TRAP(PED) MUSIC AND Masculinity: The Cultural Production Of Southern Hip-Hop at the Intersection of Corporate Control and Self-Construction

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

Black masculinity has been represented and reproduced in hip-hop since its beginnings in the 1970s. However, the production of Black masculinity in rap has relied increasingly on problematic cultural tropes, particularly variations of images such as the thug and the playa. Geographic space is also used in this cultural construction. The cultural industries have long conflated “authentic” Blackness with the Northern urban ghetto, particularly in cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. However, the expansion of the cultural industries in the U.S. South and images of Southern Black masculinity in popular media even rival “the North” in terms of exposure and sales, and Time Warner, Sony and Universal have invested millions in producing Southern-based rappers. To what extent do Southern rappers and their labels engage in a type of cultural production that evokes masculinity in rap and integrates claims of space and place? And how can such constructions in the dialectical push and pull of “keepin it real” in a context of corporate capitalism be understood?

The purpose of this study is to examine the construction and production of Southern Black masculinity in hip-hop, with an emphasis on two particular rappers in Atlanta, at the intersection of 1.) corporate interests that control the production and dissemination of these representations; 2.) the ideologies that shape the discourse on Black masculinity and manhood; 3.) the impact of location as a factor in performance; and 4.) the rapper’s self-conceptualization. How does the convergence of these four factors influence particular representations of Southern Black masculinity in rap music videos? While the first three have been studied in various degrees, the last is arguably as
important and is perhaps overlooked by scholars who study the economics and cultural production of rap and Black masculinity. Atlanta – which has been called the “Motown of the South” – is a potentially fruitful site because of its centrality as a site of cultural production and as home to numerous rappers who have achieved commercial success over the past decade.

This project will be a comparative case study of two rappers (Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe), their labels, their subgenre (which has become popularly known as trap music) and their city (Atlanta) as a site of cultural production. It will attempt to show how Jody and Zoe, the city of Atlanta as a site of cultural production, constructions of black masculinity and the various cultural industries converge in the cultural production process.
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One love to all –

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I dedicate this in memory of my paternal grandparents, K.V. Subbaroyan and Jayalakshmi.
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Introduction

In the early 1980s, the dawn of the Reagan era had its swiftest and most severe impact in poor, urban Black communities, particularly in metropolises such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington, D.C. Job loss, crime, and the introduction of the crack economy in those cities created a media and politically driven perception that young Black men were often hopeless and represented a threat to (white) America. As Mike Davis (1992) points out in his study of Los Angeles, poor blacks and other minorities were essentially cordoned off into self-enclosed areas of the city, suffocated by the lack of economic opportunities and kept away from the upper-class business interests charged with “redeveloping” Los Angeles.

Urban displacement, job loss, and the degradation of inner cities through the “malign neglect” of neoliberal policies did not go unnoticed among the people it affected the most (Rose, 1994; Forman, 2002; Quinn, 2005). In fact, the tales of woe, the narratives of communities declining and opportunities lost, became intertwined into certain Black cultural forms, including the story of hip-hop and its most visible form of expression, rap. Rap music grew in the early 1980s into a powerful voice outlining what was taking place to young Black men in the city. Its reach had become so widespread, and its message so tied to socio-economic realities, that rapper Chuck D called rap music the “Black CNN.” The idea of speaking the truth, or “keepin’ it real,” became rap’s mantra. However, the story of rap also includes the genre’s co-optation in the late 1980s
and early 1990s by multinational corporations intent on marketing its Otherness. The tensions involved with "keepin’ it real” and being embedded within corporate capitalism influence the specific themes, directions and cultural impact of hip-hop and rap.

As implied by the above, since its birth in the basement house parties in the Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop and rap have been dominated by three major themes: Blackness, masculinity, and geography. The commercialization and the globalization of hip-hop have not changed the genre’s essence, as Blackness, masculinity, and location almost always converge at the site of musical production. All three factor in the cultural production of rap, yet Black masculinity and geography have also become powerful commodities in rap and in the consumer market. Rap is used to sell almost anything from cars to cookies, while Black men and the spaces they occupy are used as powerful signifiers of Otherness in popular media. As Herman Gray (2005) notes, “(Commodified) representations of American blackness circulate widely via mass media and popular culture, achieving in the process some measure of global visibility, influence, admiration, imitation, or scorn” (p. 4).

Many of the previous studies on rap have touched on the cultural production of Black masculinity and its connection to space and place, including cultural studies scholars such as Tricia Rose (1994), George Lipsitz (1994), Murray Forman (2002), and Eithne Quinn (2005). However, extrapolating from Robin D.G. Kelley’s (1997) critique of “ghettocentricity” and Riche Richardson’s (2007) more recent indictment of the “one-size-fits-all” approach to Blackness, one could argue that scholarship on Black masculinity in rap has continued to focus on Northern inner cities. This focus may have resulted in other regions not receiving the scholarly attention they warrant. For example,
the expansion of the cultural industries in the U.S. South and images of Southern Black masculinity in popular media even rival “the North” in terms of exposure. To underscore this point, Southern rappers have eclipsed their Northern counterparts in sales, radio and video play, and corporate conglomerates such as Time Warner, Sony and Universal have invested millions in producing rappers who hail from Southern cities such as Atlanta and New Orleans (Richardson, 2007). In such situations, to what extent do rappers and their labels engage in a type of cultural production that evokes masculinity in rap and integrates claims of space and place? And how can we understand such constructions in the dialectical push and pull of “keepin it real” in a context of corporate capitalism?

The purpose of this study is to examine the construction and production of Southern Black masculinity in hip-hop, with an emphasis on two particular rappers in Atlanta, at the intersection of 1.) corporate interests that control the production and dissemination of these representations; 2.) the ideologies that shape the discourse on Black masculinity and manhood; 3.) the impact of location as a factor in performance; and 4.) the rapper’s self-conceptualization. How does the convergence of these four factors influence particular representations of Southern Black masculinity in rap music videos? While the first three have been studied in various degrees, the last is arguably as important and is perhaps overlooked by scholars who study the economics and cultural production of rap and Black masculinity. Atlanta – which has been called the “Motown of the South” – is a potentially fruitful site because of its centrality as a site of cultural production and as home to numerous rappers who have achieved commercial success over the past decade.
What makes this project unique from other studies is the fact that it attempts to portray the cultural production of Black masculinity as a multilayered one, replete with both organizational and geographical hierarchies that ultimately influence how an artist and his image are turned into commodities. This project explores and explains the role of creative managers – the intermediaries between the artist and the corporation – and how they shape the production process. Moreover, these hierarchies of production are often masked by the appearance of a local label’s autonomy and a carefully crafted exaggeration of an artist’s independence. Corporations use various tactics such as brand signifiers and the deployment of local cultural laborers such as street teams to hide the centralization of power and control. This directly impacts the artist and how masculinity is presented to the consumer, often under the pretense that the artist is directly responsible for commodified image.

This project is informed by both cultural studies and political economy, which are often framed as contradictory approaches to examining institutions and agency. However, as David Hesmondhalgh (2007) argues, political economy can have sensitivity to cultural studies approaches. Hesmondhalgh outlines two primary approaches to political economy: the American-based Schiller-McChesney tradition (named after the famous American political economists Herbert Schiller and Robert McChesney) and the European “cultural industries” approach championed by Bernard Miege (1989) and Nicholas Garnham (1990). The Schiller-McChesney tradition emphasizes the strategic uses of power (such as corporations lobbying for decreased governmental regulations) and the overarching effects of such power and control. This approach has been used to study hip-hop as an industry, as scholars such as Norman Kelley (2005a) have suggested.
a “political economy of hip-hop” that focuses primarily on the corporations that dominate the genre’s production, marketing and distribution. However, as Hesmondhalgh notes, this type of political economy often overlooks the tensions between production and consumption. The cultural industries approach does account for these tensions, often emphasizing the production side as it relates to the marketing and distribution of culture as commodity, and the contradictions that may arise in these relationships. Mako Fitts (2008) considers the use of the cultural industries approach in studying rap to be another variation of the political economy of hip-hop, which she considers “an examination of mechanisms by which contemporary capitalist modes of production in the music industry shape the tangible relations of hip-hop culture” (p. 217). But the cultural industries approach has its own limitations, as some scholars – such as Paul DuGay and David Pryke (2002) – have called for a poststructuralist approach to the cultural industries that deemphasizes the institutional concentrations of power.

Thus the Schiller-McChesney approach offers much explanatory power, but the “cultural industries” camp is attractive because of its emphasis on understanding colliding factors, including the production of cultural identities. In this light, this project will argue for a political economy perspective that incorporates the idea of identity construction, especially the idea of Otherness. Scholars such as Georgina Born (2000), bell hooks (1994 & 2004), Eric King Watts (2002 & 2004) and Bill Yousman (2003) have contributed to the idea of a political economy of Otherness, but, especially in the context of rap, additional theoretical connections can be made. This project will attempt such a theoretical framework, using as case studies two rappers (Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe), their labels, their subgenre (which has become popularly known as trap music) and
their city (Atlanta) as a site of cultural production. Although – as will be detailed – they have not enjoyed an equal level of success and in certain ways their situations offer different insights about modern rap, both Jody and Zoe made their rounds in the Atlanta music scene before becoming global commodities, buoyed by the success of their videos, ringtone sales and single downloads, and by formatted radio play across the country. The similarities and differences with each other are telling about the interplay of rap as cultural production and the interplay of masculine, ethnic and geographic symbols in rap. Likewise, their experiences with the cultural industries mirror, yet in some ways also differ, from how many other rappers, especially more well-known East-Coast and West-Coast rappers, become brand names through their songs and their personas. This is why this project will use a case study approach, which explains a specific phenomenon in detail using multiple methods. A project such as this needs a multi-method approach, and a case study is the best way to ensure that different methods are used in conjunction with one another. This project will be a comparative case study between Jody and Zoe, the city of Atlanta as a site of cultural production, and the various cultural industries that converge during the cultural production process. A case study brings out richness in detail that a more macro-level analysis might overlook. Though a case study is often limited to a specific subject or bounded system of analysis, it can, as Robert Yin (1994) notes, help to expand a broader theory.

Beyond the political economy of hip-hop and Black masculinity, this study aims to further interrogate the role of place in cultural production and the “selling” of cities and neighborhoods in the popular culture marketplace. In examining Atlanta as both a hotbed of rappers and rap subgenres over the past two decades, this study will detail how
the city has also become a brand signifier for the cultural industries. Beyond adding to the “credibility” of the rappers who hail from the city, the marketing of Atlanta as the mecca of the “Dirty South” and its various nicknames – the ATL and “Hotlanta,” to name a few – has spurred corporate investments from companies within and outside the hip-hop industry (Rushton & Thomas, 2005). Atlanta’s importance as a brand signifier will be explored in depth, particularly as it relates to the selling of trap music and of the masculinity depicted in the genre.

Closely tied to the notion of brand signification is the idea of how geography – specifically the meaning of place – is used as a means of authenticating a rapper to his consumers. The study will argue that while rappers might construct their masculinity in a certain way or emphasize themes – both lyrically and visually – that seek to differentiate them from rappers in other geographic areas, their identities frequently converge with the cultural industries’ desire to accumulate capital. This is why, despite Southern rap’s commercial sales success and global visibility, few rappers from the South – with the exception of such heavyweights as Outkast, 3 Six Mafia, Ludacris, T.I., and Lil’ Wayne – have enjoyed sustained success. That is because the production and distribution models in the South, particularly in Atlanta, are now more geared towards “one-hit wonders” and “ringtone rappers” such as Dem Franchize Boys, Spy Mob, D4L, and Soulja Boy, reflecting the cultural industries desire to get quicker returns on minimal investments.

Lastly, the project’s focus on the construction of masculinity as it relates to cultural production and place inextricably intertwines it with notions of authenticity. Too often, the notion of keeping it real conflates rappers’ claims with an authentic – an actual – experience when authenticity itself is such a problematic notion when it comes to
constructed images. Previous studies of the cultural industries from a political economic framework have often dismissed authenticity altogether, while those that come from a cultural studies/post-structural vantage point are too often fixated upon the idea. The authentic – an actual lived experience and tangible physical place – is a veritable holy grail for most rappers. The closer they are to what consumers perceive to be authentic, the easier it is for them to sell themselves as real. What this project will attempt to articulate is the fact that conflating keeping it real and authenticity is folly in any examination of cultural production. Keeping it real is not as fixed a term as previous scholars have suggested. Moreover, as I hope to show, authenticity is more of a rhetorical strategy employed by rappers, their creative management and corporations to sell more. As a result, authenticity itself is problematic to define within the context of cultural production.

This project is predicated upon the notion that not all rappers have equal opportunities in the cultural industries, thereby creating different degrees of leverage for them. On the other hand, the cultural industries do not always have to “build the story” for newly signed rappers, making their investments produce quicker returns on artists whose buzz has preceded their record deals or ringtone releases. The study will argue that the production models by rappers in cities such as Atlanta have allowed corporations to sign them to recording and distribution deals without having to spend money on resources such as A & R representatives and street teams to help generate buzz.

**Personal Interest**
It might seem odd that an Indian-American from the suburbs of Philadelphia would be interested in examining how the cultural industries produce Southern Black masculinity in hip-hop.

My focus on this subject grew partly from my own biases. I was raised among middle and upper-middle class African Americans whose conceptions of “proper” manhood were based upon an urban Northern conceptualization of Blackness. When I went to college in the Midwest, my peer group consisted primarily of African American men who grew up in or in close proximity to cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, D.C., and Minneapolis. My friends from the North looked down on their Southern counterparts, believing that Black men from the South had a “backward” demeanor and typified some of the worst stereotypes associated with Blackness.

Many of my close friends have stopped listening to rap music because of the rise of Southern rap, a trend that began in the mid-1990s with the rise of artists such as Master P., the New Orleans entrepreneur who made millions selling rap tapes and CD’s from the trunk of his car before getting an unprecedented distribution deal with Priority Records. Conversely, many of the college basketball and football players swore by Master P., Mystikal and groups such as the Hot Boyz and Youngbloodz. One of my friends from Louisiana who played on the college basketball team told me that “when P. started, that’s when rap began. There was no rap before P.” He argued that the themes that Southern rappers emphasized in their songs and made apparent in their videos resonated more with young Black men from the South than rap videos made by New York or Los Angeles MC’s. For many of us who grew up on rap, the rise of the “Dirty South” – and what
seemed to us the recycled images of minstrelsy that came with it – signaled the death of
the hip-hop we knew.

Even in my brief – and forgettable – career as a rapper in the late 1990s and early
2000s, I tried to reconstruct an “authentic” East Coast sound amidst the rise force of
Southern rap groups such as the Hot Boyz and UGK, and rappers such as Ludacris and
Mystikal. I was determined not to let rap – and what we viewed as hip-hop culture – be
hijacked by Southern interlopers. Little did I or my peers know that we were battling
against more than just the Southern rappers, but the cultural industries that began
pumping millions of dollars to reproduce and mass market the sounds of the “Dirty
South.”

For the better part of my life, my conceptualization of rap and of Black
masculinity has been shaped by my experiences growing up in the “North,” and more
importantly, in close proximity to the established Black bourgeois circles in the Mid-
Atlantic region. In this study, I confront my own biases – and those of my African-
American peers from the North – about Southern Black masculinity in hip-hop. As one of
my best friends – a Detroit native who recently located to Dallas – noted, “Cats from
down South, they’re just wired differently.” Whether this premise is accurate or not, it’s
important to note how our geographic positions help to construct the Other – and vice
versa – and how the media cultural industries play a role in cultivating this sense of
difference.
Preview of Chapters

The following chapters will attempt to show the often complicated and frequently understated processes that shape Black masculinity and geographical places into commodities, how the rappers being examined – Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe – and their representatives try to assert some agency and control in an industry that favors the corporate formatted approach to cultural production, and why the hierarchies within the cultural industries – from the executives to the marketing reps – are so important in understanding the commodification and “selling” of rappers for public consumption.

Chapter 2 conceptualizes the numerous approaches to Black masculinity, geography as it relates to hip-hop, and the cultural industries while articulating my own approach. I borrow heavily from scholars such as David Hesmondhalgh, Herman Gray, S. Craig Watkins, and Mark Anthony Neal, who all argue that we must be aware of cultural politics in the production of culture. I also examine some of the underlying tensions between cultural studies and political economic approaches to agency, especially in the commodification process. I engage with and offer my critiques of scholars such as Jason Toynbee, Keith Negus, and Dipannita Basu, who examine the cultural industries from the European-influenced “cultural economic” perspective.

A rationale for my methodology as well as a step-by-step account of my methods is offered in Chapter 3. This includes a justification for the case study approach championed by Robert Yin (1994) and Robert Stake (1995). Moreover the methodology will show how the case study is linked with larger processes. As Mako Fitts (2008) argues, “processes of commercialization do not take place in a vacuum, and it is
important for researchers to observe the social relations and labor conditions that advance cultural production” (p. 213). In an attempt to understand such conditions, the study will embrace Ian Condry’s (2007) idea that we must view the cultural production process at the site – both space and place – in order to get a more nuanced understanding of what how a rapper and his music are made into commodities. In this light, the case study method that the study embraces will be detailed. Political economic analysis as well as textual analysis are part of this case study approach. In addition, this study diverges from typical political economic scholarship because it draws significantly from qualitative interviews. This chapter will explain the justification for qualitative interviewing in political economic studies, particularly when it comes to “privileging” the voice of the laborers in the cultural industries.

Chapter 4 examines Atlanta as a site of cultural production, using historiographies of the city as well as recent economic outlooks that show how it has benefited from its music scene. A 2005 Georgia State University study shows that Atlanta made up the majority of Georgia’s $286 million in musical output and has seen a dramatic increase in cultural industries intervention. This chapter argues that Atlanta has become not only an important hub for the cultural industries, but a brand signifier and commodity sign by which rappers from the region can claim as a means of marketing. Scholars such as Murray Forman and Eithne Quinn have examined how geography – particularly claims of the hood as a nexus of identity production – impacts hip-hop, but additional scholarship on rap produced in the “New South,” examining cultural industry and racial implications in depth, has the potential to make a contribution. With this goal in mind, this chapter will explore the political economy of Atlanta’s production of rap, particularly trap music,
which has become popular as a result of radio play, ringtone sales, Internet downloads, and YouTube distribution. This chapter will also attempt to show how Atlanta has paralleled and differed from cities such as New York and Los Angeles in terms of its cultural production, and the politics associated with producing Southern Black masculinity. Using a framework advanced by John Williamson and Martin Cloonan (2007) will advance an argument that there is a convergence of cultural industries – music, fashion, television, radio, Internet – in Atlanta that fuel the cultural production of rap and Southern Black masculinity.

Chapter 5 and 6 present case studies of rappers Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe, who have become among the most recognizable artists from Atlanta. Both Jody and Zoe have continued the success of fellow trap music rappers and Atlantans Young Jeezy, Yung Joc and T.I., who have become commercially viable brands in other industries such as fashion and film. Interviews with both of rappers will be mined for insight into how they describe themselves within the cultural industries and to what extent their responses flow with, or are at odds with, how other critical scholars view the artists’ role and place. These chapters will also analyze interviews with others affiliated with the cultural production process, including the rappers’ manager, their publicist, and their label representatives. As will be shown, their views highlight what Bill Ryan (1992) considers the contradictions of creative management in the corporate production of culture. These interviews will be integrated into semiotic analysis of selected videos by both Jody and Zoe in order to add another discursive form that influences how they position and represent their masculinity. Beyond the visual signifiers of Black masculinity, the significance of place, particularly the branding of Atlanta as a validating hood
experience, will be a key concept. Influencing the semiotic approach in these chapters will be studies such as Ed Guerrero’s (1993) analysis of black representations in film and Nicole Fleetwood’s (2005) study of Black masculinity in hip-hop fashion ads as frameworks.

Chapter 7, which concludes the study, compares and contrasts Jody and Zoe’s experiences in the cultural industries by using data sources collected from the case study approach, including analysis from their interviews as well as the feedback from other study informants. This chapter examines what we might learn about the degree to which pre-existing leverage determines the degree of agency rappers have when dealing with the cultural industries. Using the interview data and other information collected from sources such as hip-hop magazines and label promotions, an examination will be conducted of each artist’s efforts to “build the story” in order to market himself to local distributors such as radio stations and CD stores, and on the larger scale, to the corporate mechanisms tasked with making rappers into national and international commodities. This is an important aspect of the study because it aims to critique some of the previous scholarship on cultural industries, particularly from the American-style political economic view, that assumes artists have a uniform experience (good or bad) in the cultural production of their music and their identities. In fact, these experiences are often influenced by the amount of leverage they have entering into production or distribution agreements with corporate entities such as music labels, video production houses, and fashion companies.

The study concludes with a reflection on the production of Black masculinity within the cultural industries while embracing the political economy of place. This
project will not argue that the rappers in the study are somehow fake or fronting because of their commodification and their willingness to play by the rules of corporate conglomerates. Instead, their claims of keeping it real and their boasts of place within the larger systems of capitalist cultural production are contextualized. Ultimately this last chapter will reflect on claims of agency that must be mediated by a larger understanding of the economic and ideological forces that shape the making of cultural texts and the branding of artists as representatives of the real.

It is my hope that this project occupies a middle ground between the decades-long debates between the power of institutions and the extents to which agency can enacted. As a lifelong fan of rap and someone who still believes it has transformative potential, I never thought I would be using terms such as hegemony and cultural industries to describe the processes that go into making music and creating an artist. Taking into account my own academic background and my constant incredulousness at how some rappers are represented (or represent themselves), this study keeps in mind rapper Immortal Technique’s sobering take on the nature of rap and many rappers’ (including my case study subjects) relationship with corporate capitalism.

_There is a market for everything man,_

_There is a market for pet psychologists nigga,_

_There is a market for twisted shit fetish videos,_

_For nipple rings, for riverdancing, for chocolate cupboard roaches_  

_But you can’t find one for cultured hardcore reality and hip-hop?_  

“Meet Me At the Trap”: Place, Agency and Industries in the Production of Black Masculinity in Hip-Hop

In their hit 1999 song “Hip-Hop,” the rap group dead prez rhetorically wonders if “real” hip-hop is possible under corporate control and whether Black men have any agency within culture-producing institutions. They lament that:

MC’s get a little bit of love and think they hot,

Talkin’ ’bout how much money they got.

All y’all records sound the same.

I’m sick of that fake thug, R&B-raph scenario,

All day on the radio,

Same scenes in the video, monotonous material.

Y’all don’t hear me though.

These record labels slang our tapes like dope,

You can be next in line and signed and

Still be writing rhymes and broke.

You would rather have a Lexus or justice?

A dream or some substance?

A Beamer, a necklace or freedom?
The group’s lines re-affirm common questions asked by rappers and cultural critics: is authenticity possible when the corporations control the production and distribution of both the music and the image? More problematically, how are the politics of identity, Otherness and place negotiated within systems dictated by corporate production and distribution models? Is it possible to embrace “justice, a dream, or some substance” – to “keep it real” – when the production of one’s identity and image are intricately linked to multinational conglomerates with concentrated levels of power?

These are the questions scholars from a variety of disciplines and theoretical frameworks have tackled, with often strong disagreements about where emphasis should be placed in this complicated process. Scholars such as Mark Banks (2006) argue that broad-brushed assumptions about the cultural industries “has hitherto been marked by a somewhat truncated understanding of the complexity of cultural work and a rather generalized view of the social relations experienced by its practitioners” (p. 467). On the other hand, the “cultural turn” in political economy, as Andrew Sayer (2001) warns, has created too much emphasis on culture and the individuals involved in cultural work and not enough on the economic systems that govern the production of culture.

The cultural industries approach in this project seeks to be nuanced and complicated by the role of race and geography in the production of music videos, while also hopefully informed by the larger economic factors at work. Therefore, the project draws upon a wide range of sources to map out a conceptual framework for this study. Included are scholars whose theoretical views I might not necessarily agree completely with, but whose work is invaluable to the scope of this project. This project’s three major themes – Black masculinity, geography (specifically as it pertains to the production of
hip-hop), and the cultural industries – are laden with contradictory viewpoints, particularly when it comes to the politics and economics of cultural production. One of the major challenges was to find a way to take post-structural, agent-oriented scholarship on Black masculinity and triangulate it with more institutionalist perspectives on cultural industries and the processes of cultural production. After all, as David Hesmondhalgh (2007) and Mark Banks (2006 & 2007) so aptly note, scholarship on the politics of cultural production often overlook the dynamics of race and place. Similarly, Black masculinity scholars who have written about hip-hop have been a little too generous in their assessments about who controls the production and who controls the image of the performer. Part of this comes from a continued romanticizing of rap and hip-hop as countercultural. Perhaps this is a byproduct of the Birmingham School’s idealization of subcultures and their obsession with authenticity. Regardless, as Melissa Campbell (2004) points out, cultural studies scholars who have focused on the subcultural aspects of rap without understanding the structural implications are unwittingly guilty of “fetishization of authenticity and resistance” (Campbell, 2004: 499).

This project allows for the idea of authenticity, especially as it relates to a lived experience at a specific site of cultural production. But in developing a conceptual framework, the project argues that these claims of authenticity and subculture, as well as of agents’ power to self-construct identities, must be tempered by the economic and political realities of the cultural production process. More importantly, notions of cultural work must be considered within the larger systems that govern production, even in a supposedly “outside the system” genre such as rap. Notions of ideology, which are prominent in studies of Black masculinity and the African-American image, should be
taken into consideration with the economics of capitalist cultural production. Culture and the politics of identity are real, but so are the systems of production that govern culture’s distribution and consumption. Culture and economics are not antithetical notions, and in sketching out the works that shape this project, I aim to show how the ideological constructions of Black masculinity and place (both as a symbol and as a brand) are tied closely to the bottom-line imperatives of capitalistic production.

To do this, this chapter will first address the relevant works on Black masculinity and cultural production, particularly as they relate to the role of agency in constructing the Black male image. Most of the works in the section interrogate identity politics, though there is considerable disagreement among the scholars cited over how Black masculinity is produced. The chapter then moves to the role of geography in hip-hop and how claimed space factors prominently in rappers’ construction of selves. This section will examine the notion of ghettocentrivity and how it has impacted hip-hop, particularly as it relates to the exclusion of Southern rap during the emerging years of the genre. The last section of the chapter deals with agency and the cultural industries, specifically over how much the former can be achieved within the latter. This section will also detail how the cultural industries as institutions shape the cultural production process while addressing the scholarly disagreements over whether cultural workers’ creative autonomy impacts the commodified product. The section ends with a look at how hip-hop has broadened the definition of cultural industries and whether this expansion of the genre’s clout has increased the level of control that rappers have in the cultural production process.
Black Masculinity

The extensive literature on Black masculinity has included works from a variety of disciplines (social sciences, cultural studies, rhetoric) and from a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives. There continues to be tension within this vast scholarship on the roles of structures and the amount of agency that Black men have in constructing their identities. However, much of the scholarship on Black masculinity, particularly as it pertains to identities, has been influenced by postcolonial theory, which itself is largely grounded in poststructuralist thought. Perhaps no scholar has articulated the Black-man-as-subject idea more clearly than Frantz Fanon, whose work had an enormous impact on both postcolonial and African American studies. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon argues that the criminal image of Black men becomes so embedded within society’s collective memory that whites not only perpetuate Othering, Blacks come to accept it. The signification of Black men as the Other is used by whites to produce difference as a justification for Blacks’ subordination – a subordination that Black men internalize. Fanon uses French psychoanalyst Jacque Lacan’s idea of mimicry and argues that the colonial male subject’s attempts to erase his sense of self by trying to imitate the master only serves to reify the superiority of the master and the inferiority of the subject. While Fanon acknowledges the institutions of colonialism and racism, he argues that Black men are agents in their own construction as the Other. As Fanon (1967) so memorably writes, “a Negro is forever in combat with his own image” (p. 194).
Fanon’s work is an important starting point in conceptualizing Black male identity. Moreover, his influence is apparent in the works of contemporary scholars of Black masculinity, who most often take Fanon’s poststructuralist approaches in conceptualizing Blackness in relation to the cultural industries. Perhaps this is why so many critical media scholars whose work focuses on representations of Black masculinity have a poststructuralist bent. The result has been to focus on the politics of representation and not as much on the processes of production that have shaped representations of Black masculinity in popular culture, especially in hip-hop.

Given their centrality to this literature, it is logical to start with Herman Gray (1995; 2005) and bell hooks (2003). They both try to connect Black masculinity with larger issues of the politics of representation and production. Gray argues that despite the rise of hip-hop, the production of modern representations of Black men – while evolving from earlier fixed binaries – continue to be problematic in their essentialism. He observes, for example, that gains in black empowerment may come at the expense of gender equity: “contemporary images of black masculinity continue to challenge hegemonic constructions of whiteness even as they rewrite and reproduce forms of patriarchal authority, enveloping some of its most disturbing aspects in black vernacular style and expressive performance” (Gray, 1995: 403). In his work on the cultural politics of Black representation in media, Gray (2005) notes that “the institutionalization of black cultural production, especially the reach of its cultural influence, is taking place in a post-civil rights period of global corporate consolidation” (p. 13). Gray’s observation highlights the contradictory nature of the cultural industries as it pertains to Black masculinity: on one hand, Black men have become global media commodities and have
seen their exposure increase significantly across various cultural texts. However, they have less access to controlling cultural production as a result of a shrinking number of media institutions and the concentration of power. Later in this chapter, I will address how Gray calls for a closer examination of the political economy of Otherness.

hooks (2003) adds that Black men have little or no control over the cultural production of their image, and as a result, their representation continues to be largely controlled by white-owned media structures. hooks argues that the ideologies of Black Otherness continue to play a significant role in the cultural production process, noting that images of Black men in popular culture are largely produced for the consumption of whites. Despite her forceful arguments on the power of ideology in controlling the cultural production of Black masculinity, hooks is vague in connecting the dots between ideologies and the institutions tasked with producing cultural texts. hooks mentions white patriarchal capitalism as the source of Black men’s continued oppression and self-loathing, however she does not identify or interrogate the specific mechanisms of the cultural industries and the production processes that have shaped representations of Black masculinity in popular culture.

Though influenced by Gray and hooks, Craig Watkins (1998; 2005) takes a more poststructuralist stance on Black cultural production, arguing that images of Black masculinity in the last decade have been shaped by both hip-hop and the postindustrial experience of urban Black youth. He adds that Black film and video producers have exploited the ghetto by making it the nexus of the Black male experience. Watkins notes that black filmmakers used the ghetto as a brand to develop a genre of films in the 1990s such as *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *South Central*, and *Clockers*, which paved
the way for video makers to make the ghetto into the most dominant symbol in music videos.\textsuperscript{1} But Watkins (2004) is also quick to point out the “ironies of capitalism” as they pertain to Black men using the cultural industries and consumption to assert agency by flaunting material goods as a means of resisting white patriarchy. He suggests that Black men are active participants in their involvement in the cultural industries, arguing that by doing so, they can make up for their lack of cultural capital in other fields. This idea echoes claims made by scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson (1996) and Todd Boyd (2002), who claim that Black men use rap as a means of exerting symbolic power.

