Derrick N. Ashong
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"Whose World is This?"
Culture, Commerce and the Politics of Authenticity in Hip Hop

"If we wish to examine the efforts of black creators, we then must pay attention to the people and institutions who enable those efforts to reach the mass public."[1]
-David Sanjek

"Probably Hiplife is the only way we can bridge the gap between us and the Diaspora."
-Reggie Rockstone, Accra, Ghana, July 2004.

The Music Industry is one of the few areas of American business where the creative and intellectual output of African-Americans is the primary driving force behind the production of marketable goods. The most fundamental item to the function of the music biz is music itself, and "Black" music has arguably had a more salient and profound impact upon the development of popular music in the United States than any other form. Yet despite the magnitude of their impact on the Recording Industry, African-Americans have not shared equally in the economic rewards of this Industry.[2]

In this paper I will look at the role of independent labels in the American Recording Industry as a vehicle to explore four critical issues. The first will be "how have the structures of the music business changed over the last fifty years?" I will consider the genesis of the Recording Industry itself, an event that significantly predates this time-

[1] David Sanjek, "Tell Me Something I Don't Already Know: The Harvard Report on Soul Music Revisited," R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music, ed. Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic, 2002) 60.
[2] Economic Development Department of the NAACP, "The Discordant Sound of Music: A Report on the Record Industry," R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music, ed. Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic, 2002) 44-58.

period, and look at the evolution of so-called "race music" into the foundation of American popular music. Secondly, I will ask "how have these changes impacted Blacks in the Music Industry?" an inquiry that will provide the basis for a later evaluation of the impact of Hip Hop on Black youth in the United States and elsewhere in the African Diaspora.

Finally, through an exploration of the function of independent labels in the contemporary American Recording Industry, I will argue that the mainstream of Black music – and in particular Hip Hop – no longer represents the interests or organic values of Black communities and will not do so until it is not only produced, but also distributed through Black owned enterprises. I will further argue that scholars of Black popular music must of necessity study the nature and function of the Music Industry, and in particular the Recording Industry, because the major players within it have become the gatekeepers of Black cultural production in the United States, and increasingly outside of it.

In exploring these questions I will posit that not only has the Music Industry been historically exploitative of Black artists, audiences and employees, but that today it has transformed one of the potential sources of Black cultural, political and economic empowerment into a force that in fact diminishes the state of Blacks in these arenas. This has happened in part due to the unwillingness of the Black leadership class to invest in the commercial and creative development of Black music and in particular, Hip Hop. I will argue that the solution to the problem is not for Blacks to further integrate the mainstream Music Industry, but rather to create independent and to some degree

racially/ideologically autonomous institutions. In short, I will argue that "racial division" is both the source of the current exploitative regime of the Recording Industry, and perhaps the best hope for changing it.

In the study of Black music much attention has been paid to the historical, cultural, anthropological and socio-political factors at play in its development, with lesser consideration given to the function and impact of the corporate Recording Industry.[3] Yet from the Spirituals through Blues and Gospel to modern day Jazz, Rock, and Hip Hop, commercial factors have played an important role in the evolution and dissemination of this music, as well as its subsequent impact on society. At the intersection of technology, culture and commerce we find a distinct analytical prism with which to evaluate the historical, cultural and socio-political relevance of African-American cultural production, particularly in the realm of music.

The advent of recording technology in the late 19th Century[4] allowed for a codification of what to that point had largely been folk music. With the development of the phonograph the oral tradition was expanded – forever and fundamentally altered. No longer was the transmission of culture necessarily circumscribed by social and geographical constraints. By this I do not mean that prior to the invention of the phonograph these strictures prevented the oral transmission of culture, but rather that this invention represented a crucial juncture in the history of oral literature in that it began a process through which

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[3] Keith Negus, Music Genres and Corporate Cultures. (London: Routledge, 1999) 83.
[4] The first phonograph was invented by Thomas Edison in 1877.
Steven E. Schoenherr, *Recording Technology History*,
http://history.acusd.edu/gen/recording/notes.html#origins, July 6, 2005. Aug. 15, 2005.

control over the representation, codification and transmission of culture would be removed from individuals and communities and placed in the hands of institutions, particularly corporations. While a given musician could at any time refuse to record a piece of music, once such a piece had in fact been recorded, the producers of culture would effectively lose control over the transmission and contextualization of that cultural product. This point will have increasing import as we consider the contemporary state and structure of the Music Industry.

For the time being, let us look to the early days of recording. In his article "The Industrialization of Popular Music"[5] Simon Frith notes the relationship between companies invested in the production of "content" (software), and the technological means of its transmission (hardware). He argues that in the early years of the music industry, music companies did not produce records for their own market value, but rather to fuel the sales of record players – a more profitable product.[6] This becomes apparent when we look at the dominant firms in the early years of the Recording Industry. From 1901-1922 they were: The Edison Phonograph Company, the Victor Talking Machine Company, and the Columbia Graphophone Company, which would eventually be known simply as "Columbia."[7]

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[5] Simon Frith, "The Industrialization of Popular Music," Popular Music and Communication, ed. James Lull (London: Sage Publications, 1987) 53-79.
[6] Frith 52.
[7] Michael Roberts, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag: Big Music's Post-Fordist Regime and the Role of Independent Music Labels," R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music, ed. Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic, 2002) 32.

In this hardware dominated music biz, independent record companies developed that did not have the resources to produce and sell hardware, but that benefited from the demand for content created by larger companies invested in the business. During the "depression" years of the 1930s both record and phonograph sales dropped precipitously. Record sales fell from 104 million in 1927 to 6 million in 1932. During the same time period, phonograph sales fell from 987 thousand annually to 40 thousand. Frith attributes this radical decline in part to the spread of radio and "talking pictures" such that "a declining share of a declining income went towards records."[8]

The combination of the Great Depression and the rise of radio and television created a "perfect storm" of sorts in the Music Industry that restructured its form and function. The industry playing field was emptied of the majority of small independent companies and saw the survival of "a small number of 'major' companies,"[9] namely Columbia, RCA Victor and Decca Records. This "majors" dominated model would characterize the Recording Industry up until this day.

