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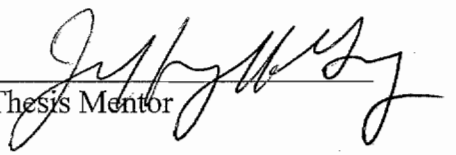
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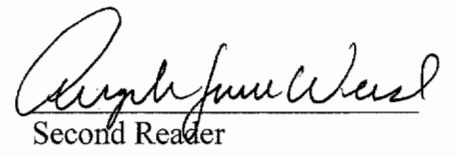
“Keeping It Real”: The Ironic Aesthetic in Rap Music’s Personae

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Authenticity has long shaped discussions of hip hop, both in academic and armchair circles. Authors like R. Scott Heath and Jeff Chang have attempted to define elements of the “hip hop community” in their work, while others like Robin Kelley and Adam Krims have focused directly on the topos of authenticity and self-presentation of rappers. These authors have consistently seen the concern with authenticity as an essential element in rap’s dominant modes of transmission: being – and “keeping it” – real is an important factor in the rap aesthetic. Modern scholarship necessarily accepts that “reality” is a construct, and hip hop’s strategies and signifiers widely accept this multiplicity of reality and identity. Russell Potter calls hip-hop a “heteroglossaic space” (15), utilizing the Bakhtinian term to imply that, in spite of the focus on authenticity, there is room in rap music for myriad voices, multiple “authenticities.” Some hip hop scholars – Hess primary among them – have begun to call these authenticities “personae.” In developing and maintaining these personae, however, speakers experience conflicts of identity in such a way that their subject positions – be they shifting or static – become ironic. Rap’s ironies stem from this conflict between the persona a rapper assumes and the initial meaning or identity he or she intends or possesses.

This article applies concepts from Linda Hutcheon’s book *Irony’s Edge* to illuminate these nuances over several years of rap’s cultural and contextual history. It considers the ironies of the personae of Run-D.M.C., Chuck D of Public Enemy, and Christopher Wallace (better known as The Notorious B.I.G.), and discusses how these ironies can help to make hip hop studies more significant in the wider sphere of cultural theory.

## “Keeping It Real”: The Ironic Aesthetic in Rap Music’s Personae

### Introduction: The Ironies of Rap’s Personae

Authenticity has long shaped discussions of hip hop, both in academic and armchair circles. Authors like R. Scott Heath<sup>1</sup> and Jeff Chang<sup>2</sup> have attempted to collect and define elements of the “hip hop community” in their work, while others like Robin Kelley and Adam Krims have focused directly on the topics of authenticity and self-presentation of rappers. These authors have consistently seen the concern with authenticity as an essential element in rap’s dominant modes of transmission: Mickey Hess writes that the appearance of authenticity is “necessary to establishing credibility as an artist within hip hop, which values a discourse of lived experience, and has roots in oral traditions of testimony and bearing witness” (297). Being – and “keeping it” – real is an important factor in the rap aesthetic. Modern scholarship necessarily accepts that “reality” is a construct, and hip hop’s strategies and signifiers widely accept this multiplicity of reality and identity. Russell Potter calls hip-hop a “heteroglossaic space” (15), utilizing the Bakhtinian term to imply that, in spite of the focus on authenticity, there is room in rap music for myriad voices, multiple “authenticities.” Some hip hop scholars – Hess primary among them – have begun to call these authenticities “personae.” In developing and maintaining these personae, however, MCs<sup>3</sup> experience conflicts of identity in such a way that their subject positions – be they shifting or static – become ironic. Rap’s ironies stem from this conflict between the persona an MC assumes and the initial meaning or identity he or she intends or possesses.

Cleanth Brooks wrote in his 1951 essay “Irony as a Principle of Structure” that irony is “the obvious warping [and modification] of a statement by the context” (800). While Brooks, a New Critic, is speaking primarily about poetry, his definitions of context are varied enough that

they can easily be reapplied. These contexts can be internal, the way the “parts of a poem are related to each other” (Brooks 799), or external, where he notes that the fundamental elements of a poem or work of art are “loaded” by their external contexts (Brooks 800).

While this suggestion makes for more productive readings of rap contexts, Wayne Booth observes that Brooks’ definition of irony is at times *too* inclusive, writing that if “every literary context is ironic because it provides a weighting or qualification on every word ... [then] all literary meanings in this view become a form of covert irony” (7). Booth’s warning is a fair revision in the sphere of literature, where specifics and details often become essential to the valuation of meaning, but perhaps too limiting in the field of musicology, where myriad elements – not limited to the artful combination of words – is involved in the production of art. It could be suggested that music is, in fact, an art form necessarily born of contexts and issued from specific sources. Listeners judge and experience lyrical music through a variety of contextual juxtapositionings: lyrics as related to sound, sound as perceived in a specific listening environment, listening environments as compared to larger cultural contexts. Music is produced for the listener by a range of organic developments of context, and so Brooks’ emphasis on context remains valuable in the study of rap music.

Brooks’ comments also become valuable in the light of the study of personae: if rappers generate identities and voices from which narratives issue, those personae can then be seen as the context for their textual content. Part of the context in which listeners receive music is the context of the persona: how much does the interpreter know about the persona? How much of the persona seems integral to the music, and how much auxiliary? Walter Benjamin’s comments on the “aura” can be helpful here: Benjamin writes, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite of the concept of authenticity” (1234). To perceive a text as “believable,” a reader or listener

must have a foothold in the original context of the work. Benjamin's term "original" could easily refer to the *originator*: the voice, real or imagined, from which the text stems.

Linda Hutcheon, in her 1994 work *Irony's Edge*, provides a series of helpful revisions that bring the consideration of identity-based irony more firmly into the postmodern era that rap music inhabits<sup>4</sup>. Hutcheon is less interested in providing a clear definition of irony – that ground, for her, has already been trodden – than in exploring "some of the possible functions of irony, but this time from the point of the view of the interpreter, not the ironist" (45). Hutcheon's comment makes the value of the persona all the more clear. The "ironist" brings something key to the table – but it is the way the "interpreter" perceives and understands the identity of the ironist that makes these personae exist. By acknowledging a speaker, interpreters give their identities value. It might be fair to say that personae exist in the space between the artist and the listener: without one, the other is impossible.

Hutcheon acknowledges some of these nuances when she brings her definition of irony into the sphere of popular music. She writes, "Entire careers are being made to this day on the ambiguities provoked by the attribution of irony: is Madonna the Empowered Woman-in-Control or the Material Girl, Complicit-with-Patriarchy-and-Capitalism? The exact same evidence is always used to argue both sides" (33). The difficulty in successfully interpreting Madonna is that her persona is so impenetrable; without a guidebook to her intentions, observers are left to interpret the meaning of her posturing independently. All readings of Madonna must necessarily be "misreadings," either due to assumptions and generalizations from the outside or the deliberate contradictory presentations of the aesthetics of her personae. The following examples seek to explore these kinds of inextricable links between ironic texts, ironic interpretations, and personae in the field of hip hop.

Perhaps because rap was born from street performances, verbal battles, and house parties, it has always involved a creation of persona. While these personae have rarely been as ambiguous as Madonna's, they have always been integral to the success of an MC. Myriad personae and subject positions exist in rap music, which Keith Negus points out has long "been produced from multiple points of origin with distinct inflections of geographical place" (531). Much of the creation of persona is based on the legitimate identity of a speaker: rappers from particular geographic areas and eras have differing personae.<sup>5</sup> Rappers have chosen to "signify" many different ways on the mic: intellectual, lyrical, bohemian, Dionysian, surreal, sexual, gangsta, bourgeois, and hood, to name just a few<sup>6</sup>.