For Boyd and other scholars such as Imani Perry (2004) and Timothy Brown (2005), rap and other forms of mediated expression offer Black men an opportunity to challenge and subvert authority, giving them spaces otherwise not offered by institutions controlled by whites. Perry, for example, frames her analysis of Black masculinity in hip-hop within postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha’s notion of cultural mimicry. Basing her assessment of the cool pose articulated within hip-hop by the supposedly hypersexual or hyperviolent Black man, she argues that hip-hop culture engages in inverse mimicry. This mimicry, she argues, “offers a social critique and a disruption of white supremacist authority.” She claims that “thug mimicry…does not subvert notions of essentialist superiority by becoming indistinguishable from the oppressor; rather, it dislocates the authority for defining the black underworld and manipulating the negative images of black America in order to serve the interests of white America. …This embodiment becomes an indictment of white supremacy…” (Perry, 2004: 109). Perry

\textsuperscript{1} The ghetto become such a cliché within Black films and in music videos that comedians such as the Wayans Brothers and Chris Rock, along with rappers such as The Roots and De La Soul, made satires that parodied Black overreliance on the ghetto and whites’ obsession over consuming “ghetto fantasies.”
essentially argues that Black men are empowered by performing the Other and exploiting Otherness for their own gain while flouting the white institutions that shaped the Black male image. In other words, by playing the role of the villain, rappers such as Snoop Dogg, Fifty Cent, and Young Jeezy capitalize upon America’s fear and fascination with a vilified Black masculine image.

In this sense, poststructuralist scholars of Black masculinity argue that power and agency can be enacted in popular culture images, even if rappers do not have control over cultural production. This symbolic power, they note, allows for the accumulation of cultural (and economic) capital that helps rappers resist and counter the oppressive white gaze.

But scholars such as hooks are unimpressed by this argument. hooks castigates Boyd’s work, contending that his “version of being ‘real’ sounds more like warmed over versions of white patriarchal masculinity’s notion that a real man proves his manhood by remaining rigidly attached to one’s position, refusing to change. It reveals the emotional immaturity that underlies much hip-hop sentiment” (hooks, 2003: 152). The new generation of scholarship on Black men, hooks asserts, positions Black masculinity within the mold of white patriarchy. She further argues that though “Boyd, and many of his cronies, like to think that calling themselves ‘niggas’ and basking in the glory of gangsta culture, glamorizing addiction to drugs, pussy, and material things, is liberation, they personify the spiritual zombiehood of today’s ‘cool’ black male” (p. 153).

And in celebrating “hip-hop masculinity,” works such as Perry (2004) and Brown (2005) perhaps underestimate the economics of cultural production and the role that corporations have in producing and marketing this Otherness. Some scholars, however,
have made attempts to show the construction of Black masculinity within the cultural industries as a combination of the ideologies of production and the economics of consumption. Eric King Watts (2004) argues that through such texts as music videos, “the performance of ‘blackness’ and ‘black manhood,’ as themes in a larger historical drama, get reproduced and passed on” (p. 595). For Watts, understanding how Black masculinity is authenticated is predicated upon how the media uses Black masculinity as a way of creating a consumable Other and conversely, how rappers use that Otherness to emphasize an authentic identity. “As rappers depict themselves as prowling ‘niggas,’ their popularity…relies on their ‘authenticating’ these performances. And so black manhood is degraded within the dynamic intersiciality of ‘ghettenomics’” (606). For Watts, the authenticity presented in commercial representations is driven by consumption of the Other. He argues that creating an authentic Black male is dictated by the need by the cultural industries and Black performers to sell Blackness as a commodity while reaffirming difference – not diversity. As Watts and Mark Orbe (2002) note, “as the market economy seeks to regulate and integrate ‘authentic’ difference, white American ambivalence toward blackness is paradoxically both assuaged by its ‘universality’ and heightened by its difference” (p. 2). This, they argue, creates a spectacular consumption of “authentic” Blackness as spectacle, commodity, and reaffirmation of difference:

Spectacular consumption is, thus, structured in a fashion different from traditional spectacle; its rhetorics respond to cultural variables in diverse patterns oriented by the logic of sign value…On the one hand, the pleasure of consuming otherness is advanced by the Other’s uniqueness. On the other, in a mass consumer culture, commodity value rises to a sufficient level only when the Other undergoes massive replication (p. 4).
Such massive replication, Watts and others argue, takes place as a result of cultural reproduction and discourse, particularly with Black communities on what it means to be a Black man. Often times, this meaning is conflated with inner city, working class identities, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Though he acknowledges the role that the cultural industries have historically played in producing and reproducing Black male identities in popular culture, Ronald Jackson (2006) advances the discursive approach to Black masculinity. Jackson’s work focuses on how Black masculine bodies in popular media have been scripted by Eurocentric ideologies and have been reaffirmed and reified by mediated discourse. Jackson makes an important argument that black bodies need to be understood as texts, inscribed with the ideological writings of white supremacy and the politics of gender, sexuality, and class. Though he does not explicitly state it, Jackson seems to presuppose a normative black masculinity, one that favors the strong, Black patriarch and rejects the hip-hop thug. For instance, he argues that rappers (in one particular Ja Rule and Case song, at least) “forthrightly declare their thuggish behaviors and treatment of women are inappropriate, but they rationalize that resistance requires lawlessness. A thug, by nature, does not abide by the rules, and that is a work of pride, not disdain” (p. 112). Jackson places a clear distinction between an ideal Black masculinity – free from the ideological scripting of white racist institutions – and the “demeaning” portrayals of Black masculinity he believes are prevalent in popular culture. Jackson’s work will be examined more in the next section, as he makes the interesting link between the Black male body as a site of discourse and the ghetto as a symbolic space through which Black maleness is authenticated and affirmed.
**Hip-hop and geography**

Like prominent studies of Black masculinity, many works on geography’s role in hip-hop and in the cultural industries have leaned towards post-structural approaches, perhaps because many hip-hop scholars give credence to the idea that hip-hop – beyond its value as a multibillion commodity – is a culturally lived experience. Similarly, cultural geographers such as Irit Rogoff (2000) and economic geographers such as Allen Scott (2000) have different approaches to analyzing geography and cultural production, but both agree about the importance of culture as lived experience.

Rogoff’s (2000) study of geography and visual culture shows that discourses around identity and place are embedded in power relations. Since these power relations inevitably get translated into knowledge systems and disseminated through structures of representation, we must recognize geography to be as much of an epistemic category as gender or race, and that all three are indelibly linked at every stage. All three categories share an engagement with belonging which plays out around dichotomies of self and other and around strategies of ‘emplacement’ and displacement” (Rogoff, 2000: 8). Using postcolonial theory, particularly the works of scholars such as Edward Said, Rogoff argues that cultural identities are constructed through ideologies of place. She argues that places are constructed discursively, such as the cultural identities of Israelis were following the creation of the state. As a result, she argues, Israelis became the “we” and the Arabs who remained in the state immediately became the Other, subjugated both
socially and politically. In Chapter 4, I will explore how ideologies shaped the construction of Black masculinity in Atlanta and the South, and how economics sustained those ideologies in popular culture representations.

Geography’s role in the production of rap music – as both a musical and aesthetic commodity – has been important for many hip-hop scholars. It may even be the importance of place to rap that partially explains why agency is emphasized by some hip-hop scholars, as they give credence to the idea that place is both a lived experience and a space constructed by discourses such as authenticity and symbolic power (Rose, 1994; Dimitriadis, 2001; Dyson, 2004; Watkins, 2004). Cultural production, they argue, emerges from these sites of discourse, rather than from institutions such as music labels and other corporations seeking to exploit rap for commercial gain.

However, there is an important distinction in how geography is defined in hip-hop scholarship. Rather than focus on specific physical locations, hip-hop scholars have often linked geography with notions of space and have argued that cities are important symbolic markers. For example, most hip-hop scholars emphasize geography and the construction of identity through the lens of the ghetto, which they claim is the hub of cultural production for the genre. No historiographies of rap or critical studies of the genre have disputed the idea of the importance of the ghetto – constructed primarily in songs and accompanying music videos as dilapidated parts of the inner-city “North” (New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles) – to the genre’s identity. More importantly, as these scholars argue, the ghetto is the creative inspiration for rappers and serves as their connection to the “real” even as they sign production and distribution deals with corporate record labels (Quinn, 2005; Ogbar, 2007). As Murray Forman (2002) and
Tricia Rose (1994) argue, rappers have defined their Blackness and their masculinity by placing themselves within proximity to a symbolic or real “hood.” The ghetto, they argue, serves as both a validation of the rapper’s claim of authenticity and a source of creative inspiration in the way he writes lyrics and presents himself. This notion of ghettocentricity – one’s proximity to the ghetto as a verification and validation of his authenticity – has been echoed by Jackson (2006), who argues that:

In an attempt to decipher and explain what is real in the imaginary, metacommunicative universe of popular culture, Black hip-hop artists and Black filmmakers have frequently drawn boundaries between the authentic and inauthentic. These arbitrary demarcations are well justified in their minds…because true thugs are making money telling their own true stories while impostors lie about ghetto experiences and make ghetto life experiences seem real (p. 108).

The ghetto also figures prominently in Rose’s cultural history of rap, *Black Noise* (1994). Her work is most often cited by hip-hop scholars for its contributions to the genre, but it has not been given enough credit for triangulating the music to masculinity and geography. Rose, whose work was published when rap music videos gained more prominence on both BET and MTV, argues that videos highlight “rap’s primary thematic concerns: identity and location” (p. 10). She adds that through these lyrical claims, backed by visual signifiers of place, rappers have “brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness. It satisfies poor young black people’s profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated” (p. 11). But Rose’s somewhat celebratory assessment of ghetto visuals quickly became outdated, as the ghetto became more of a brand for mass producing and mass marketing rap music and the genre of “hood films” that emerged in the mid to late 1990s. Four years after the publication of
Rose’s book, Watkins (1998) critiqued the idea that rap music and representations of the ghetto in film and television somehow construct an authentic narrative. He notes that cultural industry interventions in both rap and film created a new version of “blaxploitation” that turned real inner-city experiences into commercialized caricatures.

Forman (2002) also critiques Rose’s work, arguing that she oversimplifies hip-hop’s roots and its proximity to urban geography: the ‘hood is not one monolithic place. For Forman (2002), claims of place and space have been central to hip-hop since the beginning, as they not only define the rapper but the particular style he represents.

Forman argues that the textual relevancy of geography – whether it is the city or the domain that the rapper constructs as his place – is critical to understanding how and why some rappers are better able to claim authenticity than others. Places are important to understand in hip-hop, both as texts and as symbols. Historically, “space and spatial variations across the black social spectrum continue to be central to a comprehension of black identities” (p. 55). For Forman, making spatial distinctions is one way of marketing rappers and particular rap spaces (Queensbridge, the Boogie Down Bronx, South Central Los Angeles, South Side Chicago) and validating their legitimacy:

In hip-hop’s cultural forms of expression and across a broad swath of the black cultural terrain the ghetto is elevated as the source of black authenticity, the stream in which both suffering and resilience flow in abundance. It is in this sense not necessarily any actual ghetto – or later, ‘hood – that is being appealed to, but the mythical or symbolically meaningful ghetto (Forman, 2002, p. 94).

In this way, Forman argues, the discourse of spatiality and claims of place are used to authenticate a rapper’s identity, speaking to his lived experiences and re-affirming his authority in narrating those experiences in songs. Few scholars before
Forman have explicitly examined how geography has impacted hip-hop, not only in the performer’s self-construction but also in his access to the cultural industries. Forman extensively shows how geography benefited rappers from New York and Los Angeles, but he has admitted that the South continues to be under-researched as a site of cultural production in hip-hop (Forman, 2002 and personal communication, September 8, 2008).

But while these scholars are right to emphasize geography and the commodification of space and place in hip-hop, much can still be gained from interrogating rap music’s inherent conflation of the authentic and the ghetto. Whether or not there is an authentic experience, it is clear that the commodification of space and place in rap music has been instrumental to its commercial success, leading to a multibillion dollar a year consumption of what is presumed to be authentic (the ghetto). Scholars on rap and place could further question how the ghetto became a brand and why the boasts of “keeping’ it real” are so often equated to one’s proximity to the ’hood, whether metaphysical or imaginary.

Among recent cultural studies works, Eithne Quinn’s (2005) study of the gangsta rap genre in Los Angeles advances our understanding of the cultural politics associated with hip-hop’s use of space. She argues that geography became a commodity, especially through the marketing of the East Coast-West Coast “feuds” of the 1990s, and that the West Coast rappers’ claims of space and musical superiority, as well as their “dissing” of New York counterparts, only served to make their locales into brand signifiers. West Coast rappers painstakingly created an image of a “hard” locale where gunplay and sexual conquests marked their masculinity and the authenticity of their hood versus the “fakeness” of East Coast rappers (Ro, 2001; Forman, 2002; Neal, 2004; Quinn, 2005;
Cobb, 2007). Against the backdrop of the postindustrial ghetto, “gangsta (more than other subgenres) was at pains to expose and critically engage its own commercial impetus and commodified status” (p. 5). She notes that rappers’ claims of ghettocentricity and their nihilistic boasts fueled corporate investments into the genre, and as gangsta rap became more controversial, its commercialization increased. In many ways, Quinn challenges the idea of rap subcultures, arguing instead that “there is a clear consonance between product endorsement and the gangsta ethos, between commercial exploitation and personal creativity” (p. 7).

Quinn’s argument leads to a larger question: can place and space be authentic and commodified at the same time? She does not go as far as other scholars in refuting the notion of authenticity, but she pointedly deconstructs the motivations behind claiming a hood. She argues that in order to better “sell” themselves in the consumer marketplace, “rappers responded to the uprooting of their communities by redoubling their claims on the hood” (p. 67). Quinn problematizes both authenticity and commodification, since much of rap – particularly gangsta and “grimy” genres that originated from the ghetto – alternately glorified and trivialized hood life. This paradox seems to underlie some of the tensions between cultural studies scholars such as Rose and political economic scholars such as Norman Kelley (2005a), who argues that the commodification of the ghetto is what has made rap the “flavor of the month” for consumers. Is the hood narrative in rap an explication of ghetto truths – the Black CNN, as Chuck D has noted – or is it a marketing gimmick designed to make the urban poor into consumable commodities? Quinn argues that “in marketing ‘the ghetto,’ gangsta entrepreneurs ironically created a saleable product out of their own region’s deindustrialization” (p. 13). I will address this
point in Chapter 4, when I discuss more in detail how the cultural industries grew in Atlanta and how the city and its poor neighborhoods became selling points – both musically and visually – for homegrown artists.

Quinn’s critique of gangsta rap seems to bring us back to the idea of authenticity, especially when it comes to the way the authentic is represented in popular culture and its grounding in place. As Robin Means Coleman (2003) laments, the “keeping it real authenticity claims” are “fraught with overly reductive, essentializing, and even short-sighted definitions of what the Black American experience” (Means Coleman, 2003: 95). We could add to this, then, where the Black American experience is. Moreover, the cultural industries’ commodification of authenticity and their imposition of what real Black masculinity is has created a very narrow and ideologically charged impression of what hip-hop is, the role of place in this narrowing and how it relates to narrating the Black American experience. Mark Anthony Neal (2004) adds that “hip-hop has never been as essentialist as we’ve led to believe” and that the media-generated war of the coasts in the 1990 was marked by a “fundamental belief that the experiences of those on one coast marked them as more authentic – more gangsta, more ghetto, more hardcore – than those on the other. In other words, one hood was deemed more authentically hip-hop, and by extension, more authentically black, than the other” (p. 58).

In the discussion so far of geography and rap, we have gone from the dangers of essentializing one place – the ghetto – as authentic rap, to battles about two places – east coast and west coast. But rap clearly involves other geographies, other claims of blackness, masculinity and authenticity. Riche Richardson (2007) argues that the ghetto-centric framework through which Black masculinity has been represented in mass
media has had two major impacts: it has limited scholarship in the diversity of roles that different geographic places may have placed in the different versions of Black maleness while limiting the discourse on the expanse of hip-hop connection to multiple spaces, regardless of geography. In her study on the evolution of Black masculinity in the South, Richardson argues that scholarship on Black men emphasizes the urban Black male experience at the expense of a more holistic look at Black manhood, with Southern locations especially being understudied. She claims that “an engagement of black men in the South is crucially relevant to the more general dialogue about black masculinity in the United States” (p. 18). She correctly points out that scholars “need to move away from ‘one size fits all’ models for analyzing black masculinity” (Richardson, 2007: 19). Such an approach would help to shift the scholarship on the production of Black masculinity in hip-hop from a ghettocentric framework to embrace a more comprehensive one that incorporates geography and the commodification of place and space. This is not to advocate the celebration of what different locations, including the South, may offer. Richardson notes, for example, the irony of Southern rap music and its depictions of Black masculinity, since they often reconstruct “historically raced and gendered pathologies of black men as criminal, violent, and overly sexualized that have roots in southern history” (Richardson, 2007: 202). Richardson’s work leaves open the question of what is authentic, and who – Black men or the cultural industries – is responsible for conveying such authenticity.

Other scholars have also noted the problems of limiting the Black male experience and hip-hop music to the urban North. The South, Matt Miller in 2004 argued, had been largely unmentioned as an important site of cultural production, and became
noticed fairly late by the cultural industries and among what is commonly known as the “Hip-Hop Nation,” which includes performers, fans and the various hip-hop oriented media. Miller, like Forman and Quinn, emphasizes hip-hop culture from a geographic angle, tracing the “lineage” of the term “Dirty South” from its subcultural roots to its use in popular media. The notion of the Dirty South, as Miller notes, embraces the traditionally negative stereotypes of the South as being unclean and uncivilized and “flips” them into a term that markets the region’s edginess. The term emerged from a 1995 song by the Atlanta hip-hop group Goodie Mob, which railed against Southern poverty, police brutality and the political conditions that have marginalized Blacks through the region. However, as Southern rappers and rap groups gained more prominence, the term became more synonymous with the more sexualized and violent images of the South.

Miller argues that the commodification of "Dirty South" and its use has reaffirmed in mediated representations the idea that the South is a homogeneous cultural and geographical realm. He adds that as the term and the region it describes have become mainstreamed, “the idea of the Dirty South lost much of its initial meaning as a critique of the racist legacy of the South” (Miller, 2004: 203). Miller also problematizes the idea of a uniform hip-hop culture, arguing that rappers whose backgrounds are not from the East or West coast have faced issues gaining acceptance among their peers and from a larger fan base. He concludes, however, that “the development, marketing, and consumption of the Dirty South came about a result of the geography of the rap music industry, and built upon pre-existing ideas about the South and its inhabitants” (p. 207). Using notions of “country” and “dirty,” Southern rappers and their labels billed
themselves as different from their Northern counterparts, which created opportunities to market their sense of territory.

Darren Grem (2006) builds upon this idea, arguing that “the rise of Atlanta’s ‘Dirty South’ rap music industry shows the readiness of some African Americans in the post civil rights era not only to embrace their southernness but to sell it as well” (p. 56). Grem’s work will be addressed more substantively in Chapter 4, but it is important here to note Grem’s main observations regarding Southern rappers. He argues that Dirty South rap was used by rappers who felt their communities were being left out of Atlanta’s economic development and their music being ignored by rap music markets in cities such as New York and Los Angeles (Grem, 2006). Secondly, Grem – like Forman, Richardson, and Miller – notes that Southern rappers were eager to create a distinct musical genre and a commodity that could equal other geographic regions in commercial distribution. In other words, Southern rap artists and music producers helped to make their region into a fairly self-contained cultural industry comprised mostly of smaller independent labels instead of exporting their styles and sounds to other regions. Rather than focus purely on rural poverty or the economic conditions of the urban South (mainly Atlanta), Southern rappers began to gain more visibility by promoting “the Dirty South as a loosely defined, inclusive concept and a lucrative set of attractive commodities” (p. 56). While Grem’s focus is on musical groups such as Outkast and Goodie Mob, who were considered the pioneers of Atlanta’s distinctive musical sound, it is important to note that most of the commercially viable music that has come out of the South from 2006-2008 was produced and distributed by major labels such as Def Jam, Bad Boy and Universal. As Richardson (2007) points out, “rap has proliferated exponentially in the South in part
because when it became a popular (and profitable) trend, mainstream record companies with no prior investments in southern artists quickly south a piece of the action and established southern branches” (p. 200).

Despite the intervention by the major labels and other corporate conglomerates, cultural studies scholars such as Miller, Grem, and Richardson argue that the production of Southern rap was in many ways rooted in Southern Black men’s frustrations with how they were trivialized in hip-hop culture. Southern rappers did feel left out by their Northern counterparts and desired to create a musical identity that presented their masculinity and their space – lived and creative – as being unique from other regions. Richardson argues that the production of Southern rap and the construction of rappers’ identities was paradoxical because it sought to subvert the East Coast-West Coast paradigm of hip-hop by exploiting the images of Southern Black men as “countrified” or “dirty.” Richardson notes that “southern identity is the central quality that authenticates and validates artists performing in this genre and authorizes them to…rap. The movement in some ways repackages the vexed folk fetishes that have conventionally identified the rural as most authentically black” (p. 202). Richardson makes an important point here: location becomes a commodity as it reinforces certain ideologies about how place impacts Black masculinity. The success of Southern rap has been predicated upon rappers portraying themselves as Others of Others, often playing upon the ideological images of Black men as being simple, dirty, or idle. In this sense, Southern rappers and the cultural industries who produce and distribute them romanticize Southern Black masculinity yet seek to uphold images that vilify and lampoon Black men. Grem (2006) notes how groups such as Field Mob, which hails from Albany, Ga., “were proud to come from the
most ‘country’ place in the Dirty South, a place field ‘field boys’ rolled with ‘the watermelon, beer can, and peaches’” (p. 67). To make sure their consumers understood just how “country” they were, Field Mob wore country overalls, strummed banjos, and played with pigs in their videos. Though cultural critics such as Jackson (2006) have blasted these images as upholding notions of Black male inferiority, Southern rappers – as well as their labels and the video production houses tasked with making music videos for mainstream consumption – have used these tropes as powerful visual signifiers of their identities and as sales pitches to rap consumers.

From a historical perspective, this desire to emphasize geography as an important site of both cultural and identity production is not unlike the geographical schisms that emerged in 20th century jazz music. Burton Peretti (1992) argues that forces such as the industrialization of the South and the Great Migration played significant roles in how Black jazz musicians saw each other. Peretti notes a contempt that some Northern musicians held towards their Southern counterparts, a feeling he argues was grounded in perceptions of Southern Blackness: simple, unsophisticated and often uncivilized. Southern musicians not only faced more challenges in playing, but even when they did find work, their compensation often paled in comparison to musicians from the North. Peretti argues that these schisms of race transformed jazz into distinctive regional styles, and as a result, two subcultures within the jazz culture. Peretti focuses his analysis during a time when many jazz musicians made their living as either contract performers to radio or concert hall programs or earned their keep through small-scale record distribution, which preceded the rise of the cultural industries in the 1940s and 1950s. Still, his commentary on Northerners’ racial and class attitudes towards Southern musicians has
relevance to contemporary rap music, where there have been longstanding perceptions that New York and Los Angeles rappers “diss” Southern rappers by downplaying or dismissing their styles. Unlike the jazz musicians of the Jim Crow South, however, Southern rappers have seemingly used the cultural industries to engineer that feeling of disrespect into a multimillion-dollar-a-year commodity.

Geography is also an important aspect of cultural production because of the way cultural industries use cities as brand signifiers. The transformation of Atlanta into the “New Motown of the South” or the embodiment of “Dirty South” music has as much to do with the political economy of place as it does the distinctiveness and innovativeness of Atlanta’s music scene. More importantly, Atlanta’s role in the cultural production process brings up the idea of glocalization. Following a framework established by scholars such as Sonnega (1995) in his study of MTV, Southern rap is fit to pre-established molds of production, yet marketed to cater to the tastes of regional consumers. In other words, the cultural industries use geography – particularly specific locations – as a camouflage to mask the mass (re)produced music and images in hip-hop. Scholars such as Dipannita Basu (2006) and Ashwani Sharma (1996) argue that the commodification of “world music” is an example of how the process of glocalizing a cultural text is similar to colonial era methods of governing. Sharma (1996) notes that music produced in other countries is often funded by Western conglomerates but given the appearance of having been created “organically” and from within the heart of a particular community. Sharma argues that this is akin to colonial administrators making repressive policies and allowing natives to implement them – giving the appearance of sovereignty when the nexus of power continued to be held by the colonizer. Sharma’s analogy might be a bit extreme in
comparing how rap and Black masculinity are produced in a region such as the South, but it does highlight how power is stratified and how the appearance of power and control is sometimes just as effective in selling a product as actual power and control. While glocalization is an important concept to understand in this project, it is not fair to consider Atlanta’s hip-hop scene a completely glocalized system of cultural production. After all, Atlanta is a site of cultural production and the texts are not imported from other areas for the local consumption. This dynamic will be explored more in chapter 4.

Agency and the Cultural Industries

To do a worthy examination of Southern Black masculinity in rap music, this study seeks to interrogate the idea of the tension between two elements: the agent (the rapper) and the structures of production (the culture industries tasked with producing the rapper as commodity). The agency/structure tension has manifested itself in two extremes in studies of hip-hop and of the cultural industries in general, with some scholars asserting that artists do have a great deal of agency while others claiming the artists have little or none. What is interesting is that these differences are not irreconcilable, as a political economic approach – particularly the one championed by Hesmondhalgh and argued for, in lesser degrees, by Bill Ryan (1992), Jason Toynbee (2000 and 2003), and Mark Banks (2006 & 2007) – leaves space for the creative agent particularly during certain historical moments or in particular domains. Still, there are important differences among these scholars, and those differences inform my approach to this project.
What might be helpful in understanding the dynamics of cultural production is differentiating between the macro-level forces of the cultural industries and the micro-level ones that make up the notion of “cultural work” (McRobbie, 2002; Gibson, 2003; Jones, 2003; Toynbee, 2003; and Banks, 2006; 2007). Banks (2007) clearly articulates these notions, as well as the inherent tensions between macro and micro-level approaches, arguing that for many critical theorists, “there is a somewhat schematic focus on the macro-level of analysis, on the broad trends of production, and a concomitant tendency to spotlight only the larger national and global corporations of the cultural industry landscape” (p. 39). As a result, political economists often “emphasize only the objective and systemic ways in which capitalist cultural production impacts on the social realm” (p. 27). Thus political economy highlights such broad factors as ownership concentration, standardization incentives, synergistic strategies and advertiser influence. Moreover, Banks argues, “given the structuralist inclinations of Marxist theory, there has been a tendency to conceptualize all workplaces in schematic fashion…and to understand workers in one-dimensional terms…rather than as active and critical human subjects” (Ibid). Ian Condry (2007) takes Banks’s assessment and call for dual-level cultural production analysis and applies it in his ethnographic study of hip-hop in Japan, where he studies how rappers relate to a base audience and to the cultural industries trying to make them into commercial commodities. Condry argues that there is a site of cultural production where cultural industries, cultural work, and consumption converge. Condry’s work will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters, especially since he seeks to find a middle ground between political economy and cultural studies on the issue of cultural production.
With that being said, "macro-level" political economy is a very critical aspect of this study because it helps explain the rise of Southern rap and the production of images in music videos as the result of consolidation and corporations’ preference for reproducing and recycling products that have already met with commercial success. The Schiller-McChesney approach would have predicted that, after the multi-platinum sales of Southern rappers began to eclipse those of their Northern counterparts in the early 2000s, music labels invested more resources in the South and music video networks began to play more Southern rappers in their playlists. As Nina Huntemann (1999) and McChesney (2004) also note, the preprogramming of “urban” radio stations owned by conglomerates such as Clear Channel and Radio One allowed Southern rap to gain national exposure. They argue that the relationship between the major labels’ corporate parents and the radio chains facilitated easier access to pre-programmed playlists. This approach is also valuable in understanding how Southern rap (or, rather, the artists and songs out of Southern rap with "crossover," "value added," "synergistic" potential) became mass marketed and mass distributed through media giant Viacom, which owns the three largest cable channels that play music videos – MTV, BET, and VH1 (as well as their Black-oriented offshoots such as MTV Jams, VH1 Soul, and BET Hits).

While the Schiller-McChesney model can explain the above-listed industrialized formatting of distribution and promotion that was essential to the rise of Southern and its popularity in radio, Internet and music videos, it is important to also consider the role of formatting in influencing cultural production and the roles of cultural workers. For political economists, the bottom line is that although the cultural industries may not function as smoothly as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer – the originators of the
cultural industry thesis – believed they did, that dysfunction does not get in the way of profit-making imperative. Sut Jhally’s (1989) interpretation of the political economy of culture updates but still seems to take many of the assumptions of the Adorno-Horkheimer model. Jhally argues that:

The cultural realm can support itself by producing and selling cultural commodities, resulting in surplus being generated internally. Culture here becomes a part of material production, a part of the base itself, and is subject to the same laws of economic production as other industrial spheres. This leads to what is called the ‘industrialization of culture,’ a process whereby the superstructures become commodified (Jhally, 1989: 73).

The degree to which such larger industrialized processes may circumscribe the ideological vibrancy of cultural texts is a strength of the perspective. But Jhally – like Adorno and Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School scholars who came after them – misses a crucial element in cultural production. While corporations ultimately control the production and distribution of culture, the production process is made up of cultural workers who at the "micro-level" may complicate how the larger industrialized forces are manifested in the everyday production of culture. Cultural work, as scholars such as Jason Toynbee (2000), Angela McRobbie (2002), Andrew Beck (2003), Chris Gibson (2003), Janette Webb (2004) and Mark Banks (2006; 2007) argue, often goes unnoticed in broad systemic analyses of cultural production. All have argued – to differing degrees – that the cultural industries do assert control over the production and distribution of cultural texts, while also recognizing that the diversity of the cultural labor (in terms of perspectives and values) ultimately does not get in the way of the corporation’s goal of making money.
Toynbee’s (2000 & 2003) work brings attention to the idea that artists are social authors and have some control over their public identities. He argues that the degree of capital they accumulate as a result of image building helps them to influence the production of texts and as a result, gives them voice in how they are commodified. Toynbee also seems to critique the idea that artists are disconnected from the texts they produce, which is a variation of the classic Marxist notion of laborers being alienated from their work. Instead, he says, artists are willing to become commodities in order to gain more access, but still retain authorship over their creative impulse. He explains this dynamic by arguing:

The social author stands at the center of a radius of creativity, but the range and scale of voices available to her/him/them will always be strongly determined by the compass and position of the radius on the musical field. Perhaps the biggest advantage of treating popular music authorship in such a way is that it enables one to be skeptical about grand claims to creative inspiration...without discarding the notion of agency (Toynbee, 2000: 46).

Toynbee’s argument seems to strike the middle ground between the weight of cultural work and the influence of institutions, a position other scholars have expounded upon. Banks (2006), for example, argues that within larger systems of production, “cultural entrepreneurs are pursuing careers underpinned by a diverse assemblage of motives and moral principles, and, as such, contrast markedly with the desocialized drones distinctive to the fatalist critique” (p. 467). Banks, like Toynbee, observes that there are degrees to which cultural workers can have control over the production process. This notion of creative autonomy, they note, allows for the worker to exercise agency without being rigidly confined to the constraints of institutional production processes.
Creative autonomy in hip-hop is shown by the number of artists and producers who use the advances from record deals to start their own labels, which they use to produce work outside of their contracts. Moreover, as Hesmondhalgh (2007) has noted, artists and producers who have developed a reputation prior to entering into agreements with larger corporate structures often have a greater degree of leverage and are afforded the perks of the “star system,” which often includes final say in what projects they are involved in and how they are marketed (Ryan, 1992; Hesmondhalgh, 2007).