The irony that radio and television effectively "killed the recording star" in the 1930s is that these media – and particularly radio – would soon become the primary means of promoting recorded music. The growth of radio had other implications for the production and consumption of recorded music. Early radio sought to attract an "affluent and respectable" listener base, which meant that "while radio did 'kill' record sales it also left

[8] Frith 55.
[9] Frith 55.

pockets of tastes unsatisfied."[10] As such, while overall record sales dropped during the early 1930s, sales of Jazz and Blues records rose. One might imagine that because this music was not widely available on the radio, consumers who did not have the choice to listen for free went out and bought it. Regardless, this phenomenon laid the commercial groundwork for a racialized segmentation of the market for recorded music, that would allow for the eventual development of a new generation of entrepreneurs focused on the creation and promotion of "race music."

In the 1950s, recognizing the increasing popularity of this "race music," White producers began to invest in marketing it to non-White audiences. This ushered in the "cover" record phenomenon, which itself heralded the development of Rock & Roll – a genre that featured White performers translating the sound and style of Rhythm & Blues artists, into a format perceived to be more palatable to White teen audiences. Popular music scholar Reebee Garofalo writes that:

> "Strictly speaking, a cover record is a copy of an original recording performed by another artist in a style thought to be more appropriate for the mainstream market…in the vast majority of cases, black artists recording for independent labels were covered by white artists signed to one of the majors. In the 1950's covers were commonly used by the major companies to capitalize on the growing popularity of rhythm & blues among white listeners."[11]

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[10] Frith 56.
[11] Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: From Black Rhythm & Blues to White Rock n' Roll," R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music, ed. Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic, 2002) 124.

The practice of creating derivative "cover" recordings of Black music would precipitate a split in the evolution of race music, also known as "Rhythm & Blues," separating out the Rock & Roll music of the major labels from the new "Soul" music that would come primarily through the independents. With the birth of ""Rock & Roll," Black Music was given a White face in order to make it more "saleable." Later this phenomenon would undergo an historic shift as the relationship between the majors and Black entrepreneurs itself shifted.

Though the music of Blacks has played an important role in the development of the modern day Record Industry, their role on the business side has been historically limited. In an essay entitled "Notes on the Political Economy of Black Music" Norman Kelley observes that:

> "in the case of music, black artists have rarely received the just benefits of their work, especially in comparison to their white counterparts and those who control the music industry."[12]

The early companies investing in the promotion of Black music were largely White owned and as Nelson George writes in *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, despite "early attempts at black-owned labels…most…failed in competition with larger white-owned operations."[13] Where Blacks would first gain some measure of influence in the Industry was in radio. In the 1930's early "Black radio" consisted of songs played primarily to

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[12] Norman Kelley, "Notes on the Political Economy of Black Music," R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music, ed. Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic, 2002) 7.
[13] Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm & Blues, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) 11.

advertise commercial products. By the 1940's, though the majority of Black-oriented stations were still White-owned, Black deejays "defined the stations and made them profitable,"[14] often becoming as popular as the music they played.

Still Black power in radio was never fully realized. Though attempts were made by pioneering figures in Black music such as Del Shields and Clarence Avant to reform Black trade organizations like NATRA (the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers) into politically and economically viable institutions, these efforts were frustrated by a combination of lack of vision among Blacks in the industry, and external forces that saw a consolidation of Black influence in radio as a threat.[15]

The evolution and subsequent "devolution" of Black radio is in many ways symptomatic of the status of Blacks in various aspects of the industry. When we look at the history of Black independent labels we again see a promising segment of the Music Industry that either did not have the vision to pursue a race-based consolidation of its power, or did not recognize the danger posed to it by "Corporate Music."

"In the 1950s…as radio stations began to target specialized markets, a growing number of independent labels started to challenge the power of the majors," writes sociologist Michael Roberts.[16] Nelson George chronicles the rise of a number of independent labels focused on the market for black music, particularly among black audiences. Companies like Vee-Jay and Chess out of Chicago, Stax out of Memphis, Atlantic in New York and

[14] George Rhythm & Blues 29.
[15] George Rhythm & Blues 114.
[16] Roberts 36.

of-course Berry Gordy's Motown out of Detroit, sought to give black music listeners what the broader music industry would not.

In the 1960s Motown and Stax in particular took two different approaches to serving their audiences. While the former pioneered a "sanitized" sound and image that spoke to the middle-class integrationist aspirations of many African-Americans, the latter embraced the "grittier" and more distinctively Black sounds of the American South. The factor that unified both Stax and Motown during these early years was their reliance on Black radio.[17] The 1970s would see changes in the Recording Industry that would soon relegate both Black radio and Independent Black labels to a second-hand citizenship. These shifts in the production and distribution of Black music would characterize the structure of the industry to this day.

In 1971 the Columbia Records Group (CRG) a division of CBS, commissioned a study of Soul music by a group of researchers at Harvard Business School.[18] The resulting report entitled "A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group," and known in industry parlance as the "Harvard Report" would become the impetus for a drastic reordering of the relationship between the major labels and Black independent labels. Among its recommendations was that CRG establish an internal Black music division, and employ Blacks to find and develop black talent for promotion to the Black community and beyond.

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[17] George Rhythm & Blues 86.
[18] David Sanjek, "Tell Me Something I Don't Already Know: The Harvard Report on Soul Music Revisited," R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music, ed, Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic, 2002) 61.

A critical feature of the Harvard Report's recommendations came from an observation of the number of records reaching the top of the Billboard R&B charts that subsequently "crossed-over" onto the mainstream Billboard Top 40 chart. The report suggested that the CRG could effectively test market talent in the Black community to identify what had "cross-over" potential. Nelson George argues that this "cross-over" phenomenon would ultimately be the lynchpin in the coffin of R&B, or at the very least the nail that broke the camel's back. It is undeniably at the root of the shift in the relationship between the majors and Black independent labels.

