in popular culture. I take up these and other manifestations of the entire project at the RCC in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 6

### Performing To What End?

One of the most distinguishable aspects of humanity is our ability to reflect on our past. No other species does this, yet most humans do it constantly. As we get older we look at our past because we think it will give us some idea about our present, which will help us determine our future. Often we have learned many lessons along the way, and we want to teach others since we can't go back and teach our former selves. I think this is why many of us teach, write, and mentor. However, I believe that the most effective teachers, writers, and mentors are not motivated by a desire to give information to others. Instead, the most effective teachers, writers, and mentors have a burning desire to learn.

This chapter is a presentation of what I have learned through the process of writing this book. The process has been a constant push-and-pull reflective journey into my own biographical past and the data from the project at the RCC. Learning requires some tension and some resistance. In addition to the tension and resistance I've had in reflecting on my life and my work at the RCC, I have also had tension with the concept of performance. I have at times questioned if it is a valid theoretical concept for this particular project. However, I realize more than ever that humans are the ultimate performers, and culture is both our artistic craft and our stage (Conquergood, 1986). Our understandings of the roles we perform are informed by the shared meanings and the various ways that we make sense of the world. We learn through constantly reading the performative texts in our lives. These texts, "whether symbols systems or lived experiences- are always in performance" (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 11). Our lived

performances (our daily performative actions) are not always intentional to the extent that we are always consciously aware of them, yet like textual performances (performances within organized sign systems such as writing, images, and music), they are always purposeful and never neutral.

### **The Potential For Critical Education and Cultural Studies**

This book, and the project within it, has implications for how and why cultural studies are done. Cultural studies, a field that moves across disciplinary boundaries, is concerned with the relationship between culture (with its intrinsic performances) and power (Barker, 2004). But to what end, what means, and what purpose? Bennett (1998) suggested that cultural studies are to be used by agents for the pursuit of change. Yet, Bennett also acknowledged that the majority of the time, cultural studies are completed by academic scholars. Although cultural critics sometimes attempt to partner with social and political movements, the overwhelming majority of cultural studies are composed by academics that write scholarly papers read mostly by other academics. This work is extremely useful in many ways. Yet, I agree with others before me who have suggested that we have to expand the reach of cultural studies (Conquergood, 1998; Denzin, 2003; Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Diawara, 1996).

Integrating cultural studies with teaching and learning offers some promising opportunities given our diverse, global, technologically connected society and the representations that are continuously bought and sold in popular culture and media. The students in the Passport to Research program demonstrated how they could engage in critical dialogue about the relationship between performed identities in popular culture and the circulation of profit, politics, and power. This holds significance for how educators can incorporate cultural studies into teaching and learning, and how cultural theorists can incorporate teaching and learning into cultural critique. Cultural theorists and educational theorists/practitioners have been hesitant to

engage with each other because of disciplinary boundaries and perceived incompatibility (Giroux, 1994). For example, educators may be skeptical of intellectual theory and may view it as too ideological, particularly given the political climate that privileges scientific and objective teaching. Cultural theorists may view educational sites as unworthy and inappropriate locations for intellectual endeavor given the rigid and narrow nature of schooling.

A part of the disconnect may be the conflation of schooling and education. It is a popular idea that education is about performance within the confines of a school building. Yet, it is obvious that teaching and learning occur beyond school hours and outside of school walls. Therefore, this book, and the insights that are shared within it, is written for those who perform as *educators*. This could include school educators, such as teachers or administrators. However, it is also written for after-school educators, mentors, parents, and others who participate in the teaching and development of young people. We, as educators, have to collectively work toward a vision of education beyond schooling as a means to get a job, be financially independent, and contribute to the American economy. We have to move towards helping students become critical and engaged citizens. A way to do this is to integrate teaching and learning with cultural studies. The questioning of the performance of Black maleness in this book is my attempt to show one way in which this can be done. Through the presentation of ethnographic performance data, I documented how the students, staff, and I collaboratively completed a cultural critique of Black maleness. Our collective analyses of performances of Black maleness at the RCC raise questions concerning relations between culture and power, which is a hallmark of cultural studies.

### **Different Directions Ventured**

The majority of traditional cultural studies have employed textual analyses or reception analyses as opposed to ethnographic methods (Barker, 2003). However, some have called for cultural studies to move into several new directions in order to maintain its relevancy in an increasingly undemocratic society (Denzin & Giardina, 2007). This book attempts to move in three of these directions. First, it begins with the personal, the biographical, and my own location. Second, it attempts to launch critical discourses “at the level of the media and the ideological” (Denzin & Giardina, 2007, p, 5). Third, it uses critical interpretive methodologies that illustrate stories of lived experience. In beginning with the personal and biographical, we (critical educators) recognize that through our performative words and actions, we build ourselves within a world that is building us (Shor, 1999). Therefore, there it is imperative to consider the social construction of the self through the questioning of our own historical experiences and daily performative actions.

We (I) have to own up to how we have been constructed and wrestle with some tough questions. I am an African American middle class Christian heterosexual male. As I have mentioned earlier, I grew up in a loving two-parent Christian family within an increasingly violent and deteriorating post-industrial neighborhood in Detroit. I have had to ask myself how my experiences have constructed who I am, and how I perform “me” in different situations. What are the ramifications of my experiences and performances? And what are some fundamental beliefs that have gone unchallenged because of how I have become the person that I am?

My performance of Black maleness differs based on the context of the social situation. Further, my experiences and performances have inspired certain beliefs and principles. My

experiences have engendered a belief in hard work and making good choices in order to live a “successful” lifestyle. My idea of a successful lifestyle has been informed by middle class values, which have been constructed through an amalgamation of influences including my own performances, my social surroundings, popular culture and my lived experiences. Some tenets of this model of success might be the desire to live comfortably in the security of my suburban home, enjoying travel and other leisurely activities, and being able to provide for and protect my family. Although some middle-class tenets have been entrenched within me, I might also perform a different aspect of Black maleness in certain situations that might make some people feel threatened and view me as a problem, at the same time that it might make other people more comfortable with me. The ways that I perform “me” in different social situations is my way to reconcile multiple aspects of who I am.

In addition to recognizing the multiple ways we perform our layered identities, critical educators have to be willing to problematize our own beliefs, biases, and performances. If I am honest about it, my daily performance of middle class heterosexual Christian Black male is to a certain degree rooted in masculinist, elitist, and even homophobic prerogatives. My perspectives have serious consequences for how I teach, how I plan to raise my children, and even how I interact with people on a daily basis. As it is for myself, it is necessary for all educators on many different levels to challenge our perspectives and consider how they inform our daily performative actions. This is essential as we move toward critical interrogation in education through cultural studies.