But showing the complexity of this issue, many scholars ultimately emphasize the importance of the larger structures even as cultural workers struggle to assert autonomy. McRobbie (2002) argues that the individualization of creative labor has actually served to enhance the power of institutions and makes workers more bound to the capitalist system. This is an important point to note in the production of Southern rap music, where “independent” producers are often tied to larger systems of production even if it appears they have autonomy over their creative management. She notes that “people have to become their own micro-structures, they have to do the work of the structures themselves, which in turn requires intensive practices of self-monitoring or “reflexivity” (McRobbie, 2002: 518). Similarly, Gibson (2003) argues, the cultural industries cultivate a “culture” that blurs “the boundaries between what are considered the places of work and sites of socio-cultural interaction: the infrastructures of cultural production are invariably spaces where social ‘scenes’ are established and maintained” (p. 205). Gibson’s argument, as it pertains to rap, can be encapsulated in this way: in their quests to maintain their public identities by “keeping it real,” rappers are laboring well beyond their studio and concert times. Club appearances and other public outings become work
in order to advance the rapper’s career and help his label and other corporations he is aligned with sell more products. Although interesting ideological constructions may occur in such public spaces, to the degree to which these are routinized and institutionalized, the artist may also be aware that they have to be "always on" and therefore seen as a consistently branded entity.

Sayer (2001) is also skeptical about the degree to which cultural work provides agency and cautions against political economy’s “cultural turn” positing that systems trump labor when it comes to ideas about agency and control. Sayer acknowledges radical political economy’s shortcomings when it comes to notions of race and gender, but he also argues that neither of those factors shape the basic market structures that govern cultural production. Sayer is also dubious about how even innovative organizational cultures – particularly as they pertain to labor and the hierarchies of cultural work – influence production and consumption, noting that – no matter how creative cultural workers are – the market ultimately defines the cultural product. As he notes, “although culture is everywhere in society, it is not everything” (p. 693). Sayer’s critique of cultural work brings the argument back to systems of production and how, no matter what the nuances of cultural work are, scholars should not forget that capitalistic production is driven by profit and exploitation of resources – not the value of cultural meaning or the politics of difference. In pursuing the bottom line, corporations – faced with higher production costs and little return on investments – choose not to go with what they consider risky. Rather, they format production so that a product can be created in spite of the different values in the production and creative management processes.
Manifesting this perspective is Bill Ryan’s (1992) analysis of the cultural industries, extremely useful in understanding how and why images of Black masculinity are “recycled” in music videos. As he notes, “formats have played a crucial role in consolidating the conditions of creative (as opposed to artistic) work and sedimenting professional cultural practice” (p. 138). By formatting cultural production, Ryan argues, “corporations can administer the creative stage in a manner which systematically supplies them with the originals they need to expand in an unpredictable and competitive market” (p. 184). The logic here is that the rapper, though not completely controlled by the corporation, is forced to perform within a pre-constructed format that limits his or her ability to produce an “original” work. But even such rigid structures of production do not guarantee commercial success or the corporation’s return on investment. In fact, as Mike Jones (2003) so aptly notes, the cultural industries produce mostly commercial failure and in recent years, have invested more in rappers who can produce “instant” hits through Internet downloads and ringtone sales.

Modern rap, then, occurs in a radically changing political economic and cultural industry context. With more corporations entangled in what could be considered multi-mediated commodity packaging (music, videos, and related cultural texts), perhaps the “old” artist-industry model is outdated. John Williamson and Martin Cloonan (2007) contend that noted music scholars such as Simon Frith and Keith Negus have broadly defined the forces that produce popular music as the music industry. But Williamson and Cloonan argue that limiting the production of music to one industry per se “is an inappropriate model for understanding and analyzing the economics and politics surrounding music” (p. 305). Indeed, in the age of consolidation and synergistic
production practices, the term industry is hardly a fitting way to describe converging corporate interests at the site of cultural production. As they argue, “in order to understand ‘the music industry,’ it is necessary to examine a cross-sector of industries. Thus the reports are sites where the notion of a single music industry has been unpicked, and (not always explicit) recognition to the reality of a series of inter-related industries” (p. 310). To apply this to hip-hop, rappers and their management do not just deal with their record labels; they must also work with video production companies and telecommunication giants such as MTV and BET, radio stations – which are primarily owned by mega-conglomerates such as Clear Channel, Emmis, and Radio One – and the various forms of hip-hop media that encompass what Dipannita Basu (2005) calls the “hip-hop industries.” Additionally, the rise of super-retailers such as Wal-Mart, which now serves as the primary distributor of music, has forced rappers to alter their content in order to have access to the wider markets made available through retail chains (Fox, 2005). As Mark Fox (2005) notes, the rise of Wal-Mart as a music distribution giant and the fall of smaller independent music stores has forced rappers to acquiesce to the retailer’s conservative content filters, which add another wrinkle in the production and marketing process. In other words, rappers are beholden to more than one master in the processes and politics of cultural production.

Williamson and Cloonan’s critique of creative autonomy also underscores the market driven nature of music and other cultural industries. For example, artists are tasked with their own marketing and must pay out of pocket for the production of their music videos. While the artist might have more creative license in producing videos, he is ultimately bound by the economics of the cultural industries and the investment of capital
made by his record label. As Jones (2003) laments (and Toynbee acknowledges), such investments in artists often makes artists dispensable if they do not perform to the labels’ expected yield and have quick licensing potential across different outlets. This increased emphasis on licensing in the American music industry, which has increasingly become integrated with Internet, telecommunications, and television interests following the 1996 Telecommunications Act, has produced more investments in rappers – and other musical performers – who can produce a hit that can generate revenues through radio play, video promotion, and the sales of singles through online catalogs and ringtones. Veteran rapper Snoop Dogg cautions that today’s rappers are churned out by record labels for quick success and are not focusing on longevity:

They’re not making substance material — they’re not really going into creating a sound. It’s all about making the hot song for right now, but the artists who will stand the test of time like myself are about making records, not songs. You got to make a quality album so you can hold people’s attention. It’s like a movie. If you make a movie that got (only) one good scene, ain’t nobody gonna go see it‖ (“Huge Hits Don’t Spell Success”, 2007).

Another issue that emerges in the argument about cultural production is the influence of markets and how corporations tasked with producing or distributing – or both – the artists respond to changes in consumption, particularly in the age of ringtones and Internet downloads. Though much of the change in the cultural industries has happened over the past decade, it is important to note that a watershed moment in the way recording companies commodified and sold their artists occurred with the introduction of SoundScan in the early 1990s. N. Anand and Richard Peterson (2000) remind us that the recording industry – like other cultural industries – must be viewed as an institution, one by which its myriad organizations are driven by the market. They
argue that the notions of success in the music industry are not necessarily driven by fans, but by market information regimes that are “socially and politically constructed” (p. 271). Though *Billboard* introduced the methodology of market information gathering, the use of *Billboard* magazine’s charts as the indicator of an act’s success during much of the 20th century was increasingly called into question because of practices such as payola. Anand and Peterson argue that scholars and music industry insiders criticized *Billboard*’s data collection – which record executives, artists and their management used as a primary predictor of market trends – because “outside of the research department, it was impossible to independently verify the accuracy of the rankings” (p. 275).

Enter Soundscan, which continues to be a force in the way music companies promote and market their artists. Anand and Peterson conclude that while SoundScan “ushered in an era of real-time information on sales and inventory levels,” it also changed the dynamics of how the industry evaluated success. More emphasis was placed on “unit sales,” or in the world of rap, “pushin’ units,” while media conglomerates consolidated control over the charts. More significantly, SoundScan segmented the markets, making overall mainstream success secondary to niche market penetration. As a result, they conclude, “organizations that have access to SoundScan information and sufficient expertise to interpret it can identify opportunities early and exploit them. Music industry executives well-versed in the use of the technology can quickly spot emerging trends in an isolated niche and mobilize sufficient resources to target customers in that market, the net effect of which is the increasing fragmentation of market offerings” (Anand & Peterson, 2000: 280). Though CD sales have dropped, the overall idea of “unit sales” remains the primary component of the music industries’ function. SoundScan has
adjusted to the Internet revolution by publishing downloads and other sales venues. As a result, music industry executives and marketing specialists have continued to stay loyal to a market information regime that allows for continuity in production and commodification. As I will explain later in this project, SoundScan and the hip-hop specific market information regimes such as *Vibe*, *The Source*, *XXL* and web sites such as sohh.com have played a critical role in the rise of Southern rappers as global commodities and Atlanta as a lucrative site of cultural production for corporate conglomerates.

The market-driven nature of the cultural industries and their desire to exploit rap’s earning potential is what makes political economy so important in understanding the cultural production process on a more holistic level. However, despite its relevancy to studying the cultural production of Southern Black masculinity in hip-hop, political economy, as Hesmondhalgh (2007) notes, rarely accounts for the importance of culture or conceptions of Otherness. In attempting to find a place for notions of culture within political economy, Hesmondhalgh (2007) argues that we cannot essentialize the cultural industries to only the economic processes of production and distribution. He posits that the “cultural industries have a dual role – as economic systems of production and cultural producers of texts” – and that “we need to take account of both the politics of redistribution, focused on issues of political economy, and the politics of recognition, focused on questions of cultural identity” (p. 47). This approach gives space to political economy – and the larger systems of production that are inherent in hip-hop – and cultural studies, which have interrogated the role of how the music is a form of cultural expression. Such a combination facilitates sensitivity to the contradictory processes of rap...
cultural production and to potential agency by creative personnel, even if such agency may be circumscribed.

This is where Gray’s work on the politics of production serves as an important counterpoint to scholarship focused solely on the economics of cultural production. Though he is considered more of a cultural theorist and a media sociologist than a political economist, Gray’s (2005) analysis of black cultural production is invaluable in any discussion of the cultural industries and Blackness. As he notes, “global media companies…face a new set of symbolic and managerial challenges. The drive is not just to control the global proliferation of difference, but also to exploit” (Gray, 2005: 110). Gray is conscious of the impact that media consolidation has had on Black cultural production, but he does not condemn what other scholars have dubbed the balkanization of popular culture. Instead, he argues that there is a more complex way of examining cultural production that includes both the cultural politics of representation and the economics of commodities. Gray says that agency is present through the various Black cultural products – including hip-hop – that have emerged out of the consolidation of media conglomerates and fragmentation of audiences. Citing the global emergence of rap music and rappers as global stars, he calls for a “cartography of institutional and social spaces necessary to produce and sustain black self-representation under conditions of global transnational media conglomerates” (p. 31).

Gray’s argument brings us back to a central question about rap production, sensitized not just by issues of economy, but also about race and gender. Does the rap artist have any agency about his (or her) symbolic identity under conditions that favor the institutions? Some scholars seem to believe so, especially as it pertains to production
resting outside of the conglomerated cultural industries. For example, at the level of cultural work, the relationship between rappers and the cultural industries has to certain degrees been marked by a game of one-upmanship, especially when it comes to creative control and exploiting the rapper’s brand name for financial success. As George Maher (2005) argues, many rappers strive to claim independence from corporate labels by releasing mixtapes², which often are not under the label’s control and, because of low production costs, net the rapper a higher financial return. Maher’s assessment of the economic and cultural impact of mixtapes at least partially explains how Southern rappers and rap groups – Master P., the Hot Boyz, the Ying Yang Twins, to name a few – manage to be commercially viable before their foray into the corporate-controlled cultural industries. In Atlanta, rappers such as Yung Joc, Ludacris, T.I., Lil’ Scrappy, Shawty Lo and Young Jeezy were prominent in the mixtape circuits before they “blew up” as mass marketed commodities. For rappers, mixtapes and self-production is an example of what Yung Joc boasts as “hustlenomics.” Simply put, in the era of postindustrial capitalism, rappers are hip to the fact that the cultural industries seek to keep the majority of the money made from album sales and concerts; to create a source of income outside of their recording and distribution deals, rappers often make side deals that ensure more control over production and, more importantly, guarantee more money without corporate middlemen.

These dynamics highlight the “slippery slope” between agents and institutions and raise a larger question. How do music labels deal with their rap artists, especially when it

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² Mixtapes are music compilations usually produced by local DJ’s and distributed using non-traditional means such as street corner sales and ordering from magazines. These compilations are often produced independently, though some corporations have begun releasing their own mixtapes in an attempt to gain a foothold in the “underground” market.
comes to the production and commodification of Black masculinity? While political economists are right to point out that bottom-line considerations trump the “values” of corporate decision-makers, it should be noted that the commodification process is often laden with contradictions and tensions. Negus (1998 and 2004), Forman (2002), and Watkins (2005) point out that the marketing of rappers and the investments that labels make in them often clash with the more conservative values of executives charged with music production. They argue that the judgments that music and television executives made about rap and the viability of its performers – as exhibited by major corporations not taking an interest in rap until the mid-1980s and by MTV’s decision not to air “black music” until the success of Michael Jackson – demonstrates the racial and cultural filtration systems that often determines access to the cultural industries. For Negus (1998 & 2004), these conflicts between the values of mostly white and middle aged male executives and mostly young Black male performers also demonstrate the clash over control in the commodification process. But Negus’s conclusions seemed to be drawn at the height of the corporate co-option of rap music and, as Hesmondhalgh notes, overlook other factors in the cultural production process. Moreover, while Negus is right to point out how values inform corporate decisions about cultural production, he overlooks the fact that market considerations almost always trump executive discretion. As former BET executive and radio host Paul Porter opined, “the labels will sell just about any shit if it comes their way. You can have some garbage like ‘Laffy Taffy’ sell 200,000 copies, even if it has no meaning or the white guys in suits don’t even know what the fuck it means” (P. Porter, personal communication, November 19, 2007).³ As labels have relied

³ Laffy Taffy was a single produced by the Atlanta group D4L that made it to the top of the Billboard charts in early 2006. Porter and other music activists have claimed that the song’s
more on contract arrangements with artist-owned labels or distribution deals that ostensibly give the impression of artist independence, creative intermediaries such as marketing representatives and contract publicists play more of a role in how the artist is commodified (Ryan, 1992; Fitts, 2008).

Corporate conglomerates’ willingness to “allow” artists to claim sovereignty in how they are produced and marketed seems to give a false sense of power to rappers, and the decentralized nature of production houses and their corporate parents/distributors ostensibly promote the idea of agency (Basu, 2005). Some cultural studies scholars such as Katrina Stapleton (1998) and Todd Boyd (2002) have fallen into this trap, but most political economy scholars have been careful to remind people that power continues to rest mostly with industries/institutions. After all, it is, for the most part, their capital that is being wagered in the marketplace of consumption, making control – even if it is administered subtly – more important.

Despite the shifts in production and distribution, Hesmondhalgh (2007) points out that “cultural production and consumption haven’t changed quite as much as some commentators would have us believe” (p. xiii). I would expound upon his claim by arguing that the increasing decentralization of rap production and the seemingly increased leverage that rappers have gotten in production and distribution deals ties them more closely to the demands of their label. After all, few independent rappers can get airtime on BET or on New York’s Hot 97 FM, which make deals with the “majors” or signing away some of their production rights a necessary evil. Both Neal (1997; 2002) and Watkins (2001; 2005) discuss the “annexation” of hip-hop by corporations through success was due in part to payola practices by the group’s label, Atlantic Records, which is owned by the Warner Music Group.
more subtle means. They argue that rappers might have had some creative control over their lyrics, but they were often bound by the amount of money given to them as advances by record labels and their content was often determined by predicted market outcomes. Of more historical importance, Watkins argues, is the fact that agency itself in hip-hop was overstated the moment artists signed contracts. For Watkins, examining hip-hop’s growth cannot be separated from its role as a commodity that was exploited initially by small independent labels such as Sugarhill and Def Jam and then in later years, major labels such as Sony, Time Warner and Universal. Watkins critiques the idea that hip-hop culture was pure before its co-option by larger record labels. “Back in the day, hip-hop’s performing elite consisted of DJ’s, MC’s, break dancers and aerosol artists. This emergent cadre of artists…had never rejected the idea of making money, they just seldom stopped to think that the art they were creating could command money-paying patrons of any significance beyond their immediate environment” (p. 25).

In recent years, rappers have looked beyond their music to help finance their careers in the public eye. Rappers have used their status as a means of expanding into other arenas such as fashion, alcohol and dining, and other forms of production. Basu and Pnina Werbner (2001) and Watkins (2005) have explained how hip-hop has created an alternative economy for rappers, giving them some control over production and distribution of goods they might not have had in more traditional artist-label relationships. These perspectives, especially Basu and Werbner’s, expand the definition of hip-hop as an industry and broaden the notion of agency for Black men in the cultural industries and within the parameters of capitalism. After all, as Basu and Werbner (2001) point out, “Black hip-hop capitalists, whether big or small, have gained footholds in the
cultural industries, not in spite of, but because of their potent black street aesthetics” (Basu and Werbner, 2001: 253). In the new rap “game,” this is the essence of the hustle: rappers sell an image of themselves, primarily using tropes of Black masculinity to their advantage, and use whatever commercial success they get to invest in other moneymaking ventures. Atlanta-based rapper Ludacris calls this pimping the system. While Basu and Werbner’s work gives a new way of looking at the cultural industries and rappers connections to it, the authors fail to account for the role that corporate conglomerates have played in the production and worldwide distribution of rap and rappers as commodities. More importantly, they seem to overstate the “success” of Black entrepreneurism in hip-hop, especially since, as Basu (2006) later admits, “even though (rap moguls such as Jay-Z, Jermaine Dupri, and Sean “Puffy” Combs) are immensely well off, they are nonetheless tied to the colonial yoke, as their rap labels are integrated by the organizing structures of major record companies that have annexed them through mergers, joint ventures, distribution deals, or complete buy-outs” (Basu 2006: 37).

In later works, Basu (2005 & 2006) revises her claims, arguing that the consolidation of power in the cultural industries has severely hindered the ability of Blacks – particularly Black men as decision-makers and performers – to control the cultural production process. She notes that ostensibly Black-owned labels such as “Def Jam, Roc-a-Fella, and Bad Boy, are not really ‘independent.’ They act as intermediaries within the production of music. They cannot distribute being part of a major label’s network. …In essence, they are no longer more than titular CEOs who are ‘media moguls by name, millionaires by bank balance, but paid staff nonetheless’” (Basu, 2005: p. 267). Basu’s argument highlights the contradictory nature of rap’s global success. On one hand,
it has made numerous young Black men into millionaires and nominal executives, yet on the other, corporations have co-opted control and creative management of rappers. This control is not just among music labels and video production houses, but in the dynamics of business partnerships rappers form in order to branch out in various aspects of the hip-hop industries.

I would add to Basu’s argument by noting that rappers’ entrepreneurial ventures do not necessarily translate into more control over the production of the image. Rather, endorsement deals and product lines are often tied to the cultivated and marketed image of the rapper and his performance of Black masculinity. This is why notions of self-production and the extension of rappers’ names into corporate brands often gets conflated with their increased agency and control, when in fact they are mere extensions of cultural production at the systemic level. For example, 50 Cent’s marketed image as a thug – an image carefully produced by Interscope Records – were primarily responsible for his endorsement and distribution deals with Reebok and Glaceau’s Vitamin Water.

The larger systems of production that oversee the production and distribution and rap and the images of Southern Black masculinity, along with the hierarchical levels of cultural work that govern production processes, make the issue of control and agency more complicated in examining the cultural industries and issues of representation in hip-hop. The following chapters will examine cultural production at the systemic and micro levels, using two Atlanta rappers and their experiences to illustrate the intersectionality of agency, race, geography, corporate constructions, economics, and ideologies into a commodified cultural product.
Before these specific case studies are engaged, the next chapter will examine the methodological approach in greater detail. This approach will be used to interrogate the theoretical framework outlined in this chapter, especially given the combination of the cultural and the economic, and the macro and the micro, that the project considers.
“Puttin’ in Work”: Methodological approaches to studying the cultural production of Black masculinity in hip-hop

This study is guided by research questions that address issues of the cultural industries as institutions, the role of place and agency in cultural production, and the impact of commodified cultural texts such as music videos. These research questions are:

1. Murray Forman (2002) has argued that geography and space are vital in how rappers construct themselves and are constructed by the cultural industries. How does the South as a site of cultural production factor in shaping the representations of Black masculinity in hip-hop?
   - What role does geography play for the artist and the industry representatives in cultivating an image?

2. How do interview responses from the artists describe, construct or even reject themes of authentic representation of his race, gender, and geography in various textual forms such as music, videos and promotion, especially as these themes relate to Atlanta and the South?
   - What insights do interview responses from the artist offer about the role of their own agency in the construction of the artists' identity in the above textual forms? How does the artist describe their role in relation to the cultural industry?
3. Given their various organizational and corporate roles, what insights do interview responses from music industry representatives offer about how “an insider's perspective” is constructed on the role of artist agency in the artists' image in music, videos and promotion?

4. How do the images of Black masculinity produced within the music videos adhere to or diverge from historical constructions of Black men?
   
   o Does the artist see parallels or differences between his construction and the way Black men have been represented historically?

5. Both Ryan (1992) and Hesmondhalgh (2007) argue that corporations format the cultural production process to minimize risks and reap higher returns on their investments. Is the artists’ agency possible within the constructs of these corporate-shaped and controlled formats and, if so, what ways might this agency be manifested or, at least, be articulated by the artists?

   To explore these questions, I will use a comparative case study approach, employing multiple methods such as interviewing, semiotic analysis, political economy and direct observation to gather the data for this project. The first part of this chapter will explain why I chose the case study method, citing works by prominent case study researchers. In the following section, I will conceptualize the case study, detailing the various methods I use in the data collection process. Lastly, I will address issues of
accessing the interview subjects and show why dealing with entertainment figures involves a different type of recruitment process than in other fields.

Methodological Justification
This project aims to examine the “on-the-ground” forces that help to shape the construction of Southern Black masculinity in hip-hop and connect them with the broader institutional factors at play. As noted in the previous chapter, other studies of Black masculinity and the cultural industries have taken more macro-level approaches, making conclusions about the cultural production process prone to generalizations. While this project is influenced by political economy, a case study approach using other methods besides political economic analysis allows for more depth and specificity while avoiding the systemic generalizations of macro studies. However, as Robert Yin (1994) notes, case studies still allow for analytic generalizations that connect the results to a broader theoretical framework. More importantly, given the complicated nature of the cultural production process and the number of questions this study seeks to address, a case study approach – given its flexibility using multiple methods – was best suited to handle the project’s expanse.

This project interrogates the relationship between rappers and the cultural industries in the production of Black masculinity, but given the nature of these dynamics according to geographic regions, sweeping generalizations are hard to justify. This is why the case study approach is beneficial to this project. The case study is “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Cresswell, 2007: 61). The combination of methods in a case study provides for a comprehensive approach that examines the construction of Southern Black masculinity in hip-hop music at both the macro (the cultural industries) and the micro (the artists’ self-conceptualization) levels.
The rationale for a case study approach is that it provides a multi-pronged approach to examining cultural production as both process and product. While systemic analyses of the cultural industries give a broad-brushed picture of cultural production, broad approaches may not be the best tool for studying contextual differences based on geography or even a specific type of cultural artifact being produced. It could also be argued that political economy, particularly in the study of music, has largely overlooked rap and the politics of Otherness that are included in the commodification process (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Negus, 2004). Too often, as Negus (2004) points out, political economy focuses on how “industry produces culture,” but not enough on how “culture produces industry.” This is why a case study provides context into the functioning of the cultural industries (institutions and agent) at the specific site of production, along with the economic and political considerations that go into the commodification process.

Another important aspect of case studies is that they may incorporate field work, even if only for context. This case study combines the political economic approach with textual analysis, as well as interviews and direct observation. The case study’s use of contextual data is one of its strong suits as a multi-method approach (Yin, 1994; Cresswell, 2007). For example, direct observation can add a layer of detail in describing the cultural production process that other, more systemic approaches might not be able to properly account for. In this spirit, this project’s field component consisted of two visits to Atlanta. The first visit took place December 17-22, 2008. The second took place January 22-25, 2009.
The design of this project is guided by the work of Robert Yin (1994), who developed a methodological justification and strategic framework for case studies. Yin argues that case studies are used to expand theories and have been instrumental in organizational research. Because political economy approaches are mostly institutional and organizational approaches, case studies are ideal for interrogating the dynamics of institutions. But Yin also notes that case studies are useful in fleshing out other aspects of research, especially when it comes to information from respondents. In this way, case studies also fit micro-level approaches that are more popular in fields such as anthropology and sociology.

Another benefit of the case study, as Yin notes, is that it is extremely flexible and allows for the researcher to revise the project as more information is collected. He writes that “very few case studies will end up exactly as planned” and that a researcher “must be willing to change procedures or plans if unanticipated events occur” (Yin, 1994: 64). Moreover, a case study approach is not limited to one form of data collection. In fact, as Yin (1994) points out, “a major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence” (p. 96). This study relies on multiple sources of data collection to illustrate the comparative cases of Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe.

Robert Stake (1995) adds that case study approaches are differentiated by the scope of the subject matter. He categorizes the three types of case studies as intrinsic (specific to the case), instrumental (the case study is used to understand something else) and collective (the use of several cases to understand the bigger picture). As this project’s framework indicates, this is a comparative and collective case study. Stake notes that a collective approach may be more appropriate for studies that seek to answer more
systemic questions. Stake (1995) champions the interpretive approach to case studies, arguing that the researcher “recognizes and substantiates new meanings” through the study’s results (p. 97). Because of the critical nature of this project, much of the observations and data collection will be highly interpretive, making the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2 more important in helping the frame the results of this study.

**Conceptualizing the Case**

Stake (1995) notes that a case can be a single subject or a triangulation of multiple subjects as part of a collective case. However, he notes that “a collective case study may be designed with more concern for representation, but…the representation of a small sample is difficult to defend” (p. 5). Taking Stake’s caveat into account, this case study incorporates multiple subjects (the city, the industries, and the rappers themselves) as points of analysis. However, the rappers’ voice in this study will be privileged, since their conceptualization of identity underpins the premise of this study. That does not mean that the cultural industries as institutions and the city of Atlanta will not be given weight, especially since the site of cultural production is imperative in understanding the convergence of macro and micro level forces.

In this project, the case is cultural production, which incorporates organizational and institutional analyses, biographies, histories and textual analysis as means of explaining how and why a cultural text is produced. Yin (1994) argues that the components of this project fit an explanatory case study, as it seeks to answer how these various processes converge and interact in cultural production. As he also notes, “the
boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” in a case study, which is why the multiple subjects being examined help to answer more holistic rather than individual research questions (Yin, 1994: 23). The research questions in this study helped to inform my interview questions and how I went about gathering other sources of data.

The danger of conceptualizing a case with multiple subjects and complex processes is that the focus of the study can be lost. Some previously published collective case studies in hip-hop and cultural production provide a framework to keep this project in focus. Ian Condry’s (2007) study of hip-hop in Japan helps to inform this study’s boundaries. Condry looks at Japan’s hip-hop music scene on both a micro and macro level, arguing that in the case of hip-hop’s production via the cultural industries in Japan—and from the United States—“global standardization, nationalization, and localization all get reinforced simultaneously” (p. 93). Condry uses the Japanese term *genba* to describe the site of cultural production, whether it is in the small clubs, the recording studios, or in the executive suites where deals are negotiated. He says that by starting from the *genba*, “we can see how the global and local intersect” (p. 102). This is an important point to consider in analyzing the “glocal” aspects of Atlanta’s hip-hop scene, which has become a global commodity yet is grounded in the region’s various social and cultural processes.

Similarly, works by Ronin Ro (1998, 2001), Chris Gibson (2003), and Mako Fitts (2008) use case studies as a means of explaining organizational cultures. Ro’s work on Death Row Records and Bad Boy Records focused on both as institutions and as places where cultural workers interacted (often dysfunctionally) in the production of text. Ro
used interviews, court records, and company filings to show the dynamics of these record labels. However, none of his work came as a result of direct observation. Gibson and Fitts also focused on cultural work, but their case studies centered on cultural workers and their place in cultural industries as a whole. Both relied on ethnography and qualitative interviewing to help illustrate the cases clearly.

This case follows a similar trajectory as these aforementioned works because the two rappers in the study are intricately involved with both local and global forces that converge to shape their identity. This case relies on multiple data collection methods in order to comprehensively explain the forces at play in cultural production. These methods include political economy, textual and semiotic analysis, interviews, direct observations and other data collection procedures such as the reading of historical archives.

**Political Economy**

One of the strengths of political economy is that it can be used as both a theoretical framework and as a method. I used political economy as the primary approach in order to set up the expanse of the cultural production. As Hesmondhalgh (2007) points out, political economy allows for a holistic analysis of the systems of production and distribution. More importantly, as McChesney (2004) emphatically argues, political economy is a means of connecting the dots and following the money.

In this case study, political economy is valuable in pointing out the hierarchical relationships between labels and their corporate distributors. Detailing these dynamics also helps to show concentrations of power and control, since much of political economy is predicated upon how power – despite the appearance of its diffusiveness – is still tightly held by a few. Political economy helps to explain how corporations such as
Universal Music Group and Warner Music Group shape and in many cases control how capital is spent in the cultural production process.

Though political economy does have its shortcomings as a method, it can be highly effective in explaining the nature of relationships in cultural production, particularly when used in combination with other methods, such as the ones described in the next pages.

**Textual/Semiotic Analysis**

In order to provide a better understanding into how the cultural production process impacts the texts as commodity, I analyzed two songs and videos by each artist. These songs and videos, which were released as singles by Jody and Zoe, were shown on cable networks BET and MTV (both owned by Viacom) and were on regular Internet playlists such as Yahoo! Music and Pandora, as well as on hip-hop web sites such as www.sohh.com and www.allhiphop.com. Conducting a textual analysis of the songs helped me better understand how each artist represented his masculinity and his proximity to Atlanta, both physically and symbolically.

Influenced by Barthesian semiotic analysis, I “read” the images from the selected sample of Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe’s videos. Semiotic analysis provides an in-depth analysis of texts by incorporating context as a means of interpreting the symbols within them. As Mark Orbe (1998) notes:

> Semiotic analysis works to increase the consciousness of the process by which initial (paradigmatic) relationships between signs are made more prominent through a redundancy of associations within and outside a specific text. In other words, a semiotic framework focuses on how some signifiers are foregrounded with such consistency that they come to be associated naturally with certain elements (p. 35).
These signifiers are often made prominent through repetition with music videos, forcing the reader to make readings that are consistent with dominant and overdetermined interpretations of such texts (Condit, 1989). In these videos, I looked for images of the city, the semiotic markers by which the rappers asserted their Blackness (appearance, body posturing, material artifacts, setting, word choice, etc.), and the relationship between these sign systems. Moreover, my field visits were used as context to help interpret the significance of specific landmarks within the videos. As I watched the videos, I took note of whether these signifiers differ in any way from the well-worn tropes of Black masculinity in hip-hop videos from the East and West coasts. My semiotic analysis of these videos was also influenced by Celeste Condit’s (1989) argument that our interpretations of texts are enhanced or limited by our cultural fluency, but also by her assertion that mass mediated texts are not infinitely polysemic, and that truly oppositional readings are challenging for many audience members and, perhaps, uncommon. Though I am not an expert on the trap music genre, previous scholarship on the nature and ideology of signifiers in hip-hop and Black masculinity helped me make an informed interpretation of the videos (Condit, 1989; Emerson, 2002; Fleetwood, 2005).

