

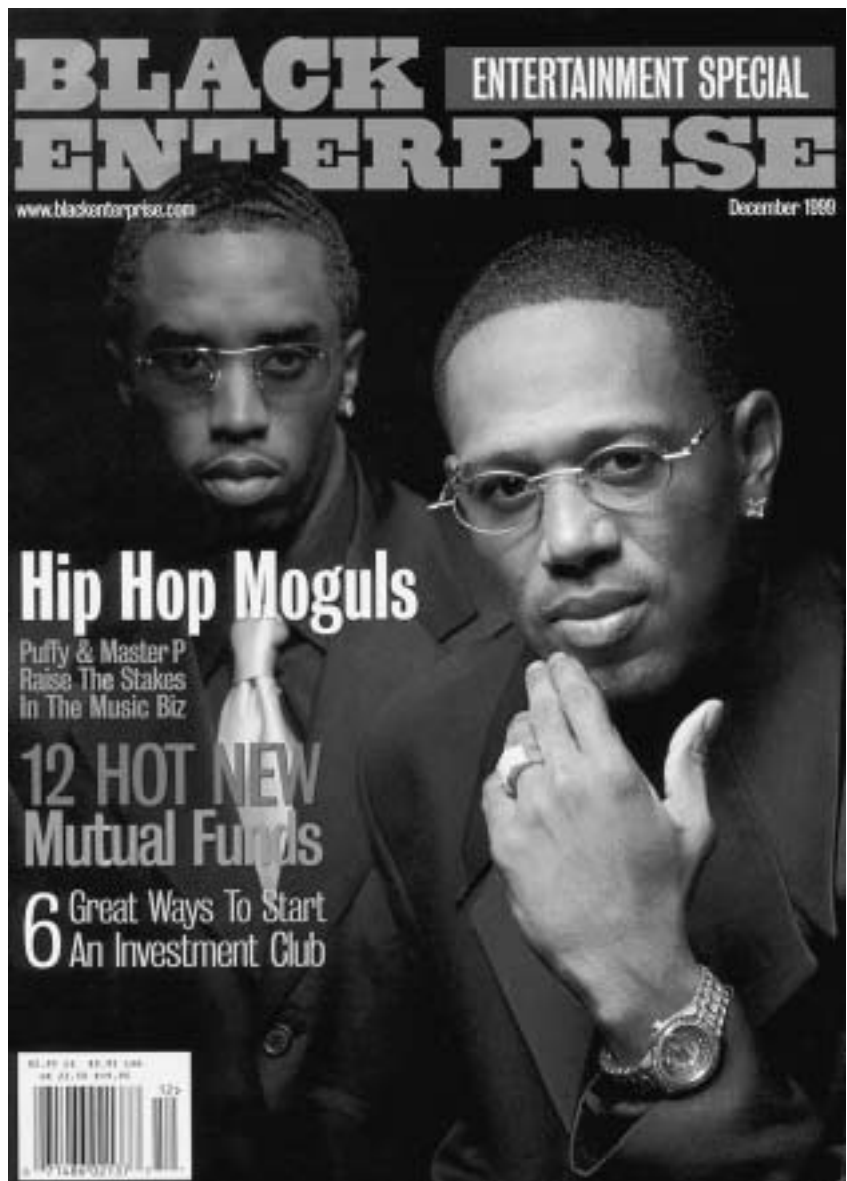
"I Don't Like to Dream about Getting Paid"

REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE HIP-HOP MOGUL

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During the Clinton 1990s—a time not so long ago when the social consensus rendered “the ballot box and the box office [as] one”¹—the ensemble of aspirations and practices that constitute hip-hop culture became accepted as common-sense elements of the American experience. In this article, I describe this process of incorporation by paying attention to a figure who proved catalytic to this cultural movement, the “hip-hop mogul.” On the one hand, the hip-hop mogul bears the stamp of American tradition, since the figure is typically male, entrepreneurial, and prestigious both in cultural influence and personal wealth. The hip-hop mogul is an icon, therefore, of mainstream power and consequently occupies a position of inclusion within many of the nation’s elite social networks and cosmopolitan cultural formations. On the other hand, the hip-hop mogul symbolizes something new about traditional American corporate culture since he is also typically young (under the age of 50), typically African American, and typically tethered either literally or symbolically to America’s disenfranchised inner cities. He is, therefore, worthy of further critical scrutiny because he crystallizes and makes visible a variety of social tensions that are otherwise so widely scattered across disparate social knowledge formations as to go either unnoticed or unmentioned. Young black and Latino entertainers and entrepreneurs like Sean “P-Diddy” Combs, Russell Simmons, Percy “Master P” Miller, Jennifer Lopez, and Damon Dash thus bring together, at a point of prominent visibility and maximum volatility, an expansive constellation of discursive formations and the requisite ideological tensions that inhere within them, whether they concern social identity politics or issues of equal opportunity and social mobility.

Politically, the hip-hop mogul becomes a charged figure precisely because of his ability to appeal to the varied sensibilities of apparently disassociated public spheres. In this respect, the emergence of the hip-hop mogul in contemporary American culture over roughly the past decade, and his ascension to the uppermost layers of the nation’s celebrity classes during that span, also raises the issue of “representation” both in a semiotic sense—as may regard the codes and symbols through which these figures generate social recognition—and in terms of an ethical responsibility to serve as stewards for the thoughtful composition of these codes as



Sean Combs and Percy Miller herald the millennial emergence of the “Hip Hop Moguls.” Cover photograph copyright *Black Enterprise* magazine, December 1999, reprinted with permission

they may “stand in for” the desires and values of those individuals who are not eligible to occupy similar positions of mass mediation and discursive credibility.

The axis around which this representational dilemma revolves is the mogul’s glamorous lifestyle, which serves as a symbolic proxy for the more mundane strivings of those with whom the mogul shares an apparent racial or ethnic affiliation. The hip-hop mogul is not intelligible without credible accounts of the lavish manner in which he leads his life, nor is he intelligible unless his largesse connotes not only his personal agency but also a structural condition that squelches the potential agency of so many others. What makes the hip-hop mogul significant is the degree to which his celebrity alleviates the tension within this symbolic relationship by appealing to the power of socially competitive consumption as a viable mode of civic participation and personal fulfillment. Indeed, I will argue that the hip-hop mogul’s rise to social and cultural prominence is symptomatic of a new paradigm in the nation’s long-standing consumptive ethos,² one in which average people engage in a push for what commentators have dubbed the distinction of “mass prestige,” a phenomenon whereby “America’s middle-market consumers . . . [trade] up to higher levels of quality and taste . . . while feeding their aspirations for a better life.”³ In short, the mogul inspires his more downtrodden constituents to “buy in” to the emerging paradigm of accessible luxury and social status and in the process assumes an influential role as social mediator. Thus, the hip-hop mogul exemplifies the changing dimensions of African American political platforms for those generations born after the civil rights movement, particularly the changing regard for the residual modern social ideal of an aspiring “mass” social formation as a meaningful referent and basis for an activist-oriented black public sphere. Similarly, the emergence of the hip-hop mogul as a visual signifier for the “good life” identifies growth-mediated forms of social uplift as rapidly normalizing black political discourses, as opposed to the support-led communal development blueprints from the civil rights era. What remains unclear is the relationship between the hip-hop mogul’s ability to represent opulence and aspiration and the mogul’s ability to signify and enable enhanced modes of development and freedom for communities wherein such enhancements would mean quite a lot.⁴

Taking an ethical approach, I will identify and examine the primary discursive frameworks through which the hip-hop mogul achieves relative social intelligibility and will subsequently interrogate the extent to which, and with what effects, his upward mobility becomes emblematic of the aspirations of a largely disenfranchised constituency. To what extent do hip-hop’s captains of industry capitalize upon those pent-up ambitions

and how did this paradoxical form of social, cultural, and economic currency achieve such a profound level of liquidity during the 1990s bull market? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what explains the longevity of the mogul's mainstream circulation as an index of prosperity long after other symbolic elements of the 1990s growth cycle have either dissolved or been discredited?