A second direction of cultural studies ventured in this book is the engagement of critical discourses launched at the media and the ideological (Denzin & Giardina, 2007). I attempted to do this within a critical media literacy program with adolescent youth that examined

performances of Black maleness in popular culture. There were successes and challenges in this process. The students did engage in critical discussions relative to media and popular culture, but analysis at the ideological level is a difficult proposition. It is necessary to define how I view (not define) ideology. I don't necessarily see ideology as "commonsense" worldviews that dominant groups use to subjugate others and maintain power (Althusser, 1971). I think of ideology as worldviews by all social groups, which may be considered commonsense by many, but do not necessarily have to be accepted. The difference is that ideologies are not always tools of domination. Instead, they are "discourses that have specific *consequences* for relations of power at all levels of social relationships" (Barker, 2004, p. 86).

An example of ideological discourses in this project were the students' beliefs that Black males are trapped within a cycle of failure and struggle, and that the only way to break this cycle is through extraordinary effort, education, and dedication. This discourse was grounded within another ideological belief in equal opportunity for all despite specific and significant challenges for some. I attempted to trouble these discourses within this project by arguing that they are not necessarily truths, but ideas that have become commonsense notions masking themselves as knowledge. The production of Black male failure is a big business, yet we all contribute to this specific knowledge about Black males through different means. As I stated, this level of deep ideological analysis was difficult to achieve. The Passport to Research focal students in this project mostly viewed Black maleness in limited ways. The students often made statements about how the media stereotypes Black males and Black people, casting them in a negative light. Yet, overall they felt that the performances of Black maleness that we analyzed in media and popular were mostly reflections of a sobering reality of Black male struggle in society.

The question that then arises is this: Can critical education and cultural studies can provoke students to an ideological level of analysis? My answer is maybe. Yet, I don't think this is something that could be done in the four or five months I worked with the students. I don't even know if it would have happened in four or five years. I am almost thirty years of age and I have been engaged in critical study full time for the last four years. Yet, I still hold on to some of the same ideological beliefs as the students in this project. I now recognize many of my own biases as descriptions and not necessarily truths. I haven't gotten to this place on my own: many people have helped me along the way. This has come through a constant process of reading, reflection, and questioning. This process is the battle over cultural hegemony, an ideological struggle over relations of meaning and culture (Borg, Buttigieg, & Mayo, 2002). Hegemony in some descriptions refers to the multiple means by which dominant classes subjugate others, but with the consent of the oppressed (Gramsci, 1978). Thusly, people contribute to their own oppression. However, from my perspective, hegemony is not about domination and oppression, but about the political interaction of various social groups to form dominant discourses (LaCleau & Mouffe, 1985). Hegemony is an ongoing struggle over meaning, and this was definitely at play in my work with the students at the RCC. Certain dominant discourses were entrenched within them, such as the narratives of Black struggle, Black male failure, and equal opportunity for all. Yet, my intent was to use some of the tools of cultural studies to engage students in the hegemonic struggle where there are no truths, but instead only descriptions that have material consequences.

### **The Need To Critique Performances of Black Maleness**

There are different types of consequences to the common representations and performances of Black maleness, and it is necessary that we as a society trouble the discourses of

Black maleness. Some of these consequences are related to academic achievement. The threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of confirming negative stereotypes has contributed to the academic underperformance of students (Steele, 1997, 2003). In the case of Black males, they feel pre-judged based upon stereotypes about themselves. Yet, the threat can also motivate Black males to become high academic achievers (Stinson, 2008). Some African America males may rebelliously subvert the negative discourses of Black maleness by being successful within the scope of middle class values. However, this too comes with a price. Many Black males expend excess energy continually renegotiating these discourses and reconfiguring other people's perceptions of Black maleness. This is a tremendous burden of double consciousness, of seeing yourself through your own eyes and the eyes of others (DuBois, 1902/1995). With this comes the pressure to perform Black maleness in a way that makes people feel at ease and "prove the world wrong" at the same time.

If Black males are not successful at renegotiating Black maleness, there can be other more serious consequences. As I have been writing these words today (March 13, 2012), I've also been regrettably reading about, thinking about, and lamenting the death of Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old Black male killed in a mostly White, suburban, subdivision (Gutman, 2012). Martin was walking around this Florida neighborhood, where he was visiting his father, after returning from a local convenience store. He was unarmed and wearing a hooded sweatshirt when he was confronted by a neighborhood watchman who viewed Martin as a threat. This confrontation ultimately led to Martin's death. Would he still be alive if he were not a young Black male in an environment where people are suspicious and fearful of Black maleness? How have we created such an environment where one's lived performance has such dangerous ramifications?

It was further reinforced in this book that the discourses of Black maleness run very deeply and are all around us. Even when we as a society have well-meaning intentions to address issues surrounding Black males, we further reify Black maleness as troublesome. Today, I also read a series of short articles in the New York Times debating the topic of being *Young, Black, and Male in America* (Young Black, 2012). Based on the title of this editorial series, and the content of the articles, it is clear that the very *existence*, or the act of *being* a Black male in America constitutes a *problem*. Each article debated Black male problems such as Black males being in prison, committing violent crimes, Black male unemployment, and poor educational achievement. Each article also either suggested solutions such as legalizing drugs, promoting two-parent families, and eliminating discrimination and stigma. Some articles also defended the current judicial/criminal justice system citing “evidence” of the “reality” of Black male troubles. There was never even a mention that being young, Black, and male in America was anything but a negative experience. How could we possibly expect anything less than the murder of innocent young Black males such as Trayvon Martin? His very performance of a certain type Black maleness in a gated community was considered a problem.

We cannot continue to be content with the same dogmatic descriptions of Black maleness. These descriptions come from everywhere, but I argue that those within popular culture are particularly damaging. We have to contend that there are only performances of Black maleness, not realities. The production of popular culture is a struggle over relations of power and cultural hegemony (Hall, 1993). Cultural studies and critical media literacy are a way to trouble the discourse within popular culture. Young people who learn to question how their identities are constructed through popular culture and media are more likely to make informed decisions about their lives (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999).

The students in the Passport to Research project were able to learn a set of rules for critical media literacy and critique underlying meanings within certain texts. They also recognized the intricacy of popular culture and media texts and the benefits of taking a closer look. On several occasions we dissected popular culture texts that the students admitted they had previously glossed over. One of the students told me “normal people just don’t see that.” This is not to say that critical education and cultural studies is about uncovering hidden meanings or showing students how they have been “duped” by the media. Instead, critical education is about engaging students in a deeper level of analysis, to a critique of even the very pleasures and beliefs that they hold dear. However, there are challenges to this process.

### **Challenges and Tools**

Despite the many methodological and theoretical challenges to critical education, critical media literacy, and cultural studies presented throughout this book, there are tools and practices that educators can use to face these challenges. It is imperative to strive to recognize your own personal ideological biases and how they influence your own perceptions. These personal core beliefs cannot be thrown out the window, instead they should be put on the table. This begins through practicing a process of reflexivity (Findlay, 2008). Reflexivity is a concept that is usually applied to researchers. However, educators, mentors, and parents must also practice a reflexive process by recognizing the social and cultural forces that influence our thinking. Writing in a personal journal is one way to engage in this process. Another is to be open and honest with our students about our biases, but to also let them know that there is always another perspective and another way to look at things.