In order to properly contextualize the next phase of this argument I'd like to briefly identify what the difference is between a major and an independent record company. Record companies typically perform a myriad of functions. For our purposes we can distill these into five primary areas: A&R, production, marketing, promotion and distribution. A&R (artists and repertoire) is the process of identifying and developing talent into a marketable product. Production is the creation of the recorded musical component of said product. Marketing is the process by which this product is packaged and presented for public consumption, while Promotion ensures that the music is on the airwaves. Finally, Distribution puts the recorded product into the hands of retailers for purchase by the public.

Distribution is a complex and costly affair and it is ultimately the prime differentiator between major record labels and independents. Roberts writes that "the music industry

is…dominated by entities that control distribution and are less focused on production."[19] While independent labels may work through either major or independent distributors, the majors universally own their own distribution companies. In writing about the 1930s triumvirate of Columbia, RCA Victor and Decca Records, Roberts argues that: "these three firms enjoyed control over the record industry until the late 1940s, establishing the industry standard – not because they sold the most records, but because each one owned and operated their own production studios, manufacturing plants, and distribution outlets."[20]

Because of the prohibitive costs of developing a nationwide distribution operation, the scale of a company's distribution has become the primary factor distinguishing major from independent labels. In the wake of the Harvard Report, the major record labels began developing internal "Black music" divisions and competing directly with independent companies like Motown and Stax[21] for the dollars of consumers, Black and White.

At the same time the majors began a new type of relationship that would presage the industry landscape of today. With the launch of Philadelphia International Records, a joint venture between CRG and Philadelphia musicians and entrepreneurs Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, the responsibilities of A&R and production would be farmed out to an "independent" Black label, while the major parent company would handle marketing,

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[19] Roberts 38.
[20] Roberts 33.
[21] Both companies would ultimately affiliate with the majors, Stax being acquired by CRG in 1972 and Motown distributed through MCA ten years later. Stax would eventually fold in 1976 and Motown would become one of many brands in a massive corporate machine (George Rhythm &Blues 137-142, 149).

promotion and crucial distribution. The relationship between CRG and PIR is the precursor to today's relationship between Hip Hop labels like Def Jam (which is now a subsidiary of Universal) and Bad Boy (which has a pressing and distribution deal through Arista, owned by Sony BMG).[22]

The impact that these major/independent relationships have upon the nature of the music produced is profound. Whereas PIR would provide an outlet for Kenny Gamble's Black Nationalist influenced and politically conscious lyrical musings, labels like Def Jam and Bad Boy are today characterized by a consistent spate of violent, misogynistic and grossly commercialized fare. This is neither by chance, nor by accident, but is rather the logical extension of the "new world order" in the Music Industry. The mainstream Hip Hop of today is largely the product of the same forces that gave rise to Disco in the 1970s, namely the pursuit of the "cross-over" record, and the resultant prioritization of White audiences over Black by major and major-distributed independent labels.[23]

My point here is not that White audiences necessarily prefer music that presents destructive images of Black women, Black youth and Black culture, but that it in fact makes sense for major record labels to sell them such images. In the words of Urban Think Tank founder Yvonne Bynoe:

> "the Hip Hop industry's decision to intentionally target White rap consumers means that overtly socially conscious and/or pro-Black messages have been

[22] Roberts 34-35.
[23] George Rhythm & Blues 157.

> substantially sacrificed in rap music to accommodate a "we-are-the-world" ethos based on hedonistic consumerism and general youth rebellion."[24]

The use of sex, violence and consumerism to sell entertainment (and other) products has been evident for years in Hollywood.[25] But when considering the role they play in the production and performance of Hip Hop "culture," many scholars have tended towards essentializing the value of Hip Hop as an "authentic" representation of Black youth rebellion.

It is here that we come to the failings of the prevailing academic discourse around Hip Hop. Norman Kelley writes that:

> "in today's world, the development, production, marketing, and distribution of popular music receives little attention from black public intellectuals, particularly those who claim to be cultural critics."[26]

The limited perspective of these scholars has allowed for a kind of romanticization of Hip Hop and its purportedly privileged place in African-American culture and politics.

The work of such capable minds as Michael Eric Dyson, Tricia Rose and Robin D G Kelley, is characterized by detailed and often insightful inquiries into Hip Hop music and

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[24] Yvonne Bynoe, "Money, Power, and Respect: A Critique of the Business of Rap Music," R&B, Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music, ed, Norman Kelley (New York: Akashic, 2002) 231.
[25] *Media Awareness Network*, "The Business of Media Violence," Media Awareness Network. 13 Aug 2005. <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/violence/business_media_violence.cfm>.
[26] Kelley 17.

culture as taken from a literary, cultural, socio-political and phenomenological approach. What is lacking in their analyses, however, is an adequate evaluation of the commercial factors that influence the creation and popularization of Hip Hop today, and by extension its content, image and place in society. Dyson, for example, has not only engaged in a kind of reification of the Hip Hop ideal, but has in the process at times been dismissive of the impact of the Recording Industry in the production of Hip Hop culture. In his 1996 text *Between God and Gangsta Rap* he writes:

> "Some critics even suggest that white record executives discourage the production of 'positive rap' and reinforce the desire for lewd expressions packaged as cultural and racial authenticity…But such views are flawed. The street between black artists and record companies runs both ways. Even though black artists are often ripe for the picking – and thus susceptible to exploitation by white and black record labels – many of them are quite sophisticated about the politics of cultural representation. Many gangsta rappers have…figured out how to financially exploit sincere and sensational interest in 'ghetto life'."[27]

The fact that some rappers may have found a means to "financially exploit" societal fascination with so-called 'ghetto life' does not necessarily diminish the degree of their own exploitation by the Recording Industry, nor its exploitation of their communities. While Dyson dismisses the argument that industry executives (who remain overwhelmingly White) have an influence on what is heard in the mainstream of Rap,

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[27] Michael Eric Dyson, Between God and Gangsta Rap, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 179.

even a cursory survey of the history, structure and function of the Music Industry would indicate that they have in fact exercised such an influence throughout the evolution of recorded music in America.[28] I would argue that the post-Harvard Report investment of the major labels into the market for Black music would indicate that this is even *moreso* the case with Black music today, than with previous forms.