Theoretical and Historical Contexts for the Hip-hop Mogul's Emergence and Incorporation

To the best of my knowledge, the hip-hop mogul reached a critical mass of public recognition and acclaim in 1999, at the peak of the record-breaking "long boom" in U.S. economic expansion. Curiously, while other prominent figures of the period—from the celebrity CEO, celebrity publicist, celebrity magazine publisher, celebrity financial news anchor, celebrity equity analyst, and even the celebrity president—have been brought low by impeachment, corporate scandal, bear market, technological change, and post-September 11 geopolitical uncertainty, the hip-hop mogul's efficacy as a symbol for a bygone golden age persists. Rather than utilize the hip-hop mogul as a point of departure for an empirical investigation of the likelihood of future capital investment and productivity gains, I would like to suggest that he is exemplary of a dominant cultural logic that seems more durable than any particular business or investment cycle, and symptomatic of a cultural propensity that strives for a synergistic balance between systemic efficiency and productively disruptive narratives of cultural irreverence. Indeed, in this era of late capitalism and American empire, novel conditions for social identity formation and knowledge production have evolved whereby the mutually exclusive polarities of individual and systemic truth claims merge at the level of commercial necessity, if not at the level of ideological intention.

Jean-François Lyotard has been one of the more prescient and lucid of the scholars who have focused on the links within postmodern times between narratives of liberation and narratives of productivity, and his thoughts on the "performative" aspect of the relationship deserve special mention at this stage of my discussion. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard notes that the dominant power apparatus's need for synergy between the networks of regulation and social agency complicates the exertion of its influence over the social body's widely scattered knowledge formations. Lyotard describes this crisis of knowledge as a residual analytical binary between scientific knowledge, which he calls "speculative," and narrative knowledge, which he refers to as "emancipatory." In

the face of a profusion of different “language games,” or local accounts of “the real,” scientific knowledge offers a totalizing narrative that operates on the basis of selective assessment and exclusion, in a manner analogous to what Foucault has called a “regime of truth.” Therefore, the narrative of speculation is generated by entities that Lyotard calls “decision makers,” who have a pedagogical and somewhat magisterial relationship to the people. Since the various communities within the social field do not play the knowledge games of the broader culture according to any shared set of rules, interactions between these localities are not stable, or even necessarily tenable. Undaunted, the decision makers scan the dissensual field in order to grant the clamor a measure of utility.

Lyotard insists that this selection process is a hallmark of post-Enlightenment society’s most pernicious form of hyperrationality and a subtle form of authoritarianism. Within this matrix of officialdom, the people go against the grain to generate narratives of liberation in a quest for self-legitimation. These narratives call for “inclusion,” whereby local knowledge is employed by the people in the name of their full participation in the social order. Unfortunately, Lyotard says, these narratives reify rather than dismantle the elitist structure of which the people are so justifiably skeptical.

It is at this juncture, I contend, that Lyotard suggests how the body politic’s irreverent narratives of freedom might be said to contribute to the dominant discourses that cohere into something called a “New Economy.” Lyotard argues, for instance, that the people’s narrative of neo-mastery and their rhetoric of emancipation eventually lead to the predominance of what he calls “performativity,” or an “optimization of the global relationship between input and output.” Eventually, in other words, the dominant hegemonic order learns how to absorb certain aspects of cultural resistance into its own mandate for self-preservation. With regard to social agency, Lyotard insists:

One’s mobility in relation to these language game effects . . . is tolerable . . . at least within certain limits (and the limits are vague); it is even solicited by regulatory mechanisms, and in particular by the self-adjustments that the system undertakes in order to improve its performance. It may even be said that the system can and must encourage such movement to the extent that it combats its own entropy; the novelty of an unprecedented “move,” with its correlative displacement of a partner or group of partners, can supply the system with that increased performativity it forever consumes.⁵

Essentially, I want to argue that the American postmodern cultural logic of empire is one whereby (1) conditions arise that are ripe for the incorporation of the people’s rhetoric of emancipation within the normalizing

tenets of the capitalist world system⁶ and (2) narratives of utopian impulse found within many forms of black expressive culture, and particularly hip-hop culture, have helped supply the specifically American discourse of empire with the necessary manna of “performativity” it needs to sustain itself as global Leviathan. Indeed, during the 1990s, hip-hop evolved from being the symbolic anathema of the dominant commercial apparatus to serving as one of its most strategically effective symbolic instruments. This evolution is a function of both black cultural producers’ increased ability to reference the mainstream marketplace as a locus for identity formation,⁷ and the ability of white youth to rearticulate black style back to official market logic via an increasingly seamless form of stylistic adoption. These newfangled cool poses, like those of an Eminem, can convey the sexual frisson of older social dispensations like Jim Crow while somehow managing to avoid the baldest forms of moral panic typical to boundary transgression.⁸

Such viral outbreaks of mass trend adoption, like that which occurred around the film *8 Mile*, form the unpredictable “tipping points”⁹ that are every marketer’s dream. At such moments of excitement, empirical figures on ratios of risk to reward are not nearly so persuasive as the blind willingness to believe in any particular form’s ability to generate a profitable outcome. In speculative historical eras, as in individual acts of gambling, there is a moment, of variable duration, when anything goes, as the saying goes—moments when not even the magistrates of officialdom know how to bring historical precedent to bear on present and future outcomes and exert a moral claim on the recognition of value. At topsy-turvy moments like these, when the dowdy appear willing to cast aside their hallowed pretensions of dignity and the appropriate calculus for valuation is anyone’s guess, power is somewhat up for grabs, and a semblance of freedom is more evident because the actual utility and value of precepts and goods are called into question. Thus, a reordering of hierarchies takes place, and depending on where one previously stood in the pecking order, that may not be such a bad situation within which to find oneself.¹⁰ In fact, when entire societies or nations find themselves mired in an identity crisis or when their confidence in the ability to carry on or preserve past glories is flagging, they can often wish for such indeterminate periods of social and economic speculation since they offer the opportunities for repositioning and resurrection. The 1990s New Economy offered just such an opportunity for protean national redefinition.

Black cultural producers and their arbiters—chiefly the hip-hop moguls and their kin—benefited, to a certain degree, from this reversal of authority. Indeed, as they rose to more elevated positions along the social hierarchy, Generation X and Y’s cultural tastes and consumption habits



By the eve of the twenty-first century, hip-hop vernacular had clearly become part of the New Economy sales pitch. Courtesy Continental Airlines advertising department

helped make quite a few black cultural producers wealthier and more influential. Thus, by the decade's close, hip-hop culture, for example, though still vilified on occasion, had nevertheless become more respected as a model for the new "horizontally structured" business world and therefore a more tolerable presence in the U.S. millennial celebration of prolonged economic growth. Indeed, black popular culture's symbolic strength, fueled as it was by new money—something that all adults either envy or admire—inevitably enabled the black cultural producers who best embodied the new era of "Nobrow Culture"¹¹ to move toward the center of the nation's widely circulated, and enthusiastically emulated, celebrity class.¹²

Within such a virtual matrix of interaction, black cultural expressions emanating from the bottom of the social hierarchy and the standards of social and moral value that they enact and uphold have fashioned performative innovations that are best viewed in terms of what Clay Christensen once called "disruptive technologies."¹³ On this count, the inner city's constructions of cultural value continually arise within media representation as managerial problems for the magistrates of official knowledge, including traditional black leadership. As the 1990s have lapsed into the twenty-first century, however, black cultural tastes have increasingly become—most notably through the commodification of hip-hop culture—extremely efficient devices for extracting profit from the consumption habits of America's youth. Ideas on how to identify and market black cultural knowledge and tastes have come to embody dynamic management solutions. Herein we find the hip-hop mogul's primary mandate, namely the effective identification, packaging, and symbolic management of the politically and socially volatile minority underclass's expressive culture.