Whatever persona a rapper chooses to affect – to "signify" – it is also important that he or she remains consistent with his or her choices throughout the span of his or her career. While concrete definitions of the idea differ, this is often referred to as "keeping it real." It seems very little to matter what, exactly, "it" is, as long as "it" is consistent, and appears genuine. Listeners don't much concern themselves with the contents of a rapper's affectations, as long as the content seems entirely "true." Since "truth" may be somewhat subjective, it's also important to mention that this appearance of truth can be constructed simply by projecting an aura of confidence. In this sense, it's fair to say that the "it" of "keeping it real" is a floating signifier, tying to different meanings, affectations, behaviors, modes of dress, and the like, depending on the subject at hand, the rapper in question, and the set of listeners involved. Adam Krims points out, "One of the principal authenticating strategies of early gangsta rap has precisely been the symbolic collapsing of the MC onto the artist – the projection that the MC himself (with the gender-specific pronoun purposefully unmodified) *is* the persona – a voice from the 'streets,' speaking from authentic experience" (95). This collapse and conflation is key: listeners'



dominant unwillingness or inability to distinguish between artist and persona goes most of the way to creating these ironies. A rapper is successful at “keeping it real” when the generation of his or her<sup>7</sup> persona is so thorough, and so convincing, that it is no longer distinguishable from the “true” identity of the artist. These personae become ironized through this conflict, and while many of these ironies are textual, most are situational, rooted in sociological context and artistic impact. This conflation of “reality” and “falsity” may cause, over the long-term, a problematic loss of the intention and importance of a text.

### **It's Like That: Run D.M.C. Perform “Street”**

Early rappers developed their personae specifically to appear appropriately “street” enough to appeal to the hip hop enthusiasts<sup>8</sup> who’d pioneered and constructed the art form, but nonthreatening enough to sell records to a wider audience. Joseph “Rev Run” Simmons, Darryl “D.M.C.” McDaniels, and the late Jason “Jam-Master Jay” Mizell dressed in identical uniforms which easily conformed to the shifting trends and styles of the time. For most of their career they wore black on black, or black on blue, jackets over jeans or dark pants. They overlaid these color-coded outfits with bright, heavy chains, matching hats, and D.M.C.’s dark sunglasses. The matching dress recalled the pop-rock groups of the early 1960s, so older viewers didn’t feel threatened, and yet their outfits were street-cool, often featuring sports team logos or brand names, subtle and unsubtle (the track “My Adidas,” from 1986’s *Raising Hell* was just part of their ethos of product placement). This formula allowed Run-D.M.C.’s visual persona to be fluid, yet distinctive.

This calculated performance of persona reflects the savvy capitalistic strategies of the group. Def Jam pegged black underprivileged youth as the primary audience, and as such, Run-

D.M.C. visually masked – although did not obliterate – their middle class roots. But they didn't avoid tackling middle class elements in their verses. In "King of Rock," D.M.C. raps that "Run goes to school every day" (McDaniels), referring to Run's college career, and many of the lyrics on their eponymous debut served to plant the seeds of materialism that would eventually blossom into the bourgeois ethos of modern hip-hop. On "Rock Box," Run claims, "You're the kind of guy that girls ignored / I'm driving a Caddy, you fixin' a Ford" (Simmons). This focus on the material elements of middle-class culture – nice cars, mandatory post-secondary education – was a significant risk for the group to take, lyrically and otherwise. While rap's lyrical content had not yet fully entered the realm of guns and violence, lower-class urban life was most prized in the lyrics at this historical moment. Here, Run criticizes the glorification of lower-class life, suggesting outright that fixing one's own car is inferior to the "Sunday drive" of a middle class man of leisure. This stance was consistent with the braggadocio of Run's peers, but highlighted the importance of money and class, a facet of the culture Run-D.M.C. approached and developed perhaps first.

In fact, the group's approach to the entire industry bought into the capitalistic tendencies of music-making as a whole more than that of any of their predecessors. Greg Dimitradis writes, "Run-D.M.C. was the first in a line of rap artists for whom the recording—not the party—became the all-important focus" (19). Producer Rick Rubin pushed the group into recording structured songs, generally under four minutes long, and brought a "producer-based aesthetic to hip hop, streamlining this otherwise more open-ended music into a more commodity-driven one" (20). Run-D.M.C. were branding themselves, and in doing so, they were branding the "street" culture that just ten years earlier had been just short of virulently spreading through black neighborhoods in New York. Suddenly the culture was all for sale, their carefully crafted

personae included. In this sense, their risks with authenticity paid off for the industry as a whole, not just for them: and paid off literally, with million-dollar record deals and an acceptance in a then-white dominated pop music world.

Still, many scholars have approached this capitalistic moment to critique it, particularly in the terms of persona. Mickey Hess has argued that “rap artists obscure, confuse, [and] split their identities” (298). Certainly Run-D.M.C. have done this here: deliberate misdirection, costuming, and clever lyricism mask and remold their origins. Hess goes on to say that this strategy is used “to subvert the often conflicting standards of authenticity and marketability” (298). It is important to understand that Hess’s proposed subversive strategies are set in a capitalist world: the “discursive spectrum” (299) of Hess’s theory features “dedication to making music rather than making money” (299) at one end and, at the other, “an outlaw identity by which the act of selling music is framed as a criminal act well within the bounds of rap’s ghetto origins” (299). In ironic terms, this image of the spectrum is flawed. Even an allowance that the spectrum is fluid – that a speaker can move along it at different moments during discourse – remains an “either/or” model of meaning, with a “general restrictive effect [...] on thinking about irony” (Hutcheon 63). Hutcheon proposes that these models are most helpfully replaced by “both/and” models. Drawing upon the work of structuralist and post-structuralist thought alike, she proposes a theory of irony which would “hold in suspension the said plus something *other than* and *in addition to* it that [remains] unsaid” (63). A performance persona in hip hop need not eschew capitalism *or* subversively embrace it: it may eschew for subversive reasons *and* embrace for non-subversive reasons.

In this way, the example of Run D.M.C. can help to illustrate the ways in which future examples of hip hop’s personas may play out ironically. In spite of post-modernism’s influential

hand, human perception still leads towards binary distinctions between polar opposites: it is simply easier to think in this way, particularly in the context of cultures and art forms which are considered to be “pop.” Common consumers of culture generally don’t apply the same levels of intellectual thought to their mass media, and it is the job of culture theorists to push beyond these habits in analysis. Before moving into more prolonged textual and contextual discussions, it may be important here to pause to bracket the question of value: it is not essential to view the texts of these examples as possessing inherent artistic value in order to grasp their larger significance. Readers may find these examples intriguing, but should they seem challenging or unappealing, the question of lasting sociological impact is still an important one, which these discussions of irony and personae can illuminate.

### **Louder Than A Bomb: Chuck D’s Complicit Critique**

While Run D.M.C.’s rap performances cribbed from the visual and physical postures of street signification to *both* challenge and emphasize the roadmap to capitalistic success, Chuck D<sup>9</sup>, MC of the late-80s group Public Enemy, performed intellectualism to both inspire *and* critique political activism. It becomes important here to clarify that performing an identity – ironically or otherwise – does not imply that the performed identity is false. Developing irony through performance cannot be equated to dishonesty: Linda Hutcheon denounces theories of irony which “see the task of interpreter simply as one of decoding or reconstructing some ‘real’ meaning (usually named as the ‘ironic’ one), a meaning that is hidden, but deemed accessible, behind the stated one. If this were actually the case, irony’s politics would be much less contentious” (11). Understanding Chuck D’s position as intellectual ironist does not mean that his intellectualism is “real” and must be “discovered”; nor should it suggest that his political

persona is “fake.” In the same dualistic way as Run D.M.C.’s capitalistic embrace can be lauded and criticized, Public Enemy’s works like the 1988 record *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* voice a chorus of subjective experiences while simultaneously coloring those experiences with challenges, doubts, and ironies.

Chuck D understood, as he developed his lyrical aesthetic, the difficulties of collecting the disparate elements and viewpoints of a postmodern society, particularly from a historically marginalized point of view. The lyrics he wrote for Public Enemy feature intensely antagonistic lyrics, which at some level seek to undermine and denounce white culture and class-based power structures. *Nation of Millions* and Public Enemy at large are some of the best examples of the either/or fallacy’s destructive politics in hip hop. While Chuck D’s lyrics do rail against the white power structure and mourn its effects, that is not their only voice: they critique those who ignore its prevalence while using such structures for their own benefit.