Dyson falls prey to a common pitfall facing both students and fans of Hip Hop or Rap Music,[29] as well as the artists themselves. Hip Hop is typically perceived in our society as a kind of native manifestation of Black youth rebellion, bubbling up organically from the underground – the music and heartbeat of "the street." The words of respected scholar and cultural critic Tricia Rose are emblematic of this:

> "as more and more of the disenfranchised and alienated find themselves facing conditions of accelerating deterioration, rap's urgent, edgy, and yet life-affirming resonances will become a more important and more contested social force in the world."[30]

While this was a hopeful ideal in 1994 when first published – and would have reflected my own thinking as a then self-proclaimed teenage hip hop junkie – I would argue that the past decade of mainstream cooptation of Hip Hop culture would indicate that if Rap

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[28] The only circumstances in which this was not the case, was when the music was created and marketed by Black owned labels operating outside of mainstream distribution channels (eg. the early years of Motown).
[29] I use the terms "Hip Hop" and "rap" or "Rap Music" interchangeably for purposes of this essay, in acknowledgment of the different terminology used by various scholars cited, to describe essentially the same thing. I would note, however, that the term Hip Hop in fact applies to a much broader cultural phenomenon of which Rap Music is a constituent element.
[30] Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 184.

Music has indeed grown in importance and evolved into a site of increased social contestation, the locus of that contestation is not in fact in the streets nor among the "disenfranchised and alienated," who to a significant degree have themselves been either co-opted, or their voices of dissent largely drowned out by the power and volume of mainstream rap.

The locus of this contestation rather, is in the corporate boardrooms where much of Hip Hop's image is manufactured or more accurately, filtered and "refined" for public consumption. Yvonne Bynoe notes that:

> "Many middle-class Black executives, like their White counterparts, have fetishized the ghetto as the domain of 'authentic' blackness, continuing to dig deeper into its bowels to satisfy hipsters looking to be down. It suffices to say that depicting Black youth as "normal" is not a marketable concept."[31]

The perception then of Hip Hop as the representative voice of the "disenfranchised and alienated" does not necessarily rise from an organic understanding of the music and attendant culture, but rather from discrete and purposeful marketing by the major labels.[32] Again, Bynoe writes:

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[31] Bynoe 232.
[32] Negus 96-100.

> "…rap music's 'anti-social' labeling in the media distorts the fact that is [sic] has become part of the established system of US-styled capitalism whereby those with access to education and/or capital rule and exploit those who do not."[33]

As Dyson argues some artists do exploit "the system." But party to this form of exploitation is not only that visited upon the rappers themselves by record labels, but a more profound and devastating exploitation of black youth and their identities. In the world of Hip Hop there are many means of "getting over," but I would argue one of the worst is getting over on the people you purportedly represent. Even a mind as astute as Dyson's might overlook this element of Rap in the absence of a critical juxtaposition of culture and commerce. Unfortunately he is not alone as is indicated by Negus:

> "Although the music industry has been referred to and acknowledged by a few writers, most of the writing has tended to concentrate on cultural criticism and locate the 'politics' of rap within the domain of a cultural struggle conducted across the broad terrain of 'consumption' that is lived outside the world of the corporate entertainment industry."[34]

The reality is that Hip Hop today is symbiotically tied to the "corporate entertainment industry" and to a large degree defined by it.

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[33] Bynoe 221.
[34] Negus 83.

To be clear, I am not arguing that Hip Hop does not in fact represent a dynamic musical force born of the marriage of urban blight with the irrepressible creativity of Black youth whose political, economic and aesthetic interests were not necessarily represented in the mainstream culture. The fact is, however, that what is commonly referred to as "Hip Hop," or "Rap Music" is typified by that small cross-section of the culture that has been filtered to us via the mainstream music industry.[35] It is easier today for just about anyone in America to see and hear an artist manufactured on Madison Avenue than one living up the street.

In effect the raw product of urban Black culture is "refined" and manufactured into its "pop" form and then sold to Blacks and Whites alike as Black "authenticity." An authenticity routinely characterized by rappers' amassing of cars, women, jewelry and other trappings of material success, in a society where Blacks in reality face disproportionate rates of poverty, unemployment and incarceration.[36] The Hip Hop Industry today represents a colonization of urban Black communities (and their identities) by multinational corporations. Norman Kelley writes that:

> "in classic colonialism, products were produced in a raw periphery and sent back to the imperial motherland to be manufactured into commodities, then sold in

[35] As with any other musical genre, the vast majority of Hip Hop artists are unknown to the mass public. What differentiates Hip Hop from other genres, however, is the marketing of the "authentic." Whereas country music is in fact associated with White Southern culture in the U.S., it does not necessarily define what it means to be White in America (though it might arguably define what it is to be White *and* Southern). Neither do Rock music or Pop. But Hip Hop does to a large degree define societal perception of Black youth across the board, in part due to the dearth of alternative representations of Blackness in mainstream culture. At the same time, the masses of these youth are in fact excluded from participation in the Hip Hop Industry due to the necessary selectivity of record labels in all genres of music.

[36] *Hrw.org*, "Punishment and Prejudice: Racial Disparities in the War on Drugs," Human Rights Watch May 2000. 15 Aug 2005. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/usa/Rcedrg00-04.htm>.