Classroom teachers and other educators have to be willing to relinquish some of their power (Buckingham, 1998). We have to let students become the experts as cultural critics. This

is inherently difficult because as educators we inherently view ourselves as the experts. Yet, we have to water their critical growth through the asking of questions, not always the answering of them. I found this perhaps the most difficult part of my work with the students in this project. There were many times when the students did not reach the level of critical analysis that I wanted them to. They did not “see what I wanted them to see.” A knee-jerk reaction to this is to try to “show them” in the hope that through your examples they will eventually “get it.” What usually happened when I had this reaction was that I ended up talking too much and dominating the conversation. This is counter-productive to critical education. A more effective approach is to continually question their assertions and to show them examples of how cultural studies can help all of us see a different perspective. The purpose of critical education is to give students the tools of cultural critique, not to give them the critique itself.

As we lead young people towards a questioning of discourses and performances within culture, it is necessary that we do so without condemning them. For example, many of the youth and even some of the young adult staff in this project talked about the negative ways in which most adults from a particular generation dismiss urban popular culture such as hip hop. When young people feel threatened by an adult’s judgment, this lessens the probability that they will critically interrogate the popular culture texts that they may enjoy. There are several ways to avoid our own critical self-righteousness. We have to be willing to listen to their perspectives and their stories. Also, we have to be willing to tell their stories with a critical interpretive lens, but without judgment. This is the third direction in which I attempted to venture in this book: toward critical interpretive methodologies that help us map sense of lived experiences in a global media economy (Denzin & Giardina, 2007).

I used the methodological tools of performance ethnography for cultural studies in several ways. In Chapter 4, I showed how four students performed as cultural critics of a range of popular culture phenomenon, particularly the racial and gendered performances of Black males. In Chapter 5, I extended that work to show how these students and I engaged in a participatory performance action inquiry (Denzin, 2007) of the specific cultural phenomena of Black music. Within this inquiry we utilized the local knowledges and perspectives of the students' mentors (Riverport staff members) and peers (Riverport students not previously involved in Passport to Research). In this process, their mentors and peers also performed as cultural critics while providing insight into the values and meanings of Black male musical performances as interpreted by a group of Black males.

The staff and students showed how Black popular culture and the performing of Black maleness is a "contradictory space, a site of strategic contestation" (Hall, 1993, p. 106). Many of the staff and student participants made "authenticity claims" about Black music (Barker, 2004, p. 9). They argued that Black music had a certain style reflected in its musicality and expressivity. Yet, there were dissenting voices amongst the staff and student participants who contested authenticity claims, suggesting that Black music is discursive, hybridized, and seemingly impossible to define. They also called attention to other Black males in popular culture who do not fit the mold of traditional stereotypes. Thusly, Black maleness is also a contested space in which there are no stable truths of identity, but cultural productions at specific times.

The productions and performances of Black maleness (and Black music) for the students and staff at this time were representative of ongoing struggle in a variety of forms. Black maleness mirrors the meta-narrative of the Black experience as ongoing oppression and struggle

coupled with determined agency and slow but gradual progress (Christian, 1995; Carson, Lapansky-Werner, & Nash, 2007). The difference is that Black maleness is presented and performed as a more particular, more disturbing aspect of Blackness. In other words, Black maleness is like Blackness, but more *troubled*. We contribute to this notion of Black maleness as troubled in different ways, and I am very much a part of this having taken up this topic.

The difficult question is. how do we (and I) continue to address the so-called Black male problem without further reifying Black maleness as troublesome (Haddix, 2009)? Although there is no concrete answer or solution, I argue that we must be prepared to implement critical interrogation of popular cultures within a framework of cultural studies. This has to occur across various educational settings including our schools, our homes, and our after-school and mentoring programs. This multi-faceted plan of action must be continuous and intentional. Yet, we cannot get caught up in the results-based framework that currently permeates the educational sphere today. There is not a one-to-one correspondence that suggests that engaging youth in critical media literacy or cultural studies will produce a certain specific result. Instead, we must be willing to think of our efforts in different terms. A helpful analogy is the collaborative cultivating of a community garden. Some people will plant seeds, others will water, and others will prune. Yet, it is not a given expectation that everyone will bear witness to the obvious appearance of fruit. However, through faith in the gardening process we believe that over time the roots will grow strong as will the garden.

### **Movement In Another Direction: Research and Teaching For the Future**

In questioning the performance of Black maleness in popular culture, this book attempted to move in three different directions in cultural studies. These directions are towards the critical critique of the personal and biographical, toward critical discourses of the media and the

ideological, and toward critical interpretative methodologies that tell the stories of lived experience (Denzin & Giardina, 2007). A significant limitation of this book and this project is that it did not fulfill a fourth potential direction of cultural studies. This is the use of broad critical collaboration in cultural studies and how we can “foster a critical (inter)national conversation on what is happening, a collation of voices across the political, cultural, and religious spectra” (Denzin & Giardina, 2007, p. 7).

In the present era in which social media and networking are dominant, communication, organization, and collaboration of groups across physical spaces is very accessible. Communication through media and technology is how many people (especially young people) learn, negotiate socially, and spend much of their time (Ito, 2009). I attempted to integrate social media and technology through the use of an online wiki (Wetpaint). However, this attempt was not successful as the students did not write, post, or communicate using this Wiki unless I asked them to. Also, they did not use the wiki outside of the time that we met together. The most likely reason for this was that they were not familiar with this forum, and we did not spend a lot of time exploring it. I would caution other researchers to use technology that students will be motivated to use in order to maximize its potential.

One would not need to look very far in order to recognize the enormous potential for social movements to be engaged through social media and technology. From governmental elections to revolutionary coups, technology has totally changed how people organize. Cultural studies and cultural critics have to work within this space of participatory culture and sharing. This is how we will be able to foster social movements that work to affect change over the course of time.

In order for change to propel forward, coalitions amongst learning communities who challenge dominating discourses must be formed. The Passport to Research project was essentially self-contained within the four walls of the computer lab where we met. Although we invited a few more students and staff members into our investigative inquiry, we did not engage with many other students in the Riverport Center or other recreational centers. Ethnographic cultural studies need to work to create this sense of collaboration between its participants and other social movements. This is necessary to effectively share ideas and interrogate systems of knowledge.

A way to exercise agency and interrogate knowledge is to question the construction of identities and positions at every level. Yet, there were certain limitations in my work with the students relative to how certain identities and positions were questioned. For example, in our analysis of Black maleness we primarily looked at urban Black heterosexual masculinity. The experiences and performances of “othered” identities and positions such as rural or homosexual Black males were not discussed in depth. What was also neglected were the ways in which traditional notions of an elite, educated, Black masculinity has affirmed sexism and homophobia (see Neal, 2006). When doing the type of cultural studies that I advocate for in this book, one must remain aware that culture is not monolithic, and that there are many different variances of culture and its identity performances.