It may not be possible to read the ironies within this text as specifically intentional. Simon Gaunt writes, “The only way to be sure that a statement was intended ironically is to have a detailed knowledge of the personal, linguistic, cultural and social references of the speaker *and* his audience” (25). To this end, even a detailed interview with Chuck D himself might not shed enough light on the nuanced and multivariate sources of ironic intention. While it is then essentially impossible – or beyond the common interpreter’s ken – to determine *whether* the statements of *Nation of Millions* are “intentional” ironies, it *is* possible to generate a potential reading of the text as an ironic one, and to see what impact this interpretation may have on common readings of the personae in play.

Much of the irony in *Nation of Millions* is “textual”; Linda Hutcheon claims that these kinds of ironies rely on “both the immediate textual environment and the work as a whole”

(144). Depending on what listeners know about rap records, the record can achieve these kinds of ironies mainly with simple reversals of expectations. Up until this point, rap was primarily manufactured to feel fun; yet with just a few exceptions, Public Enemy was little interested in this function of rap. Admittedly, binary terms like “reversal” may be too limiting to be productive in understanding the full effect this had on listeners. Hutcheon cautions against “the view that irony involves a conscious rejection of the literal meaning and the substitution of an ‘ironic’ (often opposite) meaning” (61); again, interpreters must be wary of reducing the effect to an either/or.

The song “Night of the Living Baseheads,” on *Nation of Millions*, is an excellent example of Chuck D’s awareness of the importance of both/and readings, and the irony they can create. The song does not feature a “hook” or “refrain”; rather, the verses all end with a sample of the now-iconic Chuck D line, “Bass!”. The song presents multiple meanings for the word “bass”: when spelled “bass,” it implies both the musical instrument and the low end of the auditory spectrum, but when spelled “base,” it can refer to freebased cocaine or crack, drugs of great concern to the black community in the late 1980s. Chuck D deliberately conflates the definitions in a way that can only be achieved through self-citation. By sampling himself, he forces listeners to experience his voice as a concrete art object: in terms of sound quality and timing, the sample is distinctly recognizable as a sample<sup>10</sup>, and this othering of the speech act serves as a kind of aural citation – air quotes, perhaps – that gives the dual meaning a prescient, powerful quality. By doubly invoking the power of his own voice – by sampling his own persona – he calls upon a pre-established authenticity to manufacture this double meaning.

As the song continues, Chuck D refers to it self-reflexively, calling it a “dope jam” (which features dual meanings of its own), and, when describing the behavior of those enamored

with the charms of bass/base, says that they're "Sellin' / Smellin' / Sniffin' / Riffin'" (Ridenhour). These terms are mostly applicable to the narcotic implication of the word "base," but the signs float just enough to maintain the double meaning: "riffin'" and "sellin'" could just as easily apply to the strategies of music-making. To develop its full ironic meaning, the song relies on a rapid and unresolvable oscillation between the two disparate meanings, giving the listener time to comprehend the full ramifications of the social critique at hand. It is in this dualism that the song moves from surface critique to its full ironic multiplicity: by overlapping "bass" and "base," Chuck D is indicting crackheads for their dependence, the government for its underhandedness, and the rap community for its complicity.

This kind of multidirectional critique is a large piece of Chuck D's strategy; the record aims social critique at more than white culture. The loose narrative structure of many of the songs on the record allows the speaker to challenge the expectations which listeners may have developed about the black experience while often drawing them into the sphere of responsibility. "Bring The Noise" opens with the original recording of the aforementioned line: "Bass! How low can you go?" (Ridenhour). The line establishes a clear set of expectations for the remainder of the song: emcees commonly call for the DJ to "pump the volume," "up the vocals," or "increase the levels," and at first listen, this call seems no different. The second line, "Death Row! What a brother knows" (Ridenhour), challenges these expectations. The line performs two main ironic actions: first, it reverses the meaning of the initial line completely. The query – "How low can you go?" – seems now to be an indictment of the nation's system of capital punishment rather than a lighthearted call for more low end. Second, it reduces the experience of a black person – "what a brother knows" – to a life doomed to death by the state itself. Not only does this ironic reversal and redefinition criticize the state for its perpetuation of an admittedly

cruel practice, its aggressive tone criticizes the listener for accepting the link between capital punishment and race.

Before considering the other directions this critique may turn, it's important to return for a moment to the first line of "Bring the Noise," which "Night of the Living Baseheads" samples. This kind of reflexive-sampling is not always ironic, but in this case it develops an intertextual irony, which Hutcheon points out is "made up of all the other relevant utterances brought to bear on the interpretation of the utterance in question" (144). After the re-application of Chuck D's vocal line in the later track, a second listening of "Bring the Noise" must also recall the critique of crack culture levied in "Baseheads." The reversal of the opening lines of the song now contain a third meaning, making for even more intense oscillation between concepts and another layer of ironic implication. "What a brother knows" is not just death row – it is now also an allegation of stereotypes dovetailed with cultural presumptions about drug abuse and the urban community. By yet again creating a multiple-voiced meanings through ironic juxtapositioning, Chuck D creates a new kind of social critique, attacking the complicit role listeners play in failing to stop – or even acknowledge – serious problems in their sphere of awareness.

It is easiest to think of the kinds of aggressive, challenging statements that Chuck D makes as ironic when considering the "sliding scale" that Linda Hutcheon develops in *Irony's Edge*. The scale is used in Hutcheon's work to indicate the differing functions and intensities that irony can affect in an interpreter. If read as "ironic," Public Enemy's strategies fall near the top, under the heading of "aggregative," a brand of irony among the most "contentious [and] generally accepted as a strategy of provocation and polemic" (Hutcheon 46). Public Enemy – and Chuck D's – entire persona is crafted around the creation of provocation. Their logo, which features a b-boy<sup>11</sup> in the crosshairs of a sighted rifle, could only have been intended to provoke



strong feelings; the “raised fist” Ridenhour claims in “Caught, Can I Get A Witness?” verbally presents the visual signifier of the Black Panther Party; the collage of jarring and complex sound that made up Terminator X’s bass/base tracks was often described as an “assault” to the senses. While these signs have often been read as politically inflammatory and perhaps antagonistic, they were chosen intentionally. To this end, they can be read as the Adidas jackets and sneakers chosen by Run D.M.C. are readable: as part of a pose, a persona.

The aggression in these strategies – both visual and lyrical – may not be softened when read ironically but complicated. Most obviously, the aggression serves the purpose shown in the previous examples, which is to critique and criticize a preexisting power structure. Ironic art often serves this function more effectively than serious and heavy-handed art, mainly because the perceived humor of the contradiction – or at least the smirk of recognition – attenuates the sting. If, in that case, interpreters read Chuck D’s raised-fist pose as partially ironic, it would then be possible to view Public Enemy more as calculated rhetoricians than as angry reactionaries. It matters much less, in this reading, if Chuck D was “really” that angry; it matters, instead, that he chose to appear so. In *Prophets of the Hood*, Imani Perry tackles the nearly moral question at hand:

Sometimes the various registers [of hip hop] conflict, so that the first level of text may actually affirm stereotypes of black men, for example [...] Yet a deeper register of the text may then challenge the assumptions, describe feeling locked into the stereotype, reinterpret it to the advantage of the artist, or make fun of the holder of the stereotype.

When registers conflict with each other, listeners find themselves in a quandary regarding the music’s interpretation. Should it be interpreted according to the deeper registers or the most superficial, more accessible ones? (61).

Not only does Perry's question raise important and contemporary issues in rap culture (for example, the slangy, casual use of racial slurs), but it is at the core of criticism of lyrical music. The issue is especially present when regarding Chuck D. His incendiary and provocative comments – the song “911 is a Joke” as a key example – allow him to serve as cultural watchdog, but also portray him well within the boundaries of the stereotype of “angry black man.” Should listeners allow themselves to respond emotionally to both of these elements? Should they push aside their objections at the stereotype – or at the subject matter of his polemic?