In representational terms, these solutions are all about the packaging of possibility and not outright containment or foreclosure. In other words,

the ongoing project for American industrial managers, particularly those—like the newly emergent hip-hop moguls—who govern the industries of culture and leisure, has been to harness the uniquely modern experiential opportunities afforded by America’s oceanic multicultural flows in the name of commodity production, consumption, and further economic growth. In the United States, this endeavor has always insisted upon using art and performance to overcome social stratification, thereby enabling new modes of interracial, interethnic, and class-transcendent contact, no matter how circumscribed and degraded such contact may inevitably have been. Indeed, in American popular culture, the threatening, yet strangely reassuring, proximity of the other within the crowd must necessarily accompany the individual’s auspicious quest toward modernity’s Holy Grail of enlightenment, since that proximity exacts “the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be held: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock.”¹⁴

Indeed, through the boundary-defying powers of the electronic and digital media, socially isolated territories of allegedly disreputable knowledge, such as American inner cities, have become essential to the new modes of personal identity—and social knowledge formation.¹⁵ This unlikely symbolic reversal has been progressive to the extent that it has shattered the old high-low cultural hierarchy predicated upon “good breeding,” “proper schooling,” and “aesthetic appreciation” and has placed the market’s “equal opportunity” brand of consumption at the center of the individual’s protean capacity for self-development.

Many black cultural practitioners—especially those in the hip-hop entertainment sectors—certainly benefited from this phenomenon, and with the bottom-most layers of minority communities deemed more valuable for the sake of the global entertainment complex than had been previously thought possible, rap music unit sales escalated significantly. In 2000, for example, “the Recording Industry Association of America [estimated] that rap music generated more than \$1.8 billion in sales, accounting for 12.9 percent of all music purchases” and “has surpassed country music as the nation’s second most popular genre after rock and roll.”¹⁶ These figures have since softened, along with the music industry as a whole, but the fact remains that hip-hop culture has unquestionably solidified itself over the past half-decade as a key rampart of the national structure of feeling.¹⁷

Rap’s explosive growth trends during the better part of the 1990s also led to unprecedented black economic clout for the hip-hop moguls, with two hip-hop entrepreneurs, Percy Miller (a.k.a. Master P) and Sean Combs (a.k.a. P-Diddy) recently listed squarely in the middle of *Fortune* magazine’s roster of “America’s Forty Richest under 40.” Master P sat



Anne Slater and Foxy Brown revel in the social pretensions of “bling.” Roxanne Lowit, *New York*, 22 February 1999

directly behind Vinny Smith, chairman and CEO of Quest Software, with a net worth of \$293.8 million; P-Diddy, whose personal fortune came in at a cool \$293.7 million, ranked ahead of such luminaries as actress Julia Roberts, the golf wunderkind Tiger Woods, and a slew of technology and software tycoons.¹⁸ As exemplary signifiers of the New Economy’s ability to promote Dionysian categorical dissolution, select hip-hop glitterati

became widely deemed as unlikely, but ultimately legitimate, representatives of the new American state of prosperity, privy as they now were to a magical Shangri-la of mushrooming capital gains and seemingly endless liquidity.¹⁹ As the 1990s wound to a close, many forward-thinking tastemakers of the chattering classes were keen to feature hip-hop artists prominently at the most swank social galas of the day, whether real or imagined.

In a February 1999 issue of *New York* magazine, for example, one finds a retro-inspired, black-and-white photo spread heralded by a printed announcement that reads:

You are invited to a feverish fin de siècle fling, Manhattan-style.
What will you eat?
Whom will you dine with?
And what in the world will you wear?²⁰

As a means of relieving this banal bout with premillennial tension, the next few pages convey ample information on how consumption can be articulated with the stylishly adorned body. In the montage of images that follows, the rap diva Foxy Brown is depicted at a table with the aging but spry Manhattan socialite Anne Slater. Foxy is seen sporting a garishly large diamond ring. The photo caption tells us that the bauble belongs to Slater. The caption also points out that the rapper has a 57.7-carat diamond bracelet set in platinum, courtesy of Harry Winston jewelers, draped around her willowy wrist. In keeping with these glitzy accoutrements, both women are smiling brilliantly and appear to be having a grand time, reveling, it seems, in their ability to flow casually between oppositional categories such as “old” and “new,” “high” and “low,” and “rich” and “poor.” During the 1990s, an entirely new repertoire of keywords emerged to refer to such moments of hierarchical deconstruction. Each of them, from “ghetto-fabulous,” to “flossing,” to “bling, bling”—now more commonly shortened to “bling”—all became normalized as mainstream catchphrases that described the hyperconsumption of luxury goods by celebrities and average folk alike. As the millennial countdown accelerated, the New Economy’s already overt promise of social inversion became more and more explicit and so too did the idea that hip-hop’s garish sense of style and taste could signify fashionable abundance and set the millennial standard of even the most highly regarded fashion cognoscenti.²¹

It was not altogether surprising, therefore, to see the hip-hop impresario Sean Combs headlining the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s annual Costume Institute gala merely weeks before the catastrophe-free arrival of Y2K. Imagine! Within a prime citadel of official Western culture—at an end-of-the-century celebration cochaired by *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour and attended by such disparate luminaries as comedian Jerry Seinfeld,

billionaire Ronald Perelman, Miramax Films cochair Harvey Weinstein, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, actress Gwyneth Paltrow, and socialites Patricia Buckley, Nan Kempner, and Alexandra von Furstenberg—rap, the gruff baritone voice of the ghetto, was chosen as the most appropriate musical keynote with which to “ring out the old and ring in the new.”²²

With this notion of tenuous, almost criminal, social collusion apparently in mind, that same year *Time* posed a rhetorical question to its readership that would have been unthinkable when the decade began. “And how will we remember the last days of the ’90s?” the magazine asked. “Most likely, to the rough-hewn beat of rap. Just as F. Scott Fitzgerald lived in the jazz age, just as Dylan and Jimi Hendrix were among the rulers of the age of rock, it could be argued that we are living in the age of hip-hop.”²³ Similarly, the *New York Times* fashion columnist Amy Spindler wrote that when historians recalled the stylish excesses of the Internet gold rush, they would do so in terms of hip-hop’s ascendance as a cultural pacesetter for the champagne and caviar set. “Silicon geeks and dot-comers may earn triple-digit billions,” Spindler noted, “but the folks who *really* have the knack for spending—the true nouveau riche, our Carringtons of the new Millennium—are hip-hop impresarios like Puffy Combs.”²⁴ And what kind of new age goodies did Spindler conflate with the Combs lifestyle? How about the following: a sable vest from Fendi (\$18,500); silver stilettos from the red-hot designer Jimmy Choo (\$650 a pair); an 18-karat gold Tiffany necklace and matching bracelet, both decked out in diamonds (\$33,500 and \$27,000, respectively); a bottle of Burgundy at Alain Ducasse’s new restaurant at the Essex House on Central Park South (\$800); a pound of Crème de la Mer facial lotion designed to spec for NASA (\$1,000); and title to the 90th-floor penthouse at Trump World Tower at United Nations Plaza (\$38 million).

Not surprisingly, rap’s spendthrift ways were hardly marginal practices at that time. Indeed, every major symbolic figure of that halcyon age, from celebrity CEOs and upstart technology entrepreneurs to magazine publishers and publicity mavens, were known for spending lavishly to promote their goods, their services, and themselves. Consequently, rap’s tactics of consumption became articulated rather quickly as a meaningful aspect of the New Economy’s dominant social and cultural formation. Many everyday folk celebrated these figures because during the long boom of the 1990s, more Americans had a chance to have their personal fortunes lofted in the updraft of the speculative winning streak, and they rewarded themselves by spending relatively extravagantly in their own right. Now, however, in light of a jobless recovery, a volatile equities market, and widening federal and state budget deficits, the tide of this inex-

orable period of excess has turned, and everyday people feel less wealthy and more vulnerable. Some even seem prepared to begin sacrificing their whimsies and start spending less.²⁵ Along with this shift in fortune has come a backlash against the members of the New Economy's celebrity wealth class, particularly the CEOs, investment bankers, and equity research analysts who appeared to service their greed by bilking the masses with phony information. Amid this moral crusade, how and why does hip-hop continue to thrive as what one columnist in the *New York Times* calls the last "safe haven for ridiculous expenditure"?²⁶ Why aren't Americans bashing a big spender like rap/R&B diva Jennifer Lopez as vigorously as they are Kenneth Lay, former CEO of the now infamous Enron Corporation, or the free-spending Dennis Kozlowski, former CEO of Tyco, the giant industrial conglomerate?