The question remains if we will we recognize that culture is made up of performances. Or will we continue to view what we perceive as reality? The answer to this quandary has serious consequences. So does our willingness to challenge ourselves along with the students that we teach, develop, and mentor. As I conclude this book, I’d like to provide an example of

how we can start by challenging ourselves, and our own biases. What follows is the final memo that I wrote on the last day of the Passport to Research program.

The End: 5-22-11.

They say that you should begin with the end in mind, but now that I'm at the end I can't help but think about the beginning. Yet, I'll focus on a lasting picture from the end that describes something that I learned on my journey. As I left the Report Center for the last "official" day of the Passport To Research program I exited through the gym, just to see what the students and staff were up to. There were still students of all ages scattered throughout the gym and in the "teen room," an area designated for adolescent students only. Many of the students were seated in the bleachers that had likely been set up for a speaker or presenter to talk to them at some point in the day. The students seated in the bleachers were facing a set of loudspeakers that also had been set up. I sensed that the students had some time to kill before the speaker would come. I noticed that a computer and mixer had also been set up. I watched as Ron turned on some music through the computer as the students instantly came alive. The music he selected was an instrumental version of a song called "Make It Rain." Although, this version of the song had no words, the students enthusiastically bobbed their heads and moved their bodies in a way that let you know that they could still feel every part of the music. They didn't care that there were not words in this version, yet they recognized how the song made them feel. One could argue that the song, which described the verbal battle between a stripper and a patron over payment and compensation, contained hegemonic messages of materialism, hedonism, and sexism. One could also argue that the song itself was critical because the female voice in the song, though unnamed, resisted the notion of the weak and delicate female archetype and instead exercised her power through her sexual and verbal aggression. However, at this time these arguments did not matter

to the students. The music itself made them feel good. It made them feel like they were a part of something. Their time to question and challenge some of the implicit messages will come with some encouragement from critical teachers, mentors, parents, and peers. However, this is not something that can be forced onto them or manipulated with them. It has to come on their terms while they strike a balance between their pleasures and critical performances.

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## Appendix A

### Conceptual Framework and Methods

This book, and the research that supports it, is conceptualized as a performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003). Performative ethnography is based on the premise that culture is performed, and that the boundaries between everyday theatrical performances and formal theatrical performances are essentially invisible. Performances are cultural events and actions embedded in the flow of everyday life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). The purpose of a performative ethnography is to show the lived experiences of everyday people by attempting to stay close to how people experience everyday life. Performance ethnography simultaneously writes and criticizes cultural performances.

Performative social science in this view attempts to move performances beyond imitation or even artistic construction, to sociopolitical actions of struggle. Within this struggle lies the potential for growth, critical education, and social equality (Conquergood, 1998). The potential lies “in how *participants in* and *audiences of* performance ethnography see themselves in relation to others” (Alexander, 2005, p. 412). Performativity (doing) and performance (done) are one in the same. Therefore, culture itself is an educational site, and cultural studies are vessels of education.

The field of cultural studies has been described as a *discursive formation* of ideas, images, and practices (Hall, 1997). I use the term cultural studies to describe the field that moves across disciplinary boundaries, as well as the individual cultural studies contained within the field. Cultural studies provide ways of talking about culture, ideology, power, representation,

and text associated with a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site (Barker, 2004). Because culture is an educational site, pedagogy adds to cultural studies because of its ability to illuminate the power and knowledge relationship inherent within culture (Giroux, 1994). Cultural studies are concerned with how culture is produced, transmitted, consumed, circulated, and transformed, and the associated meanings, relationships, and identities that are conferred.

Traditional cultural studies are often articulated through sole authored textual analyses of cultural phenomena. However, some have called for cultural studies to move from textual ethnography to performative ethnography (Conquergood, 1998; Denzin, 2003; Diawara, 1996). There are several reasons for this. First, there are multiple ways of learning, knowing, and representing. As scholar Nicole Fleetwood put it in an interview while talking about personal and aesthetic methods of inquiry: “it is hubris for academics to think that we can answer all questions through academic discourse” (Fleetwood, 2011). Performative approaches contribute to this pluralism. Second, a performative approach is an appropriate way of studying cultural practices because it insists on inclusion and involvement. Third, performative approaches analyze communicative actions and how people see themselves and position themselves within their experiences, thereby putting culture into motion (Diawara, 1995). Performance is an object of study, a method and model of inquiry, and a tactic for intervention or change (Conquergood, 2002). This book attempts to contribute to this tradition of performative ethnography, and it is informed by my own theoretical values.

### **Theoretical Value Orientation**

My expectations, assumptions, and beliefs are informed by my subjectivities, experiences, and what Carspenken (2001) referred to as *value orientation*. Carspecken suggested that critical qualitative researchers have a common value orientation, a system of values and

assumptions they begin with when approaching research. For critical researchers this is a belief in systematic inequalities maintained and reproduced by culture. As a person and a researcher, I hold a critical value orientation in that I assume access to power and privilege in society is asymmetrical, and that I hope to affect change in these inequalities through my research, teaching, and scholarship.

Despite my critical value orientation, my conceptual framework includes an amalgamation of critical modernist and postmodernist frameworks: an emancipatory modernism combined with a postmodern resistance (Giroux, 1988). Modernism is built on hope and faith in progress through human agency (Habermas, 1984). Modernism offers a language of possibility in the search for and movement towards democracy and social equality. Postmodernism strongly implicates the “power of representations, texts, and images in producing identities and shaping the relationship between the self and society in an increasingly commodified world” (Giroux, 1994a, p.3). My value orientation encompasses the beliefs and theories that I brought to this research.

### **Research Location, Description, and Participants**

The information presented in this book is based on research data collected within an after-school program at a recreational learning center (referred to as Riverport or the RCC) located in an urban area of a major city in the Southeastern United States. Data collection took place bi-weekly for 60 to 90 minutes for 16 weeks from January through May 2011 in the computer lab of the Riverport Community Center. Some review of portions of the data also took place with a few of the participants for four hours in June 2011. The program was designed and led by myself with occasional assistance from staff members who worked at the RCC. The program was called Passport to Research and was constructed as an inquiry based literacy

program offered for teenage boys at the RCC (see Appendix B which contains the initial lesson plans for the program). The purpose of Passport to Research was to examine how the identities of Black males and other groups are represented and performed in popular culture and media.

I volunteered at the RCC for several months prior to initiating my program and study. I hung around and assisted the program director (Ron) and teenage activities director (Moe) in whatever tasks they needed. This ranged from participating in meetings for a college preparatory program to playing basketball with students and staff. Through my volunteer experiences I began to interact with students and tell them about the upcoming Passport to Research program. Although at least 10 students expressed interest in Passport to Research, four primary students expressed a commitment and had their permissions signed. These focal students and the teenage activities director are described through performative writing in Chapter 3. Four other students and five other staff members also participated in this research via a within-group participatory action research project (McTaggart, 1997) described extensively in chapter 5.