Luckily, Chuck D encompasses these questions by recognizing the intellectual difficulty listeners may have with his brash persona, and by levying critique at the persona he strikes himself. Chuck D's criticisms of the music industry are just as cutting: on songs like “Don't Believe The Hype,” he dismisses a need for the industry while remaining an active participant in it. He claims, “All the critics you can hang ‘em / I'll hold the rope” (Ridenhour), but goes on to say, “The radio's scared of me / ‘Cause I'm mad, plus I'm the enemy” (Ridenhour). While it is possible to call this hypocrisy, not just irony, a capitalist reading can be helpful. Chuck D is the “enemy,” but he's also part of the mainstream. That this capitalistic success has arisen as a result of his anti-society persona is ironic. These statements first affirm the ongoing contributions Chuck D must make to the development and maintenance of the persona, providing constant reminders of the symbols of political rage. But more importantly, they form an ironic critique of these strategies: on the one hand, he expresses dissatisfaction with music critics who dislike his methods, while acknowledging their logic on the other. A willingness to generate a both/and reading admits that these two possibilities can certainly coexist, but when considered ironic

criticism, these lines put the responsibility for the public's reactions squarely on the shoulders of Chuck D the persona.

This kind of self-parody, Hutcheon assures readers, still deserves a place in the high-aggression portion of irony's sliding scale. She points readers to Freud, who writes in "Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious" that "despite their seemingly innocent humor" (Hutcheon 53), ironies such as parody are "directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect" (Freud 200). While certainly Chuck D sets the sights of these quasi-humorous parodies on outside sources in "Don't Believe The Hype," the authority figures Chuck D may be cutting down most often are himself, fellow rappers, and the hip hop community at large.

Much of Public Enemy's lyrics are focused on the creation of an in-group: as Hutcheon points out, most theories of irony agree that "there are those who 'get' it and those who do not" (54). This elitist strategy is part of Chuck D's purpose both on the surface and in the possibility of ironic parody. If a listener "gets" the indictment, sensitive to the subtleties and implications of his contradictions and connotations, then to a degree they feel "off the hook." No matter a listener's position in society, "getting the joke" often creates a feeling of inclusion, of safety. Black, white, or otherwise, understanding Chuck D's rage can make a listener feel immune to it. Hutcheon explains the hierarchy this way: "The ironist is always figured as on top, and the comprehending (attributing) interpreter not far below" (Hutcheon 54). Holding the microphone might make Chuck D the leader in this example, but the end result is still a collective of people who claim to understand the full implications of the satire. Listeners are given the opportunity to experience the sensation of Chuck D's "black rage" without necessarily having to live out its consequences, dangers, or even political ideals. What would be more ironic, then, than the reveal that even they were not safe from its attacks?

To introduce the possibility that every listener is culpable, Public Enemy made these conscious choices towards aggressive parody in the development of their personae from their inception. They accepted early on that while the intention was to speak for and to a distinctly black “inclusionary in-group” (Hutcheon 55) with songs such as “Power to the People” and “Prophets of Rage,” they could not prevent the consumption of their music by white audiences. Rap’s burgeoning popularity demanded it. The creation of an antagonistic, racially-charged sign system to surround and permeate their art served as an admission of – but not a resignation to – this shifting audience. It managed to appeal to both groups in a brash, Janus-faced way: black youths would appreciate the polemic (if often blind to the fact that they, too, were being maligned), and white youths (at least those interested in rap) would enjoy the “edginess” of consuming something that called their role models and sources of authority into question. For Public Enemy, the “exclusionary” strategy of “othering” whiteness actually drew a more racially diverse audience.

These white listeners, however, although immersed in lyrics which both glorified racial violence and mourned the myriad difficulties and setbacks which arose from this attitude, often missed the undercurrent of latter-day Black Power which ran through the music. “Bring The Noise” contains the line

Farrakhan’s a prophet  
and I think you ought to listen to  
what he can say to you  
what you ought to do (Ridenhour).

In spite of Chuck D’s endorsement, there was very little in Farrakhan’s message for white youths to apply to their own immediate struggles for social and political identity. This deliberate move

on Chuck D's part creates a kind of situational irony, born of the organic contexts explored earlier: a white teenager wearing headphones in the suburbs, listening to a record called *Fear of A Black Planet*. Adam Krims' idea of collapsing many identities into one is tangentially helpful here: this youth, at this moment, is both racial attacker and attacked; he reaps the benefits of white power structures, yet is actively threatened from something he is even currently enjoying.

This very plausible scenario reveals a great deal about the *ways* in which white youths may have been listening to rap. It's possible that white listeners missed many of the racially charged elements of the music – the ironies and challenges raised by the music are intensely encoded in slang and the jargon of political strife, and at the time these teens may not have had the tools to decipher the meanings. This lack of preparedness in a portion of the audience was ultimately very problematic for Public Enemy. On “Bring the Noise,” Chuck D raps, “Five-O said, ‘Freeze!’ and I got numb / Can I tell 'em that I really never had a gun?” (Ridenhour). When Chuck D asks to reveal that he's unarmed, he is as much isolating the problems of the role of emcee as he is negotiating the real-life drama of a minority in the sights of racial profiling. Regardless of the passionate intensity of their intentions, artists can only present their ideas and their personae: they are unable to force understanding in their listeners. Because Chuck D's ideas are so inflammatory, this paradox means that when meaning is lost, he can be held accountable for any potential misreading.<sup>12</sup> If white teens weren't prepared to read into the irony the songs presented, it might have been easy to hear them differently: as earnest treatises through an unironic lens.

In spite of Chuck D's middle-class roots in a multi-racial neighborhood, he may have intended for blackness to be a prerequisite for full appreciation of his music, a prerequisite which his persona expressed thoroughly. In “Party for Your Right to Fight,” Chuck D urges his

listeners to “Know who you are to be Black” (Ridenhour), and this would certainly point towards an interest in a specific audience. On “Fight The Power,” Chuck D assails Elvis Presley as a false hero, claiming, “Straight up racist that sucker was / Simple and plain / Motherfuck him and John Wayne” (Ridenhour). It’s no accident that Chuck D has isolated two very famous, very white, very heroic figures to malign. True though the claims may very well be, this is an aggressive tactic that both fed Chuck D’s persona *and* mocked it: for a man who spoke in his private life of peace and rational thinking, the anger is contradictory. It’s important to recall that neither of these utterances are ironic in and of themselves. It was when these utterances were consumed by white audiences that they became ironic, “warped by context,” as Brooks put it.

Russell Potter returns the problem to Walter Benjamin’s language, writing of Benjamin’s statements that through reproducibility, an original voice is able to enter fields of discourse it normally could not touch. Potter states,

In such a situation, questions of ‘authenticity’ turn into a struggle between the contexts and cultures of the producers and those of consumers. The *reproducibility* of the record radically increases the probability that it will be (mis)taken as an accurate sample of the productive culture as a whole, since it can now be consumed far outside of its indigenous sites of production (46).

Herein lies the so-called “danger” for Chuck D’s political persona: once it spirals out of his sphere of control, it may result in a series of misreadings resulting from the capitalistic reappropriation and co-optation of his message.

In his influential essay “Co-Optation,” Gerald Graff calls upon Foucauldian conceptions of power to consider whether this kind of co-optation is truly as insidious as those on what he calls the “radical Left” might describe it. There are certainly positive results to the re-

contextualizing of Chuck D's message: when his records are purchased by an audience the community was not expecting to include, he gains the power to be heard, as well as capitalistic profit. Still, it can be difficult to avoid viewing this breach of communal expectations as destructive. Graff writes that this contrast creates

A curious double bind for Left cultural politics: if the established society represses the Left, it proves itself evil in the way the Left has been saying it is; but if the established society tolerates the Left and even favors it with privileges and rewards, then that society proves itself to be even *more* evil, because its tactics are more subtle and insidious (171).