Qualitative Interviews

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, too many works on the cultural industries ignore the voice of those tasked with production. Fitts (2008) calls these people “culture industry laborers, or those working within the industries related to the production, marketing and consumption of rap music” (p. 212). Though Fitts includes a
much broader sample of cultural workers, the interviewees in this study are directly involved in the commodification of the rap artist.

The interview subjects in this study are placed in three categories: primary, supplementary, and contextual.

The primary subjects in the study are two male rap artists, Jody Breeze (Jacoby Wright) and Gorilla Zoe (Alonzo Mathis). Their responses to the interview questions make up a significant part of chapters 5 and 6 and are used to address the project’s research questions that deal with agency in the musical and promotional construction of masculinity.

The supplementary interviewees include the rappers’ manager, Rico Brooks and publicist Tahira Wright. In addition, I interviewed Shawn Prez, the head of Power Moves, which is the marketing arm for Bad Boy Records, the label for Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe. The supplementary interviews were conducted in order to better contextualize and triangulate the responses given by the primary interview subjects.

The contextual interviewees are Sonia Murray, the music writer for the Atlanta Journal Constitution and Kenny Burns, the former vice-president of Roc-A-Fella Records and the founder of the Studio 43 label. The contextual interviews were conducted primarily for background and were used to help better prepare me for interviews with the primary and supplementary subjects.
Table 3.1 (List of Interview Subjects by Role)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Primary Date</th>
<th>Supplementary Date</th>
<th>Contextual Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Gorilla Zoe</td>
<td>10/30/08 (phone)</td>
<td>Jody Breeze</td>
<td>1/23/09 (in-person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1/22/09 (in-person)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary</td>
<td>Rico Brooks</td>
<td>10/23/08 (phone)</td>
<td>Tahira Wright</td>
<td>1/22/09 (in-person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shawn Prez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1/29/09 (phone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>Sonia Murray</td>
<td>12/19/08 (in-person)</td>
<td>Kenny Burns</td>
<td>12/30/08 (phone)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualitative interviewing method is, as Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor (2002) note, “remarkably adaptable” (p. 170). I chose a semi-structured interview format, which, as Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin (1995) note, helps to keep the discussion on track. The semi-structured interview gives the subject the general focus of the discussion but allows him to speak at length on a particular issue (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This format was useful because of the interviewees’ time constraints, which I had to be sensitive of as I prepared the interview questions.

Because of the importance of voice in this project, I wanted to make sure that I worded my questions in an open-ended way that allowed them leverage in answering. However, as a former journalist, I wanted to make sure that my follow-up questions could get them to be more specific on certain issues. Though I had initially hoped for a
structured interviewing format to help facilitate answers that directly related to the topic, all of the interviews veered into tangential subject matter. However, as the subsequent chapters show, these “off-the-subject” remarks provided great insight into the subjects’ self-conceptualization and their broader views.

The interview questions (See Appendix A) were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In addition, the questions for Jody Breeze and Zoe were also “pre-screened” by Tahira Wright in the days before the interviews, which, as Rubin and Rubin (1995) assert, is more common when the subject has a gatekeeper who determines access. Wright told me that she used the questions to prepare the subjects for the interviews. All of the subjects were interviewed by phone with a digital recorder. Each interview lasted between 35-45 minutes. The recordings were downloaded to a computer and were later transcribed. I also conducted in-person interviews with Jody Breeze, Gorilla Zoe and Tahira Wright at the Block Entertainment Studios in Atlanta.

One of the key points to mention here is how I interpreted the interviews. As a former journalist, I have been trained to assume that the responses my subjects give me are honest. During the interviews, I failed to be self-reflexive and did not ask the all-important question: “Is this person being truthful or just telling me what I want to hear?” As I will explain later in this chapter and the study, keeping in mind this question is a necessity when dealing with subjects who are very much aware of what kind of answers an interviewer is looking for.

5 Most of the transcriptions were done by Dorothy Thomas, a retired Penn State employee. The in-person interviews were transcribed by my sister, Lakshmi Balaji. Both Thomas and my sister were compensated monetarily for the time they spent transcribing the interviews.
Direct observation

John Cresswell (2007) argues that one of the most distinct advantages of a case study approach is that it allows for multiple data collection methods, including those influenced by direct observation.

In this study, I visited several of the neighborhoods and communities in Atlanta that produced some of the city’s top rappers, including my case study subjects. I also visited several cultural “markers” in the city that have become staples of Atlanta’s hip-hop identity. The references to their places of upbringing in their songs, as I will show later, are few, but in the videos, the neighborhoods and certain landmarks figure prominently. These landmarks include the Underground Atlanta shopping mall in downtown, the Bankhead Courts public housing projects, and the Block Entertainment Studios in the East Lake/Kirkwood section of the city.6 Yin (1994) observes that field visits to such places “add new dimensions for understanding either the context or the phenomenon being studied” (p. 92). In addition to context, the ethnographic observation in this study was used as a basis of the textual/semiotic analysis of music videos highlighted later in this study.

For my field visits, I used a rental car and rode MARTA, the city’s public train system. I recorded my observations on the digital recorder as well as in my notebook, though I also tried to be discreet, being sensitive that that my verbal and written note-taking did not raise eyebrows among the people in the sites of study. I tried my best to

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6 I had also planned a visit to a strip club called Magic City, which is also prominent in rap music videos. However, Tahira Wright recommended against going, citing concerns about criminal activity in the surrounding area. The strip club is in the area just southwest of downtown and is located across the street from the Fulton County Detention Center. I did, however, drive by the location to get a better sense of its proximity to downtown and the southwestern part of the city.
beunobtrusive, making sure that my presence did not alter any of the routine actions taking place in the sites I visited. In Chapter 4, I use “thick description” to show these locations as places of both physical and symbolic importance to the Atlanta hip-hop scene and the identities of its rappers.

Other data collection

Secondary sources of information also proved very valuable, especially as context for the primary data. I read stories in *The Source* and *Vibe*, two of the most respected hip-hop magazines in circulation (though *The Source* has had to deal with numerous scandals in recent years relating to fiscal mismanagement and public feuds), as well as *Billboard* magazine. I also looked at numerous hip-hop blogs, including www.sohh.com and www.allhiphop.com. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was also an important source of information, particularly articles written by longtime music writer Sonia Murray, whose pieces helped push previously unknown local artists such as Ludacris into international commodities. Murray met with me for coffee on my first visit to Atlanta, providing me with valuable contextual information I used in preparation for my interviews and my field visits. She also introduced me to Kenny Burns (who was at the same coffee house for a business meeting), the former Roc-A-Fella Records executive credited with “discovering” Atlanta acts such as R & B singer Monica and mold rapper Kanye West. Burns offered advice on what questions to ask Jody and Zoe. Murray refuted some of my assumptions about the Atlanta music scene, challenging me to ask questions that embraced Atlanta’s more eclectic approach to hip-hop than what I had previously believed. Burns offered me advice on what to ask Jody and Zoe about their relationships with creative management.
I also watched several interviews of Jody and Zoe on YouTube, specifically those that dealt with their personal views on the rap industry. These interviews were not only excellent as preparation material, but good sources of data that could be mined for analysis.

Accessing the subjects

As a complex method that often involves field work, it should be no surprise that the case study is easier in the design phase than in the implementation process. The biggest obstacle to this project was gaining access to my case study subjects, since I was operating on their restricted schedules and had to work with – and around – their gatekeepers. The first dilemma was figuring out who those gatekeepers were. Though record labels have interactive web sites that often include the artists’ blogs (which I presume to be written by label staff or the artists’ publicists), they almost never include contact numbers for media relations or press inquiries. During the conceptualization of this project, I relied on my contacts within the industry to help me get access to my study subjects. For example, accessing my case study subjects was partly due to my friendship with an employee of Bad Boy Records, who passed along the contact information of their manager, Rico Brooks. When contacted, Brooks said he would cooperate, but directed me to publicist Tahira Wright, whose client was Block Entertainment, the Atlanta recording house that produces Jody and Zoe. Wright is an independent publicist who started her Branded PR in 2007, just two years after graduating college. Wright epitomizes McRobbie’s (2002) assessment of freelance creative workers who are often hired with little job security and no benefits, but whose work is integral to the functioning of the
cultural industries. In later chapters, this project will explore Wright’s role in the promotion of the rappers and will do a more detailed analysis of how publicists operate in the production and marketing of an image. Wright served as the gatekeeper to my primary case study subjects, intervening when complications arose.

One such complication altered the scope of the project from the original dissertation proposal. Initially, I wanted to focus the project on Zoe and Yung Joc, an Atlanta rapper on the same label whose singles “It’s Going Down” and “Bottle Poppin’” generated widespread buzz and helped make him into Bad Boy’s first Southern rapper to go platinum. However, Wright was unable to get Joc to confirm his willingness to participate in the project, and his unresponsiveness became an obstacle in moving the project forward. After months of uncertainty over whether Joc would take part, Wright suggested interviewing Jody Breeze instead, noting that Jody’s experiences growing up in Griffin, Ga., and his former life as a drug dealer would make him a more compelling interview subject. In this case, then, Jody Breeze matched the focus of the project as well as, if not better than, the original choice, Yung Joc. Jody also has had a different career trajectory that provides revealing contrasts with Zoe. In addition, she said, Jody would be more willing to do an in-person interview in Atlanta, since he lived in the area and was not touring at the time of my research. The change in subjects required a modification of my IRB request, which was quickly approved.

The interviews began shortly after I defended my dissertation proposal and received IRB approval. I first interviewed Brooks in October 2008, since he was the most readily available in the days after my dissertation proposal defense. I spoke with him by phone for about 40 minutes, after which he gave me his personal cell phone number and
his email to contact him for follow-ups. However, Wright notified me shortly after the first interview that she would still need to schedule any follow-up interviews. My second interview with Brooks took place via phone in January, shortly after he returned from Zoe’s tour with rapper Lil’ Wayne. The second interview lasted about 15 minutes, and Brooks answered my follow-up questions as they related to management conflict issues and the role that Atlanta has played in the international commodification of rap music.

The rappers themselves were a bit more difficult to get access to. Once I was able to get a confirmation to interview Zoe, Wright gave me the cell phone number to his primary gatekeeper – Zoe's personal assistant, Rici, whom he called his sister. At the end of our first interview, Zoe instructed me to call him anytime. “You take my number,” he said. “The number you called me at is my sister’s number, she’s with me all the time” (Mathis, personal communication, October 30, 2008). However, I was reluctant to bypass Wright, who had made it clear that she would be the primary gatekeeper for the interviews. The second interview with Zoe took place during my second visit to Atlanta, where I met him inside Block Entertainment Studios. Zoe let me listen to his upcoming album, *Don’t Feed Da Animals*, and responded to my questions in between his banter with the friends who had gathered in the studio. The presence of the friends potentially complicated the interview, as it was clear that Zoe had to occasionally “perform” in front of others. However, I tried to minimize the potential disruption by speaking with Zoe in a corner of the studio that was beyond earshot of the others. The in-person interview lasted about 40 minutes, though I spent an additional hour observing how Zoe interacted with his friends, as well as with a California-based DJ who was invited to the studio to preview the album. Zoe appeared initially careful with his words, but seemed to become
increasingly open during the course of the in-person interview, and at its conclusion, gave me a “bro hug.”

Jody Breeze agreed to meet me at the Block Entertainment Studio, where we spoke outside for 45 minutes as he smoked a cigarette and drank a soda he bought from the liquor store next door. Jody appeared eager to share his experiences, as he had signed three record deals over a five-year span and was working on inking a new deal. Unlike my in-person interview with Zoe, my talk with Jody was unsupervised, and he seemed to speak candidly about his experiences as both a solo artist and as a founding member of the Bad Boy group Boyz N Da Hood, best known for its 2005 single “Dem Boyz.” At the end of our interview, Jody asked me to keep him posted on the progress of the project, and told me to contact him if I needed more information.

Initially, I had included Block Entertainment founder and CEO Russell “Block” Spencer as a supplementary interviewee and had, through Wright, scheduled some time to speak with him during my second visit to Atlanta. During my interview with Jody, Spencer was in the studio. Though he had been told in advance of my presence and my desire to interview him, he declined, telling me, “Naw, I don’t feel like talking now.” After initially ignoring me while I was in the studio and occasionally trying to size me up (at 6-foot-4 and roughly 230 pounds, Block is about two inches taller and 30 pounds heavier than me), Spencer instructed me to set up a phone interview through Wright. However, Wright contacted me the following week and told me that Spencer no longer had an interest in being interviewed. To fill the void left by Spencer’s backing out of the interview, I used previously published magazine and online interviews in which he discussed his career and the way Block Entertainment works.
Contacting the representatives at Bad Boy proved to be almost as difficult, despite my friendship with one of their employees. I had planned to interview label president Harve Pierre, whose contact information I obtained from my friend. Initially, the numbers I received from my friend did not work, and because Bad Boy’s number is not listed on its web site or in any public directory, I had to try other avenues for contact. Once I was able to make contact, getting a call back was especially tough, which forced me to make repeated calls and email queries to the same gatekeepers – the receptionists. After a month of trying to get through to Pierre, I gave up and focused my efforts on Prez, who is widely considered one of Bad Boy founder and hip-hop mogul Sean “Puffy” Combs’s confidants and top talent scouts (Pennington, 2005).

To get access to Prez, I reached out to another friend who was in management at Bad Boy and had asked me to help him several years earlier. Seeking to get a return on the favor, I was finally able to get a number by which I was able to reach him. I conducted a 40-minute phone interview with Prez. Prez was an important source for this project because he has been Combs’s point man on promoting new talent, particularly in the South, where Bad Boy has distribution deals with several production houses. He coordinates the label’s “street teams” and engages in guerilla marketing tactics that help to build street buzz for the rappers signed to the label. He appeared eager to share his views on the music industry, often going into candid detail about his own initial reservations on the potential of Southern rap and the challenges of marketing Atlanta rappers beyond their home region.

Overall, gaining access to my subjects proved to be an exercise in patience and persistence. Though I was frustrated by the lack of direct access and the sometimes long
lag times between my requests and the gatekeepers’ responses to them, I kept in mind 
Yin’s caveat about case study research designs. He notes that “for interviewing key 
persons, the investigator must cater to the interviewee’s schedule and availability” (Yin, 
1994: 75). I realized that in the cultural industries, access to entertainers and their 
gatekeepers is often dictated by what the subjects will get out of such access. Moreover, 
the challenges in getting access to the subjects provided valuable data that will be shown 
in the subsequent chapters, specifically relating to how marketing chiefs, label CEOs and 
publicists help their clients “build a story” for public consumption.

One of the other primary lessons I learned in this process is that rappers and their 
creative managers are extremely aware of how their image will be distributed, and as a 
result, are highly selective in who they speak with. I believe one of the primary reasons 
why I had such difficulty in accessing many of the interview subjects is because I served 
no purpose for them. I do believe if I had identified myself as a writer for The Source, I 
would have received calls back the same day and elicited much more cooperation. I do 
not think someone such as Spencer would have so blatantly ignored me had I been useful 
in spreading his name. Because academia is not exactly a target market for those tasked 
with cultural production, being cooperative – or at the very least civil – was likely not a 
high priority for the subjects. In this regard, I am especially thankful that I developed a 
rappor with Tahira Wright, particularly since she was able to act as an advocate on my 
behalf.

This chapter outlined the justification for a case study and the various data 
collection procedures used in this project. Chapter 4, which examines Atlanta’s role as a 
hub for cultural production, incorporates the ethnographic observations of my visits to the
city and other data on its rise to becoming what some have called “The New Motown of the South” and what Combs calls a modern Harlem (Murray, 2006).
The making of trap music and the shaping of Black masculinity, ATL-style

Welcome to Atlanta where the playas play
And we ride on them things like every day
Big beats, hit streets, see gangstas roamin'
And parties don't stop til' eight in the mornin'

In 2001, Ludacris and Jermaine Dupri “announced” Atlanta as the new capital of the hip-hop nation with their anthem, “Welcome to Atlanta.” The song exemplified the city’s standing as the “New Motown of the South,” a phrase that captured the diverse and expansive array of cultural production that was taking place there. In terms of its significance in hip-hop, Atlanta had moved from the teeny-bop styles of groups such as Another Bad Creation, Kris Kross and TLC in the early 1990s to a progressively “harder” sound that reflected Southern poverty and Black male angst. This style first appeared in the Goodie Mob song, “Dirty South,” which soon became the name of an entire genre of rap below the Mason-Dixon line (Miller, 2004; Grem, 2006). The music style, which Goodie Mob and fellow Atlanta-based group Outkast pioneered, featured a heavy connection to “old” Southern music such as the blues and more contemporary Southern styles such as bass/booty music while emphasizing/exaggerating the rappers' Southern drawls as a means of distinguishing themselves from their counterparts in other parts of the country (Grem, 2006).
But there was something distinctly “Atlantan” about Dirty South rap before it became synonymous with a more generalized label of the entire Southern hip-hop scene, including cities such as Memphis, New Orleans, and Louisville. As Grem (2006) notes, “Dirty South rap was...a bold statement from rappers who felt estranged from Atlanta’s economic and social progress and excluded by their southernness from competing in a rap-music market dominated by New York and Los Angeles” (p. 56). His assertion echoes similar claims by Miller (2004) and Richardson (2007) about the South occupying a distant “third space” in the production of hip-hop, overshadowed by the longstanding East Coast-West Coast binaries that have dominated the production of and discourse on rap. To underscore the inferiority complex many Southern rappers have felt when compared to their Northern counterparts, Mississippi rapper/producer David Banner – who works primarily in Atlanta – notes, “In most cases, when a Southern act comes out, he has been running all his life just to get to the starting line. So when the gun goes off and everyone else takes off running, we've been running full speed just to get to the starting line.” (Hall, 2003: 1). This idea will be explored later in the chapter.

But as Atlanta’s rap scene became more commercially successful and more major labels began signing Atlanta-based rappers and producers, the city took on more importance as a hub for hip-hop and popular culture. As Kenny Burns, a former vice-president for Roc-A-Fella Records (the label started by Damon Dash and rapper Jay-Z) points out, almost every notable figure in hip-hop now either has a home in the city or has economic ties to it. Since the early 2000s, with the rise of rap superstars such as Ludacris and T.I. (and the continued prominence of Outkast), Atlanta has shed its “dirtiness” and evolved into what many African-American music luminaries consider the New Motown.
Puffy Combs has even likened the city to a modern-day Harlem because of its strong African-American culture and its importance in Black history (Murray, 2006).

As a site of cultural production, Atlanta\textsuperscript{7} is a city of complexities and contradictions. It is home to multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola and Time Warner (which owns Atlanta-based CNN), yet small and minority-owned businesses maintain a strong presence there, catering to the working-class Blacks who live just minutes from downtown (Keating, 2001). It has built upscale condos in posh neighborhoods such as Lenox, Fernbank and Buckhead, but still struggles to deal with quality of life issues in areas such as Kirkwood, Bankhead, East Lake, and Adamville. The city retains a rich African-American heritage, marked by world famous landmarks such as the Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, but these markers of identity have been overshadowed in recent years by Freaknik and the city’s highly marketed Black strip clubs such as Magic City, Body Tap, and Club Blaze.\textsuperscript{8}

Atlanta has benefited from its reputation as a center of regional commerce and its numerous transportation venues such as Hartsfield International Airport, but its poorer residents have little access to reliable public transportation and continue to be geographically isolated from the city’s more prosperous and job-rich areas (Crawford & Rosenblatt, 1980; Keating, 2001). It is also home to two of the most prominent historically Black colleges, Morehouse and Spelman, yet these higher education

\textsuperscript{7} In hip-hop terms, Atlanta does not just include the city limits. The Atlanta hip-hop scene also includes the cities of Decatur, East Point and College Park, and as Jody Breeze argues later in this project, extends even further to places such as Griffin.

\textsuperscript{8} Freaknik is an annual spring gathering of students of students from historically Black colleges and universities that features varying degrees of revelry. The weeklong event was hosted by Atlanta from the early 1980s through the early 2000s, but city officials closed it down after reports of violence and other crime. Freaknik moved to Daytona Beach and was renamed Black Spring Break.
institutions are located within walking distance of the ghetto. The city’s paradoxical reputation is encapsulated by human rights icon W.E.B. Du Bois, who called the city “South of the North, yet North of the South.” Historian Andy Ambrose (2008) argues that the label is still accurate, noting that the city occupies “a position connected to, but in many ways separate from, the region in which it resides” (Ambrose, 2008).

These contradictions are not lost among Atlanta’s rappers, nor are they immune from similar paradoxes in their own experiences as performers and products in the cultural industries. Some of Atlanta’s rappers have become international superstars, yet these same rappers must often answer to corporate executives in New York and Los Angeles tasked with producing their music and distributing their image. Moreover, the neighborhoods where many of them hail from have been transformed into symbols and signs – mass marketed to the world’s hip-hop consuming public as affirmations of their “ghettoness” and Atlanta’s authenticity as a hip-hop hub. Atlanta’s reputation as a home of “hot” music is well-earned, as evidenced by its presence in hip-hop magazines and its rappers’ regular airplay on both urban radio stations and music cable networks. The *Billboard* Hip-Hop Awards and the BET Hip-Hop Awards both moved to Atlanta in the mid-2000s, reflecting corporations’ desire to tap into a Southern audience. Since 2000, the same year that Atlanta rapper Ludacris made his national debut, rappers who hail from the area have consistently topped urban music playlists. Ludacris, Lil’ Jon, T.I., Young Jeezy and Yung Joc have become platinum-selling artists, while “ringtone” rappers such as Soulja Boy and the group D4L have enjoyed widespread notoriety and commercial success for their radio and music video singles. Having first emerged on the national rap scene thanks to the work of groups such as Outkast and Goodie Mob, the city
has now become synonymous with eclectic rap subgenre styles such as crunk, snap and trap, which have all gained commercial success (Miller, 2004; Grem, 2006). Atlanta’s emergence has paralleled the rise of its rap stars and intersected with the majors’ increased investment in the region through production and distribution deals (Hall, 2003; Rushton & Thomas, 2005; Grem, 2006; Peters, 2007).

But how does the Atlanta region figure in the cultural production of Black masculinity and hip-hop? Where does its physical prominence end and its symbolic prominence begin in the cultural production and commodification process? In addition to interrogating the research questions outlined in the previous chapter, these questions provide an important starting point to examining the processes that shape Atlanta’s rap music and the identities of the rappers who claim it as a real and symbolic home.

This chapter will explore numerous aspects of Atlanta as it relates to the conceptualization of Black masculinity, the role of place in this conceptualization and the cultural industries. First, the chapter will sketch out a brief cultural history of the city focusing on the years leading up to Atlanta’s hosting of the Olympic Games in 1996, which corresponded with the rise of “Dirty South” rap in its original definition. This history relates to how Black masculinity was conceptualized in Atlanta following the end of Jim Crow. The next section will then detail Atlanta’s role as a site of cultural production, describing the neighborhoods and landmarks that inspire the city’s rappers – particularly those who claim the trap music style – and giving rise to its cultural industries. This section will include several direct observation-based snapshots that seek to add context into the ground forces that intersect in the cultural production process. The section will also show how these various locations and landmarks figure into the
representation of Atlanta’s hip-hop scene and the “branding” of rappers who have emerged from the region. The last section will be an examination into how the cultural production process has been shaped by both major corporations and the locally owned and operated production houses, with the focus being on Block Entertainment and its relationship with Bad Boy/Atlantic Records. This section will explore how on-the-ground forces such as street teams, publicists and marketing staff (in Atlanta and New York), strip club listening parties, and dope boy imagery help to “sell” Atlanta rappers to a local audience while packaging them for mass consumption outside of the region. It will also show how Atlanta – through catch phrases such as “the ATL” and “Hotlanta” and genres such as trap music – has become a brand for marketing the rappers who hail from the region. By examining the political economy of place and notions of cultural work, this chapter will preview the forces that are at play in constructing and commodifying the project’s case study subjects, Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe.

The transformation from the Old South to the New South to the Dirty South

In the years after the Civil War, Atlanta – contrary to the lore of General William Tecumseh Sherman’s “burning” of the city – was positioned relatively better than other Southern cities whose economies were destroyed by the war and the sudden shift from relying on a slave-based, agricultural production system. Atlanta, as scholars such as Larry Keating (2001) argue, was a lot more like its Northern counterparts, increasing industrial production and becoming “urban” as more American cities became centers of manufacturing and trade. Atlanta’s reputation as an embodiment of the “New South” only grew in the early part of the 20th century, thanks to railroad expansions and the city’s
unique position as a major hub of the Sun Belt trade region. In the years before the Great Depression, companies began to relocate their offices to Atlanta, thanks to the railroad access and the modern road systems that set the city apart from its Southern counterparts. As a result of this expansion, Atlanta has remained “the dominant wholesale and retail center of the Southeast” (Keating, 2001: 11). However, as Dana White and Timothy Crimmins (1980) point out, the “white business Atlanta” grew, displacing many Black businesses. As a result, “the virtual disenfranchisement of blacks began,” forcing many Black businesses to stop selling to whites altogether and focus their efforts to survive by catering to Blacks only (White & Crimmins, 1980: 31).

Segregation had two significant impacts in Atlanta. For one, it ensured that systemic economic inequality would pervade in the years after segregation was abolished. Blacks earned significantly less than whites and, more importantly, had less access to home-buying opportunities because of Atlanta’s enforced residential segregation. Black residential enclaves became pushed further and further away from the heart of the city as post-World War II development emphasized bringing more middle- and upper-income whites into the urban areas (Keating, 2001). But segregation also created a stable middle class of African Americans, one that was largely immune from the extreme poverty that rural Blacks in other parts of Georgia and the South faced (White & Crimmins, 1980). White and Crimmins (1980) note that “basic to an understanding of black Atlanta is the recognition that it has never been what is popularly known as a ‘ghetto,’ …a circumscribed and relatively recent territory of black rural in-migrants. On the contrary…black Atlantans have demonstrated considerable, if interrupted, upward mobility” (p. 30). As a result, segregation’s impact appeared more muted, though
middle-class Blacks still lagged far behind in terms of income and wealth than their white counterparts (Keating, 2001).

This is not to say that Blacks were not subject to symbolic and actual violence. In 1906, race riots – fueled by a gubernatorial race in which both candidates accused Black men of molesting and raping white women – claimed the lives of approximately 40 African-Americans. The riots also exacerbated efforts by white politicians to disenfranchise Black voters, who had gained some degree of leverage in the post-Reconstruction years (Dorsey, 2004). At this time, Atlanta also developed into an important site of racialized cultural production, particularly as it related to the circulation of popular culture texts influenced by the tensions and ideology of the antebellum era. This was in part due to the presence of the Ku Klux Klan, which made Atlanta its national headquarters and established the “Imperial City” during the 1920s (White & Crimmins, 1980). The Klan’s rise in Atlanta was fueled in part by books such as Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* and the film it inspired, D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (Guerrero, 1993; Richardson, 2007). As Ed Guerrero (1993) argues, the circulation of demonizing and marginalizing images of Black masculinity in these antebellum films, coupled with the South’s embrace of “Old Dixie” nostalgia, served as powerful ideological (and physical) barriers for Black men in the South. These ideologies, as Keating (2001) explains, carried well into the post-segregation era, when Atlanta’s economic development focused on the advancement of the white business community and the city’s remaining white residents and the tacit marginalization of its Black residents. Black men were especially impacted by the exclusionary nature of the city’s business and residential plans, as fewer jobs were available to them at the height of

At this time, the de facto segregation of Atlanta and the surrounding region’s cultural activities became more apparent. As theatre and arts districts grew in the midtown neighborhoods, Black Atlanta – particularly in points south, west and east of the city’s center – began to develop cultural destinations that appealed to African-Americans far beyond the region. In 1983, organizers from the area’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s), including Morehouse, Spelman, Clark, and Morris Brown, established a weeklong celebration of Black college life. Coined Freaknik, the event became a destination for young Blacks from around the country, drawing an average of 250,000 visitors to the city at the height of its popularity in the 1990s (Suggs, 2008). Freaknik soon became a staple of Black music, appearing in songs and music videos by non-Atlanta rappers such as Luke and Tupac. Moreover, rap and video producers cashed in on Freaknik’s popularity and its embedding into Black popular culture, releasing CD’s such as *Freaknik Booty Party* and adult videos themed around the event. Freaknik took on a life of its own, becoming a hip-hop symbol in much the same way that Howard University’s Homecoming became. But what had been initially reserved as a coming together of Black college students turned into a more violent and sexually charged affair by the 1990s. As a result, Freaknik and its raucousness “tormented, titillated and drove Atlanta to the brink. …But by the time it ended in 1999, politicians and police had made movement in Atlanta so restrictive that for the students, Freaknik was hardly worth it anymore” (Suggs, 2008).
The development of Black Atlanta as a destination for people from other parts of the country coincided with the “birth” of Atlanta’s hip-hop scene. In the mid- to late-1980s, Atlanta DJ’s began spinning local artists who combined the lyrical emphasis of New York rappers with the more bass-heavy sounds of rappers from Miami, Houston and Memphis. But Atlanta’s embrace of its “Dirtiness” would not come for another decade. Instead, Atlanta natives Kevin Wales and Dallas Austin focused on developing pop sensations who combined rap with R & B. In 1991, the kid rap group Another Bad Creation debuted on the national scene, emulating the styles of 1980s kid R & B group New Edition. Within a year, Jermain Dupri, the son of music executive Michael Maudlin, helped launch the careers of rap/R & B hybrids Kris Kross, Arrested Development and TLC, groups that catered to a radio-friendly sound. Of the three, Arrested Development was perhaps the most Southern in its style. Despite being from Atlanta, the group earned a Grammy nomination for its song, “Tennessee,” an homage to the symbolic “return” of Blacks to the South and an embrace to a more simplistic way of life (Richardson, 2007). But Miller (2004) notes that Arrested Development presented a narrowcasted view of the South, arguing “the sense of southernness conveyed by the group was more closely linked to northern urban blacks’ feelings of nostalgia and rootlessness than to the rap music of the South’s major cities” (p. 180).