In the current post-dot-com zeitgeist, it seems that in order to escape the jeremiads against the "fabulous life" of greed and excess, one must view individual wealth and the consumptive practices that accompany it as a legitimate outcome of strenuous striving to succeed, and representative therefore of an unexpected (almost divinely ordained) social mobility that arose against the grain of conventional wisdom. Thus, in most rap devoted to the intractable virtues of "bling," artists regard having "clawed . . . out of a brutal . . . housing project to become a multi-platinum star" as a common theme: "Often it is not even articulated; it goes without saying that the squandering protagonist is a rags-to-riches figure who beat overwhelming odds and has every right to the fruits of that success."²⁷ Thus, the rapper's upwardly mobile ascent is not tethered to a sense of either individual propriety or communal accountability in the same manner as is the ascent of a CEO for a publicly traded company. As the *New York Times* recently quipped, "Sean Combs was once accused of hitting a record executive with a chair and a Champagne bottle, but at least he has never smacked your 401(k) around."²⁸

The typical hip-hop mogul does not have the same degree of culpability for the New Economy's hegemonic meltdown as, say, Morgan Stanley's Internet stock maven Mary Meeker since, unlike the other symbolic figures of the age who have now hit the skids, he never had to sell his customers on anything other than his belief in his own fantasies. His trade is purely in the realm of socially mobile aspirations—the quintessential pixie dust of the postwar American dream.²⁹ Thus, magically, and quite tautologically, he always stands a good chance of convincing his target market of a satisfactory return on their psychic and material investments, and he can continue to be representative of mass expectation of the good life without being responsible for its fulfillment. In the end, neither the corporate CEO of the publicly traded institution nor the equity research ana-

lyst has had such luxury. As Americans continue to ponder the possible shape of populist movements to come in the wake of the dot-com implosion, it might be productive to consider the values, beliefs, and practices that could shape such popular sentiment if it does indeed begin to cohere. It might be fruitful, therefore, to consider the way in which the black youth publics that continue to serve as hip-hop culture's core constituencies imagine the shared utopia toward which they may be attempting to strive.

Hip-hop Utopia and Mass Spectacle in the Black Public Sphere

There has always been a utopian creative impulse within hip-hop culture that defies the progressive political frameworks that prioritize civic, educational, and legal meritocracies over a politics of pleasure and chance that revels in often ill-begotten wealth, street-corner prestige, and explicit sexual titillation. Indeed, prototypical rap utopian fantasies blend ethereal instrumentation with wistful lyrics that offer alternating visions of ghetto upward mobility, intoxication devoid of either physical side effect or legal penalty, unlimited access to sexual pleasure, anti-apocalyptic perseverance, and the end of white world supremacy. In short, they typically represent historical materialist modes that take account of present, past, and future disenfranchised lifestyles in the distinctive linguistic accents of America's various ghetto communities. These typically adolescent renditions of the world are utopian in their frustration with the pauperized and hyperscrutinized status of black and Latino ghetto residents and politically familiar because of their frequent lyrical homage to twentieth-century black empowerment iconography and rhetoric. Yet despite their alternative activist readings of American progress, these songs and their music video corollaries exhibit the sort of generic fixation with commodity culture and upward social mobility that thwart their full recognition as typical grassroots rallying cries. It is precisely the rap utopian imagination's insatiable hunger for the capitalist commodity that alienates so many members of the civil rights era political consensus from black youth culture generally, and prevents them from regarding these subaltern dreamscapes as the stuff of "real politics." Fancying themselves as moral crusaders against the evils of capitalism's "false consciousness," the members of political coalitions from the New Deal and Great Society heydays want the hip-hop generation upstart to reform his or her behavior relative to the contemporary commodity culture of "mass prestige" facilitated by aspiration-savvy marketers and their luxury knock-off merchandise.³⁰

In this manner, a high-minded attitude of Puritan restraint of the civil rights era political establishment stands in contradistinction to the opportunistic demeanor of the hip-hop mogul, who recognizes that utopian aspirations can be bought and sold, and the higher the price the better.³¹ As the labor-oriented activists of industrial-era utopias would like to suggest, the mogul's typical dreamscape is individualistic rather than communal, and its material bounty extends to a limited inner circle composed mostly of the mogul's mother, his crew of friends, his children, and from time to time a lover—just enough people to fit on a private yacht. In the mogul's world of like-minded insiders, gone is much of the “old school” utopian longing for the arrival of a monolithic blackness in a shared promised land. The mogul may lament the plight of the black masses, and he may simulate reference to these constituencies in the name of performative “authenticity,” but he doesn't sacrifice his own quest for the American good life on their behalf. Rather, the mogul's vision of gilded glory is as competitive and exclusive as it is opulent. As the prototypical mogul anthem “Hate Me Now” attests, moguls and their talented minions flaunt their rise from among the ranks of the downtrodden by making public displays of their newly begotten wealth. For the mogul, jealousy, envy, and hatred from the crowd are merely rites of passage; to be the object of such “hatred” merely serves to crystallize his essential charisma and mark him as one of God's chosen few. As far as the mogul is concerned, once his surroundings reach a reasonable facsimile of what he desires, anyone who doesn't approve of his elevated social position can rot in hell.

Frequently, moguls, like their talent rosters, will depict themselves as “gangsters” or members of criminal “families” in the mafioso tradition of Al Capone, John Gotti, and the Gambino crime syndicate. A major aspect of the mogul's utopian sense of freedom is one of identity shifting, or at the least, identity “layering.” In other words, while hip-hop moguls can never be said to deny their racial and ethnic heritage, they are encouraged to use the material aspects of gangster social formations, even those constructed by other ethnic groups, to expand the options for social performativity normally afforded blacks or Latinos. Moguls use “gangsterism,” then, as a trope for escaping the limited “place” afforded minority men of color in American society.

Through the gangster motifs of fast cars, fast women, fancy clothing, strong liquor, and a “never say die” attitude, the mogul can gain social mobility and transcend what Manthia Diawara has called the imprisoning common sense of racial “immanence” that confines black people to the immutable realm of the stereotype.³² Material goods present life-and-death stakes for the mogul's version of utopia precisely because they represent socioeconomic benchmarks of achievement that blacks have been



P-Diddy and family strike a “gangster lean” in juxtaposition to the World Trade Center, weeks before its destruction. Cover photo, *The Source*, September 2001

told will forever elude their grasp. The mogul knows that the world of high-priced merchandise and elite social experiences was not meant for him—indeed, he has been barred by the mainstream “from all social roles not conventionally associated with blackness”³³—however, he refuses to accept the stark terms of this disenfranchisement.

In a certain sense, the word *nigga* is the signifier for comradeship and rivalry that inner-city black men have given to those who make a whole way of life from the loud gestures that preemptively mock the very people who would mock their ghetto strivings for mobility and social significance. Niggas take the heat for their brazen social pageantry without flinching and are willing to pay the ultimate price to make their great escape from the anti-utopia to which they have been relegated. If the nigga lives long enough to realize recompense for his initiative and is savvy enough to leverage his gains within and against his immediate surroundings, then he can graduate from relative obscurity and move up to the more elevated plane occupied by the moguls and their handpicked superstars. While niggas are out to establish their self-worth and prove themselves in a hostile environment, moguls possess the sense of entitlement required to begin speculating on the value of the surrounding world. Given that black disenfranchisement has been predicated upon making black people the objects rather than the subjects of capitalist speculation,

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there is something to be said for the mogul's display of nerve. In fact, it is this gumption that makes him worthy of celebrity status and mass mediation.

However, in a not-so-progressive manner, the mogul achieves his version of utopia via social isolation from, and antagonism toward, less successful ghetto residents—even as he claims, paradoxically, to represent and inspire their aspirations for greater glory. Whether or not he portrays himself as a gangster, above all else, the mogul calibrates the distance between the lowly member of the *hoi polloi* that he once was and the elite persona to which he can now lay claim in terms of money, jewels, automobiles, VIP parties, exotic travel, and an abundance of willing sexual partners.³⁴ In short, the mogul “is a self-made aristocrat, a former member of the underclass who’s raised himself up from its ranks and seized his chance to ‘shine.’”³⁵ Because of his largesse, the mogul is an elect member of the ghetto community, the speculative confidence man extraordinaire, and he regards himself as an activist of sorts, an example to others of what they could make of their lives if they would simply seize the right opportunity when the time comes.³⁶ As self-made men, moguls are not inclined to wait around for social intervention; they spot available opportunities for material advancement and seize them as best they can. They simply want people to get out of their way and let them handle their business.