Chuck D continues to rail on power structures even when they have accepted him: even when critics began to run favorable reviews of Public Enemy's work and to accept him into a culture wider than the hip hop niche, his subject matter changed very little: the 2006 release *Rebirth of a Nation* continues to mine the same symbolic library of ideas and concepts for songs, particularly on power tracks like "Rise" and "Rebirth of a Nation." Graff is critical about this kind of rut, suggesting that it "is a result of the deformed situation of an intellectual subculture which senses that its society is illegitimate but has lost the vision of an alternative" (173). This "self-imposed marginality" (Graff 173) ultimately dates Chuck D's political persona by twenty years: while there is still a real political need for these ideas, his seeming inability to reframe them in new language makes the persona stagnant.

Graff would suggest, I believe, that Chuck D may be an example of the ways in which society enacted *repressive desublimation*, "[embracing] threatening ideas and [channeling] them into politically unthreatening forms" (Graff 170). The irony here is the idea of "unthreatening": Chuck D's entire persona was built around making threatening intellectual claims, and yet this persona thrived, becoming part of the mass culture. While it is possible to read this contradiction

as negating the importance of Chuck D's messages, rather I would suggest that, in Foucauldian terms, Chuck D succeeded in terms of his rise to power. When white audiences *did* develop an interest in his music, he embraced the opportunity to expand his fanbase *and* reach the objects of his critique directly. Both his anarchic and capitalistic personae are "true" in their own way: Chuck D's black power polemics are as real and memorable as his calls for peace, which he certainly made throughout his career. It is when these both exist together that they perform the same double voiced oscillation that his lyrics often do at the level of the line. In the long term, Public Enemy has been successful, though not necessarily commercially, perhaps due to the "dating" of the strategies as previously discussed: after the burst of interest in the early 1990s, their work faded to the province of the "true heads"<sup>13</sup> and music historians. Yet Chuck D remains a powerful and influential figure – his persona has shifted in the public eye from "angry young black man" to "elder statesman" – while often repetitive, sometimes awkward, and occasionally clichéd, the intellectual focus and interpretive potential of Public Enemy's lyrics are lost on few hip hop historians, and this status owes much to the ability of these readers to maintain a "both/and" way of accepting the ironies of his work and persona.

### **If I Wasn't In The Rap Game...: Biggie Smalls' Polyphonic Ironies**

Like those that surround Chuck D, the ironies which frame the career of the Notorious B.I.G., born Christopher Wallace, were reflexive, dealing with the ways in which his persona conflicted with his "identity." If Public Enemy's ironies are aggregative, and used as tools to contribute to an overall goal, then the irony of Wallace's persona on his 1994 record *Ready to Die* occupies several different places along Hutcheon's "sliding scale" of irony. In Hutcheon's terms, the record is "complicating," "self-protective," and "assailing" in its use of ironies.



Wallace's personae are multiple, creating complicating ambiguities; they skirt the line of personal specificity, with self-reflexive tendencies; and they are ultimately used to levy a social critique against themselves and the lives that they represent.

*Ready to Die* is a conglomeration of stories. The record features one major persona – mostly unnamed – and begins with a sonic collection of aggregated sounds which are meant to chronicle the character's birth and origins. "Intro" is a series of skits layered on top of four songs by black musicians of different decades, encouraging the reading that the character is literally born of and raised on the origins of hip hop. Here, narrative is formed as much by sonic sampling and the presentation of audio as by the dialogue and sound effects layered over them. The character's birth accompanies Curtis Mayfield's 1972 hit "Superfly," and the crescendo of the new baby's cries accompany Mayfield's assertion that "the only game you know is do or die" (Mayfield). The Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 "Rapper's Delight" is the soundtrack to the character's childhood, fraught with the intense marital strife of his parents, who argue incessantly about the youth's bad behavior. An unidentified – though perhaps not unidentifiable – early rap track, featuring a steady drum loop and talky, iambic vocals<sup>14</sup>, underlies the youth's criminal plans, as discussed with an unidentified third party. As time passes, an instrumental track from Snoop Dogg's 1993 record "Doggystyle" fades in, soundtracking the end of the character's four-year stint in jail. The track ends with a deliberately campy admission that the rest of the record is going to be a story: you can just about hear Biggie rubbing his hands as he claims, "I got big plans, nigga, big plans" (Wallace) and punctuates the promise with a theatrical laugh.

It should be emphasized that the narrator here is a character: the voice speaking at the end of the track and the life chronicled throughout is a persona. Mickey Hess defines a hip hop persona artist as one who, in part, "step[s] outside the marketing of a performed authentic self to

traffic not in the reality of the ghetto, but in fantasy” (Hess 309). Though the content of Wallace’s lyrics leans more toward the former, he still performs many of the same rites of persona that Hess explores in his article, shifting of register and the assuming of a name among them.

One of the undercurrents of commonality between these and many other rap artists is the assuming of a new name. All of the MCs discussed herein have taken new names<sup>15</sup> - Run, D.M.C., and Chuck D – but nearly all rappers do so at some point in their career. Wallace is particularly interesting in that his moniker – Biggie Smalls – was taken from the 1975 film *Let’s Do It Again*. The Biggie Smalls character in the film is a gangster – just like Wallace himself was, for a time – involved throughout the movie in rigging fights, gambling, and gunplay. By taking on the name, Wallace takes on the persona as well, separating his initial identity from that of the gun-toting gangster persona. While Wallace did spend part of his youth living that persona out, the separation of his voice from his character on the record indicate that, at least at the time of the recording, that period in his life was over.

Once the name and attitude of the persona are made available, the record goes on to “complicate” this persona, adding in other voices and possibilities of identity as it progresses. Wallace shifts easily in and out of different voices and characters throughout the record, using several different techniques. “Gimme The Loot” appears to feature two characters in dialogue with one another, and although both are voiced by Wallace, a combination of studio distortion and delivery in different vocal registers allows subsequent lines to sound as though they come from different subject positions. His careful timing in “Things Done Changed” characterizes different utterances as possibly originating from different subject positions: “Loungin’ at the barbecues, drinkin’ brews / With your neighborhood crews, hangin’ on the avenues / Turn your pagers to nineteen ninety-three / Niggas is getting’ smoked, G” (Wallace). And his brilliant,

shifting vocal inflection throughout the record allows each song to seem as though issued from a different origin. For example, the vocal tone on “Juicy” is jubilant and confident; “Everyday Struggles” is serious and methodical; “Suicidal Thoughts,” the record’s somber closer, is despondent and chilling. While much of this sensation comes from the lyrics, it can simply be felt in Wallace’s presentation.

Whether each song on the record is about this same character is deliberately left ambiguous, which can, in fact, be quite generative. The use of many subject positions allows the record to explore many different kinds of stories, but Wallace never claims to be doing anything but play-acting. *Ready to Die* never claims to be a conglomeration of stories *about Christopher Wallace himself*, and the public perception of *Ready to Die* as a collection of life stories is part of the irony. *Ready to Die* is meant to critique the place black youth held in American society in 1994, and it functions primarily through verbal costuming and the posture of persona.

While the complete believability of these myriad subject positions can be challenging to developing a cohesive ironic reading of multiple personae, it’s the same quality that makes the ironic reading possible. Sometimes the issue of multiple subject positions is addressed directly, as on “Machine Gun Funk” where he reminds listeners that “Just because I joke and smoke a lot / Don’t mean I don’t tote the glock” (Wallace). The protagonist’s identity is inherently multiple, occupying several different traditional rap personae at once. But the identities are also plural: for example, to experience the story the song tells, listeners must believe that there are two speakers on “Warning.” As with “Gimme The Loot,” Wallace performs all the vocals, but through the aforementioned strategies, it’s clear that the lines,

It’s my nigga Pop

from the barbershop

Told me he was in the gambling spot  
and heard the intricate plot (Wallace),

are told from the position of the record's protagonist. The subsequent lines, "Remember them niggaz from the hill up in Brownsville? / That you rolled dice with / Smoked the blunts and got nice with" (Wallace) are Pop's lyrics, and the verbal inflection, vocal distortion, and tight internal rhyme speak to the heavy characterization of this voice. If listeners can believe that just one author can create a conversation like this, they can just as easily conceive of the idea that neither of those speakers are Christopher Wallace himself. Songs like "Warning" are delivered from so deep inside the shifting subject positions that they seem to contain no irony at all. While these songs seem to perpetuate the stereotypes and glorify the life of the violent gangbanger, they are necessary: since irony is so heavily built on juxtaposition and contrast, tracks like "Warning" and "Machine Gun Funk" build up the sensation of authenticity. They generate the listener's faith in the persona: this action nicely mirrors Run-D.M.C.'s interest in "performing street" in the 1980s, and *Ready To Die* wouldn't achieve its biting social commentary without them. Wallace develops and maintains his authenticity by being anybody but himself.