Still, Atlanta was becoming more of a “hot” location for singers and groups who could take advantage of R & B’s more commercial, mainstream-friendly sound in the 1990s. Thanks to the emergence of Black-run labels such as LaFace Records (headed by Antonio “L.A.” Reid and Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds), Atlanta’s reputation grew as a site of popular music production, but it had yet to earn a reputation as a hip-hop hub. In
the mid-1990s, however, two Atlanta-area teenagers named Andre Benjamin and Andre Patton – who became known as the group Outkast – were signed to LaFace and immediately made waves with their debut album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, which went platinum in 1994. However, at a 1995 rap music awards show in New York hosted by *The Source* magazine, Outkast received less than a favorable reception among audience members hailing from New York. They were booed loudly, and as a result, vowed to “show all them motherfuckers” that they would be a force to be reckoned with (Grem, 2006). Later that year, Goodie Mob, another Atlanta group with close ties to Outkast, released its album *Soul Food*. Dirty South rap, as it became known, embraced a Southern identity distinct from the urban North that shaped hip-hop (Miller, 2004; Grem, 2006; Richardson, 2007). In a way, Goodie Mob and Outkast were politicizing their Southernness, and at the same time, locating their Black masculinity at a point outside the ghetto-centricity of urban Northern rap. As Grem (2006) notes:

> Thematically, they emphasized the peculiarities of southern black life and played up cultural differences between New York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. Musically, the groups tapped into southern black music, particularly gospel, rock n’roll, the blues, and Stax soul, mixing southern sounds with drawled deliveries. …By stressing such cultural markers, Goodie Mob and Outkast might deliver a message about black urban life similar to one delivered by an East or West Coast group, but *how* they delivered it made it sound unusual to others (p. 58-59).

But affirming this Southernness was more than just about stylistics and creating a unique sound, Miller (2004) and Grem (2006) argue. At the time of Outkast and Goodie Mob’s rise, the Atlanta region was preparing for the 1996 Olympics and expediting economic development initiatives that would help its businesses and attract new
corporate investment. As a result of some of these economic development initiatives, poor Blacks were being pushed out of downtown neighborhoods, particularly sites close to Fulton County stadium and the Olympic Park district (Keating, 2001). Politically, Blacks in the region were facing more obstacles from a new conservative movement led by Congressman Newt Gingrich, a Republican from nearby Cobb County who decried “welfare queens” and made welfare reform and the end of social service programs one of the centerpieces of the GOP’s “Contract with America.” For Atlanta groups such as Outkast and Goodie Mob, “New South politicians like Clinton and Gingrich are integrated into an imagined space where unfairness reigns…in other words, a space that looks a lot like the ‘Old South from the perspective of many African Americans” (Miller, 2004: 183). As opposition to welfare and affirmative action grew in the early years of the Clinton era, Atlanta was beginning what would become a decade-long effort to gentrify certain neighborhoods that presented potential for long-term real estate growth (Keating, 2001). As a result, poor and working-class Blacks were being priced out of their own neighborhoods, such as parts of Kirkwood and along Campbelltown Road, one of the main thoroughfares into Midtown. Blacks were being pushed farther south and farther west, which presented more obstacles for African-American men who struggled to enter the increasingly white-collar workforce of the region (Keating, 2001).

As Miller (2004) pointedly argues, Dirty South rap emerged as a means of articulating the real disenfranchisement Black men were facing in Atlanta. More importantly, Goodie Mob’s critiques of Southern Black life highlighted the fact that Southern Black masculinity – with the notable exception of being depicted as brutes in films such as Birth of a Nation – had been nearly invisible in the discourse on Black
America, a conversation that was largely centered around the lives of postindustrial
ghetto youth in New York, Los Angeles and other northern cities devastated by the loss
of manufacturing jobs (Forman, 2002; Miller, 2004; Watkins, 2004; Richardson, 2007).
The politics of place became as important as the politics of racial identity, as Atlanta
rappers were quick to point out the contradictions of a modern metropolis with vestiges
of the Old South – such as the Confederate flag flying at the 1996 Olympics, racial
segregation still present in the region’s upscale neighborhoods and country clubs, and a
criminal justice system seen as enforcing some of the Jim Crow inequalities of past eras –
in their music (Keating, 2001; Miller, 2004; Grem, 2006; Richardson, 2007).

But by the late 1990s, Atlanta rappers who had used Dirty South as a term to
encapsulate the injustices and inequalities of the city while promoting an alternative form
of Black masculinity found themselves representing not only Atlanta, but a homogeneous
region that began to include all points South of the Mason-Dixon divide (Miller, 2004;
Grem, 2006). As the Dirty South began to take on a broader meaning geographically and
a less political, more commercialized meaning lyrically, Atlanta began to emerge at the
beginning of the 2000s as a new hip-hop mecca. Bad Boy executive Shawn Prez notes
that his label and other “majors” began to invest more in the Atlanta music scene because
“the SoundScan numbers were much higher than the East Coast or West Coast artists.
…When labels like Bad Boy and Def Jam and some of the predominantly East Coast
only labels paid attention is when Soundscan started turning toward the Southern artists”
(S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009). The last section of the chapter will
detail how the Dirty South genre fueled commercial investment in Atlanta while creating
one of its most lucrative – and controversial – subgenres: dope boy music, also known as
trap music. But as the next section will show, the importance of certain geographic areas of the city and specific landmarks grew with the increased consumption of Atlanta-based rap music. Accordingly, “the rise of Atlanta’s ‘Dirty South’ rap music industry shows the readiness of some African Americans in the post civil rights era not only to embrace their Southernness but to sell it as well” (Grem, 2006: 56).

**Mapping “Hotlanta” as a site of cultural production**

If the 1990's sound of Dirty South rap was defined by the politics of Atlanta and its Old South history, then the new Dirty South rap that emerged in 2000 was in many ways the opposite. Atlanta’s new Dirty South music, shaped profoundly by the booty music of Miami and the dope boy music of New Orleans and Memphis, heralded a post-Freaknik era that embraced the rowdiness – and raunchiness – of Southern life. While women rappers were never a major part of the Atlanta music scene (though some such as Lisa Left Eye Lopes and Chicago transplants Da Brat did make names for themselves in the 1990s), the post-1990s Atlanta rap scene was also markedly more masculine in its presentation. Some female rappers such as Chyna White and Shawnna did gain some notoriety, but their fame came primarily as a result of collaborating with artists such as Lil’ Jon and Ludacris. Beyond its more masculinist delivery, the new Dirty South was categorized by more bass-heavy beats that de-emphasized lyrics and placed more prominence on what people could dance to. Moreover, the songs became more commercialized and radio-friendly, seeking to take advance of a non-political mainstream audience (Miller, 2004). As Miller (2004) notes, “in its passage from subculture to the larger sphere of popular culture, the idea of the Dirty South lost much of its meaning as a
critique of the racist legacy of the South” (p. 203). In other words, the signification of Dirty South changed while the significance of the term stayed the same. The success of Outkast’s *Stankonia* and Ludacris’s *Back For the First Time* made Dirty South into a commodity, thereby encouraging “rappers from around the South to define for themselves what it meant to be ‘dirty’ and ‘southern’” (Grem, 2006: 67). Southern rappers, as Richardson notes, defined themselves and/or became marketed as Others of the Other, performing to the opposite of what rap music consumers in the North had been used to. “East coast rappers are all about words and their flow is a lot more intricate and is faster than the south,” says Prez. “The South is a lot more laid back. …They’re really talking about their own struggles and their own experiences” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009). Radio stations in cities such as New York and Los Angeles, which had been initially reluctant to play Southern rappers, began to include them as staples of their playlists, a product of both the rappers’ popularity and the consolidation of formats by corporate-owned radio networks such as Clear Channel, Emmis and Radio One (Huntemann, 1999; McChesney, 2004). Atlanta rap songs that got radio and video play also shared another common trait: they were dance-friendly. By the early 2000s, Atlanta’s rap music scene, influenced by its strip clubs and eclectic nightlife, developed a more dance-friendly reputation across the country, thanks to the emergence of Lil’ Jon’s crunk music style and club songs such as Ludacris’s “Just Like That,” Bonecrusher’s “Never Scared” or Lil’ Scrappy’s “Headbussa.” Jermaine Dupri, who sold his So So Def Records company to Arista Records, a subsidiary of Sony BMG, attributes Atlanta rap music’s popularity to its frequency on nightclub playlists.

[The music is] bringing back the excitement in the club. It's similar to slam dancing almost, because it's all about going to the club and getting wild. At the same time, all the
records promote fun rather than violence, more or less. [Bone Crusher's] 'Never Scared' is a little violent, but at the same time, the feeling that you get from the record is one of excitement (Hall, 2003: 1).

While many rap groups in Atlanta embraced dance-friendly styles such as crunk and snap, combining dance tunes with harder-edged street songs, some Atlanta rappers were defining their identities in relation to the drug game. Though Atlanta has never been known as a city of street gangs, drug dealing has figured prominently in the underbelly of the region for years. In 2001, the Black Mafia Family, a drug syndicate that had moved from Detroit to Atlanta, began funneling cash into rap production efforts. The group was rumored to have bankrolled the careers of several Atlanta area rappers, most notably Young Jeezy prior to his record deal with Bad Boy (Brown, 2006). The rappers who claimed to be affiliated with the BMF, as it became to be known, heralded a new wave of “dope boy” music in Atlanta that glorified drug dealing and violence in drug-infested areas (the trap). In 2003, however, the dope boy genre in Atlanta became known as trap music with the release of T.I.’s second album, Trap Muzik. The album’s top single, “Rubber Band Man” referred to the method of counting stacks of money, and T.I. – a former teenage drug dealer – popularized the idea of carrying around money in rubber bands. One year later, Bad Boy Records and Block Entertainment released Boyz N Da Hood, a quartet of Atlanta rappers – including Jody Breeze and Young Jeezy – whose self-titled album was dedicated to the group’s connection with the drug trade. In their debut single, “Dem Boyz,” the group boasts:

Dem Boyz got work, Dem Boyz got yay

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9 In published magazine articles, Young Jeezy distanced himself from BMF following the indictments of its founders, Demetrius and Terry Flenory, in 2005 on cocaine trafficking charges. In 2007, BMF rapper Blue Davinci was charged with trafficking multiple kilos of cocaine.
Dem Boyz got purp, Dem Boyz got haze

Dem Boyz got glocks, Dem Boyz got K’s

Dem Boyz got blocks, Dem Boyz gettin’ paid

Trap music is defined by a hard-driving bass laced with heavy synthetic beats. While some of the music is similar to Miami bass and booty music, there is also a darker, brooding tone that highlights a more sinister side to the artist. The music’s tone is, as Jody Breeze would argue, “gangsta” and not “bubble gum.” Trap artists use the beats to emphasize the fact that the dope trade, while profitable, is dark and cold. The music, unlike the more dance-tailored beats of snap and crunk, is for “riding.” A song such as “Hood Nigga” is tailored to play in a car, blasting the bass from the trunk. More importantly, the beats used distinguish trap music from other types of rap while helping the consumer make a connection with the trap as a physical place. Such connections are also emphasized in trap music videos. For example, to underscore Boyz N Da Hood’s connection with the trap, the video for “Dem Boyz” was filmed in parts of SWAT and Bankhead, two neighborhoods in the city known for the drug trade. Moreover, two of the actors from the HBO series The Wire make cameo appearances, as if to legitimize Atlanta’s ghetto landscape.

As a result of trap music’s commercial popularity, Atlanta has become a key brand signifier of the genre and has been transformed into “Hotlanta,” the “ATL” and the home of the “trap.” Atlanta’s landmarks, which have been shown in music videos, referred to in songs, and reproduced in films such as ATL, play an important role in placing the rapper’s identities within an actual space, but they are also vital to the “selling” of the city and its rappers in the sphere of public consumption (Forman, 2002;
Quinn, 2005). Longtime music executive and Atlanta resident Kenny Burns points out that the cultural industries’ investment in the city, along with the commercial success of its music scene, has furthered the notion that it is now a “go-to-market” for cultural production. “It’s trendy, it’s hip, it’s crazy. Atlanta is now what New York and LA used to mean, as far as the dream” (K. Burns, personal communication, December 29, 2008).

By 2005, the Atlanta music scene accounted for the majority of the nearly $400 million in revenue the state of Georgia received from its music industries, employing nearly 3,000 people in facets related to cultural production and distribution process (Rushton & Thomas, 2005). In the mid 2000s, Atlanta’s “hotness” also spurred the local economy, attracting numerous celebrities who bought high-end houses in the area. As one music executive noted, “People in the [hip-hop] industry are gravitating to Atlanta for the same reason they go to Nashville for country. We're seeing a lot of people that have dual residences in Miami and Atlanta, for example. And it's not like they're buying small condos to live in for the weekend” (Applefield Olson, 2004). Even after the economic downturn of the late 2000s, the presence of high-profile entertainment figures fueled the notion that Atlanta was becoming a cultural hub for the Black Elite. As Michael Rushton and Marcus Thomas (2005) point out, “as Atlanta grows as a cluster for the industry, success breeds success, as industry players are drawn to the attractions of what economists refer to as a ‘thick’ market” (p. 9). To underscore this premise, the Bravo network premiered in Fall 2008 a show called The Real Housewives of Atlanta, a reality show primarily focusing on the lives of several Black women and the lifestyles of the city’s Black elite.
But Atlanta’s credibility as a hip-hop hub lies in its rappers’ ability to sell the
disenfranchised and “darker” parts of the city, places that make up the symbolic space
known as the trap. To better understand the cultural production process of Atlanta’s rap
music scene, this section will describe aspects of the city’s geography – including
landmarks and neighborhoods – and its production hubs in greater detail, particularly as
they relate to hip-hop and the representation of Black male identities. The direct
observations were made during my field visits to Atlanta in December 2008 and January
2009. The sites examined in this section are the downtown shopping area known as
Underground Atlanta; the Bankhead Courts Public Housing complex (which is
supposedly where “trap” music originated); and East Lake, the neighborhood that
includes some of Atlanta’s poorest communities and is featured prominently in music
videos made by Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe. The descriptions of these places offer
context in understanding the actual physical places that have become signs and brands in
rap songs and videos. Moreover, understanding their histories provides a better
understanding of how and why they figure so prominently in the identity of “Black
Atlanta.”

**Underground Atlanta**

In a promotional video for *XXL* magazine, Boyz N Da Hood stand in front of the
entrance for Underground Atlanta, proclaiming that city’s subterranean shopping center
is the heart of the hood. While their boast might be figurative, it underscores
Underground Atlanta’s importance in the city’s hip-hop scene and a hub for cultural
production. Underground Atlanta is located in the heart of downtown, just one block
away from the Five Points MARTA station, the central hub for the city’s public train
system. It is shadowed by commercial hi-rises such as the Georgia Pacific building and
bounded by state and federal office buildings. Though the mall is technically subterranean in structure, the entire Underground Atlanta complex also occupies two above-ground blocks, which include shopping, an outdoor public space with brick steps fashioned to resemble an amphitheater, and a storefront façade with banners remaining from the city’s Olympic Park project.

Once hailed as a step towards redeveloping the blighted downtown area of the city and attracting (white) visitors, Underground Atlanta today is a paradox in terms of the city’s efforts to establish a downtown shopping and cultural destination. On one hand, as Keating (2001) observes, the mall was “built…to increase downtown pedestrian traffic at night, but the complex’s location and its inwardly focused design did little to accomplish this” (p. 201). But on another level, Underground Atlanta – despite its failure as a multiracial destination – has retained a flavor that has made it appealing to lower-income Blacks, specifically those who can access it via MARTA. It remains a popular destination for working-class African-Americans, particularly youngsters who do not have to travel far from neighborhoods such as Garnett, East Lake, Kirkwood and Mechanicsville. More importantly, for rappers, it has become a badge of one’s proximity to the hood and the “real” Atlanta. In the XXL video, Jody and Zoe, along with other members of the group Boyz N Da Hood, use Underground Atlanta – a recognizable symbol of Atlanta’s hip-hop scene – to brand themselves as being connected to the hood. “We’re here to show y’all the roots, the heart of the ATL, the hood,” Jody says as he passerby approach him to give daps, pounds and bro hugs (“Boyz N Da Hood,” 2008).

During my visits to Underground Atlanta, the paradox of its commercial failure and symbolic significance was evident. Just in front of the entrance to the mall, which
faces the Peachtree Street entrance of the Five Points MARTA station, both sides of the sidewalk are filled with outdoor street vendors. As one nears the mall, elderly gentlemen in suits offer copies of *Final Call*, the newspaper of the Nation of Islam. Vendors hawk small jewelry, electronics, fruits, CD’s and various Barack Obama paraphernalia. Several other vendors sell small artwork, African jewelry, and other accessories. Homeless people wander the sidewalks in front of the mall, some carrying trinkets they attempt to sell to passersby. The public amphitheater, which was designed to be a cultural mingling area, is empty, save for a few people puffing cigarettes.

To the right of the main mall entrance, there is a cell phone store blasting music from inside. Two young men stood in front of it, attempting to hand out CD’s. No one took what they were offering. As I approached them, one walked to me with a CD, yelling, “Ayo, it’s $10, man. It’s hot.” I declined, turning to observe the other young man trying to sell the CD’s to three teenage girls who walked out of the cell phone store. Across the street, another young man attempted to sell his CD’s, playing what appeared to be one of his songs from a portable CD player resting on the sidewalk. The CD-sellers epitomize the “side hustle” of rappers who rely on direct sales pitches to potential consumers. Though most of these rappers would be lucky to sell a handful of CD’s a week, they’re motivated by the maximizing of profits and the low overhead costs (CD production is relatively cheap, especially for people with CD burners). But hawking one’s CD is not only common in Atlanta, but in other areas where rappers hone their salesman skills through direct contact with prospective buyers. Persistence and vigilance are of the utmost importance. If one potential consumer turns away, more are sure to pass by. The young rappers in front of Underground Atlanta are aware that one successful sale makes
up for 10 failed attempts, so they keep trying, optimistic that a sympathetic person/hip-
aficionado/tourist will stop and fork over $10. Though this practice is common in almost
every city, it has taken on a special significance in Southern cities such as Atlanta, where
street-corner and back-of-the-trunk music and DVD sales epitomize the swagger of the
Southern hustla. Ludacris reportedly sold 100,000 copies of his CD from the trunk of his
car in the Atlanta area and other parts of the region before signing a record deal with Def
Jam/Universal for wider distribution (Johnson, 2000). Prior to that, New Orleans rapper
Master P used the money he made selling tapes of his raps to start No Limit Records,
which at one point was the most influential rap label in the United States. Signifying its
iconic status, the Southern hustla selling CD’s in backrooms and on street corners was
mythicized in the 2005 film Hustle & Flow.

Adjacent to the mall is an enclosed, open-air strip of nightclubs and restaurants. At night, the clubs become a primary gathering spot for young African-Americans who
do not venture to Midtown or Buckhead for their nightlife. The strip, known as Kenny’s
Alley, also features a performance stage where Atlanta hip-hop station Hot 107.9
occasionally has talent shows or small concerts by local artists. More importantly,
Underground Atlanta’s venues do not enforce dress codes that are in place in other parts
of the city to keep away young Black men with long tees and baggy jeans. The shopping
area, which had been a centerpiece of the city’s effort to redevelop downtown and
“refurbish” its image, is now populated by mostly young Black men, some of who
actively pursue their dreams of becoming rap stars or trap stars. As the last section will
show, places like Underground Atlanta are key in validating a rapper’s street credibility
and his proximity to the “base.”
Bankhead Courts

Of the neighborhoods glorified for being connected to the trap, perhaps none has more symbolic significance than Bankhead, also known as the West Side. The neighborhood is on the western edge of Atlanta in an area made up mostly of industrial parks and other manufacturing sites. The neighborhood, split vertically by I-285 and horizontally by the Donald Lee Hallowell Industrial Highway, is known as Bankhead, a working-class, African-American community. Bankhead is where poorer Black residents of Atlanta relocated to in the 1960s when public housing in the city was demolished in favor of higher end development (Keating, 2001). It is also where blue-collar jobs, though declining, exist. Bankhead is not heavily populated, and most people who live there reside in the public housing apartment complex, the Bankhead Courts. The Bankhead Courts were made famous in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the Atlanta Child Murders, in which 29 black children and young adults were killed over a two-year span. Several of the victims resided in Bankhead Courts, which sparked rumors that that the murders were committed by KKK members from neighboring Cobb County.

Today, however, Bankhead is known to hip-hop aficionados as the home of rappers such as T.I., Young Jeezy and Shawty Lo. Bankhead Courts, as hip-hoppers have come to understand, is a symbol of the ghetto Black masculinity that its rap products have tried to convey in their music and in their videos. Notable examples of the complex’s prominence include T.I.s “You Don’t know Me”and Boyz N Da Hood’s “Dem Boyz.” It is the “hood” that lends credibility to any rapper who identifies with it.

But Bankhead is not the Marcy Projects in New York or even the Magnolia Projects in New Orleans, both places that have been made notorious by bloody turf wars
among rival drug gangs. Though geographically isolated (the nearest MARTA station is two miles away and there are no major grocery stores within five miles), Bankhead Courts appears to be a self-sustaining community. The complex is divided by the industrial highway, making accessibility from one part of the projects to the other difficult during peak travel times. Residents often run across the highway in front of cars to get from one side to the other. On one side of the complex are older apartment homes, brick structures that reflect the era in which they were built. Inside this side of Bankhead Courts, there is a basketball court where young children play and a bus stop where the city bus picks up people for direct routes to the city or drop-offs at the MARTA station.

At the end of the development, next to the Bankhead Courts Community Center, is a building that houses the Bankhead Courts Residents Association. As Keating (2001) notes, Atlanta’s poor Black population, despite their displacement and disenfranchisement, are very well organized and politically influential. Residential associations such as the ones in Bankhead lobby the City Council to ensure that improvements are made and living costs are held down (Keating, 2001). On the other side of the development, the units are constructed townhouse-style. Across the street from the townhouse section of the complex is the Bankhead Courts library, a small octagonal structure that appears to hold no more than a few hundred books.

Despite its isolation from the rest of the city, Bankhead Courts is relatively stable, thanks to a mobilized community of residents. The Atlanta Police, which have a substation a few miles down the road, and the Bankhead Courts Residents Association have worked together to monitor criminal activities. The residents association is a stabilizing force in the neighborhood, helping to maintain the appearance of the complex.
While the poverty is apparent, Bankhead’s significance as a landmark in Atlanta’s hip-hop scene seems to be more rhetorical and symbolic than physical. The “trap” – which is more synonymous with crack houses and other places of drug transactions – is not obvious in the neighborhood. It is the home of trap music because two of its most prominent natives, T.I. and Jeezy, have glorified its significance to the dope trade.

*Magic City and the strip club industry*

In many ways, Atlanta’s cultural industries are similar to other big cities where hip-hop has flourished as both cultural movement and commodity. Atlanta’s hip-hop scene grew in the 1990s because local clubs and concert halls hosted concerts by up-and-coming rappers. More significantly, the presence of Hot 97.5, a Radio One owned hip-hop station, provided a forum for local rappers to generate buzz for their releases. Hot 97.5 – which later became Hot 107.9 – helped rappers such as Drama, Young Jeezy and the Ying Yang Twinz make names for themselves long before they became known to a national audience, but perhaps its biggest success was Ludacris, whose career as a disc jockey at the station gave him an opportunity to promote his music long before his record deal (Murray, 2008). The clubs and the radio stations in Atlanta – as well as in other Georgia cities such as Athens, Savannah, Macon and Albany – help to create publicity for the artist, often making them “hot” before they’re noticed by major labels seeking to take them beyond regional recognition. These are the sites of cultural production that create a dynamic interaction between rappers and their fans, which is also an important base from which the artists are funneled upwards in the corporate cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Banks, 2007; Condry, 2007).
What makes Atlanta unique, however, is the importance of its Black strip clubs in the cultural production process. Atlanta is, according to noted music journalist Sonia Murray, “a strip club city” (S. Murray, personal communication, December 19, 2008). Strip clubs have been institutions in the city for years, and the venues catered specifically towards Black men gained notoriety thanks to Freaknik and “shout outs” to clubs given by groups such as Outkast, Goodie Mob, and the 69 Boyz. *The Players Club*, a 1998 movie starring Jamie Foxx about a Black strip club, was a composite of the city’s top Black strip clubs – Magic City, Body Tap, and Club Blaze – and featured a hard-edged soundtrack co-produced by Ice Cube (who co-starred in the film). Beyond popular culture, the importance of Atlanta Black-oriented strip clubs is heightened by the de facto segregation of gentleman’s establishments in the city. “White” clubs such as the Cheetah Lounge and the Pink Pony are located in more upscale areas of the city, catering to patrons who often come from the northern and western suburbs. The dancers in those clubs are almost all white, the majority of whom are blondes catered to fit the “Georgia Peach” prototype. Black strip clubs such as Magic City and Body Tap, located in Southwest Atlanta and downtown, respectively, feature mostly African-American dancers and play Southern “booty music” that emphasizes a woman’s ability to “pop that thing.”

Of the strip clubs in Atlanta that have become immortalized in rap music, perhaps none is more prominent than Magic City, which is just blocks from downtown at the tip of Southwest Atlanta (SWAT). The club was featured in the music video for the “Welcome to Atlanta” remix and was the location for videos made by groups such as Outkast, the Ying Yang Twinz and Lil’ Jon and the East Side Boyz. Part of Magic City’s appeal to rappers is that it is a club that is in close proximity to some of Atlanta’s poorest
neighborhoods, which in many ways validates their connection to the “underbelly” of the city. Just two blocks away from the club is the Fulton County Detention Facility, where mostly young Black men enter and leave at all hours of the day. More significantly, the trap is not far away, as some of the blocks in SWAT that are just walking distance from the strip club are home to some of the city’s more notorious open-air drug dealing areas.

Magic City draws hometown rappers and athletes and the numerous visitors who come specifically to partake in the Black Atlanta nightlife. On Friday and Saturday nights, the parking lot of the club is filled with expensive cars such as Bentleys, Maybachs and high-end luxury trucks with specialized rims. Security is always present, as bouncers keep vigilant eyes on Forsythe Street to ensure no one “messes with” the strippers or the clients who come into the club. Magic City is also just a block away from the Garnett MARTA station, a place one of my informants told me not to get off at during my field visits. The spot is popular among rappers and numerous athletes, as well as the high rolling “dope boys” who use Magic City as a place to flaunt their visibility and their freedom just a block where some of their peers are incarcerated. Both from its location and the kinds of activities that go on inside, Magic City symbolizes the new definition of Dirty South: a place where raunchiness, hypermasculinity, sexuality and bass converge in the shadows of Atlanta’s skyscrapers. This convergence is reflected in Dirty South rap music, which, as a whole, has embraced the strip club culture as both a symbol of Atlanta and a reaffirmation of rappers’ connection to the “real.”

Black strip clubs are where local rappers began promoting their singles, in hopes that the more a stripper requested their songs and shook her booty to them, the more buzz it would create. As Sonia Murray (2008) notes, strip clubs have now become the first
place for many record labels and up-and-coming rappers to get their songs played before they hit the radio. “Strip club DJ’s play songs that the labels give them,” she says. “If the girls like the song and request it, the more it will get played” (S. Murray, personal communication, December 19, 2008). She adds that this practice is so commonplace that radio stations such as Hot 107.9 have listening parties at strip clubs in order to create hype for singles. “It’s the best testing ground because it’s the truest form of entertainment,” says Kenny Burns. “At the end of the day that was the only place you could go hear like all the records that were in the street, because the radio wasn’t playing everything that was in the street” (K. Burns, personal communication, December 29, 2008). Jermaine Dupri reflects the sentiment of many Atlanta rap artists when he says, “If I don’t hear my songs in there, I’m a little disturbed sometimes, because that means I’m not making a street-enough record and a record with enough beat to be played in a strip club” (Peters, 2007: 43). As a result, strip clubs in Atlanta and other parts of the South have now gained notoriety for “drawing not just men looking for shaking behinds, but music execs and radio program directors scouting out talent” (Campbell, 2006).

In addition to being testing grounds for the trendiest music, strip clubs are also where rappers showcase their material success, cultivate their credibility as conspicuous consumers and most of all, assert their masculinity. The term “make it rain” originated in Atlanta and was popularized by rappers such as Nelly (who, despite his St. Louis roots, collaborates frequently with Atlanta rappers) and Ludacris. In videos where strip clubs are featured prominently, rappers “make it rain” by throwing wads of cash in the air. The purpose of these displays of excessive materialism is to not only reward dancers for their booty shaking and “pussy popping,” but to challenge other men to do the same
(Campbell, 2006). These affirmations, as Dwayne Campbell (2006) notes, have occasionally led to violence in strip clubs and nightclubs, as young men who don’t have the stacks to throw around feel affronted by those who do. This type of “dissing” led to two shootings in 2006 and 2007 – the first involving a member of T.I.’s entourage outside of a Cincinnati nightclub and the other involving football player Pacman Jones in a Las Vegas strip club. “Making it rain” in strip clubs has become a symbol of the hood rich Black masculinity, a practice that has infused the illicit moneymaking of the dope boy lifestyle with the ostentatious images of the rap lifestyle. Money, women, and Black men seeking both are placed into unique interactions at Atlanta strip clubs, inspiring and often times validating the imagery conjured up in the Dirty South rap genre.

As I will show in the final section of this chapter, the strip clubs play a vital role in the Atlanta cultural industries and serve as facilitators in the commodification of Atlanta rappers and the construction of their masculinity.

*East Lake/Memorial Drive*

At the eastern edge of the city, at the border of Fulton and DeKalb counties, is the neighborhood of East Lake. East Lake and the neighboring Kirkwood community are two of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, areas that have been re-shaped in recent years by job loss and extensive redevelopment efforts prior to the housing market crash in 2007. This area is just four miles from downtown and a short ride on MARTA, close to the Inman Park neighborhood where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. neighborhood is located. East Lake became known in the 1970s and 1980s as one of the hubs of Atlanta’s drug trade,

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10 In 2006, Philant Johnson, the assistant for T.I., was killed outside of a Cincinnati nightclub following an alleged altercation inside the club. Johnson’s alleged killer, Hosea Thomas, was sentenced to 66 years in prison in 2008. The shooting also led T.I. to reevaluate his life, and as a result, change his “dope boy” image.
and according to local law enforcement officials, produced the highest number of incarcerated felons in the region (Lewis, 2008). In 1991, the community gained nationwide attention as a result of the shooting of an eight-year-old boy at the East Lake Meadows Housing complex (Scruggs, 1991; Miller, 2004). The shooting brought to light the controversial tactics of Atlanta Police’s counternarcotics squad, the Red Dogs, inspiring a 1992 rap song called “Police Brutality” by the Atlanta group Success-N-Effect and numerous references in Goodie Mob’s *Soul Food* three years later.

The East Lake Meadows housing complex – where employment among residents was at 14 percent in 1993 – was a stone’s throw away from the sprawling East Lake Golf Course, which had gone into disrepair as a result of wealthy patrons shying away from the area. In 1995, millionaire Tom Cousins partnered with the East Lake Meadows Residents Association to redevelop both the golf course and the housing projects. Cousins’s investment into the eastern end of East Lake spurred mixed-income housing developments that replaced the dilapidated homes along Memorial Drive, the main artery of the neighborhood. A new YMCA was built near the golf course and middle-income residents began to move in to buy and fix blighted single story homes across the street. But the redevelopment at East Lake Meadows, which was renamed the Villages at East Lake, did not remake the entire community. Moreover, several housing projects, including a luxury condo project that was meant to transform the intersection of Memorial and Moreland drives, were shelved as a result of the housing market crash. Despite the gentrification in some parts of the community, along with certain areas of Kirkwood, the “trap” continues to thrive in East Lake, where young men stand on street corners and make deals with stopped cars just blocks away from more affluent
developments and the stalled new construction efforts. East Lake’s reputation as a neighborhood still struggling with poverty, crime, and violence had a profound impact on one of its products, Russell “Block” Spencer, who established Block Entertainment Studios in the heart of the community.