When those whom the mogul has left behind betray their envy for him and become “playa-haters,”³⁷ they simply let the mogul know that he has done the “right thing,” further reinforcing his solipsistic moral code. This form of spiteful self-absorption that poses as neighborliness is typically at the root of all capitalist-derived notions of community and is one of the more regrettable elements of the postwar consumptive consensus that has infiltrated the ghetto’s childhood dream of what it wants to be when it matures. Nevertheless, despite the relative tedium of the mogul’s message, “rap fans continue to find vicarious enjoyment in the . . . fantasy, in which being hated is the inevitable price for being one of the few who makes it in a world that otherwise guarantees anonymity and poverty for most.”³⁸

Still, the mogul is not solely a figure of ideological alienation, for he can never be too discursively disconnected from the spectacle of the black masses because it is the volatile energy of the crowd that gives him a creative impulse to channel, to package, and to sell. In this respect, the mogul is a figure who attains celebrity through his mastery of what I call the “ghetto sublime,” which means he can grant us thrilling proximity to a form of social danger of truly monumental proportions while simultaneously providing us safe remove from the object of our fascination. The mogul, therefore, is the figure capable of extracting the productive element from the yawning ghetto maw, for the benefit of broader society. This figure is a speculative prospector if ever there was one. The hip-hop

mogul thus simultaneously symbolizes inclusion within and resistance toward mainstream capitalism and emerges as a potent blend of the “speculative con,” the “disciplined self-made man,” and an entrancing figure-head of racial double-consciousness with a capitalist twist.³⁹

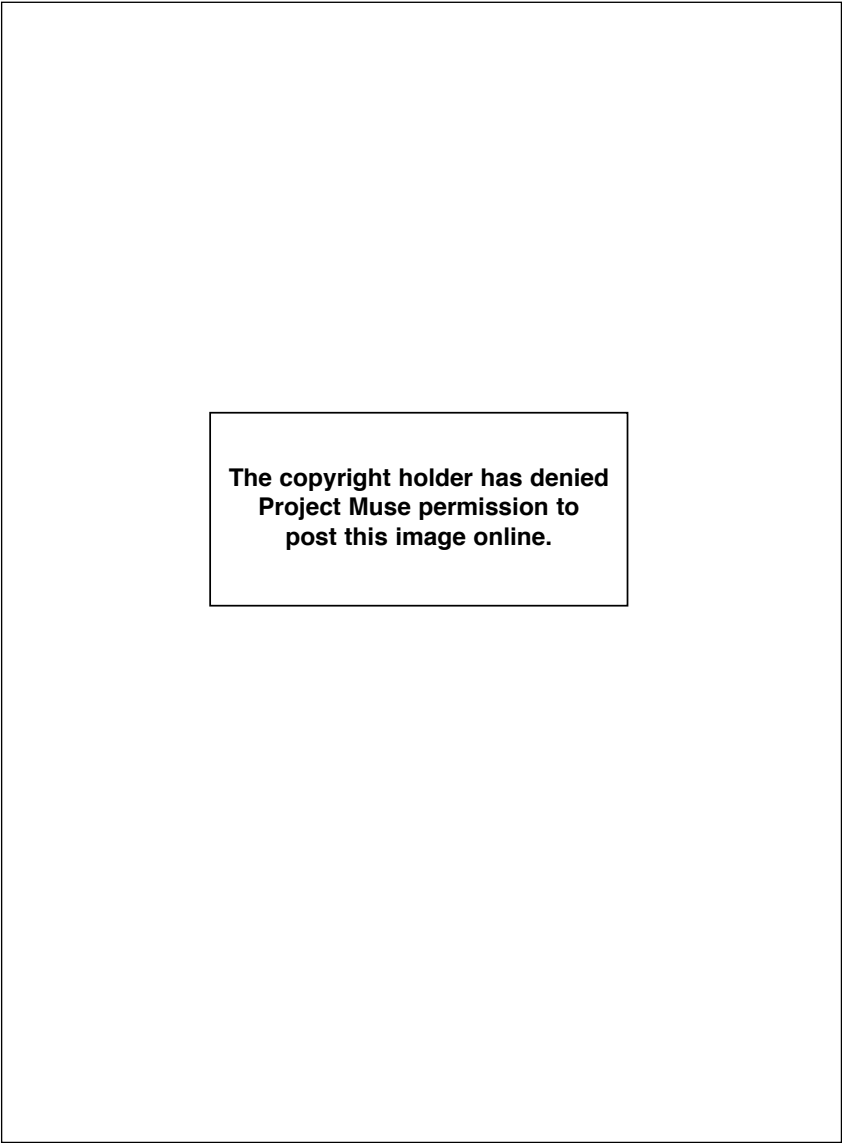
There is always a political dimension to the mogul’s balancing act with respect to the symbolic multitudes of everyday folk. Even as postindustrial American society has almost ceased to imagine the oceanic crowd as a sublime wellspring for social possibility and political engagement, there is still a residual cultural recollection that the masses in the public square once symbolized almost unfathomable “heterogeneity and instability . . . the result of the promiscuous intermingling and physical massing of social classes, age groups, races, nationalities, and genders along the great boulevards of the industrial metropolis . . . atomic particles . . . the result of multiple liquids combined in a single test tube always with an uncertain outcome: a new substance, an explosion, a surge of energy, accelerated decay, a fizzle, new fermentations.”⁴⁰ Hip-hop culture, whether under the auspices of moguls or not, always needs periodically to resurrect this foundational thematic element from its own hallowed past. Indeed, if the mogul cannot claim to understand and be able to tap the volatile energies of the street, he will cease to exist as a viable figure of commercial and cultural enterprise. In this regard, the mogul is the epitome of utopian double-consciousness with respect to the masses, for he

is the man of the crowd: at once immanent and transcendent, at once an insider and an outsider, at once everyman and the exceptional individual who provides the masses with a singular identity, a singular face, a mirror image of a sovereign collectivity that is now always in motion. . . . Fully swept up in the multicolored and polyphonic waves of modern revolution, he is able to channel their tidal fury towards higher and nobler ends: national sovereignty, liberty, empire, progress.⁴¹

Thus, for all of his upwardly mobile pretensions, the hip-hop mogul needs the spectacle of the more impoverished masses for they give him the raw material, the literal human canvas, for which, and upon which, his ascent can be made emblematic. Even as American ghetto cityscapes have formed a contemporary scene of “excess with respect to the imagination’s ability to comprehend the whole [that] renders a plunge into the abyss inevitable,” the hip-hop mogul has been a useful figure in the sedimentation of recent American hegemonic formations, for he enables “the plunge [to be] productive because it is controlled.”⁴²

The emergence of the hip-hop mogul is symptomatic of an age wherein, despite a prevailing wish to the contrary, the crowd’s volatile possibility for social change has become exhausted as a model of political

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Rapper Jay-Z brings hip-hop culture to Wall Street. Cover photo, *Time Out New York*, 13–20 September 2001

mobilization, even as it has become a highly marketable simulacrum of exactly that sort of transgressive human potential. In this respect, we might regard the rise of the hip-hop mogul as not so much the sign of the end of history on an unnecessarily grand scale—and given prevailing diplomatic conditions on the geopolitical stage such an extrapolation might not even be possible—but at least as a leading indicator that in the

United States “modernization has run its full course” and the “model of politics based upon the physical massing of bodies in public spaces or the performance of symbolic marches in real time and space” is being “superceded by a politics of gestures that relies upon virtual, indirect, and asynchronous forms of presence, organization, and participation.”⁴³ From this basis, mass gatherings like the Million Man March are less viable as templates for the mass expectation and mass action of the future and less significant than the proliferation of more diverting images of sensuous collectivity. These new forms of mediated mass utopia might include the carnivalesque revelry of Damon Dash and Jay-Z’s celebrated “Big Pimpin” video, and the updated “Dr. Frankenstein and the monster” iconography of rapper 50 Cent’s video for his hit single “In Da Club,” wherein a black “gangsta” is created in a pristine secret laboratory and inserted into a writhing mass of dancing black, brown, and white bodies at a nightclub, under the panoptic scrutiny of his creators (Dr. Dre and Eminem), who observe the mass spectacle from behind a two-way mirror in the manner of some weird virtual-reality focus group. In varied dreamscapes such as these, hip-hop moguls represent new forms of iconographic leadership that emerge from within and at the same time from beyond the populist mob. Thus, the hip-hop mogul utilizes his marketing skills to become both the fuse that kindles the crowd into a riotous frenzy and simultaneously an effective mechanism for its discipline, regulation, and conversion into circumscribed simulacra.