Hutcheon rightly points out that these issues of ironic "complication" hold a negative side as well, and in the case of *Ready to Die*, this precarious development of authenticity may actually fall apart if the idea is extended too far. If none of the speakers are Wallace, the cartoonish persona he's developing may seem exploitative or insulting, rather than savvy as he intends. Admittedly, Wallace's personae never commit to being witnesses to or participants in these stories, but when pursued, this irony can only further Wallace's authenticity. He is transmitting stories that he accumulated as a crack dealer in New York City in the late 1980s: he simply transmits them in the first person, acknowledging the importance of "keeping it real." If "keeping

it real” means “having been there,” Wallace cannot risk the veracity of his storytelling by relegating the tales into the third person.

Wallace also displays an awareness of the problems of authenticity on the first proper song on the record, “Things Done Changed.” The first use of the first-person on the record – which will be the organizing motif of transmission throughout, in spite of the multiple persons involved – is on the line, “Niggas is getting smoked, G / Believe me” (Wallace). The immediate question arises: who’s saying “Believe me?” Wallace presents the issue, and then leaves it up to the listener to determine; the rest of the verse returns immediately to the second person, exhorting listeners to contrast past experiences with present conditions. Regardless of the subject position of the speaker – witness or participant – Wallace needs listeners to suspend their disbelief and accept the rocky development of these multiple personae. The record depends on it to exist. Here, “believe me” is the signal phrase that makes the interpretation of multiple personae possible.

The content of these subject positions is developed in a way that Hutcheon would call “self-protective,” an inflammatory version of irony that serves both to aggrandize and deprecate the persona. In this space, the specifics of Wallace’s personae are developed. The ambiguous and “complicated” irony allows listeners to acknowledge that there may be many personae, but it is through the function of self-protectiveness that Biggie presents the details. On the positive side of Hutcheon’s spectrum, the persona can sometimes be triumphant and ingratiating, as on “Juicy,” which feels most like a celebration of Christopher Wallace as a real person. The song’s hook, “And if you don’t know, now you know” (Wallace), may also serve as a tag that the song is closest of any on the record to a genuine transmission of personal meaning. The speaker in “Juicy” acknowledges that other subject positions on the record aspire to his success by stating,

“It was all a dream / I used to read Word-Up! Magazine” (Wallace). The presence of the “I” in the second line returns the listener to the rapid oscillation of ironic multiple-meanings: just as the speaker in “Juicy” is reflecting on his own past, he continues to inhabit previous personae. This self-referential multiplicity is fairly positive and low-stress for the listener; it conjures up little strife or discomfort, and while it may raise a helpful question, little meaning is lost if the meaning goes unheeded.

Because of their aggressive strategies and uncomfortable subject matter, the more negative sides of the self-protective spectrum contain more meaning, and consequently are more destructive to the relevance and importance of the work when omitted or unexplored. Without considering these songs as a product of a persona, it is easy to read Christopher Wallace as the paranoid murderer on “Warning” or the oversexed misogynist of “Me and My Bitch.” If, however, listeners believe that these narratives are products of character, it becomes possible to decode from them a variety of meanings, the ironic among them.

Wallace provides clues throughout these presentations of reprehensible personae that he remains aware of their offensive, controversial nature. Linda Hutcheon discusses – sometimes mourning, sometimes praising – the lack of a widely understood ironic “mark” (149). She does, however, posit the existence of “meta-ironic” markers, which “do not so much constitute irony in themselves as signal the possibility of ironic attribution” (Hutcheon 154). “Warning” is just such an example, where no irony is directly present, but where the song’s construct allows listeners to freely interpret irony. In this case, the meta-ironic marker is one of simple contradiction. The speaker claims repeatedly, “Damn! Niggas wanna stick me for my paper” (Wallace), bemoaning that other gangsters are willing to commit murder to rob him. He contradicts this criticism when he raps, “There’s gonna be a lot of slow singing / And flower bringing / If my burglar alarm

starts ringing” (Wallace). While the first verse of the song criticized murderous thieves, the persona reveals here that his intentions are no different. While it is possible to draw upon Wallace’s criminally spotty background and attribute his experience with firearms to the content of the song, the contradiction shown here presents the *option* of an ironic reading.

“Me and My Bitch” features more overt ironic modes, most notably in the narrative it presents. The song opens with dialogue, where the persona is *not* voiced by Wallace, between the persona and his girlfriend. The verses of the song *are* all delivered by Wallace, and the shift in performer further dislocates the speaker of the song’s narrative from any question of “real” or “assumed” identity. The character here cannot be Wallace himself – it takes two people to properly play him. The dialogues, which run at the beginning and after each chorus, involve the persona haranguing his girlfriend with questions of her fidelity and loyalty. He asks, “Would you kill for me?” The verses of the song are scattered with these kinds of moments of foreshadowing, and the song’s narrative ends with the speaker discovering his girlfriend “dead with the gunshot to the heart / And I know it was meant for me” (Wallace). This clearly ironic cautionary tale is shot through with other ironic signals. In the opening lines of the song, the persona claims, “When I met you I admit my first thoughts was to trick / You look so good, I’d suck on your daddy’s dick” (Wallace). These particularly blue lyrics are not only ironically inappropriate given the overall context of the song, but they also play the role of self-parody, indicating that Wallace himself may deplore the cartoonish nature of the persona’s worldview. Here, the persona is so overstating his base heterosexual impulses that they actually alter: and the absurdity of his comment is laughable, allowing the line to be read both humorously and as a critique of this particular type of masculinity.

And ultimately, the goal of the irony in *Ready to Die* is to serve the function that Hutcheon calls “assailing,” which is essentially an attempt to be corrective to a problem, no matter the cost. The artist displays the problem as having qualities so serious and dire that it *must* be solved. Wallace’s interest in addressing and correcting the problems of black urban life in poverty lifts him to the same level of social critique that Public Enemy displayed, yet the fact that his ironic strategies are so often employed via a subtle condemnation of an ironically presented persona often obscures the socially conscious intention of the work.

But Wallace *was* attempting to develop, in many places on *Ready To Die*, a socially conscious work. “Everyday Struggles” displays a strikingly similar set of strategies to Biggie’s contemporaries, particularly West Coast rapper Tupac Shakur. There are no shortage of Tupac songs which speak to the dangers and dead-end qualities of gang life rather than glorifying them, and “Everyday Struggles” is no different. The key ironic moment in the song comes at the opening of the third verse, where Biggie raps, “I’m seeing body after body and our mayor Giuliani / Ain’t tryin’ to see no black man turn into John Gotti” (Wallace). Biggie’s social critique here is notably aggressive. Giuliani doesn’t want the protagonist’s drug ring to fail because of the drugs involved: he wants him to fail because he’s black. This naming of a particular figure<sup>16</sup> pulls the critique out of the abstract and into the real world, functioning as aggressive social critique.

Hutcheon points out that while ironic aggression is very effective for social correction, sometimes it can devolve into “a bitterness that may suggest no desire to correct but simply a need to register contempt and scorn” (Hutcheon 54). “Things Done Changed,” which can be easily read as Biggie’s thesis for the problems assailing black youth, straddles this line precariously. The final verse, in part, states,



Because the streets is a short stop  
Either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot  
Shit, it's hard being young from the slums  
Eatin' five cent gums, not knowin' where your meals comin' from  
And now the shit's getting' crazier and major  
Kids younger than me, they got the Sky Grand Pagers  
Goin' outta town, blowin' up  
Six months later, all the dead bodies showin' up  
It make me wanna grab the nine and the shottie  
But I gotta go identify the body  
Damn, what happened to the summertime cookouts?  
Everytime I turn around a nigga gettin' took out  
Shit, my momma got cancer in her breast  
Don't ask me why I'm motherfuckin' stressed  
Things done changed (Wallace).