To get a better understanding of East Lake’s importance to Atlanta’s rap scene, one must drive through Memorial Drive, which extends from downtown Atlanta into DeKalb County. East Lake begins on Memorial Drive just past the intersection of Moreland and a mile before Walker Park. As one travels east towards the East Lake Meadows area, the composition of the blocks changes from commercial to residential. Small barbecue shacks stand next to small churches, and just a few yards away are shuttered one-level homes. Memorial Drive then crosses into a small part of Kirkwood before becoming East Lake again. Just beyond Walker Park is the Atlantic Shopping Plaza (technically in Kirkwood), where most of the businesses have long since left. The only ones still in open are a Family Dollar and Esso Night Club, which opens at 10 p.m. on most nights. The storefronts for a beauty salon and Rent-A-Center have not been taken down, though their windows are plastered with promotion posters for rap and R & B acts.

Block Entertainment – the production label for Zoe, Jody, Boyz N Da Hood, and Yung Joc, among others – is right next to the shopping plaza, though an uninformed observer would not know it. From the outside, 1605 Memorial Drive Southeast appears to be a shuttered car detailing business. The building is bounded by a steel wire fence, and cars can only enter the premises by ringing a buzzer. The cracked pavement of the parking lot is filled with oil streaks. On the front of the building, a sign hangs with prices for car detailing services. There are iron bars on the windows, which are covered from
the inside by a translucent material so that no one can see inside. Next to the building is a burger joint, which advertises “the world famous ghetto burger.” At the intersection of Memorial Drive and Maynard Terrace is a service station, a liquor store, a barbeque shack and a Checkers fast food restaurant. On the other side of the intersection is a middle school. Men and women walk down Memorial Drive while some young men are “posted up” on the corner of Memorial and Maynard during daytime and evening hours. The Block Entertainment Studio is sandwiched in between the “ghetto burger” place and the sloping front parking lot of Atlantic Shopping Plaza. Cars are parked along the steel fence. Several cars and SUVs are also parked on the lot within the steel fence, including a late model Acura SUV on 24-inch rims, a late 1970s Chevrolet Corvette on 22-inch rims and a 2009 Dodge Challenger. The building is always monitored from the outside by an informal security team who are part of the Block Entertainment “family.” At night, a large black bullmastiff guards the front door. Though the dog is friendly to visitors, its presence serves as a deterrent to strangers who might try to enter the premises. Later in this chapter, I will focus on Block Entertainment’s role in the cultural production process.

Further along Memorial Drive, an older YMCA with an empty field stands next to several shuttered and dilapidated homes. Many of the homes along this section of Memorial Drive have not had inhabitants for a while, though young men and women walk along the road, occasionally stopping in front of the homes before moving on. Atlanta Police maintain a low-key but visible presence. Some unmarked cars sit in front of stores or in empty parking lots while police cruisers roam the road, especially near the middle school. According to some of the people who live in the area, police have focused more of their efforts on monitoring the parts of East Lake and Kirkwood that are
gentrifying. A tattoo parlor and a boutique coffee shop have opened recently to draw young, affluent people from the gentrified parts of Kirkwood and nearby Decatur. As East Lake and Kirkwood continue to undergo physical changes, the landmarks along Memorial Drive serve as a reminder that progress for some is still years away. The blight is ingrained into both the physical and cultural landscape of this part of Atlanta, and it is vividly reflected in the music produced at 1605 Memorial Drive Southeast. As the next section will show, Block Entertainment is active in the production, marketing and distribution of trap music and the commodification of Atlanta’s dope boy lifestyle.

**Welcome to “the Block”: Selling Trap Music and the Hood Story**

Atlanta’s transformation from a “third space” in the hip-hop nation to a go-to market for rap did not happen by coincidence. As Grem (2006) notes, Atlanta’s rise as a hot spot in cultural production coincided with investments made by major labels and the multinational conglomerates that owned them. For example, Grem argues, when L.A. Reid sold LaFace Records – the label that had produced chart-toppers such as Monica, Usher, Toni Braxton, Outkast and Goodie Mob – to Arista, “a collection of independent labels quickly filled this void by LaFace’s departure” (p. 67). He adds that independent labels “offered something that ‘major’ labels like Arista, Atlantic, and Columbia could not consistently guarantee – greater artistic license and the potential for higher returns, sometimes substantially more than a major label’s offer, on every CD or tape sold” (p. 68). These indies usually required little capital, as CD’s and mix tapes could be mass produced quickly and sold in local record stores and on street corners such as the ones outside of Underground Atlanta. But Grem’s point is only partially correct. While
independent labels in Atlanta gave rise to rappers who would not have been initially noticed by the majors, the corporate cultural industries did have a significant role in broadening Atlanta rap’s appeal.

Arista (owned by Sony BMG), Bad Boy (owned by Warner Music Group), and Universal Music Group were among the majors who began to work out distribution deals with Atlanta production labels. This, as Grem (2006) points out, led to “a complex relationship between indies and major labels,” spurring a “sometimes fierce competition between them for talent” (p. 68). Moreover, he adds, these production and distribution deals “had a profound effect on the notion of the Dirty South, encouraging rappers to reinterpret continually their now profitable southernness. By claiming to represent persistently fresh takes on what defined the Dirty South, a steady stream of rappers hoping to cash in on Atlanta’s growing popularity repeatedly recast the Dirty South in their own image” (Ibid.) One of the byproducts of this trend was trap music, which quickly became sellable because it combined hard-edged beats, catchy hooks, and notions of laid-back Southern Black masculinity. Miller (2004) notes that “the development, marketing, and consumption of the Dirty South came about as a result of the geography of the rap music industry, and built upon pre-existing ideas about the South and its inhabitants” (p. 207). This relationship between the production of Southern rap and the notions of what and who Southerners – particularly Black men from Atlanta – were helped fuel dope boy, or trap music.

For some rappers who perform trap music or identify themselves as “trap stars,” the dope boy genre is more than an image – it is a lifestyle. But commodifying the dope trade is nothing new in hip-hop, or the larger media industry, for that matter. But in
Atlanta, urban poverty is still not as understood in popular culture as the ghettos of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, which makes a rapper’s visual claims – using images of the Southern hood to underscore their physical space’s authenticity – just as important as his lyrics. And since Atlanta rappers have rarely relied on their lyrical wordplay to sell their music and masculinity, music videos or hooks to emphasize their status as dope boys or conspicuous consumers become just as important to these claims as the dancefriendliness of the beat is to getting airplay beyond the strip clubs.

The commodification of the Southern Black male, the dope boy lifestyle and physical spaces as means of mass marketing rap produced from the South is not a new concept, since record labels did the same in promoting New York and Los Angeles rap (Rose, 1994; Forman, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Richardson, 2007). However, the production and commodification processes that have developed in Atlanta and in other parts of the South defy “traditional” ways of viewing the cultural industries. For instance, the “selection” of rappers by major labels is not as clear cut as scholars such as Andrea Ordanini (2006) indicate; moreover, the cultural values clash that Negus (2002 & 2004), Forman (2002) and Watkins (2005) claim underpinned the relations between cultural industry executives and rappers has become outdated in many ways, given the cooption of rap labels into multinational conglomerates. In a sense, the selling of Black to make green has trumped whatever personal aversions executives at Warner Music Group, Universal and Viacom might have. Similarly, Atlanta’s dope boy music, with its heavy bass and sometimes hard to understand Southern slang, becomes an asset to labels when they understand its marketability and reproduction potential. The bottom line, says rap
executive Shawn Prez, is that “money talks” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

The relationship between smaller labels such as Block Entertainment and major labels such as Bad Boy/Atlantic challenge the dynamics of artist development that Ordanini (2006) outlines in her study of music industry selection models. Ordanini argues that in the music industry, there are two major approaches for how artists are cultivated: the direct model, in which major labels sign an artist, promote him or her, and often see immediate chart success, and the agency model, in which independent labels often cultivate artists for longevity. Ordanini argues that “a direct model of selection creates a cluster of artists whose heavy success is relatively faster than the success of artists with a prior independent experience: A&R departments of major companies in this sense, have the function of rebalancing long-term expected returns by independent artists with rapid but not necessarily repeated successes by big international artists” (Ordanini, 2006: 187). But Ordanini’s study, which was conducted using European charts, overlooks the fact that in the age of media consolidation, majors often exercise direct or indirect control over smaller independents. In other words, major labels have found ways to “have their cake and eat it, too” by producing the chart-toppers – even if they have limited long-term prospects – and mediating the access that independent artists and their labels have to the marketplace (Roberts, 2005; Williamson & Cloonan, 2007).

Bad Boy’s relationship with Block Entertainment highlights these power dynamics, particularly the complexities and contradictions of Ordanini’s agency model. For starters, the relationship has helped Warner Music Group become one of the key producers and distributors of Southern rap music, particularly from Atlanta. Moreover,
the production and distribution agreement between Bad Boy and Block Entertainment creates a framework by which the talent scouting, marketing, contract negotiating and local production is handled by the “independent” label, while the mass distribution – arguably the least labor intensive aspect of the cultural production process – is in the hands of the major.

But to better understand how this process works, and how it relates to the commodification of Southern Black maleness and the “glocalization” of Atlanta, one must visit the site of cultural work and the different levels of cultural production involved. As Gibson (2003) points out, “cultural production is channeled through gatekeepers, individuals in a range of settings who manage and promote certain flows of sounds images, words and commodities” (p. 205). The primary gatekeeper on the “local” scene is Russell “Block” Spencer, the founder and CEO of Block Entertainment. Spencer established the production company in 2000 after spending years as A & R manager and talent scout for major labels such as Def Jam. His biographies mention that he has worked with Tupac, an association meant to give him instant credibility among hip-hop consumers. Spencer also worked with Atlanta producer Jazze Pha to start Sho’Nuff Records, a local production house that signed R & B singer Ciara and subsequently inked a distribution deal with Warner Brothers Records. But in establishing Block Entertainment, Spencer became both an entrepreneur and a cultural worker. On one hand, he recruited and signed rappers from Atlanta, producing and distributing singles and mixtapes throughout the region. Using both his name (as a prior associate of Tupac) and his former business contacts, Spencer was able to make Block into a regional powerhouse
by 2005, thanks in large part to sales from mixtapes and access to local radio stations such as Hot 107.9.

Spencer, however, also continued laboring for the majors. His “scouting” abilities earned him the trust of Sean “Diddy” Combs, who was looking for ways to increase Bad Boy’s visibility in the South and find new ways to sell records. At the time of Bad Boy’s foray into the Southern rap music scene, the label was undergoing major changes. Warner Music Group bought out Bad Boy’s contract with Universal Music Group in 2005 and immediately took a majority stake in the company. Combs no longer had sole executive control over the label, but remained its CEO. In a press release, Warner Music Group CEO Lyor Cohen said, “We're thrilled to welcome Sean and Bad Boy Records to the Warner Music fold. We believe Sean's entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to push the envelope creatively will be a perfect fit for Warner Music Group. The Bad Boy name has not only stood for hip-hop music for more than a decade, but has evolved into a unique and vital brand” (Bad Boy press release, 2005). However, many of the company’s artists left as a result of not having their contracts picked up by Warner Music Group. Seeking to rebuild and “re-brand” the label and find a new source of income, Combs sought out Spencer, who had by then assembled the group Boyz N Da Hood and created enough buzz for them in Atlanta to merit wider distribution. This Atlanta street cred is highlighted (and perhaps constructed) in publicity materials, such as in this quote attributed to Combs: “When Block and I first met, I realized he had an ear for the streets of the South. Block brought Boyz N Da Hood to Bad Boy, proving that he knows the sound of Atlanta and the South” (Bad Boy press release, 2005). As a result, Bad Boy and Block Entertainment inked a distribution deal for Block’s artists that “gave” the recording
roster to Bad Boy (and Warner Music Group) while Block handled the artist development and story building. So what does Spencer get out of the arrangement? “I was looking to take the music we make in the South to another level, and the collaboration between Block Enterprises and Bad Boy South was the perfect avenue for both of our companies,” he states. “When the machine is working successfully, you don't look to fix it, but to add to it to make it better” (Bad Boy press release, 2006).

This indicates Spencer’s unwillingness to challenge the established system of production and instead benefit from it. More importantly, the deal, which made him the “head” of Bad Boy South, gave him control over music production. He frames his situation with Bad Boy as one where he has leverage. “I'm the boss over there. I have total control. I've proved I can put a record together and walk it all the way through. I can put together an artist and a record” (Starpoyn, 2005). But the investment Bad Boy and Warner Music Group made in Atlanta’s rap music through the agreement with Block did not create a new Bad Boy South label. As it turns out, Bad Boy South is Block Entertainment, which has a full-time staff of Spencer, Rico Brooks and Spencer’s attorney. Brooks points out that “[Bad Boy South] is just name, it’s just a logo, it’s just an imprint, it’s just something they said to tag. It sounds good on paper” (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008). Without any formal Bad Boy South office, Block Entertainment executives must deal directly with New York on business matters.

The way that this operating agreement is structured supports the idea that cultural production and cultural work are glocalized. In other words, Block Entertainment/Bad Boy South might be a local franchisee of an international conglomerate, but it has little actual power in terms of distribution of the cultural product. To borrow from Sonnega,
Warner Music Group as the global corporate giant has hidden its true form, presenting itself to locals as “one of them.” Similar to the advertising methods used by multinational firms to make products appear indigenous to a specific locale or region, Block’s sign value – the studio’s “hood” location, the lingo used to promote Block ENT/Bad Boy South, and its importance among the cultural gatekeepers in the city – masks its lack of actual control in the distribution of Atlanta artists and the construction of their international image. As I will show in later in this project, such dynamics reify hierarchies of place in the cultural production process.

Adding to this notion, Kenny Burns states that “the only reason Bad Boy South exists is because Puffy wants his hand in the South, so he gets him a person that can lock it down, so to speak, for him” (K. Burns, personal communication, December 29, 2008). The increased exposure that Spencer receives from his arrangement with Bad Boy and Warner Music Group helps to build the buzz around his studio. Hip-hop magazines, web sites and other media give him coverage, which is another opportunity to plug the label and the artists it manages. But building the story on a local level is far more complex than getting magazine and web site articles published. Block, like other Atlanta-based record labels, has mastered the ability of utilizing the local cultural industries to advance the products – the rapper, the rapper’s image, and the music. The commodification process of the rapper is two-pronged: the first being the local story building and passing the litmus of regional consumption, while the second is the funneling upward to wider channels of distribution. The local commodification and marketing process involves several steps, which include studio planning, street teams and guerilla marketing, “taste” tests at local venues such as strip clubs and night clubs, and media management. The second involves
Block and the artist’s manager (Rico Brooks) negotiating with the major for airtime on radio, concert tours, as well as budgeting for music videos. However, the first prong of the commodification process is directly connected to Atlanta’s space as a cultural hub, thereby warranting a closer examination of each step.

*Studio Planning*

The Block Entertainment Studio, as mentioned earlier, is in the heart of the East Lake and Kirkwood communities. Though its exterior “blends in” with the surroundings, inside, the studio is a plush corporate office equipped with a bar as one enters, a waiting room lined with promotional posters and wall hangings of Block artists’ chart success (such as Yung Joc’s certified platinum record). In the next room is the office, which is made up of a handful of cubicles and a “planning table.” The studio is in the back of the building, and when music is playing from the control room, the entire building vibrates.

The studio executives are Block and Rico Brooks, who manages the Block artists. Brooks, a native of Albany, Ga., got into music management by working in the music retail industry and developing a rapport with local rappers who would try to “sell” their albums to local music distributors. “I saw some flaws in the way that the artists would present their package to stores, like they had talent and they had music that was good, they just didn’t have anyone to represent them and go and present their music in a professional way to people,” he says. “So I started consulting independent labels and the artists and from that I met a lot of people who all came up like through the Atlanta scene” (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

Initially hired to be the manager for Boyz N Da Hood, Brooks has taken on more of a role in Block Entertainment, straddling responsibilities between managing the artists
and the interests of the label. As a result, he says he has to “make sure the artist is happy and deliver something to the label that they’re happy with too. So I walk a little line; I call it a fine line, but overall I’m just trying to deal with the overall well being of the artist and all the aspects of his career, whether it’s financial, dealing with his accountants, or his lawyers” (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008). But for Brooks, strategic management of the label ensures his artists sell well, which in turn benefits Spencer, who is in charge of laying out the vision for the artist and the music. In an interview with *Vibe* in 2007, he articulated some of his strategies for marketing his artists and their music, including the idea of “selling the image.” Using Gorilla Zoe as an example to highlight the dichotomy of promoting an authentic thug image and one that sells out, he notes:

> You got to have the full packaging when you're talking about marketing. I can't have Gorilla Zoe coming out in bright ass colors and talking all this happy shit if he's a Gorilla. Ain't nobody gonna believe Will Smith if he was in Boyz N Da Hood (“Block Commandments,” 2007).

Spencer says he believes that music consumers have short attention spans and that, in order to succeed, a rapper must cultivate a product that ensures longevity.

> Consumers have to buy into the artist- not the song. I don't make records for people to buy into the records, I make records for people to buy into the artist. That's why you have to have at least two good solid records, mixtapes supporting those records, and a team. How far does ringtones help you? You got to have a solid album, because you want to live to see the third or fourth album. You want ringtones to be a steppingstone for movies, your own record label, and clothing lines (Ibid).
Spencer emphasizes brand building as a means of maintaining a loyal consumer base. His views on artist development are grounded in his experience as an A & R manager at other labels, but he also brings up the notion that hustling a product involves some degree of rapport between the artist and the consumer. As his rappers record music in the studio, Spencer conceptualizes how the songs will be marketed, focusing on what will draw the listener into the rest of the album. For Spencer, packaging a rapper involves more than “selling some fucking ringtones. You got to do more than one record, you got to do more than two records – because you're going to have a guy like me laughing, and I'm going to put an end to your shit” (Ibid).

While producing and marketing the songs (and the rapper) may be Spencer’s responsibility, he does not make the decision on how the song will sound and what songs will be promoted. Bad Boy and Warner Music Group provide Spencer and the label’s rappers with a degree of autonomy, but everything must still be OK’d with executives in New York, who provide the access to the wider channels of distribution. Brooks notes that making the product is more than just having Zoe or Jody go into the studio and record.

So basically, we record and produce a full album and we turn it into Bad Boy and if Puff likes it then it goes. …But it’s a lot of back and forth as far as singles. As far as doing the album, it’s pretty cool…. But when it comes time to the singles, that’s when they start getting, when it’s about the money, that’s when they get, they start getting a little picky. (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

Brooks’s comments reflect the notion that the corporation exercises its power when its money becomes an issue, particularly over how its money will be used. Once Bad Boy signs off on the album and endorses the song(s) to put out as singles, then it is
up to Spencer to organize the story building for the artist in advance of the album’s release. The label and its marketing staff (who are actually Atlantic Records/Warner Music Group employees) then negotiate with Spencer and Brooks over how the artist will be marketed. “But as far as the image that they want to present, they’ll give us choices, say, ‘Here’s six we like, which ones do you like?’ They’ll give us, we choose from the choices that are given to us” (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008). His comments seem to imply that a framework of images are decided by the corporate staff and offered as choices to the artist, a top-down format that gives the artist little control in putting out his image. When the artist and the corporation disagree, financial disputes that arise often lead to the rapper spending money out of his own pocket to cover extra costs that Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group is unwilling to cover. Brooks notes that the corporations “still want control…when there’s a dollar amount attached to it.” He adds that:

You can try to fight to get some discretionary money or you can to do what you want to do to get it jump-started. Sometimes you even have big artists like Kanye West, who has sold millions of records, the label said look we’re not promoting any more singles, he’ll pay for it himself. I’ve even had Zoe spend his own money to get a record jump-started. Because at the end of the day, whether it’s you or the label, at the end of the day it’s the artist’s career, you understand? My artist is not out being promoted whether the label decides to or not, because there comes a time in a project’s life where they say look, “We’re done, we’re not spending any more money.” But that’s when the management has to come in and say “We’re not done, we want to still push another single or we want to shoot another video,” so there would be instances where we have taken our own money and shot videos. And once they saw that it was going well they gave us our
money back. It’s called investing in yourself, but definitely, there’s definitely the need for control, the want, and everything has to have a dollar amount with the labels. And so it’s getting even tighter now (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

Brooks’s comments reflect the notions that corporations exert more control when they believe the artists are overstepping their bounds and going beyond their budgets. Moreover, his statements also conform to Ryan’s (1992) idea that while corporations try to be indirectly involved, they can step in and use money as a means of getting what they want from the artists. Such instances of tension between the label and the artist will be explored in greater detail in chapters 5 and 6, as they highlight the struggle over ownership of the image and access to control over production. Despite these conflicts, Bad Boy has, for the most part, a more “hands off” approach in dealing with Block for two reasons: the distance between New York and Atlanta and Bad Boy’s lack of familiarity with Atlanta. That is why, as Prez notes:

It’s no accident that we hooked up with Block. He understands his landscape. He’s born and raised down there. We didn’t understand the landscape the way he did. I can’t expect to go and sell rock records all of a sudden. I would get somebody who I considered to be credible in rock music and then I have to, as a businessman, trust that person’s decision. So I think it’s the same thing with this. Block understands their lyrics. We understand music. We understand rap. But he understands his back yard and we trust when he says this is what needs to be done that this is what needs to be done. (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

This arrangement allows Bad Boy and Warner Music Group to leave most of the labor to Block Spencer and his staff, while giving Spencer an aura of autonomy in creating music and cultivating his artists’ image. Once the songs are produced and Bad
Boy approves a budget for the artist to work with, Block Entertainment mobilizes the marketing and promotional blitz in Atlanta and the region.

.strip clubs

As mentioned in the previous section, Atlanta strip clubs are key factors in the commodification and promotion of rap artists. As rappers such as Jermaine Dupri, Gorilla Zoe and Yung Joc point out in their songs, “Magic City Mondays” is both an opportunity to view the spectacle of strippers shaking to their music and a litmus test of whether the song can successful on a mass scale. The strip club, in many ways, becomes a validation of the rapper’s authenticity if he is able to successfully get the women to request his songs and “p-pop” and “twirt” to his music. Tahira Wright, who has helped to coordinate strip club listening sessions, notes that the strip club is a powerful social networking space. “A lot of people in the industry go there, so it’s a good place to get your songs out,” she says. “Regular dance clubs have segregated music nights, so it’s harder to get play there” (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009). Strip clubs such as Magic City, which cater to mostly Black men, become sites of cultural production, as they turn into unofficial gatekeepers. The strip club helped get rappers such as the Ying Yang Twinz and Mike Jones notoriety and street buzz before they inked deals with major labels.

However, major labels have also caught on to the idea of strip clubs as important places of filtering what’s hot and what’s not before circulating a rapper or his music to the various forms of hip-hop media. For Prez, who made a name by promoting Bad Boy artists along the East Coast and getting their songs played on radio stations and night clubs, accessing Black strip clubs in Atlanta and other parts of the South is integral in
product development and credibility. “This is part of their culture,” he says. “And they knew intuitively and instinctively and just do it. This is where I need to be, this is where if we’re going to start a record we obviously want to be places like…all of the bigger strip clubs in Atlanta and just throughout the south because that’s where people are hanging out” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009)

Bad Boy tasks Block with pushing the music to the strip clubs, specifically Magic City, where there is a level of “street credibility” to being in the DJ’s rotation. The music gets into the hands of the DJ in several ways, but one notable practice is inviting DJ’s from strip clubs, night clubs, and radio stations to the Block Entertainment Studio for listening sessions. The DJ’s are often wined and dined to ensure a successful agreement to play a selected song. Because dope boy music is not as dance-friendly as crunk or snap music, the singles that are chosen for strip clubs do not always make it to the radio or beyond. The singles in the strip club are often exclusively used as means to an end – wider recognition of the artist. However, for a rapper such as Gorilla Zoe, a song like “Hood Nigga” is an ideal track to generate buzz in the strip club.

If the music is “approved” at a place such as Magic City or Body Tap, then the strip club circuit expands to other cities in Georgia such as Macon and Savannah, and then beyond. Prez (2009) states that using strip clubs as a starting point diverges from what labels have done in the past because “we’re used to starting at the top and working our way down. Now we’re starting at the bottom and working our way up” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009). The credibility of being played at an Atlanta strip club and the buzz it generates helps to fuel the second phase of Bad Boy and Block’s commodification of its rapper – the deployment of street teams.
Street Teams/Guerilla Marketing

As Gibson (2003) points out, “the ‘work’ of music cannot be divorced from the social networks of people who make and promote it, and the sites they occupy in order to do so” (p. 205). If Atlanta is defined as a physical space of cultural production, then the laborers who occupy the social spaces contained within the region are an important – if unrecognized – aspect part of the cultural production process.

At Block Entertainment, informal workers who make up street teams or other aspects of production come into the offices at all hours of the day, often for little pay. They are, as Gibson (2003) calls them, “a reserve army of labor” whose primary reward is being part of a movement (p. 205). As McRobbie (2004) argues, the cultural industries exploit young people for their inexpensive labor and their energy, but that people who take part in these processes enjoy the work and the few prospects of reward, and integrate their labor with their social lives. She argues that in this new economy of cultural production, “this intensification of work weakens almost all social bonds beyond those of the creative network and personal and familial relationships. …De-spatialized as well as de-socialized, the entire range of work activities is inevitably depoliticized” (p. 112). At Block Entertainment, young people – some of them from the East Lake and Kirkwood neighborhoods – hang out and tend to the needs of the rappers or producers in the studio. They are not officially employees, but are part of the label’s street teams. As McChesney (2004) points out, street teams are used as means of engaging in guerilla marketing – low cost, grassroots efforts to promote a product. Prez notes that Block’s street teams are made up of area teens and college students who are looking for ways to get into the music industry. Sometimes, they are aspiring rappers or R & B artists looking to curry favor
with someone such as Spencer in hopes of passing along their demo. No matter their motivations, the street teams are highly trained for guerilla marketing throughout Atlanta and – due to the uncertainty of their employment – are dedicated to the label’s efforts. In the months before Gorilla Zoe’s album release, for example, a printed sign hung outside the door to the studio’s office. The sign read: “Before U Enter….As we get closer to March 17, we will be getting CRAZY busy in the office! …Right now, it’s all about ZOE! If you can’t contribute to the cause, keep it outside.” Such an implicit warning is attempts to ensure street team members’ loyalty.

The street teams mostly work the neighborhoods where the rappers need to gain the most credibility, as well as in venues such as Underground Atlanta, where promoting an up-and-coming artist is essential to creating more widespread buzz in the city. The marketing efforts include postering store walls, distributing free sample CD’s to passersby, and creating a word-of-mouth interest among friends. As McChesney notes (2004), “even personal relationships are deployed to sell” (p. 162). Part of legitimizing the artist in some of Atlanta’s neighborhoods is to ensure that he is “branded” as being part of Block Entertainment (Bad Boy is not as emphasized because it does not carry the same amount of credibility among many Atlanta hip-hop fans). Branding the artist as being part of a famous local label is not a new practice in hip-hop, but in the South, it signifies the power of the role that kinship – being a member of a hip-hop family – plays in rap production and consumption. For instance, in the late 1990s, any rapper associated with the New Orleans-based label No Limit Records was ensured commercial success because of the perceived legitimacy of being signed to self-made rap mogul Master P’s recording empire. Similarly, Block Spencer’s reputation carries a lot of weight in Atlanta,
and a Block artist is “introduced” to the public with that relationship factoring prominently in promotions.

Once the strip clubs, nightclubs and the “streets” of Atlanta are buzzing about an artist, the next step in the commodification process is getting the word out through mass media. This is where media management plays a crucial role in helping to build the artist’s story to a wider audience.

**Media Management**

As Spencer decrees in his “Block Commandments,” one of the principal tasks of a rapper and his label is to sell the image. This is where notions of realness become commodities, and the rapper’s connection to the street – or some form of hardship or hustle – becomes paramount in marketing. As noted earlier, creative management involves not only the production of the text, but of the image that is designed to sell the rapper to the mass consuming public. To “build the story” beyond the strip clubs and the local venues, a rapper’s management must rely on media professionals to build bridges with various forms of hip-hop media and other kinds of exposure. In December 2007, Block hired Tahira Wright, who had formed her one-person public relations firm, Branded PR, just a few months earlier. Wright, who majored in music industry management at Georgia State University, got her start in the rap game through an internship at Hot 107.9, which helped her build contacts in the cultural industries.

In the changing dynamics of the cultural industries, record labels are relying less on in-house publicists and more on contract workers such as Wright, who are often paid freelance wages and do not have any medical benefits (McRobbie, 2004). Wright, however, is able to sustain a steady salary by being on a retainer with several
clients, including the R & B singer Bobby Valentino. As a result, she says, there is a certain degree of stability with being a contract laborer for a label such as Block Entertainment. Wright is tasked with helping to mold the rapper’s image and generating constant buzz for her clients. Because she is based in Atlanta and has familiarity with the local sites of cultural production and distribution, Wright works with the label and the rapper to ensure that the rapper’s name and image are constantly in the forefront, consistently “hot.” Moreover, it is up to Wright to balance the label’s desire to push the artist (and sell the product) with consumption markets that make strategic sense. As she notes:

I kind of put real expectations on artists. … So I think there’s a respect level there where I’m able to be real with my clients. I want them to have realistic expectations. I think we should shoot for the moon but in certain areas (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

Wright cautions her clients against overexposure and promoting oneself too fast, especially if the artist has not yet passed the local litmus tests. She works with both the Block Entertainment staff (Spencer and Brooks) and the marketing staff of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group to make sure that the rapper is strategically exposed and promoted, ensuring that buzz precedes and follows the rapper’s ascent into the mainstream consuming public. The buzz, as she notes, can be related to the album, but more often, it is about selling the whole image. She explains that:

I try to definitely break out of their comfort zone and reach things that are not necessarily just urban, if that makes any sense. Like for instance Zoe has tattoos, and there’s a magazine called *Ink*. That’s … a national magazine, and I placed one of my other clients there, but it’s more a mainstream magazine that’s not just urban. They have actors,
musicians from different genres, and since he has some tattoos and artwork we can use something out of the music that will draw more of a mainstream appeal. (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

Wright’s statements imply that targeting the mainstream (white consumers) and not just an urban (Black) base must be strategic, and that through non-rap media such as a tattoo magazine, Zoe might have access to consumers who would not know his music. Because the promotion of the artist is ultimately coordinated between the New York office of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group and the Atlanta office of Block Entertainment, Wright is often in contact with the marketing departments of the larger label. This is especially true when Wright tries to get a Block artist exposure beyond the Atlanta and regional media market. Often times, local publicists such as Wright are left to do only local promotions, while the national marketing staff of the larger label is tasked with the wider channels of distribution. “I have another client where they want to kind of split duties where they would handle the national placements and I would handle all the regional placements in each market,” she say. “Which to me, that’s fine. If you’re going to do the work and I’m going to do my part, and we’re working together, that’s fine” (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009). While she says she has had occasional conflicts with the New York marketing team, she notes that coordinating Block artists’ publicity has mostly gone smoothly. “With this project I haven’t had anyone from the publicity department really say do this or don’t do that,” she says. “So it hasn’t really been a fight with them for me” (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

One of Wright’s primary tasks is to make sure that her artist is on the cutting edge of the local scene, whether it is through attending local premiers, awards shows or
appearing on the cover of local hip-hop magazines. For instance, she accompanies the artist to photo shoots and helps the artist and the label management pick out photos that would be best for publication. Though Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group has taken a mostly hands-off approach in the story building process for Jody and Zoe, Wright points out that the major label still offers financial support for marketing, which has become increasingly rare at a time when many labels are cutting their budgets. As Wright notes, such cuts happen often, leaving the artist and the local production houses with no support from the label.