Conclusion

Typically, the utopian imagination of progressive factions and coalitions in American political life responds to the disaffecting tendencies of the marketplace with a prophetic critique that refutes the prevailing capitalist obsession with unfettered speculation, commodity exchange, and social inequality.⁴⁴ The New Deal–Great Society consensus that held sway in the American political landscape between 1947 and 1970—and has been on the decline, along with American real-wage growth, ever since—generally rejected the fantasy world of the free market as the primary locus for utopian yearning because the market demeans the sanctity of the social contract and leads to the excessive self-interest at the root of many manifestations of evil. For adherents of this almost archaic sensibility, the commodity is the cutting edge wielded by a system of domination that sunders more egalitarian forms of communal bonding while it sows reactionary seedlings of resignation among the citizenry.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, despite the work of progressives to shift national civic objectives to something other

than commerce and common stock dividends, and even after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq, “millions of Americans are refocusing on the one thing that most defines their lives, the upward and downward ticks of interest rates, the gyrations of their mutual funds, the achingly palpable lure and temptations of wealth.”⁴⁶ This is to be expected at a time when the majority of American households and an increasing portion of the electorate have some sort of ownership of common stock.

Indeed, by 2001, the Federal Reserve determined that 52 percent of the nation’s citizens had some form of stock ownership, with the percentage of all stock-holding households moving upward from 31.6 percent in 1989, 36.7 percent in 1992, and 48.8 percent in 1998. Politically speaking, the growing ranks of small investors represent an emerging and potentially significant political bloc within which blacks are sorely under-represented.⁴⁷ Among registered voters, shareholders now outnumber those not in the market by a ratio of 53 percent to 43 percent.⁴⁸ The escalating visibility of this group signifies a new development in the story of America’s postindustrial evolution in the age of globalization, one that redefines the very meaning of mass political constituencies. Indeed, if “every political and cultural struggle of the past century that called itself democratic was waged for a mass constituency, and in its name,” then it seems that shareholders rather than citizen-workers may constitute the next significant electoral bloc of the twenty-first century.⁴⁹ This trend represents a challenge to progressives and hip-hop moguls alike who are seeking to overtly revitalize the support-led social movements of the past—as Russell Simmons is attempting to do through his Hip-hop Summit Action Network—because, for all of the democratic changes wrought by commercial entertainment, the fact of lagging asset-ownership within black communities relative to that of white ones continues to exert a structuring influence upon American social life. Quite simply, African Americans are generally not part of the rapidly growing “equity class.” This means that many blacks do not share an important characteristic of contemporary American life with their fellow citizens. Recent statistics suggest, for example, that blacks “still account for just 5% of stock investors.”⁵⁰

Besides constructing an entirely new electoral category—one over-represented as white—the migration of average citizens to the asset-owning class has had tangible economic spillover effects. Indeed, the typical American’s stock portfolio enjoyed healthy gains during the 1990s, rising in value from \$10,800 in 1989 to \$25,000 in 1998. Stock holdings across a broader base of American households helped send the net worth per family from \$59,700 in 1989 to \$71,600 in 1998.⁵¹ These gains have been preserved largely through asset rotation into real estate ventures and holdings despite the past three years of bear market downturn in the

equity markets. Again, according to the latest Federal Reserve statistics, “the median net worth for all families rose 10% to \$86,100 in 2001 from 1998 and was up 41% from 1992.”⁵² To some extent, these figures of aggregate gains in household wealth mask growing discrepancies between white and black households. Indeed, the most recent statistics indicate that while the median net worth for whites rose 17 percent in 2001 to \$120,900, it fell 4.5 percent to \$17,000 for minorities.⁵³ Part of the reason for the durability and recent increase in the wealth gap has been the underparticipation of African Americans in equity ownership. Perhaps this discrepancy enables minority celebrity figures like the hip-hop mogul to assume such grand representational proportions through the simulation of communal wealth in the guise of individual achievement.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these sobering circumstances, politicians who seek to galvanize and subsequently win over the slumbering hip-hop electoral base will have to go against the conventional wisdom of the civil rights establishment, who typically are slow to consider growth-mediated paths out of disenfranchisement. This reluctance clearly stems, in part, from a tendency to view the aspiring spending patterns of the minority working classes as pathological. Indeed, a wide range of potential progressive factions that could coalesce into productive political coalitions—from civil rights-era holdovers even to members of the hip-hop generation—do not have faith that underprivileged groups will know what to do with their capital gains when they monetize them and are convinced that these groups will go on detrimental spending binges in pursuit of unnecessary trinkets of the high life.⁵⁴ Indeed, popular comedians of color like the cable channel Comedy Central’s David Chappelle consistently mock the hypothetical scenario of working-class black Americans feverishly hoarding cartons of menthol cigarettes and urban athletic apparel in the unlikely event that the U.S. government were to grant blacks monetary reparations for slavery. Following from this prevailing assumption regarding minority and working-class “false consciousness,” many progressives also generally contend that to advocate even a small measure of the growth-mediated approach for social development, as Jesse Jackson has done with his Wall Street Project initiative,⁵⁵ is to capitulate to a consensus that does “not dream of a future qualitatively different from the present . . . [and at] best . . . envision[s] a modified society with bigger pieces of pie for more customers.”⁵⁶

It may be time, however, to give growth-mediated measures for social development more consideration and find ways to articulate this need persuasively to democratic constituencies. Bruce Robbins interrogates the reticence within progressive constituencies of the academy—especially those ensconced within the interdisciplinary bastions of cultural studies

that have their own celebrity academic figures who enjoy a quasi-mogul status in their own right—to adopt this rhetorical stance. He asks:

Does the critic's, anthropologist's, or sociologist's progress indeed *require* arrest and stasis in the characters or cultures under discussion? The one example of upward mobility that is not doubted, indeed seems only confirmed by all this complexity of argument and research, is the upward mobility, the “cumulative” advancement, of [cultural studies] itself. But it remains to be seen whether the contrast between an upward mobility blocked in society and permitted in scholarship is really a necessary one. Could the latter have perhaps worked just as well if the research had shown the opposite, in other words that there *is* significant upward mobility in society? Or could this alternative logic only emerge in some different disciplinary constellation?⁵⁷

Given the unlikely prospect for politically viable alternatives, it would be wise for progressives to consider ways to encourage their respective constituencies to prepare for growth-mediated modes of communal development and upward mobility in various public spheres, even if such propositions undermine their typical interventionist methods and motivations.⁵⁸ Clearly, lack of financial aptitude is an unnecessary obstacle before the desire of minority populations to share in the nation's economic good fortune when capital investment cycles turn favorable. As Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan himself advocates, “improving basic financial education . . . is essential to help young people avoid poor financial decisions that can take years to overcome.”⁵⁹ Efforts to utilize the allure of celebrity figures like the hip-hop moguls for such pedagogical imperatives need to be explored and pursued. Such efforts will prove effective, however, only if they do not come across to would-be progressive constituencies as “holier than thou” discourses that seek to convert and cure the mass pathology of “consuming prestige” but rather as empathetic discourses of fellowship that acknowledge that the pursuit of wealth, and the symbolic elements of the “good life” that wealth enables, are part of the very fabric of freedom in modern capitalist democracies. By so doing, we may find the kind of ideological flexibility necessary to make celebrity figures like the hip-hop moguls more ethically responsible for the widely held public aspirations that they already currently signify. And by so doing, perhaps we can gradually defuse the explosive charge that the moguls trigger in a tautological commodity culture with an insatiable appetite for the spectacular aura of racial and ethnic authenticity, and we can begin to pay more attention to how these folks are going to sustain their businesses amid unrelenting technological and industrial change. If nothing else, the ascension of the hip-hop mogul has gone a long way toward opening up

space in working-class and poor minority communities to view mainstream corporate enterprise with more than absolute suspicion and disdain. These openings may enable new progressive coalitions to proceed with building their proposed agendas without being hamstrung by the class-based friction that has typically plagued the hip-hop generation from within.⁶⁰