> metropolitan centers or back to the colonies. The outcome for the colony was stunted economic growth, as it was stripped of its ability to manufacture products for its own needs."[37]

Contrast this with the observations of Roberts who posits that:

> "in essence, the majors are using the indies as subcontractors to cut back on production costs, principally labor costs, a strategy that mimics a widespread pattern of farming out production that cuts across almost every industry in the United States."[38]

In this case the not-so-independent "indies" of today's Recording Industry represent the "raw periphery" Kelley talks about. The "black music" divisions at the major labels are in fact structured and operated in line with the rhetoric of keeping the music "street," again implying an "authenticity" that is in fact an image purposefully created and promoted by the labels.[39] This perception of the "authenticity" of Hip Hop as the cultural product of what is effectively the urban colony affects not only the mass public, but also we in the academy, who without a critical understanding of the industrial forces at play in the production of Hip Hop are just as liable to buy into its manufactured image as the next person.

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[37] N. Kelley 10.
[38] Roberts 27.
[39] Negus 96.

The Hip Hop/Rap valorization trap is a seductive one and its influence is also evident even among those who work within the Hip Hop Industry. As such, a person with such ostensibly inalienable Hip Hop credentials as Bakari Kitwana, former editor of the *The Source*[40] magazine can write that:

> "as the national forum for Black youth concerns and often as the impetus for discussion around those issues, rap music has done more than any one entity to help our generation forge a distinct identity."[41]

While I do not take great exception with the import Kitwana places on the relative impact of Rap Music in the formation of a generational identity, his statement is self-sabotaging at the outset. I would argue that Hip Hop is emphatically *not* the national forum for Black youth concerns, but is rather merely marketed as such. If it were in fact such a forum it would necessarily need Black youth in positions of power as the arbiters or perhaps more appropriately, the "moderators" of such a forum. But where are the Black youth who run major record labels?

When posed with such a question respondents will typically conjure up the usual suspects: Russell Simmons at Def Jam, Sean "P Diddy" Combs at Bad Boy or perhaps even Jay-Z and his Rocafella Records (itself a division of Def Jam). Yet Kelley makes the salient point that:

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[40] The foremost magazine of Hip Hop music and culture.
[41] Bakari Kitwana, The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and The Crisis in African American Culture. (New York: Basic*Civitas* Books, 2002) 201.

> "rap moguls such as Def Jam's Russell Simmons and Bad Boy Entertainment's Sean "P-Diddy" Combs are either showcased or touted as model entrepreneurs in today's hip hop-driven industry. What is often overlooked (if not patently ignored), however, is that their companies cannot distribute their music effectively without going through one of the five major conglomerates."[42]

How can "the national forum for Black youth concerns," be run overwhelmingly by White record executives?[43] In the absence of an analytical framework that interrogates the intersection of commerce and cultural production some might take umbrage at the assertion that it in fact is. Given his stated belief that the case for White executive influence over rappers has been overstated, when Dyson challenges us to:

> "…acknowledge that gangsta rap crudely exposes harmful beliefs and practices that are often maintained with deceptive civility in much of mainstream society, including many black communities,"[44]

we can reasonably assume that he believes this illuminating music to be largely the unfiltered expression of the rappers themselves. Again, a simple juxtaposition of this perspective with the structure of the Recording Industry as explicated earlier in this paper, would indicate that this is not likely the case. Even those gangsta rappers who are "quite sophisticated about the politics of cultural representation" are nonetheless scouted

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[42] N. Kelley 8.
[43] Negus 88-89.
[44] Dyson 177.

and signed – in other words *selected* and given a public forum – by record labels; labels who as discussed earlier have vested interests in the promotion of some ideas over others.

I maintain that the possibility of Hip Hop as a national forum for the native expression of Black youth concerns, cannot be interrogated with a blind eye turned towards the central role of the Recording Industry in determining what voices are heard in the rap world – a role that effectively places the Industry in the role of "moderator" of said forum. In any forum the moderator to a degree controls the discourse, and I reiterate that a national forum for Black youth cannot be credibly run by White record executives.

For the sake of argument, however, let us assume that these executives could and were in fact motivated to overcome centuries of racial prejudice in addition to class, age, cultural and aesthetic differences and serve as impartial arbiters of Black youth consciousness. This would still require that if such a forum were not in fact run *by* Black youth, it at least be run *for* them. Yvonne Bynoe writes however that:

> "with 1997 Soundscan reports indicating that approximately seventy-one percent of rap music buyers in America are White, they, rather than Black buyers, have become the targeted audience for rap music."[45]

Hip Hop does not serve the interests of Black youth because it is no longer created for them.[46] This transition did not happen in the wake of the writings of Dyson and Rose, but

[45] Bynoe 230.

in advance of and in the midst of them. Speaking of the music that preceded and followed the 1991 beating of black motorist Rodney King and the subsequent LA Rebellion in 1992 following the acquittal of the police offers charged in the case, Robin D G Kelley writes that:

> "most gangsta rappers write lyrics attacking law-enforcement agencies, the denial of their unfettered access to public space, and the media's complicity[47] in making black youth out to be criminals."[48]

In many ways the work of such artists presaged the LA Rebellion and the Rampart Police Scandal of 1999.[49] It is undeniable that these artists did in fact represent issues happening in urban Los Angeles that the mainstream media was either unaware of or disinterested in. Yet contrast this to Kelley's take in the same article, on the recently released debut of rap superstar Snoop Dogg's "Doggy Style." Kelley describes the record as:

> "pure profanity bereft of the rich story telling and use of metaphor and simile that have been cornerstones of rap music since its origins"[50]

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[46] Not at least in its mainstream form. Various forms do exist in the "underground" that exist outside of the corporate label infrastructure and represent different visions and voices of "blackness."
[47] For me Kelley's point begs the question, "why do such artists not challenge the *Industry's* complicity in making black youth out to be criminals?" A possible answer: "many of them do, but they are not typically the ones that get signed to record deals, particularly in the Hip Hop world post Telecommunications Act of 1996."
[48] Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles," Droppin Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture, ed. William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) 118.
[49] *PBS.org,* "Rampart Scandal Timeline," Frontline WGBH, 15 Aug 2005. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/lapd/scandal/cron.html>.
[50] R.D.G. Kelley 148.