The use of the RCC computer lab for the Passport to Research program afforded our group a variety of technological innovations. A large multimedia board allowed us to view web-based videos simultaneously as a group. Also, each student was able to access the internet simultaneously. We used an internet wiki site known as Wetpaint that allowed us to post and share information, videos, pictures, writings, and other texts interactively.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this research project were comprised of segments talk from each session of Passport to Research, interviews with students and staff members, observational field notes, electronic student writings from the Wetpaint site, and other student artifacts and notes. All sessions of Passport to Research were either audiotaped, videotaped, or both. 87% of the sessions

were audiotaped, 13% were videotaped only, and 25% were audiotaped and videotaped. Within 48 hours of each session I took brief notes while listening or watching specific portions of the session. All sessions were later transcribed. I transcribed 50% of the sessions and interviews, and 50% were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist.

I interviewed participants in order to elicit their thoughts, opinions, perspectives, and descriptions of the experiences (de Marrais, 2004). The four focal students were individually interviewed at least once, and four additional students participated in a group interview. Five staff members were interviewed once and participated in one group interview. The teenage activities director was interviewed twice and participated in a group interview with other staff.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurs simultaneously during the process of data collection (Charmaz, 2006). When I wrote a note or transcription this was in part because I simultaneously analyzed what I noted to be important data for the study. Therefore, the process of writing my observation notes, and transcribing videos and interviews is a part of the method of interpretation. I also used a multiple leveled coding system that led into a narrative, performative, aesthetic analysis.

I uploaded transcriptions of Passport to Research sessions and interviews into the qualitative data software program Atlas TI. I also copied and pasted electronic student writings from the Wetpaint site or any additional notes into transcription data from the matching chronological day. I coded segments of student data by looking for segments of talk or writing that I classified as “critical.” The code critical was used when students questioned underlying assumptions or information from any source. On a few occasions I coded data as “uncritical” when students were either unable or unwilling to question assumptions or popular conventions despite many prompts and cues from myself. During this phase of coding I also coded examples

of participants discussing Black or Black male identities or performances by using a one word code that summarizes the primary topic of the cluster of data (Saldana, 2009).

The next phase of data analysis is based on the perspective that writing itself is a method of inquiry and analysis (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). I wrote handwritten notes of key observations that I observed from each session or interview. I used these notes to write a detailed memo for each session or interview. I analyzed these memos by looking for identified patterns in participants' critical performances, and their analyses of critical Black male performances in popular culture. I then wrote detailed traditional narratives of my analyses' while attempting to incorporate an aesthetic sensibility into the representation of the data (Finley, 2008). For example, I sometimes wrote poetry or used visual images combined with text to illustrate the participants' lived performances within the research.

A similar, though slightly different, process was used in analyzing much of the data presented in chapter 5. Chapter 5 describes a participatory performance action inquiry (Denzin, 2007) that occurred within the Passport to Research program. In this process we drew from a group of staff members and a group of students who did not normally attend the Passport to Research program. Thusly, these staff members and students served as additional participants. I implemented a constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006) of data collected from the additional participants. I coded segments of the data using grounded coding (Charmaz, 2006) by attaching a short phrase within the Atlas TI system. I searched for patterns within the coded data and linked the codes using the code manager in Atlas TI. After coding, I read through each individual and group interview that took place within the inquiry project. I then wrote a detailed memo about my observations of from each interview. I used the memos and codes to write a narrative analysis of the individual interviews. Then, I used the memos and the codes to write an

aesthetic representation of how the participants dialogued with each other in the group interviews. Within my performative writing, each participant's exact words are presented as though the entire group is engaging in a large dialogue, even though there were three separate group interviews.

The entire process of data collection and analysis was not based on objectivity in research. Instead, I emphasized reflexivity in an attempt to monitor how my subjectivities influenced the research process. In particular, the analysis and the representation (performance) of the data through narrative, performative writing, and other methods were products of my unique interpretation of the data. The performance of the data was a result of the co-constructing of meaning between the participants and I. The performative texts were a staged reenactment of ethnographically derived data (Alexander, 2005). Yet, I was a complete participant in the construction of the data within the project, and the presentation of the data. In reading any text, the reader inevitably produces new texts that are culturally and socially mediated (Smagorinsky, 2001). When I read the data throughout the course of data analysis, I produced new texts based on my culturally and socially mediated meaning-making process. Thusly, the analysis of the data is only my presentation of these new texts that I have created, not a representation of the "true meaning."

## Appendix B

### Proposed Passport to Research Agenda and Planned Sessions

**\*Each student was provided a notebook with the proposed agenda and lesson plans. The agenda presented in the appendix here is not reflective of every lesson or text that was covered, only what was proposed.**

#### Passport To Manhood Proposed Agenda

Week 1	Literacy, Texts, and Identity
Week 2	Black Male Identities
Week 3	Critical Media Literacy
Week 4	Black Male Identities in Media
Week 5	Black Males and Hip Hop
Week 6	Women and Media
Week 7	Women and Hip Hop
Week 8	Review
Week 9	Participatory Action Research
Weeks 10-16	To Be Determined. Based on our studies of Black male identity and media in weeks 1-8 we will develop a research project that will address relevant questions that we have.

## Passport To Research- Critical Media Literacy Study

### Week 1 Literacy, Texts, Identity

#### Guiding Questions

1. What is literacy?
2. What is a text?
3. What are some things we've always assumed about literacy that may need to be questioned?
4. Why (or why not) is literacy important?
5. What is identity?
6. What do literacy and texts have to do with identity?

#### Key Texts

- Portions of chapters entitled "Reading" and "Writing" from Haki Madhubuti's (2002) "Tough Notes: A Healing Call for Creating Exceptional Black Men"
- Audio and Written Text of Nas' (2001) "I Know I Can"
- Selected Texts From The Students

#### Session 1

Introduction to the program. Jairus and Mo will review the structure and tentative plans for the semester. Introduce guiding study questions and discuss.

Home Study: Locate a text that will introduce you to the group. Prepare to talk about why this text represents you.

#### Session 2

Students will review their identity texts and discussions will center on those texts

## Passport To Research- Critical Media Literacy Study

### Week 2 Black Male Identities

#### Guiding Questions

1. What is the perceived identity of Black males in the United States?
2. How has this identity been constructed and by whom?
3. How has this shifted or stayed the same?
4. How does this perceived identity affect us?
5. How is power practiced within this process?

#### Key Texts

- Excerpts from Baldwin's (1963) "My Dungeon Shook: Letter To My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation"
- Excerpts from Obama's (1995) "Dreams From My Father"
- Excerpts from Spike Lee's (1992) Malcolm X
- Excerpts from Menace and Boyz In The Hood

#### Session 1

Jairus and Mo will facilitate discussion based on guiding questions. Will collaboratively read excerpts from Baldwin and Obama and discuss.

#### Home Study

Watch film Malcolm X and take notes. Develop three questions that you have. Develop three observations related to the construct of Black male identity. Post these in our Wiki site.

#### Session 2

Students will discuss their questions and observations from Malcolm X. Will view film as necessary to reference points from the discussion.