To continue to dream of *only* non-market-driven, support-led engines for political mobilization represents a disabling blind spot that will only let figures like the mogul off the hook for other forms of representative capacity that they might embody if they were compelled to acknowledge the full complexity of their behind-the-scenes business and social lives. Too frequently, however, progressive intellectuals can think only within the realm of market-averse myopia. For example, in his critique of the New Economy and its virulent strain of market fundamentalism, Tom Frank writes that “the key to reigning in markets is to confront them from outside. . . . What we must have are not more focus groups or a new space where people can express themselves or etiquette lessons for executives but some countervailing power, some force that resists the imperatives of profit in the name of economic democracy.”⁶¹ But how does one even begin to conceptualize “economic democracy” without at least considering the beneficial spillover effects of the profit motive, individual initiative, and entrepreneurship? How does one consider persuading marginalized folks who view themselves always already on the outside looking in not to pursue commercial routes to cash in on that outlaw status when the hip-hop moguls are succeeding by doing exactly that via increasingly hyperreal methodologies? Indeed, imagining where an “outside” might be in twenty-first-century public life looks increasingly difficult, especially as mainstream notions of human perfectibility and social improvement, indeed of “utopia” itself, have become tethered ever more closely to the processes of financial speculation and the prospect of these processes trickling down to the lower stratum of our society through the wonders of new developments in information technology. The digital economy, complete with the hip-hop mogul as a newfangled “knowledge worker” adept at the manipulation and management of urban culture’s increasingly open-source code of stylistic innovation, is merely the newest version of the postindustrial society as American utopia.

Certainly, any enthusiasm for the benefits of various market mechanisms should not get in the way of preserving and refashioning what sociologist William Julius Wilson has called the “nation’s equalizing institutions,” such as public education, unions, government-sponsored safety nets, and certain forms of international trade protection.⁶² Indeed, if the

demise of the New Economy in the fires of corporate malfeasance proved anything, it is simply that the quest for wealth and the personal liberties that it facilitates require compassionate guidance and earnest cooperation. As pedagogues and scholars we can and must be available to confer with a range of constituents, within and beyond the academy, in this crucial enterprise. But, in order to do so, we must recognize that our efforts will be complementing, rather than replacing, the influence of celebrity figures like the hip-hop mogul. A multipronged intervention in this regard might not be such a bad thing to which to acquiesce. What better way, after all, to combat the “authoritarian irrationalism”⁶³ of our world? What other method but a multifaceted one can contend with the information inundation endemic to discursive formations like the rapidly ossifying New Economy and similar maelstroms of moral and economic ambivalence that will surely confront us again in the not-too-distant future?

Notes

This essay developed from a presentation made in March 2003 for the Norman Lear Center’s “Celebrity, Politics, and Public Life” seminar series at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California. I am grateful to the members of the Lear Center for their insightful feedback on my presentation. Titus Levi and Marcia Dawkins were especially generous with their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Walter Kirn, “The End of the Affair,” *New York Times Magazine*, 26 May 2002, 11.

2. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003). Cohen argues that the quarter century following World War II forms an era of consensus on the United States as a “consumers’ republic,” namely “an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality,” 7.

3. Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske, “Luxury for the Masses,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2003, 48.

4. In the words of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, we can think of the social tension embodied in the hip-hop mogul as a “relationship between incomes and achievements, between commodities and capabilities, between our economic wealth and our ability to live as we would like.” Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 13.

5. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15.

6. In a conversation that he conducted with VA Linux CEO and open-source software champion Larry Augustin, highbrow talk show host Charlie Rose summed up the New Economy’s emancipatory populism with a pithy quip: “Everyone’s innovation is everybody’s opportunity.” *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, 6 January 2000.

7. In a personal anecdote he offered during an interview, Ralph Ellison points out that, to some extent, black Americans have always activated their subjectivities against the grain of, yet from squarely within, mainstream popular culture. For instance, when asked how he overcame his childhood in racially intolerant Oklahoma, Ellison replied: "There were the accidents through which so much of that world beyond the Negro community became available to me. Ironically, I would have to start with some of the features of American life which it has become quite fashionable to criticize in a most unthinking way: the mass media. Like so many kids of the Twenties, I played around with radio—building crystal sets and circuits consisting of a few tubes, which I found published in radio magazines. At the time we were living in a white middle-class neighborhood, where my mother was a custodian for some apartments, and it was while searching the trash for cylindrical ice-cream cartons which were used by amateurs for winding tuning coils that I met a white boy who was looking for the same thing. I gave him some of those I'd found and we became friends. . . . I moved back into the Negro community and . . . was never to see him again, but knowing this white boy was a very meaningful experience. . . . Knowing him led me to expect much more of myself and of the world." Ralph Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. J. F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 63–64.

8. Not only is this form of mimicry embodied at the grassroots level, it is also enacted through verbal expression at the most rarefied heights of the financial services arena. For instance, if one had been watching CNBC "Business Center" on 19 January 2000, one could have borne witness to Bear Stearns technology and Internet analyst Scott Ehrens encapsulating his analysis of America Online's wellspring of liquidity in terms of a healthy backorder of advertising sales, a pleasant circumstance that Ehrens described via reference to the hip-hop-savvy euphemism "Baby Got Backlog," a remark made in an obvious attempt to piggyback on the enduring popularity of an immensely popular rap song from the mid-1990s called "Baby Got Back," by Sir-Mix-A-Lot. The key difference being, of course, that the rapper penned his lyric in musical tribute to the evergreen allure of the black woman's stereotypically callipygian backside, the denigration of which served as a formative salient of natural science in the West.

9. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000).

10. For example, Matthew Grant writes that "in the sphere of the culture industry, the 'anarchy' inherent in capitalist relations of production expresses itself in the moment of indeterminacy, the unavoidable moment of autonomy granted the cultural producer. The music industry, like the movie industry, cannot produce a hit through formula and hype alone. It requires a moment of aesthetic autonomy to produce (at least) the appearance of diversity in the market, a diversity necessary to generate desire for the latest product. Although a calculated part of the system, this autonomy gap does allow for the insertion of something else into the cultural commodity. . . . we can understand this gap as the site for intervention and resistance." Matthew T. Grant, "Appendix 2: Of Gangstas and Guerrillas," www.gsd.harvard.edu/~appendix/issue2/grant/index2.htm.

11. John Seabrook, "Nobrow Culture," *New Yorker*, 20 September 1999, 104–11.

12. Laura M. Holson, "Dot-Com to the Stars: The Intersection of the Internet and Celebrity," *New York Times*, 6 June 2000.

13. Clay Christensen defines technology as “the processes by which an organization transforms labor, capital, material, and information into products and services of greater value . . . [a] concept of technology [that] extends beyond engineering and manufacturing to encompass a range of marketing, investment, and managerial processes.” Christensen goes on to say that “*innovation* refers to a change in one of these technologies.” Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997), xiii. I am seeking to account for the ways in which black popular culture’s potentially adverse, or “disruptive,” technological effects have been managed by various agents within the global entertainment complex and converted into market-enhancing, or “sustaining,” ones.

14. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 194.

15. Robin D. G. Kelley, “Playing for Keeps: African-American Youth in the Postindustrial City,” in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans/U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Random House, 1997), 195–231.