Kelley's musings are emblematic of the turning point in Hip Hop that has lead to its current state. Hip Hop did not need a Harvard report – the wheels of change within the Recording Industry were in motion long before this music came to the national consciousness – but in its early years, it was not seen as a marketable entity by record executives White or Black. Again Yvonne Bynoe:

> "While it is clear that the original Black independents were edged out of rap music by the major record companies' consolidation of record distribution, and by their own bad management and poor financial planning, better-educated and better-financed Black entrepreneurs did not immediately follow them into the rap business. Middle-class Black Americans, generally speaking…saw rap as ghetto music that was beneath them, and Black record-industry executives thought that 'multi-racial' disco would have more longevity than 'Black' rap."[51]

Once, however, the major labels did in fact see the commercial potential of Hip Hop, they began to invest in it, not with the kind of focus and commitment with which they approached Rock music,[52] but with enough money and influence to shift the game their way.

The days of groups like Public Enemy rhyming about Black Nationalism, or "gangsta rappers" like NWA, Ice-T and Ice Cube challenging the brutal practices of law enforcement in their neighborhoods, were numbered at best. Black anger could be

[51] Bynoe 227.
[52] Negus 95.

marked, but it was a dangerous commodity. It needed to be controlled and channeled in a way that would not offend consumers and threaten future sales the way the scandal following Ice-T's "Cop Killer" did.[53] Negus refers to "one senior executive in an international department [who] remarked that he had sat in meetings and heard rap recordings being referred to as 'too black' for international promotion…"[54]

And so the majors made sure that their Black music was not "too black." It had to have street credibility, but not the kind that might compromise commercial viability. And so songs like "Get Money," and "Just Put it In Your Mouth" replaced "Fight the Power" and "Fuck the Police." In the midst of this transition it was crucial to the marketing of the music that it was perceived as "authentically" Black. This product required street cred. As Norman Kelley points out:

> "Marketers know that if black kids – the naïve-but-sophisticated urban authenticators of postmodern American taste – can be induced to consume massive quantities of whatever is being sold, they, the marketers, can once again attract demographically desirable young whites to follow suit."[55]

Note that this Hip Hop formula is in fact nothing new, but rather the same "cross-over" doctrine espoused by the Harvard Report in the 1970s. But the manipulation of Black culture for the consumption of White youth is not limited merely to the relegation of the urban colony to a minor league "farm team" where artists can be tested before heading

[53] The controversy over "Cop Killer" eventually resulted in Ice-T being dropped from the Warner label.
[54] Negus 94.
[55] N. Kelley 20.

over to the "majors." As has historically been the case, the labels have also invested in the ultimate cross-over – the White artist playing Black music – a development any student of the history of Black music could have seen in the offing. Again, Reebee Garofalo:

> "Unfortunately, it is impossible to separate the popularity of white rock and roll from a racist pattern that exists in American music whereby a style that is pioneered by black artists eventually comes to be popularized, dominated, and even defined by whites as if it were their own."[56]

And yet Hip Hop has been peculiar in this regard, periodically disrupting the established patterns of cultural expropriation and exploitation. While White rapper Eminem remains one of the best-selling Hip Hop artists to date, he was discovered and mentored by a Black producer, Dr. Dre. 50 Cent, another of Hip Hop's current crop of megastars was in turn brought up from the underground and into the mainstream by Eminem.

Even prior to the Dre-Eminem example, Def Jam's Russell Simmons signed White punk-rappers the Beasty Boys who would go on to become one of Hip Hop's early commercial successes. Nelson George writes that:

[56] Garofalo 135.

> "It was one of the rare moments in pop history that a successful white group practiced a black music style with a black person so intimately involved in guiding their careers."[57]

George goes on to note that a similar phenomenon occurred with Boston's Maurice White – a Black manager – and White pop sensation New Kids on the Block. Has the situation then been reversed? Is Dyson correct in positing that some Blacks are today able to exploit the very Recording Industry that has traditionally exploited them?

The answer is to some degree "yes." Periodically Blacks in the Recording Industry have taken advantage of the prevailing "racio-economic" dynamics to advance their own ends. Is this something to be lauded or valorized? Only if one is prepared to ignore the overwhelming patterns of exploitation that work *against* the interests of Black artists, executives, consumers and communities. A gross but instructive example would be to liken this phenomenon to that of Black slave holders in the American South. They were certainly better off than their slaves, but that did not remove the fact that their overall life-chances were diminished by the existence of the institution of slavery.

What separates the Hip Hop industry from that of Rock & Roll is the aforementioned politics of authenticity. Whereas Rock & Roll was given a White face in order to increase its marketability, Hip Hop is given a stereotypically *Black* one. Even White boys need to be "street" in order to be legitimate in the Hip Hop game. And so it is one

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[57] Nelson George, Hip Hop America. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) 66.

played in "blackface" by all except those who determine its rules; a modern-day minstrelsy accepted to an epic degree by the ignorant and the educated alike.

Hip Hop does not represent the voice of today's youth and certainly not the voice of Black youth. As I've stated on numerous occasions in lecturing to college students about popular music:

> "Show me who decides what artists get signed. Show me who determines what artists get a record recorded and actually released.[58] Show me who decides who gets a record recorded, released and given enough promotional support that you might actually hear about it. Show me who makes those decisions, and I'll show you the 'voice of Black youth'…"

Again, I refer to Norman Kelley who asserts that:

> "The war for control of black music was won many years ago by corporate America, facilitated by a black leadership that has never fully understood the economic significance of its own culture."[59]

I would then qualify Kitwana's assertion about the impact of rap music on our generational identity. Our generation has not in fact "forge(d) a distinct identity," rather I believe we have been sold one. However "real" any given mainstream artist is keeping it,

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[58] *CNN.com*, "Music acts 'go it alone'," Associated Press 12 Aug 2005. 12 Aug 2005. <http://www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/Music/08/11/diy.music.ap/index.html>.
[59] N. Kelley 11.

reality dictates that he nonetheless tow whatever representational line is ultimately drawn by his corporate patron.