## Passport To Research: Critical Media Literacy Study and Research

### Week 3 Critical Media Literacy

#### Guiding Questions

1. What is critical media literacy?
2. Who practices critical media literacy and why should we engage in it?
3. What is the role of media in today's society and why should we study it?
4. How does the media construct identity for certain groups?

#### Key Texts

- Center For Media Literacy (CML) Five Key Questions and Five Core Concepts
- American Coalition for Media Education- Developing a Media Education Language
- Exerts from prepared commercials or brief news stories

#### Session 1

Jairus and Mo will facilitate discussion of guiding research questions, and go over tools for engaging in media study.

#### Home Study

Locate a text on Youtube or some other video sharing site and deconstruct it using CML's Five Key Questions. Be prepared to talk about what you studied.

#### Session 2

Students will bring in self-selected online texts and facilitate discussions around them.

## Passport To Research- Critical Media Literacy Study

### Week 4- Black Male Identities in Media

#### Guiding Questions

1. How are Black males portrayed in media? How is Black maleness performed?
2. What are the different media forums that present or represent Black males?
3. What are the manifestations of these representations?
4. How is this exertion of power?
5. How do Black men participate in this process?

#### Key Texts

Excerpts from CNN's "Black In America 1"

Excerpts from John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood*

Excerpts from Hughes Brothers (1993) "Menace To Society"

Excerpts from *Paid in Full* (2002)

Excerpts from *Lottery Ticket*

Excerpts from Giroux's (1995) *Racism and the Aesthetic of Hyperreal Violence: Pulp Fiction and Other Visual Tragedies*

#### Session 1

Jairus and Mo will facilitate discussion of guiding questions. Will watch excerpts from *Black in America 1* and *Boys In the Hood*. We will read excerpts from Giroux analysis of these and other films and characters and discuss.

Home Study: Preview the movies *Menace To Society* or *Paid In Full* by reading the Wikipedia site information about them. Think about what is implicated in the titles of both of these movies

and write down your thoughts. Post these notes in our Wiki site. In three groups you will deconstruct the characters Kane, O-Dog, and Shareef or Ace, Mitch, and Rico. What do these characters represent? What can we assume about them? Do you know people like them, and are they similar to any other films?

## Session 2

Will watch portions of Menace to Society and Paid in Full. Students will discuss their character analyses'. In three groups you will deconstruct the characters Kane, O-Dog, and Shareef or Ace, Mitch, and Rico. What do these characters represent? What can we assume about them? Do you know people like them, and are they similar to any other films?

## Passport To Research- Critical Media Literacy Study

### Week 5 Black Males and Hip Hop

#### Guiding Questions

1. How does hip hop affect representations of Black males?
2. How do Black males perform in hip hop culture?
3. What is a “gangster image” and how is it sold?
4. Who benefits from the selling of this image?
5. What roles do different people play in the illegal drug trade?
6. Why would Black males pursue a career in illegal drug entrepreneurship?

#### Key Texts

Audio and written text of Rick Ross’ “BMF”

Musical video of Jay-Z’s “And the Winner Is”

TV Episode of History Channel’s (2010) Gangland: BMF- Black Mafia Family

#### Session 1

Jairus and Mo will facilitate discussion of guiding questions. Group will deconstruct “And the Winner Is” and “BMF”

Home Study: Watch Gangland:BMF (right now it is available online) and formulate three questions that you have. Write these down and post in our Wiki. Think about our discussion from session 1 and connect the episode with one of our guiding questions. Write down your thoughts on this (minimum 200 words)

#### Session 2

Students will facilitate discussion based on their observations from the TV episode and everyone’s questions and observations from the Wiki

## Passport To Research- Critical Media Literacy Study

### Week 6 Women and Media

#### Guiding Questions

1. What are traditional gender roles in the United States? How have these shifted and/or stayed the same?
2. How do you see gender roles performed in media?
3. How are these similar or different in the so-called “black community”
4. How are Black male-female relationships performed within media?
5. How is this exercise of power?

#### Key Texts

Excerpts from hooks’ 1994 “Teaching To Transgress”

Excerpts from Collins’ “Black Sexual Politics”

Auditory and written text from Lauryn Hill’s “That Thing”

Youtube Television commercials

#### Home Study

Interview a parent or both parents about their beliefs regarding Black male-female relationships. Post initial thoughts about the interview into our Wiki

#### Session 1

Jairus and Mo will facilitate discussions of guiding questions. We will deconstruct “That Thing” and TV commercials.

#### Session 2

Students will discuss their interviews and their thoughts about them. Will read excerpts from Black Sexual Politics and Teaching to Transgress

## Passport To Research- Critical Media Literacy Study

### Week 7 Women and Hip Hop

#### Guiding Questions

1. How are women represented in hip hop and how is this performed?
2. Why do these performances occur?
3. How has this influenced your own thinking about women?
4. How have women resisted or conformed to these representations within hip hop?
5. How do the images and performances of Black men and Black women compare?

#### Key Texts

Deanean-Sharpley Whiting's "Pimps Up, Hoes Down: Hip Hops Hold on Black Women

Online lectures on women and hip-hop (available on YouTube)

Music video of Young Money's "Every Girl"

#### Session 1

Discuss guiding questions. Watch of hip-hop and women panels/lectures and discuss.

#### Home Study

Watch Young Money video "Every Girl" and deconstruct using the tools for media literacy study. Post your findings in our Wiki site.

#### Session 2

Discuss student media deconstructions. Read excerpts from Pimps Up, Hoes Down

## Passport To Research- Critical Media Literacy Study

Week 8 Review of Major Concepts Thus Far. Space to catch up on any interviewing.

### Week 9 Participatory Action Research

#### Guiding Questions

1. What is (participatory) action research?
2. Why is action research necessary?
3. What issues might you be interested in learning about? What questions do you have?

#### Texts

Movie “Expectations Of the System”- this is a participatory action research project

#### Session 1

We will discuss the guiding questions and watch “Expectations of the System”

#### Home Study

Think about research questions and write ideas in our Wiki.

#### Session 2

Continue to develop research questions. Talk about how we might go about accomplishing this research. Talk about who the research will be for and who it will be presented to.

## Appendix C

## Passport to Research Attendance

Week	Dante	Glen	Carlos	Rob	Participant 5	Participant 6	
1	2	0	2	1	1	1	Times Present Per Week out of 2.  *Indicates a week in which the Passport to Research Group only met once.
2*	1	0	1	0	0	0	
3	2	2	2	0	0	1	
4	2	2	2	0	0	0	
5	2	2	2	1	0	0	
6*	1	1	1	0	0	0	
7	0	2	2	1	0	0	
8*	2	2	2	1	0	0	
9	2	2	1	1	0	0	
10	2	2	0	1	0	0	
11	2	2	2	0	0	0	
12	0	2	2	0	0	0	
13	2	2	2	1	0	0	
14	2	2	2	0	0	0	
15	1	2	1	1	0	0	
16	2	2	1	0	0	0	

Participants 5 and 6 stopped attending Passport to Research after the first couple of weeks, and did not contribute much to the dialogue when they were present.