While the song certainly critiques the commonly understood and widely stereotypical problems assailing black youth – gang wars, drug rings, and violent death – it also assails the deterioration of the entire modern condition: disease, declining relationships, the dissolution of family values and community. The text of this song, in fact, makes many of the ironies in the rest of the record possible. By establishing his initial position as both authentic and sympathetic with its opening declaration, “Believe Me,” and by developing the song as an “assailing” critique, his lapses into differing subject opinions can always be viewed in contrast to this content. While “Juicy” might be the most historically accurate in terms of the life Christopher Wallace was actually living, it

seems likely that “Things Done Changed” most closely reflected the high-minded goals Wallace had for the project. The contrasts between his existential questions and the various aggressive, violent, misogynistic tones of later tracks are thrown into harsher relief, and the conflict or difficulty with the record then becomes a reconciliation between the various personae and this initial, “true” self.

Still, the term “true” is tricky, and deserves a digression. Imani Perry points out that “it is the task of the critic to avoid making one-to-one correlations between the music and the artists, to avoid a venture into some strange brand of artistic determinism” (Perry 91). This acknowledgement makes it possible to see that the rhetorical choices of person and voice in *Ready to Die* serve to develop and perpetuate the same sorts of in-groups that Public Enemy more overtly developed in *It Takes A Nation of Millions*. Perry writes,

when the audience listens to the third-person telling story [about gangsterism], its comprehension depends on either knowing the character from the inside – through first-person narrative, the archetypes present in ‘being’ tales – or knowing the actual lives in black urban communities (Perry 92).

In a manner similar to *Nation of Millions*, a certain degree of authenticity is required to fully appreciate the satirical critique *Ready to Die* posits. The first person of “Things Done Changed” rarely shifts into the third-person style Perry mentions, but it does shift into other notably distinct first-persons. The transition from “Gimme The Loot” to “Machine Gun Funk” is an excellent example. “Gimme The Loot” displays the first-person account of two gangsters glorifying the violence of robberies. The first line of “Machine Gun Funk” cinematically establishes a shift in perspective when the speaker announces,

So you want to be hardcore

With your hat to the back  
 Talkin' 'bout your gats in your raps  
 But I can't feel that hardcore appeal  
 That you're screaming,  
 Baby I'm dreaming (Wallace).

The new speaker illustrates the problems that the aggressive style of "Gimme The Loot" implicitly suggests, and while it criticizes the earlier speakers' approach, the new speaker lapses into the same kind of aggressive self-aggrandizement. He raps, "Sticks and stones break bones / But the gat'll kill you quicker / Especially when I'm drunk off the liquor" (Wallace). These are speakers who struggle with consistency: in wearing masks to "keep it real," Wallace presents to us characters who cannot determine for themselves what "real" is for themselves.

The key function of Wallace's critique serves to show that regardless of self-analysis, introspection, and the shifting perspectives of a maturing mind, violence and hedonism are so deeply ingrained in the aesthetics and symbolic language of rap culture that they're difficult to escape. The title track, "Ready To Die," features the most ironic presentation of this growing sense of self-perception:

As I sit back and look when I used to be a crook  
 Doin' whatever it took from snatchin' chains to pocketbooks,  
 A big bad motherfucker on the wrong road  
 I got some drugs tried to get the avenue sold  
 I want it all from the Rolexes to the Lexus,  
 Gettin' paid is all I expected  
 My mother didn't give me what I want, what the fuck?

Now I got a glock, makin' motherfuckers duck (Wallace).

In this verse, Wallace uses shifting verb tenses to illustrate that his character is ultimately unable to make a positive life transformation. The first few lines critique the past life the narrator once led, a life in fact very similar to the one described in "Gimme The Loot." Still, in the fifth line, a Freudian slip shifts the speaker into the present tense, and while he attempts to correct himself in the next line, the syntax of "Gettin' paid is all I expected" (Wallace) feels broken and confused, betraying an ironic uncertainty of self. By the last line of the excerpt, the speaker abandons the past tense entirely, no longer making pretenses that his life of crime is over.<sup>17</sup> The refrain of the song, which claims, "I'm ready to die!" (Wallace) painfully illustrates the futility of the character's struggle, and ends up being the central conceit of the record as a whole.

"Suicidal Thoughts" is the record's answer to the title track, and the answer is deeply negative, self-deprecating and difficult to listen to. As previously mentioned, the vocal tone of the song is strikingly different – Biggie's voice sounds flat, despondent, and exists in concert with a friend on the phone. He raps,

When I die, fuck it, I wanna go to hell  
 Cause I'm a piece of shit, it ain't hard to fuckin' tell  
 It don't make sense, goin' to heaven with the goodie-goodies  
 Dressed in white, I like black Tims and black hoodies (Wallace).

While the metaphor is simplistic, the character admits that the physical trappings of his gangster reality prevent him on a deeply symbolic level from entering hell. His acceptance of the social binaries of black and white are telling on a Jungian symbolic level, but they're also telling in the light of self-identification. If the speaker is black, and black is equated with hell as an ultimate destination, how can any of the speakers on his record be saved?

Ultimately, readers must know that neither the Biggie Smalls of the record's world nor the artist himself was saved. Christopher Wallace died on March 9, 1997, gunned down by a still-unknown assailant. This death was six months to the day after the death of Tupac Shakur, another gangster rapper, and the other face of the East Coast/West Coast rivalry that garnered so much attention in the mid-to-late 1990s. The responses to these deaths were chillingly different in many ways. While the rap community banded together to remember both rappers, the public response to Wallace's death was far less sympathetic than it was to Tupac's demise. Greg Dimitradis cites a particular group of youth who "valorized" Tupac and who "did not care about the death of Biggie [...] indeed, they did not want to speak about him, and they even ridiculed his violent demise" (115). While this phenomenon is ironic in and of itself, and was not necessarily widespread, much of this reaction might be attributed to the irony and doublethink *Ready to Die* levied upon and demanded of its listeners. Tupac's earnest "street poetry" may have been easier to conceive of for many audiences than Wallace's aggressive, assailing ironies, and as such, Tupac's foray into social critique was ultimately more sympathetic.<sup>18</sup> While Perry writes that "Listeners more readily find the drug dealer authentic than an urban guerrilla or prison escapee" (92), Tupac's moralistic poetics generally made it very clear which side of the fence he stood on, ideologically, and Wallace did not. This is in large part the reason that listeners were able to separate Tupac's persona from his narratives, unable to determine Chuck D's persona from his politics, and insistent on cementing Wallace as telling of his own experiences rather than developing ironic satire.

Michael Eric Dyson has given a great deal of credit to Tupac's street poetry, and has allowed Tupac the benefit of multiple readings. He writes,

Did Tupac draw from his own experiences or did he raid the experiences of others to spin his haunting tales of urban woe and social neglect? If he did would he be different from any other artist whose primary obligation is to make art out of imagination, fiction, and fantasy? Stories don't have to be real to be true. Wouldn't Tupac have been artistically authentic in borrowing the lives, experiences, and stories of others as the grist for his powerful rap narratives? (157)

If readers and listeners can give Tupac this benefit of the doubt, then must they not examine Wallace, so often painted as Tupac's East Coast doppelganger, in the same manner? Perry writes that "Biggie's genius as an MC was to take heed of the manner in which West Coast rap had eclipsed the East and to adopt and reinterpret the symbols of West Coast hip hop through an East Coast style" (63). Multiple voicings and the generation of street narratives were among these styles and strategies, and it is here that the meaning of Wallace's work can become blurred or lost if this strategy is reduced by the intentional fallacy.