Like I was experiencing that with one of my clients now who was in a deal with kind of a label similar to this [inaudible] major and now has his own deal, but the way the deal is structured is he sort of has to prove himself before they do more, so they’re offering him marketing and PR, but even his album, he has to get album artwork. They referred him to a company that does out packaging. Normally if you’re assigned to a label, they’re going to set up a photo shoot and take care of all the packaging and you’re not going to be as artist and manager going to get your own album package. Because that’s another whole creative process there, to come up with a concept and actually bring it to task (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, Block’s relationship with Bad Boy and Warner Music Group essentially turns the studio into the on-the-ground support network for the artist. As a result, Wright says, the artist is given more logistical support in helping to cultivate an image that is ready for mass consumption. The story building that takes place in Atlanta creates a platform for the artist. For Wright and the Block Entertainment staff, the next phase is partially turned over to the artist’s handlers in New York, who are then ready to make the rapper into a mass consumable commodity.
Wider channels

Once the guerilla marketing campaigns and the street teams have done their job, and Wright has helped create a buzz for the artist among local media outlets and entertainment venues, Warner Music Group comes in and begins the wider distribution – radio access on stations across the country, music videos, and other media appearances to promote the artist. Brooks says that by the time Bad Boy and Warner Music Group is involved, “the ball is already rolling, so all we need them to do is bring the bigger machine and push it to the next level.” As Wright noted in the previous section, the promotional responsibilities on the national scene fall in the hands of marketing folks at Bad Boy and Warner Music Group. The wider channels of distribution include a national guerilla marketing campaign spearheaded by Bad Boy and Power Moves, “plugging” a rapper’s single on the radio several months in advance of the album release, getting articles published in the gatekeeper hip-hop media, working with video producers (and subsequently the video distributors such as Viacom and YouTube) to create a “sellable” image of the rapper, and touring. While creative managers such as Block Spencer and Tahira Wright remain involved in certain aspects of these processes, strategy-savvy executives in New York take primary control over the global commodification/branding of the rapper and Atlanta.

The first step of the wider distribution process is an extension of the guerilla marketing campaigns on the local scene. Once a rapper has achieved a degree of “hotness” in Atlanta, he is then ready to be branded on the national level. In the early and mid-2000s, an Atlanta rapper’s local success did not ensure his access to a larger market, primarily because, as Prez points out, cultural gatekeepers (nightclubs, radio stations) in
cities such as New York and Los Angeles were not as receptive to Southern rap. As a result, Bad Boy had to “sell” Southern rappers to their distributors, a process that Prez admits took time – highlighting the fact that they were still perceived as the Other.

The differences [between East Coast and Southern rap] were just learning to appreciate Southern rap because up north you’re used to a certain type of sound and the sound is completely different in the South so people who worked at the label, we all had to – and I include myself – had to learn to appreciate that sound and really, because you always want to be passionate about anything you market and if you’re promoting and your heart’s not in it, you’re not able to effectively sell it to anybody (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

To effectively sell the artist, Bad Boy’s street teams, which are handled by Prez’s Power Moves, Inc., go to hip-hop industry conventions, Black business expos, urban radio conferences, college campuses and major nightclubs in almost every city. While Prez admitted that getting Northern hip-hop aficionados to appreciate Southern rappers was difficult at first, the brand value that now comes with Atlanta has made “selling” the rapper much easier. As Wright notes, “Atlanta is so well respected…that people are more intrigued about artists that are from here now, where before when New York was like a heavy on East Coast rappers, East Coast/West Coast thing, and southern rappers were looked at as sort of lower. But I think it’s actually easier now to get them exposure” (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009). Part of the success in selling Atlanta is connected to the idea that the commercial success of many of its rappers underscores its potency as a site of cultural production. In other words, being from “ATL” and “Hotlanta” gives a rapper brand recognition in much the same way that being from the Boogie Down Bronx did for rappers in the 1980s or South Central L.A. did in the 1990s.
The guerilla marketing campaigns also include strategic leaks of music, either through label produced mixed tapes or through “friendly” DJ’s who will spin the rapper’s single as a hot track. Prez and Combs are much more effective in controlling the distribution of the music than the Atlanta street teams are, making the process a manufactured propaganda effort masked as more haphazard guerilla marketing. But Prez says cuts in the music industry, including the drastic reductions in marketing budgets, make guerilla marketing more cost effective than traditional advertising. Moreover, the lack of financial investment in marketing efforts actually allows for the label to “stick with [its] artists longer” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

The guerilla marketing campaigns lead up to Bad Boy and Warner Music Group’s distribution agreements with urban radio stations across the country. While payola is still a common practice in radio, Warner Music Group does not need to be as aggressive in reaching out to individual radio stations. Instead, the company’s marketing efforts target the consolidated playlists of corporate radio stations such as Clear Channel, Emmis, and Radio One (Huntemann, 1999; McChesney, 2004; Hatch-Miller, 2005). Once programming managers at these radio companies agree to play the song, it gets often gets inserted into a centralized playlist that is circulated among the corporations’ radio stations. Another way of getting radio play, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, is getting the song to influential DJ’s and general managers at specific radio stations in major media markets such as New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago and Miami. In these situations, the rapper is introduced as a Bad Boy (South) artist in order to give him instant credibility among hip-hop consumers familiar the Bad Boy brand. The public relations staff of Warner Music Group will then work with radio stations to set up in-
studio interviews with the artist in advance of the album’s release. For the artist, it is an opportunity to plug himself, his album, and Atlanta, but for the label, it sustains brand recognition.

Similarly, interviews in hip-hop magazines such as *The Source*, *Vibe* and *XXL*, as well as web sites such as BET.com, sohh.com, and allhiphop.com help to give the rapper credibility among the “base.” These consumers are often known as “hip-hop heads,” and their approval is essential to the artist’s long-term survival. For example, Atlanta rappers such as Soulja Boy and D4L made it big as ringtone rappers, and as a result, do not have the credibility among hip-hop consumers that fellow Atlantans such as Young Jeezy and T.I. have. Selling the artist involves pushing his biography, a narrative that most often emphasize the hard knocks and his proximity to Atlanta’s recognizable ghetto markers (the ones mentioned earlier in the chapter). For instance, an article about Zoe in *XXL* magazine begins, “Atlanta’s latest trapper turned rapper, Gorilla Zoe, has the drive to survive in the streets forever” (“Next Up,” 2007). The next few graphs highlight his drug dealing and getting kicked out of school while hustling. As Chapter 6 will show, these are aspects of Zoe’s narrative that are overplayed in order to vouch for his street credibility to a wider hip-hop audience. This goes back to Spencer’s credo of selling the image. More importantly, this narrative allows Zoe to be consumed as the real deal, an authentic product who is not “fronting.” This notion of keeping it real, as Prez points out, is what separates rappers who can sell both records and an image, and the rappers who can only claim modest visibility as a result of not being “bought” by the masses. He notes:

Why does 50 Cent sell millions of records? Because he’s believable. He was shot and he has shot people. I can believe his story. So in addition … he came out and made great music in the club and his first album I think was really good. But the fact was people
gravitated toward him because they believed him (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009).

Prez’s comments seem to indicate that believability leads to “buyability,” which is underscored by the rapper’s music video. Bad Boy usually works with known producers to create a video that will sustain the rapper’s image beyond his single and album. The music video, as scholars such as William Sonnega (1995) and Carol Vernallis (2004) argue, has eclipsed the song itself as a means of promoting the artist. The video is shot on location in Atlanta, thereby re-affirming the city’s brand signifying value while validating the rapper’s claims of that physical space. Locations such as Underground Atlanta, Bankhead, SWAT and East Lake are the most common filming sites because they make the most visual impact in reaffirming the rapper’s realness (Rose, 1994). The videos are then pushed for access on target programs on Viacom such as BET’s 106th and Park and Rap City, and MTV Network’s hip-hop channel, MTV Jams. On a show such as 106th and Park, the rapper gets a chance to plug the album and himself, giving more exposure to the product and enhancing his chances of long-term visibility. However, appearing on these programs involves making the trip to New York and attending meetings in the corporate offices of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. Brooks says Block rappers are not thrilled by that prospect, especially in dealing with New York-based executives whom he says have typecast them. He notes that:

The execs, they’re in tall buildings in New York and they don’t get the Southern, what the whole, they don’t get the Southern movement, because the way we move, the way we talk, the way we walk, the way we act – it’s totally different. Like I know my guys hated going to New York, because in New York it’s just a little different, the way they come first with each other. It’s not like the whole Southern thing so they do box you in, and
they do have a certain conception, it’s like a certain perception (R. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

Still, Brooks admits, the New York team is smart enough to know how to strategically roll out the Atlanta rappers on television and on the Internet. Bad Boy releases song clips and authorized “leak” music videos of the artist on sites such as Myspace and YouTube in order to build a grassroots following among users. The interactive nature of these web sites also creates the impression that the users who watch the videos and listen to the music are part of a community or a larger movement. The Warner Music Group public relations teams dispatch web-savvy designers to create home pages for the rapper, allowing users to become “friends” with rappers such as Jody Breeze and Zoe. The staff also creates similar sites and forums on hip-hop blogs, reinforcing a simultaneous grassroots and mass marketed effort that gives the rapper the maximum exposure while sustaining his street credibility among the “base.”

The final affirmation of the rapper’s circulation in the wider market of hip-hop consumption is the tour or the live show, which, as scholars such as Greg Dimitriadis (2001) and Condry (2007) note, connect the rapper most directly to his consumers. These consumers, Jason Rodriguez (2006) observes, are often young white hip-hop fans who seek to validate their own realness as hip-hop enthusiasts by going to concerts and connecting with the Blackness being presented on stage. Though labels such as Bad Boy often coordinate tours that feature the entire roster of artists, individual rappers also get added to other shows that can help increase visibility. For instance, Gorilla Zoe was added to platinum-selling New Orleans-rapper Lil’ Wayne’s tour in December 2008, giving him an opportunity to plug the spring release of his album, Don’t Feed Da Animals. Touring allows the rapper and his label to get exposure in media in other parts
of the country, facilitating album release parties or night club appearances that only serve to build the story. The story, which has been crafted, packaged and sold from the “trap” and the cultural testing grounds of places like Magic City and East Lake, is now a widely circulated product in the global marketplace. As Toynbee (2003) and Condry (2007) note, however, it is then up to the consumer to decide whether the product – the rapper, his music, his masculinity, his label, and his city – is worth buying.

**Conclusion**

This chapter detailed the context and complexities of the cultural production process in Atlanta rap and how it relates to both a physical place and the various social spaces that make up the cultural industries and cultural work. As shown, Atlanta serves first as a cultural testing ground for the rapper and helps to cultivate a crafted image that builds a following prior to his circulation in other markets. Once the rapper is circulated, Atlanta becomes a symbolic space – a brand signifier – that helps to validate his credibility to the larger marketplace of hip-hop consumers. This process highlights both the multiple – and sometimes conflicting – steps in the commodification process and the numerous gatekeepers that a rapper and his label must pass through before he is mass marketed and mass distributed. But conflicts during commodification, specifically between the on-the-ground image-builders in Atlanta and the image-circulators in New York, highlight the role of geography and the significance of place in cultural production. More importantly, these conflicts bring out notions of power and of the hierarchies in cultural work. Atlanta’s hip-hop scene might be teeming with entrepreneurs such as Block Spencer, but these entrepreneurs must acquiesce some control to the New York-
based majors such as Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group in order to access the mainstream.

Atlanta’s history has shaped its modern culture, and the city still embraces a strong Black identity. This identity factors in the cultural venues that make up “Black Atlanta,” and moreover, it influences the way its rappers claim the city space. The rapper and his label’s attempts to build legitimacy must go through these cultural test sites and local gatekeepers. The rapper’s identity and the label’s credibility do originate from a specific cultural origin, and for a genre such as trap music, the proximity to the dope trade must be validated on the local level in order for the rapper to have any hopes of being consumed as authentic. In this sense, “culture matters,” as Gibson (2003) argues, but it is important to also understand that “so too are the economic constituents of the cultural industries – firms, labor, spaces of production and performance – also sites that are culturally produced, about which discourses are made, enacted and contested” (p. 211).

The real experiences of building a reputation in Atlanta, specifically at the sites central to cultural production, are vital to the story building of the rapper and the major’s attempts to make him “hot” prior to his wider distribution. While this process relates to the industrialization and mass production of image, it also underscores the fact that commodification is not as smooth or as top-down of a process as traditional political economy indicates. Cultural work is vital on both the local level and the wider channels of distribution, fueling the label’s (and its corporate parent’s) ability to sell the rapper. But these notions of cultural work, while important, are secondary to the primary labor – the artist’s involvement in the cultural production process and the degree of control he
exerts in his commodification. While this chapter focused primarily on the cultural industries in Atlanta that make up the cultural production and mass distribution processes, the next two chapters will more closely examine how the rappers themselves – Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe – view their role in the cultural production process. Notions of agency and control over image – particularly in how the rappers are presented in media such as music videos – will be interrogated in these chapters.
The Struggle to “Stay Fresh”

In traditional versions of political economy, notions of cultural work are usually tied to alienation from one’s labor and the commodification of a product without the artist as agent (Ryan, 1992; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Banks, 2007; Fitts, 2008). Scholars such as Hesmondhalgh (2007) argue that the cultural production process – laden with intermediaries and creative managers – often leaves artists detached from the texts they help to create. As Chapter 4 outlined, this detachment and the hierarchies of labor in cultural production are often given a guise of independence. Moreover, the cultural production of Atlanta might seem dynamic, fresh, and different from other parts of the country, but the global distribution of its cultural texts and images are in some ways still tethered to corporate decisions made in New York. In these dynamics, control over production and distribution is still a top-down process that can create conflicts between a corporate distributor (such as a parent label or music video channel) and the rap artist’s management.

But what role does the rapper play in these dynamics, and how much agency can he enact in the cultural production process? In addition, how does a rapper’s self-conceptualization – including his view of his own masculinity – impact his involvement in these processes? Beyond interrogating the political economy of place, this project aims to understand and articulate the artist’s role in creating and commodifying a cultural
product. Atlanta rappers have faced their own struggles for recognition in the hip-hop marketplace, but as the cultural industries have turned to the South for redefining rap music and re-presenting Black masculinity, it would appear that they would have more leverage. However, while Atlanta’s brand signification as a hot site of cultural production has helped its rappers gain access to wider markets, not every rapper is bound by the same career or image narrative. In the trap music genre, a rapper’s story is grounded in what he claims to be a real-life hustle. It is not surprising, then, that Jody Breeze, the focus of this chapter, claims that his drug-dealing lifestyle transitioned him into the rap game, and that the transformation of Jacoby White into Jody Breeze was an extension of his biography. Authenticity is key in Jody’s self-conceptualization; as he notes, “There ain’t nothing like talking about something that you never been through” (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

By describing Jody’s career and his commodified image and analyzing his role in cultural production, this chapter seeks to interrogate the role of agency, especially when put up against the institutional processes of the cultural industries. If, as Toynbee (2000 & 2003) argues, artists are active in their commodification, then how does a rapper see himself once his songs have been produced and his music videos have been filmed? The first section focuses on Jody’s upbringing and how his family background and lifestyle – or at least his discursive constuctions of such – influenced his move to rap music. The section, using materials from Jody’s interviews, highlights how Jody defines his masculinity and how he situates himself in relation to Atlanta. Moreover, it explores how Jody’s solo career was in many ways defined by his connection to Boyz N Da Hood, a group started by Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. The
second section analyzes lyrics from Jody’s songs, “Stay Fresh” (2005) and “Fast Forward” (2007), and the images in the corresponding music videos. These music videos were played regularly on programs such as BET’s Rap City following their debut, but received little airplay on more mainstream programs such as BET’s 106th & Park. Using textual and semiotic analysis methods, I show how these texts and the artist’s own discourse signify his masculinity and his place, and how these signifiers help to brand him as authentic. The third section goes into more detail examining how Jody’s cultural texts relate to political economic considerations of how hip-hop is produced and images are made. This section, using frameworks set up by Ryan (1992), Hesmondhalgh (2007) and Fitts (2008), seeks to show how the rapper’s image is produced according to a formatted model, yet also highlights differences that allow the rapper to claim a more active role in this process. The last section analyzes how Jody’s self-perception converges and clashes with the cultural industries’ production, packaging and marketing of him. This section also seeks to explain whether Jody’s struggles as a solo artist are tied to his insistence on “being real” and running into conflicts with his creative management. The last section also interrogates whether self-conceptualization and agency are connected in the cultural production process.

From Trapping to Rapping: Jacoby White to Jody Breeze to Boy(z) N Da Hood

Grem (2006) argues that the Dirty South rap music of Outkast and Goodie Mob allowed non-urban rappers from the South to construct their styles outside of the typical urban street narrative. Based on his upbringing, Jody Breeze could have gone the same route, particularly since his masculinity was not bound by or within the ghetto. Like other
Southern rappers, he has used place – particularly the notion of the South as the Other – to construct his masculinity and define his music career. Moreover, as will be explained later in this project, Jody’s triangulation of place and his masculinity to his notion of authenticity has been vital to his commodification as a trap artist.

Prior to becoming Jody Breeze, Jacoby White was a small-time drug dealer in a small Georgia town. White grew up in Griffin, Ga., located about 40 miles south of Atlanta. Though Griffin’s economy is primarily driven by light manufacturing and white-collar businesses, it is surrounded by rural areas along the Highway 19 corridor. White was raised primarily by his mother and his grandparents and credits his upbringing for providing him with a grounded approach to his life and career.

It did a whole lot for me to grow up in a place like that, because the scene [in Atlanta] is so different from where I came from. It’s no different, but it’s just much busier and a bigger place. Being that I’m from a small town, my morals are more, you know – I mean like I feel like I was raised by older people to really stay humble and…that’s what’s missing today, niggas don’t tell their kids…what’s really wrong and what’s really right. So I grew up in a small town where everybody knew everybody, so you really couldn’t be doing too much, because everybody knew you, so you’re going to have to stay on your shit. So I think that really grounded me, you know what I’m saying, to be ready for this type shit right here, because you never forget where you came from, never forget your morals, never forget what you stand for, for real. …That’s what keeps me going today. (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

Jody’s statements highlight the importance of place in his upbringing, particularly as it pertains to how his perspective as a man and a grounding in “the real” was shaped by being in a small town; as we will see, the real is an oft-stated trope for Jody. It is, in fact,
a frame that he uses to describe his relationship with the cultural industries. Moreover, Jody appears to emphasize humility as a characteristic of the small town Southern Black masculinity as a contrast to the big city. To underscore this contrast, he differentiated the Southern lifestyle with what he experienced in New York. White spent a year in Harlem with his grandfather and says he learned to appreciate his rural upbringing more as a result. “I hated [New York]. It was totally different,” he says. “Like people from the South think, like, New York is, I don’t even know how you can describe New York. It’s so much shit going on, like from being from the South and the way we lived, it’s totally different. So I really couldn’t really buy into that sort of living” (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009). Once White returned to Griffin, he began to play basketball and says he was a highly regarded athlete in a town that has produced pro football players such as Chris and Nic Clemons. However, despite his desires to play basketball and strong family support to stay out of trouble, White says he succumbed to the temptations of drug dealing by his mid-teens. His then-girlfriend became pregnant before his senior year of high school, and he saw drug dealing as a means of supporting himself and his soon-to-be-born daughter.

I wanted to do it all, but what really stopped me, I just didn’t do right. I just wouldn’t do right in school. I was smart, could do the work, just didn’t want to do it. Out here on the street, just being young and want to experience different type shit, and getting caught up. If I would have knew better, I really would have stuck to doing what I was supposed to do, but I got caught up in shit (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

His statements – particularly his claim about “getting caught up” – imply that he had little choice in his lifestyle and that being “out on the street” was a result of simply not knowing better. Selling drugs, according to White, was a way to pay bills, but he
claims he never saw it as a permanent lifestyle. As he pondered his career options, White says he stumbled into rap, a music form that had little resonance to most people living in Griffin.

I always knew how to rap, but I really thought it was lame, and I really didn’t think that it could be like this. So one day, I’m about to have my little girl, my woman, she’s about six or seven months, and I know I got to do something, you know what I’m saying? I was going to go to jail or get shot, you know what I’m saying? I was doing too much shit, so we was just out in the yard one day, my crew, all my homeboys. I grew up with these guys, we grew up from five and up. I just rapped one time – rapped one time for the whole group; they went crazy. Like, to see their expression and to see how they were feeling about what I was saying, sort of made me look like, “Can I really do this shit?” So my last year of school I used to go to the cafeteria and test it…rapping on the table and beating on the forks and spoons and shit. Man, I started rapping like a week or two. I had the principal, I had people coming out of the kitchen, the cooks and everything. The whole cafeteria would crowd around the table to listen to me rap. Just out of nowhere, nobody knew I do this, they didn’t know me from shit. I mean, I’m like, “If this is what I got to do to get out of my situation, then this is what I’m going to do.” And my homeboys, they was like, “No more dope for you, no more fuckin’ around, you can rap.” And that’s basically how I started. I just started practicing my craft and kept going (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

As the above quotation indicates, his discovery of rap and his performance of it at school highlighted the intersection of interests between his peer group and authority figures (the principal), as well as his own desire to use rap as a means of escaping the streets. What is more noteworthy about the above statements is that the narrative mirrors similar stories by rappers in other geographic locales about how rap moved them away
from the trap life. By emphasizing rap’s importance as an alternative to the drug life, Jody’s comments re-affirm notions of limited agency within the trap and the narrow career options Black men have in trying to get out of the trap.

While White acknowledges that he did not entirely abandon drug dealing, he says he became much more focused on landing a rap deal. He moved to Atlanta after graduating high school, coming back frequently to Griffin to spend time with his family and friends. For many up-and-coming rappers, there are several key ways of getting visibility: attending local concerts and attempting to sway audiences during open mic sessions, recording demo tapes and CD’s and sending them to local producers or radio stations, or selling CD’s directly to potential consumers (as shown in the description in Chapter 4). White, however, says he did not have to do any of those things to get noticed.

In fact, his career trajectory conforms to a Hollywood plot – similar to those in Hustle & Flow, 8 Mile, and Get Rich Or Die Tryin’ – of using one’s skills and hustling to become an overnight sensation. He claims his freestyle skills gave him immediate access to the local power brokers, thereby allowing him to bypass the typical “paying of dues” to get noticed.

It was a blessing, man, it was just some shit. People don’t really understand my story, but this is one of the craziest stories ever. The radio station in Macon, 97.9, they had a free-style battle every day, three rounds to call who got the play. …Whoever wins that continues to go on. I called in this shit one day, man, playing around in the neighborhood, on the phone, you could hear yourself coming out of the radio. I rapped one time. They loved it. The DJ would then call me everyday to rap. He called me two weeks straight, ‘cause nobody fucked with me, so he put me on a car show in Macon. And it just so happens Jazze Pha’s manager was on it, too. They was coming to see an R&B group, and
they came on right after we did our freestyle thing. So when I got up there and did my thing, they was blown away. I had everybody like, “Who in the hell is this kid?” So he walked up to me and talked to me, let me know what he was doing, whatever. And at that time, “I’m like, OK, whatever.” So he called Jazze on the phone right then. Jazze got on the phone and says, “Brother, you must be special for him to be calling me and telling me shit like that” (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, this construction of discovery and stardom conforms to a very popular and mythicized narrative of using freestyle skills to become a hip-hop sensation. Having been “discovered,” White went to Atlanta, where he accompanied Jazze Pha to an album release party. He says the two had instant chemistry, with Jazze inviting him to record in his studio the following week.

He said, “OK, here’s the beat for you.” I never been in a studio, never rapped on a microphone, I didn’t know anything about the industry, rap. So I went in and rapped “Stay Fresh,” it was the first song I ever did. Man, when he heard that he was like, “You’re not going nowhere.” They put me in a condo here for two, three months, right around the corner. I recorded like forty songs. I had a deal in three months with Warner Brothers (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

While these comments might have oversimplified Jody’s entrance into the rap industry, they perhaps reflect the desire by creative managers such as Jazze Pha to recruit and sign “raw” talent in order to mold them into successful commodities. Jazze Pha’s willingness to sign Jody for the benefit of Warner Brothers appears to parallel Block Spencer’s effort to sign Atlanta artists for the benefit of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. Upon signing his contract and agreeing to become part of Jazze Pha’s Sho’Nuff Records (owned by Warner Brothers Records), White became Jody Breeze and, for the
most part, shed his identity as a native of Griffin. He embraced Atlanta as his hometown and the physical space – the trap – that he would claim. As a result, Jacoby White, the small-town former basketball player and drug dealer, transformed into Jody Breeze, the trap star who claimed Bankhead and parts of Southeast Atlanta as his symbolic home. Such a claim constrasts with his statements about being connected to the small town setting of Griffin and highlights the important of how place serves as a brand signifier, since Atlanta has more capital as a hip-hop hub than Griffin. White took the name Jody from the lead character in the 2001 movie *Baby Boy* (Hess, 2008). For Jody, the quick rise forced him to quickly understand the dynamics of the hip-hop and cultural industries. More importantly, he says, it made him have to negotiate parts of his identity and sell himself as a trapper at a time when trap music – led by the likes of T.I. – was becoming the next hot item from Atlanta. He says his family had reservations about supporting his decision until Russell “Block” Spencer convinced his mother that rap was a legitimate career choice.

So Block came there, talked to my mom. Said we need him to be doing this. Three months, man. Seriously, three months. … When I come around, ain’t too many people doing, they don’t have a label, they don’t, nothing really going on. Jazze is the only one doing something. I swear to God, three months, Warner Brothers came, we did a hundred thousand dollar video, all this shit, three, four months. We shot a video two months after shit spread because it caught, real big. I was getting five thousand a show within six, seven months, me rapping. So it came natural to me, you know what I’m saying? I never write, I never wrote nothing down, so my style was different. I was like

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11 According to Jody, taking the name from the lead character in *Baby Boy* was inspired by the fact that the character – played by singer Tyrese Gibson – was a smooth lady’s man who was able to get what he wanted from the women in his life. This image conforms to Jody’s self-construction as a “playa.”
something they never really seen before in a young cat like myself. I was 18, so I’m
doing my thing. And that’s really what started my whole career. I came straight into the
game, I came straight into it, no demos, no agent, no CD’s out, never did none of that
type shit, I came straight into the game (J. White, personal communication, January 23,
2009).

Jody’s solo deal with Sho’Nuff paved the way for him to sign with Spencer’s
Block Entertainment in 2004 and become a founding member of Boyz N Da Hood, the
ensemble Atlanta rap group that was conceived to be a Southern gangsta counterpart to
the New York-based rap crews such as Cam’ron’s Diplomats and 50 Cent’s G-Unit. The
group, named after the 1991 John Singleton film (which was set in Los Angeles), was
also touted as the new N.W.A., the L.A.-based 1980s rap group that introduced the
gangsta rap era. Boyz N Da Hood was produced by Block and distributed by Bad
Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group, becoming Sean Puffy Combs’s first highly visible
Southern act. Jody joined fellow founding members Big Gee and Duke, as well as Young
Jeezy, who inked a one-album deal with the group. Boyz N Da Hood debuted with its
self-titled album in 2005 with its single, “Dem Boyz,” which featured Puffy in the music
video. The album sold 383,000 copies, and “Dem Boyz” peaked at No. 13 on the
Billboard rap chart. The group boasted of its activity in the drug trade and was marketed
as a quartet that stayed true to the streets. To boost these claims, each member of the
group took on a street alias. Jody took on the name Young Gunna, which he says
reflected his street credibility. “‘Young Gunna’ is for the hood. To let niggas know I'm
not just a pretty boy, I could be very dangerous” (Hess, 2008). As the next section will
argue in greater detail, the names Jody and Young Gunna affirmed his attempts to build
his image around two of the most well-worn tropes of Black masculinity: the player and the thug.

Touting Boyz N Da Hood as a true-to-the-streets gangsta group was also Block Entertainment and Bad Boy’s attempt to capitalize on trap music and offer a hardcore alternative to Atlanta’s more dance and radio-friendly rappers and rap groups. Similar to the street narratives that made rappers such as 50 Cent and the Game into multi-platinum successes, each member of Boyz N Da Hood sought to keep it real in their public appearances by boasting of their hardness. At the time of Boyz N Da Hood’s debut, another Atlanta group, Dem Franchize Boyz, had become a ringtone sensation with “White Tees.” After the group was dropped by Universal Music Group, the label signed Shop Boyz, whose Lil Jon-produced single, “Party Like a Rock Star,” became a radio hit. Boyz N Da Hood, on the other hand, was known more as a gangsta group that represented the street life and in many ways was marketed as the opposite of Dem Franchize Boyz and Shop Boyz. “Puff is a businessman,” says Kenny Burns. “He knows what type of music is going to sell and what isn’t. That’s what has made him successful as a businessman” (K. Burns, personal communication, December 30, 2008).

Part of Boyz N Da Hood’s appeal – and Combs’s genius as a hip-hop mogul – was its own members’ stated disdain for commercial music and their desire to represent the “real hip-hop.” Jody became one of the group’s most outspoken members, criticizing both rappers and the cultural industries for selling out the streets. Frustrated by what he perceived to be major labels’ lack of investment in “street shit,” Jody notes that music executives are “so sold on this bubble gum ass shit and this ringtone ass shit. I mean it’s like okay I’m with it but we need to bring it back, not all the way back to that gangsta shit
but we need some more realism in it” (Michael, 2008). He adds that the Atlanta rap scene – as well as other rap hubs – has lost its substance and strayed from the street narrative. “It’s the same bubble gum ass topics,” he told a hip-hop magazine. “Everybody ain’t happy all the time where they could go make a dance song. There’s real shit goin’ on and I’m gonna rep that. Boyz N Da Hood, we brought gangsta shit back to the industry. I just wanna get back to the street shit” (Michael, 2008).

An important point to take from this quote is that Jody appears to equate real with gangsta and fake with bubble gum/commercial, despite the fact that gangsta is in many ways commercialized (Watts, 2004; Quinn, 2005). Part of bringing “gangsta shit back,” Jody says, was to be heavily involved in the mixtape circuit, which allows an artist to get more street circulation and generate buzz among the most loyal hip-hop consumers (Maher, 2005). While other Boyz N Da Hood members worked on their own projects, Jody recorded several mixtape songs with local Atlanta DJ’s and made guest appearances on albums of artists such as Jazze Pha, T.I., and Lil’ Wayne. He also toured Southern cities, hoping to build a loyal fan base that would support his solo career aspirations. However, he says his contractual obligation to Boyz N Da Hood and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group prevented him from focusing on his solo album. Despite the visibility he gained with “Stay Fresh” and the buzz he generated as a member of Boyz N Da Hood, Jody was unable to release his solo album, A Day in the Life of Jody Breeze. He says being bound to his obligations as a member of Boyz N Da Hood kept him from devoting time to developing his solo career.