How did we come to this point? Nelson George eloquently lays the groundwork for the current state of Blacks in the Recording Industry in his seminal text The Death of Rhythm & Blues. In it he argues that a kind of integrationist "Politics of Respectability" [60] has been at play in Black music, reflecting the assimiliationist sentiments of the Black leadership at large. He writes that"

> "[Black leaders'] ignorance of music, not as an entertainment force but as a social and economic tool, was a weakness later disciples of both Washington and Du Bois suffered from, seeing the music and its milieu as vulgar."[61]

George posits that Blacks have not focused on creating viable, autonomous institutions, but have rather doggedly sought entry into the mainstream of American life. In the case of the contemporary Recording Industry, the willingness of independent Black record labels to follow the example set by Philadelphia International Records and the Columbia Records Group, has ultimately resulted in a situation where Blacks have not maintained control over the means of production and distribution of Black music and have thus lost control over our cultural product. Again Norman Kelley:

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[60] A term first coined by Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham in Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920.
[61] George Rhythm & Blues 8.

> "Because African-American leaders essentially ignored the early years of black music development in the United States, others moved in and established a foothold."[62]

It is worth noting that independent Black labels did not necessarily fold up in the face of competition and cooptation from the major labels. The fact is, just as Frith notes the industry has from its inception been dominated by entities that were invested in both the "hardware" and "software" of music.[63] This dominance has been passed on to the descendents of those early majors – companies who today control massive distribution networks that make it very difficult for independent Black companies to compete.[64] Without an ideological rationale for staying "Black-owned," Black labels would not necessarily have perceived a short-term financial incentive to remain so. But in speculating about the power of Hip Hop in global culture today, one wonders what impact its cultural influence and commercial value could have had were they cultivated and reinvested in the communities from whence they came.

Is the situation then a lost cause? Is Hip Hop a complete farce? Have we all been sold a commercial bill of goods about the power its music and culture have on Black youth? Is Hip Hop of no use in the pursuit of cultural and economic empowerment in Black communities? Not exactly. Though it might appear to contradict my argument thus far, I believe that Hip Hop is in fact very powerful and highly instructive to anyone interested in the development of African Diasporic youth identity. It is powerful not only because

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[62] N. Kelley 14.
[63] In the contemporary Recording Industry Sony BMG is the best example of such a company.
[64] George Rhythm & Blues 161.

of its idealization of the individual who has pulled him or herself up by her Timberland boot straps, but because of its ongoing reinforcement of the concept of "our music." Youth around the world, from Havana to Accra, from Bulawayo to Brixton see themselves as a part of the Hip Hop community.

The good news is that many of these youth are in fact quite aware of the commercial and cultural dynamics at play in the production of "our" music. I recently observed a cross-section of views posted by users to an online bulletin board on the BBC 1Xtra web site. The thread, entitled "Non-Commercial Hip Hop Fans," was a debate on the virtues of "underground" verses "mainstream" Hip Hop. Some of the posts exhibit a clearer insight into what is really happening in the Hip Hop Industry, than that shown by many scholars. A post by a user named *leftfielder*:

> "Mainstream culture, pop culture included is 99% image...Artists sell off their image and how the listeners perceive their lifestyles - which is why acts like 50 cent, the game, the list goes on, sell...Simply because they are marketable."

She continues:

> "Big sales obviously will change the ethos of the artist, as has been the case with Eminem. I understand that he for example is now just in it for the money, which is

> easy to trash - but he was a major underground player for ages before he blew. People forget that."[65]

The recognition of the intersection of culture and commerce is implicit in her statements. Another user with the tag *beautifawll* presents a more personal take on the state of Hip Hop today. In speaking of the mainstream she writes:

> "i jus get tired ov hearin the same lyrics bein sed over and over like dey stuk on repeat or sumthin,when i was younger i strted listenin 2 hiphop cuz it made me feel gud n helped me when i was goin thru struggles with my family (was basicalli my drug)n it used 2 hav meanin which helpd me fink alot but now its wearin thin…den i srtd listenin 2 [underground UK Hip Hop] n it felt like the meanin was bak.meanin aint how bad ur life is or how many drugs u tuk or even how many times u bin shot at meanin is sumthin dat shud make u fink not make u feel sorri 4 dem cuz ov how badly there life is f*cked up,what happened to the hiphop that used to comfort me when i was younger?"[66]

Finally, the thoughts of 1Xtra DJ Nesha on listener patronage of mainstream versus underground Hip Hop:

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[65] *1X Messageboard*, "Non-Commercial Hip Hop Fans" BBC 1Xtra. Aug 2005. 13 Aug 2005. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/1xtra/F1865405?thread=731546>.
[66] *1X Messageboard*, "Non-Commercial Hip Hop Fans" BBC 1Xtra. Aug 2005. 13 Aug 2005. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/1xtra/F1865405?thread=731546&skip=60&show=20>.

> "At least in the US when hip hop was underground, people went out and bought the music because it related to their struggle. How many of you drive Bentleys and drink Crystal?? Yet you'd still spend your money on a dream-peddler than a man from East who's hustling just to pay for his studio time?" [67]

Hip Hop has grown into a global force and nowhere is this fact more salient than in the African Diaspora itself. Because of the "politics of authenticity" that largely defines it, youth from Africa and throughout the Diaspora have taken on the trappings of urban African-American culture as a symbol of pride and of Pan-African unity. Yet that pride is subject to the same warped visions of Blackness that are being marketed to youth here in the United States. A recent op-ed in the online edition of the Black Star News details the experience of an African-American cyclist in Malawi, who is shocked to find a store called "Nigger" manned by two Malawians. David Sylvester writes:

> "I asked the guys what was up with the store name. After hearing my obvious non-Malawian accent and figuring out that I was from America, the man thumped his chest proudly and said, "P-Diddy New York City! We are the niggers!"[68]