16. Kelefa Sanneh, “Gettin’ Paid,” *New Yorker*, 20 and 27 August 2001, 60.

17. Just days before the release of Eminem’s hit film *8 Mile* in November 2002, the *New York Times* reported that “after more than two decades of growth, hip-hop album sales hit a wall in [2001], declining about 15 percent to 89 million . . . from a peak of 105 million the previous year, according to the Nielsen SoundScan company, which tracks sales figures. Album sales for the music industry were down overall, but less—3 percent in 2001—reflecting both the recession and the growth of free Internet file-sharing services. For the first six months of 2002, sales of hip-hop albums were down almost 20 percent from the same period [in 2001], compared with a general industry drop of 13 percent.” Lola Ogunnaike, Laura Holson, and John Leland, “Feuding for Profit,” *New York Times*, 3 November 2002.

18. *Fortune*, 16 September 2002, www.fortune.com/fortune/40under40/.

19. Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1998), 249.

20. Roxanne Lowit, “Ciao!” *New York*, 22 February 1999.

21. Constance C. R. White, “It’s All about Ice,” *Talk*, December 1999–January 2000, 186–89. Such marketing efforts probably influenced the spending habits and style predilections of aspiring consumers. As one recent *New York Times* article reported, overall, the diamond market was up 12 percent in 2000 over figures posted in 1998. Monique P. Yazigi, “Bigger Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend,” *New York Times*, 13 February 2000.

22. Frank DiGiaco, “It’s the Last Party of the Century,” *New York Observer*, 13 December 1999, 3–8.

23. Christopher John Farley, “Hip-Hop Nation,” *Time*, 8 February 1999, 54–57.

24. Amy M. Spindler, “Character Development,” *New York Times Magazine*, 23 July 2000, 54.

25. Gretchen Morgenson, “Economy Can No Longer Count On the Consumer,” *New York Times*, 9 March 2003.

26. Rob Walker, “When Diamonds and Escalades are O.K.,” *New York Times*, 19 January 2003, 16.

27. *Ibid.*, 17.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Stuart Elliott, "Advertising," *New York Times*, 19 November 1999.
30. Silverstein and Fiske, "Luxury for the Masses," 50.
31. In this respect, the rap utopia exemplifies what columnist David Brooks has described as the "realm of abundance." He writes that "in the land of abundance, a person's lower-class status is always temporary. If the complete idiot next door has managed to pull himself up to the realm of Lexus driver, why shouldn't the same thing happen to you?" David Brooks, "The Triumph of Hope over Self-Interest," *New York Times*, 12 January 2003.
32. Manthia Diawara, "Homeboy Cosmopolitanism," in *In Search of Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 239.
33. Ibid.
34. A rap magazine profile of the New Orleans rap collective, the Cash Money Millionaires, describes their rap utopia in the following manner: "Welcome to a world where life is truly beautiful. A world where Cristal flows from bottles like water from fountains. Every expensive car sits on chrome. Rolexes decorate wrists like cuff links, and every foot is covered with the hide of some endangered species of reptile. Every citizen in this utopia is adorned with a minimum of \$10,000 worth of jewelry at all times, women are treated like showpieces, ballers ditch their \$100,000 cars for candy-painted helicopters, cell phones chime in unison like a well-orchestrated symphony, and players make paper airplanes out of \$50 bills for fun. It's gross materialism, and you'll hear it on every Cash Money release." Eric Robinson, "It's a Wonderful World," *Rap Pages*, February 1999, 96. For those who don't know, Cristal is made by the esteemed French winery Louis Roederer. A recent catalog from the premium Manhattan wine boutique Sherry-Lehmann describes the 1995 vintage of Cristal as "the ultimate in rare 'luxury cuvée' Champagnes . . . one of the most sought after wines in the world." At Sherry-Lehmann, a case of 1995 Cristal will set you back \$2,159.40 plus tax. A bottle will require a mere \$179.95.
35. Simon Reynolds, "It Isn't Easy Being Superman," *New York Times*, 10 October 1999, 29.
36. Consider the right-wing-leaning call for ghetto self-sufficiency in DMX's hardcore track, "Do You": "Do you—Cuz what it boils down to it's true / Do you—Cuz you are held accountable for you / Do you—is that really what you want me to see? / Do you—Cuz I'mma do me, truly."
37. Memoirist and fiction writer Dave Eggers attributes the *ressentiment* of "the hater" to information overload: "The average one of us is absolutely overwhelmed—as he or she should be—by the sheer volume of artistic output in every conceivable medium given to the world every day—it is simply too much to begin to process or to comprehend—and so we are forced to try to sort, to reduce. We designate, we diminish, we create hierarchies and categories. . . . But you know what is easiest of all? When we dismiss. Oh how gloriously comforting to be able to write someone off. . . . It's exhausting. It's born of boredom, lassitude. Too cowardly to address problems of substance where such problems actually are, we claw at those close to us. We point to our neighbor, in the khakis and sweater, and cry foul. It's ridiculous. We find enemies among our peers because we know them better, and their proximity and familiarity mean we don't have to get off the couch to dismantle them." Dave Eggers, "Too Legit to Quit," *Harper's*, August 2000, 20–22.
38. Reynolds, "It Isn't Easy Being Superman," 38.

39. Jackson Lears, "Luck and Pluck in American Culture," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 24 January 2003, B15.
40. Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "The Mass Panorama," *Modernism/Modernity* 9, no. 2 (April 2002): 244–46.
41. *Ibid.*, 247.
42. *Ibid.*, 248–49.
43. *Ibid.*, 278.
44. "Over the years and against conventional wisdom, utopians sustained a vision of life beyond the market. . . . The goal is not a new economic order, but freedom from an obsession with economics." Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 27.
45. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), x.
46. Peter Applebome, "Where Money's a Mantra, Greed's a New Creed," *New York Times*, 28 February 1999.
47. Jeanne Cummings, "Small Investors Now a Big Bloc," *Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2002.
48. Jacob Weisberg, "United Shareholders of America," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 January 1998, 29.
49. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, xiii.
50. Ianthe Jeanne Dugan, "Broken Trust," *Wall Street Journal*, 12 September 2000, 1.
51. Richard W. Stevenson, "Fed Reports Family Gains from Economy," *New York Times*, 19 January 2000.
52. Barbara Hagenbaugh, "Nation's Wealth Disparity Widens," *USA Today*, 23 January 2003.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Alex Kotlowitz, "False Connections," in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999), 65–72.
55. George Packer writes in the *New York Times Magazine*, for instance, that, "if the Wall Street Project lacks the high moral tone of the civil rights movement, it echoes the noise of a bottom-line society moved more by power and access than by moral appeal. Jackson seems to have reached the shrewd conclusion that Bill Clinton's America is not swayed by a desire for economic justice, and that government is unlikely to attempt anything on the scale of the movement's gains. And who can blame him for facing those facts." George Packer, "Trickle-Down Civil Rights," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 December 1999, 76.
56. Jacoby, *The End of Utopia*, 10–11.
57. Bruce Robbins, "Double Time: Durkheim, Disciplines, and Progress," in *Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies*, ed. Cary Nelson and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (New York: Routledge, 1996), 188–89.
58. David Brooks asks, "Why don't more Americans want to redistribute more wealth down to people like themselves? People vote their aspirations. . . . None of us is really poor; we're just pre-rich. . . . Democratic politicians proposing to take from the rich are just bashing the dreams of our imminent selves. . . . As the sociologist Jennifer Lopez observed, . . . As long as rich people 'stay real' . . . they are admired. . . . All this adds up to a terrain incredibly inhospitable to class-based politics. . . . You have to be more hopeful and growth-oriented

than your opponent, and you cannot imply that we are a nation tragically and permanently divided by income. In the gospel of America, there are no permanent conflicts.” David Brooks, “The Triumph of Hope over Self-Interest,” *New York Times*, 12 January 2003.

59. “Greenspan Urges Better Money Sense,” *New York Times*, 7 April 2001.

60. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Must Buppiehood Cost Homeboy His Soul?” *New York Times*, 1 March 1992.

61. Thomas Frank, *One Market under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), xvi.

62. William Julius Wilson, “All Boats Rise. Now What?” *New York Times*, 12 April 2000.

63. Paul Gilroy, “Black Fascism,” *Transition*, nos. 81/82: 91.