## **Conclusion**

The conflicting and conflating ironies of these multiple and challenging personae and their resultant reactions are all the more clear in the moments in which they are stripped away. It is clearest to see that rappers are assuming roles when they drop those roles, and for reasons sociological, personal, and commercial, that tends only to happen when someone dies. The 1997 death of Christopher Wallace, as mentioned above, sent a shock throughout the hip hop community, particularly because it came so close on the heels of Tupac Shakur's equally violent demise. But Wallace's death outlined for the public, in a way Shakur's would not for years, the process of mourning that followed the senseless death of gang violence. Wallace's close friend

Sean Combs (better known as Puff Daddy) and his wife Faith Evans were both famous, and the world watched them experience the loss of their friend. Imani Perry writes, “Puffy’s mourning of Biggie’s death was visceral” (133). Her assessment carries even more weight when one considers that Puffy, Sean Combs’ persona, was and is that of the savvy, streetwise businessman. Combs dropped that persona to mourn publicly, and to record “I’ll Be Missing You” with Faith Evans, an R&B song utterly stripped of the subversive ironies Combs used to help produce *Ready to Die*.

Run D.M.C. had to drop their personae as well, turning from their ironic doubled presentations of self to mourn the violent death of Jam Master Jay, their DJ and friend, in 2002. Because it is believed that Jay may have been shot by a member or employee of a rival recording studio, his death required Run and D.M.C. to acknowledge murder and gang violence, facets of rap culture they had rarely spoken publicly about and certainly never rapped about extensively. Their changing attitudes as a result of Jay’s death reveal that their personae were present before: again, sometimes it is easiest to notice the power and presence of something when it is no longer present.

Ultimately, the struggle to make sense of these deaths also sparks in observers the awareness that there was so much in these lives they knew nothing about: personal histories, interests, families, hometowns. When these elements are revealed to the world, the real human beings beneath the personae are thrown into sharp relief, clearly contrasted from the finely honed facades of braggadocio and cultural critique. I do not intend to suggest that these strategies *lead* to death, or that only death can illuminate them: but rather to say that the examples on hand can allow critics, in the future of rap criticism and hip hop theory, to explore these ironic contrasts while our subjects are still alive and in the height of their productivity. While hindsight certainly

provides a wealth of intertextual material for cultural criticism, contemporary examples are readily available.



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<sup>1</sup> This work has been done in many places, but primarily in Heath's article "True Heads," which explores the demands of hip hop's audience as well as the social spheres the community encourages.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Chang has written perhaps the most famous book of hip hop history, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, but has also compiled *True Chaos*, a new anthology of essays and interviews. Where Heath's work has been sociological and consistently scholarly, Chang's history has been more pop and anecdotal – a necessary addition to a particularly anecdotal genre.

<sup>3</sup> MC, sometimes spelled "emcee," stands for "Master of Ceremonies," but the meaning in the rap world is a bit different than the common mental image of a host with a microphone. Originally, the phrase "Master of Ceremonies" was deeply tied to the term "MC," but it grew to refer to any rapper or vocal performer in the hip hop milieu. It has often been explained as "mic controller," "mic checker," "microphone commander," or, as rapper Rakim would explain it, "to me, MC means move the crowd."

<sup>4</sup> Russell Potter's book *Spectacular Vernaculars* would help to support this reading, with its subtitle of "Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism." Other works by authors like Michael Eric Dyson, Davarian Baldwin, and Mark Anthony Neal use the prefix "post-" to name and define hip hop's political presence.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Krims' book *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* offers a fresh, smart musical breakdown of these differing kinds of personae. He creates a genre system for rap, and though the system constantly bears revision, his acknowledgement of the contribution of geographical locale to the choices of style and content an MC makes are essential to understanding this concept.

<sup>6</sup> A large note on the terms I've used here: intellectual MCs, to name a very, non-exhaustive few, include Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Black Star. Lyrical MCs like Rakim, Gang Starr, and Devin the Dude are received and analyzed primarily in the context and content of their poetics. Bohemian MCs structure their personae around their attitudes of peace and the aesthetics of "hippie" culture, as in the examples of De La Soul, Common, Mos Def, Lupe Fiasco, and A Tribe Called Quest, all to varying degrees. By "Dionysian," I mean to refer to the bacchanalian, hedonistic attitudes of many "party" rappers, such as Three 6 Mafia, the Ying Yang Twins, the Cash Money Millionaires, and T.I. "Surreal" MCs include the Wu-Tang Clan, Kool Keith, and various lyricists on the Anticon label: these rappers tend to structure their rhymes in almost a schizophrenic "word salad," tending more to explore combinations of sounds than coherent meaning. While "sexual" rap seems redundant after "Dionysian," and while most rappers at some point discuss sex, it's important to recognize that artists like LL Cool J, Kool Keith, and the Ying Yang Twins have all had periods in which sex and sexuality were the focus of their lyrical content. Generally, female rappers are put into the "sexual" category: not by choice, perhaps, but because it's often the case that only when engaging in heteronormative memes can these women be given license to "signify." "Gangsta" rappers include Ice-T, N.W.A., Snoop Dogg, and Mobb Deep. When I say "Bourgeois" I'm referring to any artist whose primary lyrical function is flashiness, capitalistic success, or money in general. Like sex, this is rarely the main focus, but artists like 50 Cent, T.I., Kanye West, and Chamillionaire have all devoted large portions of their careers to discussing their own wealth. The "hood" persona claims its own authenticity in the very topos of the lyrics, and focuses mainly on specific urban locations, issues, and concerns. Tupac Shakur, Outkast, Notorious B.I.G., Lil Wayne are all or have all been involved at times in these sorts of personae.

<sup>7</sup> Krims suggests that simply "his" is enough, given the overwhelming number of male gangsta rappers, but enough has changed in the last eight years that I feel confident tagging on the female pronoun.

<sup>8</sup> Often called "heads."

<sup>9</sup> Née Carlton Douglas Ridenhour.

<sup>10</sup> In hip hop, the term "sample" is used to refer to any audio clip replayed and reappropriated into the context of the new song. Samples are often integrated very seamlessly, and are generally used to actually construct the musical background for a rap song, but are usually noticeable to a trained ear by the differing quality of the recordings. In Public Enemy's case, samples are also noticeable due to the sometimes stilted nature of their timing. It is clear that this particular sample is *not* part of Chuck D's new

delivery – its grainy quality and its syncopated timing make this clear – and it is in this way that listeners recognize that he is not merely repeating himself.

<sup>11</sup> A term commonly used in the late 1980s to refer to someone heavily involved in hip-hop culture, but which particularly references someone involved in breakdancing. The silhouette on the logo is wearing a track jacket and a Kangol-style hat – common signifiers of membership in this particular in-group.

<sup>12</sup> Ironically, “Caught, Can We Get A Witness?” criticizes rappers for the watering-down of tracks that would save them from this difficulty: “You singers are spineless / As you sing your senseless songs to the mindless / Your general subject – love – is minimal / . . . / I rebel with a raised fist: can we get a witness?” (Ridenhour).

<sup>13</sup> Hip-hop fans.

<sup>14</sup> Both drums and vocals here are hallmarks of standard hip hop fare in the early-to-mid 1980s; for this reason, the track, though unidentified, feels both familiar and archetypal.

<sup>15</sup> I have taken particular care in this section to refer to Wallace by his birth name when I am discussing his strategies as an artist: when I mean the persona the song or album assumes, I try to use those terms, or the name of the persona at hand, if available.

<sup>16</sup> And one who is still politically relevant 14 years later!

<sup>17</sup> Other lines on the record attempt to resolve this conflict: on “Machine Gun Funk,” Biggie raps, “I’m doin’ rhymes now / Fuck the crimes now / I’m on the Ave / I’m real hard to find now” (Wallace). Even these assertions are complicated by the speaker’s inability to abandon his old way of living: though the speaker claims to have abandoned a life of crime for a life of rap, he acknowledges that he’s still on the streets, where most of his previous drug deals happened. This assertion, too, is deeply ironic: the doublethink of it requires listeners to equate the rap game with a life of crime, and this is part of Biggie’s critique as well.

<sup>18</sup> Readers must again here bracket the question of value: it is not to suggest that one form of critique is more complex, successful, or artistic than the other: merely to suggest that because of Tupac’s earnest and nearly-static subject position, listeners were more ready to sympathize with his comments and statements.