In his online travel log Sylvester cites numerous experiences of being referred to as a "nigger" as a matter of course during his travels in Ethiopia and Kenya.[69] I have had

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[67] *1X Messageboard*, "Non-Commercial Hip Hop Fans" BBC 1Xtra. Aug 2005. 13 Aug 2005. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/1xtra/F1865405?thread=731546&skip=20&show=20>.
[68] David Sylvester, " 'Nigger' Restaurant in Africa," *The Black Star News Online Edition* 3 Aug 2005. 13 Aug 2005. <http://blackstarnews.com/?c=122&a=1561>.
[69] *Kevin Bowser Scholarship Fund*, ed. David Sylvester, Contribute2.org, <http://www.contribute2.org/update3.htm>.

similar experiences in my trips home to Ghana. In July of 2004 I conducted the first in a series of interviews with "Hiplife" pioneer Reggie Rockstone. During our conversation he offered the following insight into the influence of Western Hip Hop on the lexicon of Ghanaian youth:

> "As far as the influence, what effect. Its um, you know, they might watch the videos and hear the word "nigger" and "bitch" and all that shit, and they think its hip. So sometimes kids'll roll up on you and say some wild shit like, you know "wassup bitch?" You know. They fuckin'…they be on the radio and give a shout out and say, say "what you doin' tonight?" "Yeah, I'm with my bitch" you know, cuz they don't know. But then the power of the word too, you gotta' understand , it's what the word represents, cuz to him, you see it don't have the same…back drop"[70]

I could cite numerous other examples from interviews I've conducted with members of the Hiplife community over the last two years. Stories of young Ghanaian men carrying guns in the streets of Accra[71] – a city where criminal gun violence has been virtually unheard of – because they want to emulate their American heroes. Footage of Ghanaian college students who believe that African-Americans are the upperclass of American society, because they've never seen White people with such cars and so much jewelry as the Blacks they see on TV.[72]

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[70] Interview conducted with Reggie Rockstone, "Hiplife" Pioneer. Accra, July 2004.
[71] Interview conducted with Black Santino, DJ at VibeFM. Accra, July 2004.
[72] Interview conducted with DJ Moe, student and DJ at University of Ghana, Legon. Accra, July 2004.

And yet despite all this I believe that there is hope in and for Hip Hop. That hope does not lie in romantic notions of the "authentic," but in the real possibility of creating new institutions that both serve and represent the communities from which they draw creative and commercial fuel. I further believe, that the hope for a real and representative Hip Hop lies not in the hoods of New York or LA or Chicago, but in those of São Paulo, Lagos and Dakar. I mention these locales because they have all produced Hip Hop artists that have achieved regional or international acclaim[73] without an affiliation with the major labels. Further many of the most popular of these artists have done so without stooping to the marketing of explicit sex, senseless violence and gross commercialism that characterizes mainstream Hip Hop in the U.S.

Is it mere coincidence that Black artists selling Black music targeted to Black audiences through Black-owned production and distribution outlets are eschewing the undermining of Black humanity in the building of their careers? I don't believe so. I will not go so far as to claim that all or even most artists in these communities manage to escape the standard nihilistic ethos of mainstream Hip Hop. My research thus far, however, indicates that artists who would here be known as "conscious" rappers – and thus relegated to the periphery of the industry – have in fact taken a much more central role in the Hip Hop industries of these developing nations.[74]

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[73] Examples include Racionais MCs from Brazil, 2Face Idibia of Nigeria and Daara J in Senegal.

[74] Reggie Rockstone – the pioneer of the Ghanaian Hiplife movement – for example, avoids explicit sexual and violent imagery in his music, and nonetheless remains one of the best-known artists in Ghana, has won a continent-wide Kora award in 2004 for best music video, and recently completed a collaboration with international Dancehall Reggae star Beenie Man.

Which brings me to my closing points. If writers like Nelson George, Norman Kelley, Yvonne Bynoe and others are correct in arguing that the Black community in the United States has suffered for its unwillingness to invest in the development of a Black Music Industry, then perhaps that mistake can be avoided and potentially rectified in the development of a Pan-African Music Industry rooted in those territories ignored by the major labels – places currently poor in cash but rich in the heritage of African descended musics, in the potential for economic advancement[75] and in love for the spirit and possibility of Hip Hop. Again Norman Kelley:

> "While the black public is vaguely aware of the relationship between African-Americans and the recording industry, it has rarely been offered a historical overview or even economic strategies to help rectify the situation. Thus, some of rap's most embarrassing vulgarities and its glorification of social pathologies are indirect payback for the black leadership's record of benign neglect of its own cultural patrimony."[76]

It is in the effort to educate the Black public throughout the African Diaspora about the realities of the relationship between music, community and industry that the intellectual resources of the Black intelligentsia are sorely needed. Scholars of Black music and particularly Hip Hop must familiarize themselves with the structures and function of the Recording Industry in order for their analyses to be more than Pollyannish. Because many of these scholars do not in fact have substantive experience working in the Hip Hop

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[75] Carol Pineau, "The Africa You Never See," *Washingtonpost.com* 17 April 2005. 15 Aug 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A58294-2005Apr16.html>.
[76] N. Kelley 16.

Industry either as artists or industrialists, it is even more imperative that they prioritize educating themselves on a side of the story that is intentionally obfuscated to both insiders and outsiders by the marketing engines of the Industry itself.

Finally I would like to close with some thoughts on an observation by popular music scholar Reebee Garofalo. He writes:

> "Were it not for the artificial separation of the races, popular-music history might read surprisingly differently."[77]

I believe he is quite right. Were it not for the "artificial separation of the races," Blacks might actually own the products and representation of their culture. The existence of this artificial separation, however, necessitates a kind of "re-segregation" of the Music Industry based on lines of racial and ideological autonomy. Black people need to do more than make their own music – they need to be the ones selling it. Anything short of this and our voices will continue to belong to someone else.

[77] Garofalo 136.

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