## Appendix D

### Individual Interview Protocol For Black Music Inquiry Project (Staff)

What comes to mind when you think of Black music? What is Black music for you?

What genres come to mind when you think of Black music?

What has Black music meant for Black culture?

Do you believe that certain people or certain groups of people influence what is considered Black music?

How do corporations, advertisers, or entertainment media such as radio or TV influence what is considered Black music?

What types of music or genres of music are not considered Black music? Why?

When you hear a song, for example on the radio, how do you know that it is considered Black music?

When you watch a music video or performance, how do you know that it is considered Black music?

Do you believe that someone of a different race might have different thoughts of what is considered Black music than Black people themselves?

How might age influence what someone might consider to be Black music?  
What about gender?

How might the geographical area in which someone lives influence what they consider to be Black music?

How has what is considered to be Black music changed over time?

How do you think what is considered Black music will change in the future?

## Appendix E

## Group Interview Protocol For Black Music Inquiry Project (Staff and Students)

From your perspective, were all of these performances considered Black music?

Do you think that others might differ with your opinion of whether these performances are considered Black music?

What were the different cultural codes that you identified in the performances? How did they differ across the different genres and performances?

In our project we've been talking about the performance of Black masculinity in popular media. What do the performances in these videos have to say about Black masculinity or the Black male image?

We've formulated an opinion that many young Black males living in urban areas predominantly gravitate toward hip hop and R & B as opposed to other genres of music. Why do you think this is the case?

Have you noticed a similar situation when it comes to the sports that Black males gravitate towards? Why do you think this is the case?

## Appendix F

### Note-Taking Worksheets Used During Group Interview For Black Music Inquiry

Please note the cultural codes that you see in each video. Cultural codes are indicators of certain types of artistic expression or cultural messages.

Examples of cultural codes that we have noted have include

1. Dress
2. Movements and gestures
3. Instruments within the performance
4. Background of the performance include the people and audience members

Carolina Chocolate Drops- Snowden's Jig

Darius Rucker-Alright

Trombone Shorty-St. James Infirmary

Lenny Kravitz- Come On and Get It

Fishbone Performance

YC-Racks

## Appendix G

### Participant Assent Form

Page 1

My name is Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of Georgia and an approved volunteer at the Brookhaven Boys and Girls Club. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents in an After-school Program” that questions how Black male identities are represented and performed in popular media, and how Black male adolescent students develop scholar-intellectual identities in the context of critical media literacy study and research. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in the Passport to Research Program at the Brookhaven Boys and Girls Club which will meet twice per week for 90 minutes each session from January 2011 thru early May 2011.
2. Complete home study activities related to our sessions in Passport to Research.
3. Participate in the development, implementation, and presentation of research related to the study of Black males in popular media.
4. Participate in three interviews throughout the course of the Passport to Research program that will last approximately 30 minutes each.

Data from this study will likely be used for future papers, publications, and presentations. Data includes information from Passport to Research sessions, conversations, and electronic communications such as emails or writing in an electronic Wiki. Each session of Passport to Research will be videotaped and transcribed, and each interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. However, all data digital video and audio files will be safely guarded, kept confidential, and destroyed within five years. Pictures and/or videos of you may help in the presentation of this research. However, if you prefer that pictures or audiotapes of yourself never be used for presentations of this research, you can indicate this below and pictures and/or video will never be used in this manner. You will also select a pseudonym in order to keep your identity confidential. Your participation in this study may be beneficial as it may enhance your

## Participant Assent Form Page 2

ability to engage in literacy related tasks. **You are volunteering to be part of this study, so you don't have to do anything you don't want to do. You can also decide to stop participating at any time**

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

I allow the researcher to use images or videos of myself in any future publications or presentations.

YES \_\_\_\_\_

NO \_\_\_\_\_

Signature

Signature

Jairus-Joaquin Matthews

\_\_\_\_\_Signature \_\_\_\_\_Date

## Appendix H

### Participant Consent Form (Student 18 years or older)

Page 1

My name is Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of Georgia and an approved volunteer at the Brookhaven Boys and Girls Club. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents” that I am conducting under the direction of Dr. Donna Alvermann. This study questions how Black male identities are represented and performed in popular media, and how Black male adolescent students develop scholar-intellectual identities in the context of critical media literacy study and research. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in the Passport to Research Program, which will meet twice per week for 90 minutes each session from January 2011 thru early to mid May 2011.
2. Complete home study activities related to our sessions in Passport to Research.
3. Participate in the development, implementation, and presentation of research related to the study of Black males in popular media.
4. Participate in three interviews throughout the course of the Passport to Research program that will last approximately 30 minutes each.

As a participant in this research I understand and acknowledge the following:

- All activities will be related to research. This research will be used for future writings, publications, and presentations.
- My participation in this study will be kept confidential and I will choose a pseudonym that will be used in all of the researcher’s data collections, data analyses, and writings.
- All sessions of Passport to Research will be video-taped and audio-taped. All data will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the researcher, and then destroyed within five years.
- I have the option of choosing whether any images of videos of myself be used for any future writings, publications, or presentations.

Participant Consent Form Page 2 (Student 18 years or older)

- This research may be beneficial as participation in this study may enhance my ability to engage in literacy related tasks

Page 2

- Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. Firewall technology will be used to protect the research computers from unauthorized access. Hardware or software storing the data will be accessible only to authorized users with log-in privileges.
- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or stresses during this research. I am volunteering in this study and I have the right to not participate at any time without any penalty.

I agree to take part in a research study titled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents,” which is being conducted by Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 678-458-0607 under the direction of Donna Alvermann, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706-542-2718. My participation is voluntary; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Jairus-Joaquin Matthews Researcher	Signature	Date

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

I allow the researcher use images or videos of myself in any future publications or presentations.

YES \_\_\_\_\_ Signature      NO \_\_\_\_\_ Signature

## Appendix I

## Parental Permission Form

Page 1

My name is Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of Georgia and an approved volunteer at the Brookhaven Boys and Girls Club. I would like to invite your child to participate in a research study entitled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents,” that I am conducting under the direction of Dr. Donna Alvermann. This study questions how Black male identities are represented and performed in popular media, and how Black male adolescent students develop scholar-intellectual identities in the context of critical media literacy study and research. If you agree for your child to participate in this study, he will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in the Passport to Research Program, which will meet twice per week after-school for 90 minutes in each session from January 2011 thru early to mid May 2011. They will not miss any other activities.
2. Complete home study activities related to our sessions in Passport to Research.
3. Participate in the development, implementation, and presentation of research related to the study of Black males in popular media.
4. Participate in three interviews throughout the course of the Passport to Research program that will last approximately 30 minutes each.

As a parent or guardian of a participant in this research I understand and acknowledge the following:

- All activities will be related to research. This research will be used for future writings, publications, and presentations.
- My child’s participation in this study will be kept confidential. My child will choose a pseudonym that will be used in all of the researcher’s data collections, data analyses, and writings.
- All sessions of Passport to Research will be video-taped and audio-taped. All data will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the researcher, and then destroyed within five years.
- I have the option of choosing whether any images of videos of my child can be used for any future writings, publications, or presentations.

## Page 2 Parental Permission Form

- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or stresses during this study. My child is volunteering in this study and has the right to not participate at any time without penalty.
- This research may be beneficial as participation in this study may enhance my child's ability to engage in literacy related tasks.

I agree to allow my child \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in a research study titled "Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents," which is being conducted by Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 678-458-0607 under the direction of Donna Alvermann, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706-542-2718. My child's participation is voluntary; my child can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have information related to my child returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent for my child to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Jairus-Joaquin Matthews	Signature	Date
Researcher		
Telephone: 678-458-0607		
Email: <a href="mailto:jairusjoaquin@gmail.com">jairusjoaquin@gmail.com</a>		

Name of Parent or Guardian	Signature	Date

I allow the researcher use images or videos of my child in any future publications or presentations.

YES _____	NO _____
Signature	Signature

## Appendix J

### Participant Consent Form (For Staff Members)

Page 1

My name is Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of Georgia and an approved volunteer at the Brookhaven Boys and Girls Club. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting under the direction of Dr. Donna Alvermann. This study questions how Black male identities are represented and performed in popular media, and how Black male adolescent students develop scholar-intellectual identities in the context of critical media literacy study and research. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in the Passport to Research Program, which will meet twice per week for 90 minutes from January 2011 thru early to mid May 2011 as a co-director.
2. Participate in the development, implementation, and presentation of research related to the study of Black males in popular media.
3. Participate in two interviews throughout the course of the Passport to Research program that will last approximately 30 minutes each.

As a participant in this research I understand and acknowledge the following:

- All activities will be related to research. This research will be used for future writings, publications, and presentations.
- My participation in this study will be kept confidential and I will choose a pseudonym that will be used in all of the researcher's data collections, data analyses, and writings.
- All sessions of Passport to Research will be videotaped and audiotaped. All data will be kept indefinitely in a secure location accessible only to the researcher and destroyed within five years. I have the option of choosing whether any images or videos of myself be used for any future writings, publications, or presentations.
- Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. Firewall technology will be used to protect the research computers from unauthorized access. Hardware or software storing the data will be accessible only to authorized users with log-in privileges.

## Participant Consent Form Page 2 (Staff Members)

- Participation in this research may be beneficial as it may assist in my professional development as an after-school educator.
- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or stresses during this study. I am volunteering in this study and I have the right to not participate at any time.

I agree to take part in a research study titled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents,” which is being conducted by (Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 678-458-0607) under the direction of (Donna Alvermann, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706-542-2718) My participation is voluntary; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____	_____	_____
Jairus-Joaquin Matthews	Signature	Date
Researcher		
Telephone: 678-458-0607		
Email: <a href="mailto:jairusjoaquin@gmail.com">jairusjoaquin@gmail.com</a>		

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

I allow the researcher to use images or videos of myself in any future publications or presentations.

YES _____	NO _____
Signature	Signature



## Appendix L

### Parental Permission Form (For Additional Student Participants in Black Music Inquiry Project)

#### Page 1

My name is Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of Georgia and an approved volunteer at the Brookhaven Boys and Girls Club. I would like to invite your child to participate in a research study entitled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents,” that I am conducting under the direction of Dr. Donna Alvermann. This study questions how Black male identities are represented and performed in popular media, and how Black male adolescent students develop scholar-intellectual identities in the context of critical media literacy study and research. If you agree for your child to participate in this study, he will be asked to participate in an interview within the Passport to Research program that will last approximately 30 minutes.

As a parent or guardian of a participant in this research I understand and acknowledge the following:

- All activities will be related to research. This research will be used for future writings, publications, and presentations.
- My child’s participation in this study will be kept confidential. My child will choose a pseudonym that will be used in all of the researcher’s data collections, data analyses, and writings.
- All sessions of Passport to Research will be videotaped and/or audiotaped. All data will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the researcher, and then destroyed within five years.
- I have the option of choosing whether any images or videos of my child can be used for any future writings, publications, or presentations.
- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or stresses during this study. My child is volunteering in this study and has the right to not participate at any time without penalty.
- This research may be beneficial as participation in this study may enhance my child’s ability to engage in literacy related tasks.

## Parental Permission Form Page 2

I agree to allow my child \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in a research study titled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents,” which is being conducted by Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 678-458-0607 under the direction of Donna Alvermann, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706-542-2718. My child’s participation is voluntary; my child can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have information related to my child returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent for my child to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Jairus-Joaquin Matthews	Signature	Date
Researcher Telephone: 678-458-0607 Email: <a href="mailto:jairusjoaquin@gmail.com">jairusjoaquin@gmail.com</a>		

Name of Parent or Guardian	Signature	Date

I allow the researcher use images or videos of my child in any future publications or presentations.

YES _____	NO _____
Signature	Signature

## Appendix M

### Participant Consent Form (For Additional Staff Members in Black Music Inquiry Project)

Page 1

My name is Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of Georgia and an approved volunteer at the Brookhaven Boys and Girls Club. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that I am conducting under the direction of Dr. Donna Alvermann. This study questions how Black male identities are represented and performed in popular media, and how Black male adolescent students develop scholar-intellectual identities in the context of critical media literacy study and research. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview within the Passport to Research program that will last approximately 30 minutes.

As a participant in this research I understand and acknowledge the following:

- All activities will be related to research. This research will be used for future writings, publications, and presentations.
- My participation in this study will be kept confidential and I will choose a pseudonym that will be used in all of the researcher's data collections, data analyses, and writings.
- All sessions of Passport to Research will be video-taped and/or audio-taped. All data will be kept indefinitely in a secure location accessible only to the researcher and destroyed within five years. I have the option of choosing whether any images or videos of myself be used for any future writings, publications, or presentations.
- Internet communications are insecure and there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. However once the materials are received by the researcher, standard confidentiality procedures will be employed. Firewall technology will be used to protect the research computers from unauthorized access. Hardware or software storing the data will be accessible only to authorized users with log-in privileges.
- Participation in this research may be beneficial as it may assist in my professional development as an after-school educator.

## Participant Consent Form Page 2 (Staff Members)

- There are no reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or stresses during this study. I am volunteering in this study and I have the right to not participate at any time.

I agree to take part in a research study titled “Critical Media Literacy with African American Male Adolescents,” which is being conducted by (Jairus-Joaquin Matthews, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 678-458-0607) under the direction of (Donna Alvermann, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 706-542-2718) My participation is voluntary; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Jairus-Joaquin Matthews	Signature	Date
Researcher		
Telephone: 678-458-0607		
Email: <a href="mailto:jairusjoaquin@gmail.com">jairusjoaquin@gmail.com</a>		

Name of Participant	Signature	Date

I allow the researcher to use images or videos of myself in any future publications or presentations.

YES _____	NO _____
Signature	Signature