I was in the middle of Sho’Nuff/Warner Bros. and BlockENT/BadBoy. But I was the nigga that stayed down. When I got signed, that’s when everything [deals] started poppin’ off for everybody else. If I would have known what I know now, I would’ve went straight
for mine. But that's what's wrong with the streets these days [too]: no more loyalty, period. Everybody's out for themselves. I'm just not that type of nigga. (Houston, 2009).

These comments highlight Jody's frustrations with the business side of rap. His sentiments on this topic will be explored more later in this section and chapter. Despite the release of “Stay Fresh” as a music video and numerous appearances by Jody to promote his album’s release, Warner Brothers and Sho’Nuff decided against distributing A Day in the Life of Jody Breeze. The label did not give an official reason, and Jody did not offer any theories about why Sho’Nuff/Warner Brothers shelved the album. Instead, the album was “leaked” through the Internet on such web sites as YouTube, MySpace, down-south.com, and sohh.com. Though frustrated by Sho’Nuff Records’ unwillingness to distribute and market him, Jody says he remained committed to Boyz N Da Hood in hopes that the group’s popularity would help boost his solo career. “Basically… I really had just sacrificed a whole lot of stuff for Boys N Da Hood and my album was suppose to come out before Boys N Da Hood,” he says. “It just took up a lot of time. We didn't know what was going to happen” (Hess, 2008).

In 2006, following the departure of Young Jeezy to Def Jam/Universal, Boyz N Da Hood added Block artist Yung Joc, whose solo album, It’s Going Down, became the first platinum seller for Bad Boy South. As Boyz N Da Hood put more effort into their solo careers, Jody says conflicts grew within the group and with Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner. Part of this conflict stemmed from the label’s unwillingness to do invest significant money into marketing the group following their debut album.

I don’t wanna say it took away the shine but it slowed down the movement, you know what I’m sayin’? It was so big, and us not knowing each other really and coming out to do something that big but then we parted ways so early. We lost some of our fan base – it
wasn’t like a movement. At the time I didn’t know that he only had a one album deal with the group so I’m just riding along with the group but I had a two or a three-album deal. It allowed him to get out of that situation and start a new situation and he did real good, he did his thing (Michael, 2008).

Moreover, Jody says, he began to realize that the economics of the hip-hop industry was more important than notions of kinship and loyalty. When he signed with Block Entertainment, he hired Rico Brooks – Block Spencer’s right hand man – as his manager. This management relationship created a tension between what was best for Jody and what was best for his label. Feeling he was being slighted financially and disrespected as a solo artist, Jody says he began to doubt whether he could co-exist with fellow group members. The solo success Joc enjoyed as a trap artist who had crossover appeal created more problems for Jody, who felt that both his management team and the label were not giving him enough support.

I really don’t like to regret anything, but the only thing I really do regret is not thinking more of myself, you know what I’m saying? Because in this game, that’s what it’s all about. People are in it for themselves. That’s another thing to go back and relate to where I come from. I was taught to bring your brothers, you know what I’m saying? When you’re family and you’re really being called family, you call me family, you know what I’m saying? If I say I love you and you’re my family, that’s what I mean. So if I go up, you go up, you know what I’m saying? But it was really never like that, you see what I’m saying? That’s the only thing that hurt me about the game, just to see how selfish a motherfucka can be (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

Still, Boyz N Da Hood recorded another album in 2007, adding Gorilla Zoe as a replacement for Yung Joc. Their second release, *Back Up in Da Chevy*, was in many ways a sequel to their first attempt, full of references to the trap and their connection to
the streets of Atlanta. In an interview with an XXL magazine web cast that promoted the release of the album, Jody proclaimed the group’s loyalty to the streets: “We love the hood, we ain’t goin’ nowhere” (XXL Interview, 2008). Despite marketing the group to hip-hop publications such as XXL and blogs such as www.down-south.com and www.sohh.com, Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group did not promote the album nationally. The label chose instead to invest money into Gorilla Zoe’s debut album, Welcome to the Zoo. As a result of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s lack of financial commitment to Boyz N Da Hood and the group’s lack of circulation beyond the South, none of the songs in Back Up in Da Chevy made the Billboard Top 100. The album sold just 50,000 copies as of 2008. In chapter 7, the rationale for Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s decision to spend more of its resources on marketing Gorilla Zoe over Boyz N Da Hood will be explained further. Zoe’s rise as a solo artist, coupled with the commercial success of Young Jeezy and Yung Joc, left Jody as the odd man out as a solo artist. In 2007, Jody left Sho’Nuff Records, claiming he that he did not agree with the way he was being marketed. “Sho’nuff is more of an R&B label and I'm more of a street cat. We couldn't really see eye to eye” (Hess, 2008). He did not blame Jazze Pha, who, despite establishing the label, had very little control of its day-to-day activities. “I just been a part of that situation for like four years goin’ on five and I ain’t really made no progress,” he says (Michael, 2008). While frustrated by the label’s unwillingness to promote him, Jody says he was not surprised by their decision.

I think with Sho Nuff it was because I was back and forth with the Boyz N Da Hood so I really couldn’t be a Sho Nuff artist the way I wanted to be. I had to do a lot of Boyz N Da Hood shit and it took up damn near all of my time. I was just being dedicated you know? That’s how the game goes man, you live and you learn (Michael, 2008).
Jody’s comments seem to reflect the tensions between how he saw himself and how his label viewed him, a conflict that, in his words, seemed irreconcilable. With his solo album still unreleased and without a major label as distributor, Jody recorded another album, *Best Kept Secret: Jody Breeze’s Biography*, which was released as a mixtape by Block Entertainment and Atlanta-based DJ Teknikz. The album included several “diss songs” – including one of former collaborator Lil’ Wayne – and two singles that were made into music videos, “Fast Forward” and “Work.” Despite not having a major distributor for the album, Jody was able to get “Fast Forward” aired on BET’s *Rap City* and in numerous local rap programs around the South. In 2008, Jody was still looking for another record deal, but he helped finance his continuing aspirations by becoming a songwriter, writing tracks for artists such as Sean “Puffy” Combs, Cee-Lo, Lloyd and Yung Joc. “I never really wanted to write. But, that’s where the money is at. I want to touch every part of the game,” he told a hip-hop web site (Houston, 2009). Jody also left Boyz N Da Hood, though he continues to be under contract with Block Entertainment and Bad Boy South as a member of the group. Moreover, he is still managed by Brooks. Still, Jody says that with the commercial success of Yung Joc, Bad Boy’s investment into Gorilla Zoe as a solo artist, and Big Gee’s imprisonment, the group will not record together again. “I’m not really tryna do any more Boyz N Da Hood albums. I might, I might make an appearance but I’m not really concentrating on that” (Michael, 2008).

Despite being, as Tahira Wright says, “in between deals,” Jody has tried to keep his name fresh among hip-hop enthusiasts, marketing himself through independently produced and distributed mixtapes and diss songs, interviews in hip-hop publications, and
– despite his conflicts – continuing to align himself with Block Entertainment. His career narrative seems to illustrate some of the contradictions that rappers must negotiate, particularly as it pertains to self-construction and reconciling the differences between the real and performance. Jody’s comments in this section have highlighted how a rapper’s sense of his masculinity and his performative abilities can clash with his creative management’s vision, and how in such conflicts, his agency is limited. Jody’s “overnight success” narrative, which seemed to build upon the romanticized notions of how rappers can make it with purely skill, also shows how someone who enters the hip-hop industries in such a way often finds he has little leverage to negotiate his commodification. Jody seems to explain this by contrasting the selfishness of New York cultural industry personnel and other industry-embraced rappers with that of his more small-town, "moral" upbringing.

Jody’s comments also highlight how rappers assert their masculinity by emphasizing place in a symbolic fashion. His insistence of being connected to Atlanta and the trap, which seemingly contradicts his small town upbringing, show how one must reaffirm his realness by locating himself within a place that has brand recognition. Such affirmations are also seen in his lyrical and visual texts. The next section will analyze lyrics from two of his songs, which were also made into music videos, in an attempt to show how Jody Breeze presents his masculinity and showcases his identification to Atlanta and the trap as places and symbols.
Since his unconventional discovery at a Macon car show, Jody Breeze has sought to sell himself as a “true-to-the street” rapper who shuns the “bubble gum” music of the genre. Unlike other Atlanta rappers who embraced more dance and radio-friendly sounds to become better selling and more widely recognized commodities, Jody relishes his position as an “authentic” product. As he told one magazine of the hardcore image of Boyz N Da Hood, “There’s no need for us to change because to me, the streets run the industry” (Jackson, 2005). This branding of Jody Breeze as a gangsta and trapper is underscored by his musical and visual texts, which focus on his life as a drug dealer “on the grind” in the streets of Atlanta. Unlike other rappers who have sought to branch out their image in attempt to widen their brand recognition, Jody has stayed with the street narrative as a means of keeping a consistent story. Such a narrative created conflicts with his label, Sho’Nuff Records, and has failed to produce a conventional solo album release, but it underscores his commitment to “keeping it real” as a means of self-promotion. As Jackson (2006) argues, rappers seek to maintain a symbolic link to the hood as a means of validating their authenticity. In addition to Jody’s largely self-financed promotional efforts, his songs and videos help to build the story of a drug dealer-turned-rapper. The lyrics and images analyzed in the following pages help to underscore the conceptualization of Jody’s masculinity and his connection to the trap. As this section will highlight, the commodification of Jody Breeze involves the production of cultural texts that seek to validate his claims of realness, branding him and the space he occupies. The songs and the videos in this section were chosen because they were released as singles and have had the most widespread distribution for Jody as a solo artist. Moreover,
these texts illustrate the image that Jody seeks to project as an artist, conforming to how he constructs his masculinity and his proximity to a physical and symbolic place.

*Stay Fresh* (2005)

Jody’s debut single, “Stay Fresh,” had limited airplay on radio and was aired infrequently on BET shows such as *Rap City* and *Rated Next*. Part of the song’s appeal is that its background beat and hook are taken from the R & B group Floetry’s “Say Yes,” which helps to emphasize Jody’s playa image over his thug persona. While he references his trap lifestyle in the opening verse, Jody emphasizes his desire to appeal to – and consume – women. This consumption is acted out in the video, which is a series of images attesting to Jody’s lyrical claims. The video begins with Jody and Jazze Pha standing at the entrance of Underground Atlanta with scantily clad women dancing slowly behind them. Throughout the video, Jody reminds the viewer that he is in control over a domain that includes expensive cars and a fleet of women. In one scene, Jody is standing in front of a white Bentley, and in subsequent shots, a Latina woman in a white one-piece dress is dancing and grinding against him. As he raps, Jody uses hand gestures to indicate that both the woman and the car are his.

*Findin’ fitted hats to match ya throwback*

*I’m the cat wit the braid to the back breakin’ your ho back.*

*Know dat! It’s Mr. FoSacks*

*Ah crackin’ Prozac*

*The smoke that I blow from inhalin’ da dro got me so relaxed*

*And ya know that I’m hustlin’ jack*
Lookin’ for a lil’ tenda thang wit a romp to put a hump in her back

While Jody’s lyrical boasts might seem to repeat commonly used affirmations of a rapper’s “playa” status, they also seem to underscore his desire to depict the Southern hustler as being more laid back – by emphasizing the calming influence of Prozac and marijuana – than his Northern counterpart. This, as noted in Chapter 4, seems to play off the notion of Southern rappers willing to capitalize on the idea of presenting themselves as the Other of the Other. It also appears that, given Jody’s lack of vivid lyrical descriptions, he appears more committed to let the viewer consume the images within the video. The dope boy rags-to-riches theme is quite common in music videos, and among Atlanta rappers such as Young Jeezy, T.I., and Ludacris, images of excessive consumption are often used to contrast the hood. Though Watkins (2004) argues that these displays of excess are often young Black males’ way of subverting and challenging (white) capitalism, these images, as Fitts (2008) notes, also repeat well-worn themes of hypermasculinity and hypercommercialism.

Jody uses the similar visual tropes to signify his success, but there are several key differences in his video. First, Jody’s images of excess, such as shots of him leaning against the Bentley and surrounded by the scantily clad women, are juxtaposed against a backdrop of downtown Atlanta. This is significant because the viewer outside of Atlanta might focus on the excess, while the viewer from Atlanta could notice the landmarks (such as Underground Atlanta) that reaffirm Jody’s connection to the city. This use of place in a domain such as a music video is a common tactic for a rapper to underscore claims of authenticity (Rose, 1994; Forman, 2002; Quinn, 2005). For Jody, representing his Black masculinity is linked with the success of rapping and “trapping,” but it is also a
requisite to remain physically and semiotically linked with the “hood.” The snapshots of Jody leaning against a building talking on his cell phones are the “winks” to the viewer that he is still active in the dope boy lifestyle he raps about. As Quinn (2005) argues, a rapper such as Jody must sell both himself and the space he occupies as a means of authenticating his credibility to the consumer. As she calls it, such mass marketing of ghettocentricity epitomizes the “tyranny of ‘keepin’ it real’” (Quinn, 2005: 190).

In the song, Jody is “talking” to a female listener, but in the video, he appears to be posturing for male viewers and asserts his masculinity in overt ways. For instance, he positions his body in such a way that – despite his slender frame – assert his dominance over the landscape. Body posturing such as leaning forward and slanting shoulders force the viewer to keep focus on him while the objects in the background – the cars and the women – become blurry. By making the objects of consumption peripheral, Jody is reminding the viewer that he is the center of attention. Jody positions himself prominently in the scenes so that he is not “lost” among the objects he consumes. As Fitts (2008) argues, such positioning between the rapper and his objects – primarily women – reaffirms the superiority of Black hypermasculinity in a symbolic sphere.

But the consumption of women can be seen as political. In his second verse, Jody boasts:

Well you can catch me in a white tee, white Regal

White mink, white flo, white seats, passengers are white freaks

Satisfied? Can't be! Got a dude but he ain't me.

Opposites attract so since you so hot I can be yo AC

Now you could never make me
But what you could make me
Is some steak and some baked beans
Tuck my napkin to stay clean
And just so happened I went from trappin' to rappin’
It wasn’t my passion for fashion

The most important aspects of these lyrics are Jody’s subtle emphasis on going from dirty to “clean,” a point he makes in the food analogy before saying it more explicitly in “trappin’ to rappin’.” Moreover, the emphasis on white seems to be implicitly linked with Jody’s claims of purity – that he is somehow representing a pure and untainted hip-hop aesthetic. To underscore these lyrical claims, one of the most significant images in the video is a scene featuring three blonde women with pig tails on a 1970s Cadillac convertible wearing suspenders and shirts that read “Jody Rocks.” These women represent what Jody – a Black man from the South – now owns, and he reaffirms his ownership of the women by having them in proximity to the Cadillac, which is a longstanding representation of Southern Black masculinity, particularly of the Southern pimp (Richardson, 2007). Given the South’s history of race relations and violence against Black men, notably the lynching of Emmitt Till, because of their encounters with white women, this frame carries significant symbolic power. It affirms to the viewer that Jody, despite his Blackness and his Southernness, can still claim white women (who are all dressed to look typical “country girls,” as the suspenders and pig tails are meant to signify) within his sphere of consumption.

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12 Songs such as Outkast’s “Players’ Ball” and Ludacris’s “Southern Hospitality,” and movies such as Hustle & Flow (2005) have also popularized this image.
In the last scenes of the video, the cameos that singers such as Ciara and Lloyd and rappers such as Young Jeezy make confirm Jody’s “hotness” in Atlanta and affirm his standing among the city’s popular artists. One of the commonly used methods of brand building in rap is the use of guest stars in songs and in videos. By using more established stars in his video, Jody is affirming his legitimacy within a scene that has become “hot” among hip-hop consumers. By linking his image with the likes of Ciara and Young Jeezy, Jody is trying to emphasize his buyability by using Atlanta’s brand significance. Such an effort is not unlike the way 50 Cent used Eminem to build brand recognition or the way Boyz N Da Hood used Puffy Combs to gain access to an audience outside of the South. The brand building works on two levels. The first level is the idea of legitimizing Jody within the Atlanta rap scene, an important aspect of building a loyal consumer base. On the second level, Jody’s connection with more established stars helps to sell him as a certified product to a wider audience. To make a parallel to advertising, this brand building is similar to having a recognizable spokesperson give a testimonial for a new product, reaffirming its reliability to potential buyers. This idea will also be examined in the next chapter as it relates to Gorilla Zoe’s career ascension.

The last scenes also transfer the video from the “streets” into a fantasy domain that pays homage to Jody, as exhibited by the “JB” logo in the background and the “white” of the scene. The white background and the crew’s white clothing symbolize the purity of Jody’s rap status (which must be affirmed in both the lyrics and the visuals), but the color also signifies his continuing affiliation with the trap. Long white tee shirts, as popularized by the Atlanta group Dem Franchize Boyz single White Tees, were a symbol that a young Black man was “holding.” This phenomenon was not limited to Atlanta,
thereby making the white a more universally recognized symbol of Jody’s dope boy status. In the final scene, Jody is leaning against a building, wearing a long white tee shirt and a black baseball cap cocked to the side, and speaking on the cell phone. As he speaks, a black woman in a tight pink dress walks slowly towards him. The last frame is a skyward shot of Breeze on his cell phone with music slowing. Such a shot re-introduces the prominence of place – in this case both physically and symbolically – and attempts to sell the viewer on the idea that Jody, while successful, is still living the dope boy lifestyle. By combining the conspicuous consumption images with that of the hood, Jody is seeking to affirm his connection with both. He is, as he claims in the video, a trap star who is still active in the rap and drug games.

*Fast Forward* (2007)

If “Stay Fresh” emphasizes Jody’s playa persona and the images in the music video typify what Fitts (2008) calls the “booty video,” then “Fast Forward” reminds listeners and viewers that Jody is first and foremost a trap artist. The song and video represent the street narrative that many rappers use as a means of authentication to mass consuming public. Lyrically, the song emphasizes the main tropes of the drug dealing lifestyle, replete with innuendos about drug trafficking and implied violence on anyone who dares to stop Jody’s hustle. In the opening verse, Jody raps:

*Ay, this is not a rapper, and I’m not a poet*

*Call me a trapper, you niggaz better know it*

*I’m on the block for real how they knock and rock some pills*

*I’m tryna get it poppin’ but them houses in the crib*

*Well I am to the top, I wanna see some mils*
Goin’ top or drop seated on some customs rims

About a lot of obvious I’m on a couple hills

Pop a lot of booze and drinkin’ couple beers

This is not The Wire, we move ‘em bout some reals

Hops in the industry and cops a couple deals

Now I’m hot as a Hennessey sittin’ in the sun

Lot a niggaz get me, but I’m not the one

And if you want it all you gotta do is ask for it

If you pained I will leave his brain on his dash boy

If you don’t what I’m sayin’ then fast forward

Take a chance be a man boy

Unlike the more laid back imagery that Jody seeks to depict in “Stay Fresh,” the lyrics in “Fast Forward” highlight a more aggressive stance, particularly as it pertains to his connection to the trap. Whereas Jody emphasizes the transition from “trappin’ to rappin’” in “Stay Fresh,” in “Fast Forward,” he claims he is not a rapper and is instead still entrenched in the trap life. Moreover, the verse is replete with Jody’s “hood dreams.” While many rappers claim that rap took them out of the drug game, one common claim in trap music is that rap only broadcasts the rapper’s trap lifestyle. As noted earlier, Jody makes it apparent that he views himself as a trapper first and a rapper second, and that his involvement in the drug game will continue despite his record deal. Jody’s reference to The Wire – the popular HBO television program focused on Baltimore’s trap – is to remind the listener that what he raps about is not for entertainment, but a narrative of real life. Here, it is plausible that Jody is seeking to distance himself from any connection to
the industry in an attempt to re-affirm his realness. Moreover, given the fact this song was not produced by Sho’Nuff and Warner Brothers, it seems as if Jody is more uninhibited making a stronger connection to the trap.

The video serves as a visual exclamation point for Jody’s lyrics, as he and his crew are featured prominently on a street corner engaging in various transactions that are cleverly hidden for the viewer to presume. The video begins with Jody, wearing a white tee-shirt with “ATL” on the front and a white baseball cap turned backwards, standing on a street corner in front of a bar with five other young men in long tees. In the next scene, a woman wearing a black cut-off shirt and cut-off jean shorts is gyrating to the music, with a shot of a downtown street in the background. The frames cut back to scenes of Jody and his crew on the street corner, negotiating with people who pass by. As Forman (2002) and Quinn (2005) argue, place is often represented as a series of symbols and signifiers in a music video as a way for the viewer to understand that the rapper is not only selling himself, but his hood as well. By situating himself “on the block,” Jody seeks to reaffirm the idea that even as a rapper, he is still connected to and identifies with the trap. As mentioned earlier, part of Jody Breeze’s packaging as a commodity is his ability to project a “realness” that connects with consumers who conflate street credibility with authenticity. To reaffirm this claim, Jody raps:

"You can’t slow me down, ‘cuz I ain’t fakin’ ‘bout shit

Don’t getting’ paper now, but I’m still breakin’ down bricks

So don’t play around ‘cuz I told hate to now clicks

And now I lay you down, A.K. or break it down quick

I see the way the people hate, nothin’ in this world is free"
You can take me out the hood but not the hood outta me

Don’t get me confusin’ MTV or BET

Cuz I’m a be around for a minute just be watchin me

I represent for the South my residence is a slum

Couple golds in my mouth, big begets in my charm

I’m the soldier and get, I’m the youngest in charge

The job show me respect ‘cuz I’m a vet and I know it

Unlike “Stay Fresh,” Jody vividly describes just how connected he is to the trap life, a means of authenticating his claims to the listener and the viewer. Perhaps Jody’s lyrical boasts of violence and “pushing weight” reflects Dyson’s (2004) claim that “rap projects a lifestyle of self into the world that generates forms of cultural resistance and transforms the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life” (p. 68). But it is more likely that Jody uses the trap as a means of advancing a reputation he believes will create more of a following. Ironically, while Jody claims that his trapping will not be on MTV or BET, the video for “Fast Forward” was shown on both – albeit infrequently. Moreover, he specifically locates himself as a Southern trapper while universalizing his place (“I represent for the South my residence is a slum”). The emphasis that Jody’s residence is a slum contradicts his earlier boasts – perhaps as a result of his understanding of who constitutes his consumer base.

There are three main themes in the video that affirm Jody’s masculinity, all of which help to sell his image and underscore the persona he attempts to exude. For starters, the physical setting of the video – the street corner – is a commonly used signifier to validate a rapper’s hood savvy. While Jody seeks to emphasize his
connections to Atlanta through the use of the captions, the tee shirt and the shot of an Atlanta skyline, the street corner scenes are generic enough for viewers in other parts of the country to relate to. In this sense, Jody tries to universalize the street corner and make his masculinity proximal to it. Some scholars of Black masculinity argue that the street corner offers symbolic power and allows Black male rappers to resist molds of white patriarchy. Like Dyson, Collins (2005) argues that the street persona that Jody exudes offers an opportunity for him and other rappers to “reject the discourse of Black sidekicks and sissies as the route for White acceptance and as a path to adult masculinity and claim media space to argue that there is another way to be Black, male, and adult” (p. 191). But Collins’s claims do not take into account the street corner’s commodification and that its symbolism is in fact a result of cultural production that is at least partially shaped by corporate entities such as Warner Music Group and Viacom.

Secondly, Jody repeats his connection to the drug game and tries to broaden his block appeal by featuring Philadelphia rapper (and former drug dealer) Freeway in the song and video. As noted in the previous analysis, having a guest star is a brand-building tool that many rappers use. However, in this case, having Freeway as a guest star highlights the specific audience that this video targets. This desired audience is made clear through a series of frames that begins with Jody dialing his Blackberry and beginning a call. As a scantily clad woman dances alone on the same street, the frame shifts to the front of a church. At the bottom of the screen, the caption reads “Philadelphia.” A Bentley coupe pulls in front of the church and in the next frame, Freeway is standing in front of the car speaking on the cell phone. A well-dressed woman gets out of the passenger side as Freeway continues to talk on the phone. As the next
frame shows a solo shot of Freeway, wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap, and a long polo shirt, the music cuts to his verse. The Philadelphia to Atlanta rap connection is shown in the video as a trap connection, as evidenced by the two speaking on their cell phones and transporting money from one city to the other. In this aspect, Jody seeks to conform his Black masculinity to more popular notions of urban (Northern) Black masculinity that are informed by the larger ghetto narrative (Rose, 1994; Forman, 2002; Dyson, 2004; Watts, 2004). While Jody has marketed himself as an Atlanta rapper, the video demonstrates his attempt to reach a broader audience as a means of widening his street credibility. By rapping with Freeway and showing the “trap” of Philadelphia, Jody is seeking to identify his masculinity with the more broadly accepted “hood nigga” trope commonly used by East Coast rappers.

While Jody does not make references to them in the song, women are presented as a different kind of commodity in the video. Though Jody has used conspicuous consumption of women to underscore his sexual boasts in “Stay Fresh,” women in this video are shown as mules for the transactions he is making with Freeway. Women, as Emerson (2002), Jhally (2006) and Fitts (2008) note, are frequently featured in music videos as sexual chattel, but their roles as active accomplices in the male rapper’s trap activities in these domains continue to uphold gender hierarchies. As Gray (1995) argues, the performance of Black masculinity in these videos and the relations depicted between Black men and women often re-affirm hegemonic constructions of a Black male patriarch who commands the woman to do his bidding. In this video, the use of women as accessories to his trade underscores his claims of symbolic power.
Jody is using an established prototype for music videos as a means of affirming his uniqueness. The paradoxical nature of this video also seems to validate the claims of political economy scholars such as Kelley (2005) and Fitts (2008), and cultural critics such as Jackson (2006) and Hurt (2006), who argue that such music videos often exaggerate a rapper’s masculinity and seek to present hyperboles as reflections of an authentic experience. However, when combined with Jody’s self-promotion as a trap artist, “Fast Forward” adds to his claims of authenticity and underscores his desire to be firmly grounded in the streets of Atlanta and in the trap.

While “Stay Fresh” and “Fast Forward” strike different tones, both songs seek to bolster Jody’s claims of masculinity, whether it is his consumption of women or his connection to the trap lifestyle. Both texts rely on commonly used tropes of gangsta rap, attempting to position Jody – through various lyrical and visual postures and poses – within an authentic space. Moreover, Jody uses both songs to distinguish himself from imposters, arguing that only his narrative can be seen as viable and believable. While Jody’s lyrical anecdotes and their visual affirmations might strike the consumer as hyperbolic, they are consistent with his story-building efforts and uphold his claim that one “can take me out the hood but not the hood outta me.” But as the next section and Chapter 7 will argue, his claims of realness are tempered by the realities of the cultural production process.
One of the weaknesses of using traditional political economy as a primary mode of analysis in studying hip-hop is that it fails to account for “self-production” as a factor in the commodification process. In this sense, rappers are unique because of their active role in plugging the hype machine that keeps them “hot” (Basu & Werbner, 2001; Maher, 2005). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group cultivate the rapper’s image and help to generate a buzz that will make audiences more likely to consume the rapper and his music. But while other forms of entertainment such as rock music or acting allow for a greater distinction between performative identities and private lives, rappers’ images often depend on being able to blur that distinction and keep audiences guessing between the real and the narrative of performance (Forman, 2002). For Jody, there are continued discursive attempts to re-affirm his realness and his continued connection to the streets, though he allows for greater separation between his rap career and trap career when talking to different publications. However, the contradictions in such claims – and the distance he places from the trap – become more apparent when Jody realizes what audience he is speaking to. In his interviews with me, for example, there was likely less pressure to emphasize his proximity to the trap than there would be had I been a reporter for XXL or Vibe. Still, as the analysis in the previous section showed, Jody must demonstrate a consistency in his narrative because his primary selling point is his claim of being real. Moreover, he positions his masculinity firmly in the street life, packaging himself as one whose rap career has not taken him out of the trap.
Another aspect of this self-production is the creation and distribution of texts that keep a rapper in the public eye when he does not have new music or when his music videos are not being aired. The Internet has allowed for the production and distribution of “street” texts, often in the form of diss songs or interviews that mock a rival. Going after a target can help give a rapper increased visibility of the artist, though some of these attacks can have a strong backlash against the dissembling rapper. For Jody, diss songs are a way of positioning his masculinity and his rap skills as superior to whom he sees as competition. As William Jelani Cobb (2007) argues, such rap battles were common in the earlier days of rap, when a rapper’s viability and credibility were primarily based upon his lyrical prowess. However, in the age of SoundScan and the pressure that both artists and the cultural industries to produce sales, diss songs do not carry nearly the same amount of notoriety or mainstream circulation as they once did. Still, a diss song or a feud can keep a rapper such as Jody – who has struggled for commercial recognition – in the pages of hip-hop magazines such as *The Source*, *Vibe*, *XXL*, and *Word Up*, or on hip-hop web sites such as [www.sohh.com](http://www.sohh.com), [www.allhiphop.com](http://www.allhiphop.com), [www.ballerstatus.com](http://www.ballerstatus.com), [www.24hourhiphop.com](http://www.24hourhiphop.com) or [www.down-south.com](http://www.down-south.com), all of which carry credibility among Jody’s targeted “base.”

Releasing diss songs or making call outs on mixtapes have also been part of Jody’s attempts to validate his standing within the Atlanta music scene, particularly as he has attempted to label himself as both a “country nigga” and one who represents the streets of Atlanta. In the introduction to *No More Secrets*, a mixtape he released in 2008, Jody lashes out at fellow Atlanta rappers – and former Boyz N Da Hood members – Yung Joc, Young Jeezy, and Gorilla Zoe while claiming that “without Jody Breeze, there
would be no Block ENT.” These attacks and claims underscore Jody’s attempts at marketing himself as authentic and as someone so indispensable to the Atlanta rap game that the city’s hip-hop production would not be where it is without him. More importantly, in this introduction, Jody also boasts that he is from the country, but that he is still part of Atlanta. “I’m a country nigga, I rep my city – Griffin, GA – all the way up to the ATL. A lot of niggas keep hollerin’, ‘Hey that nigga ain’t from Atlanta.’ Fuck nigga, whatchu talkin’ ’bout? I live 30 minutes down the road. I go whereva I want to.” Jody’s assertion that he still represents Atlanta because of Griffin’s proximity to the city highlights the importance of claiming place in hip-hop. While many successful rappers have been able to move beyond claims of geography and space, Jody’s boasts of his connection to the streets of Atlanta show his continuing effort to build a story that can lead to a wider consumption. Until Jody is able to get more distribution and a more favorable recording and production deal, he must harp on the street narrative as a means of showcasing his authenticity while downplaying or ridiculing the success that his fellow Atlanta rappers have been able to achieve by symbolically (and physically) moving out of the trap.

For the labels that have signed and distributed Jody, the trap-to-rap narrative has been the primary mode of producing, commodifying, and branding him. As noted earlier, Atlanta’s importance as a hip-hop hub allowed rappers to claim numerous symbolic spaces, but Jody – particularly through his affiliation with Boyz N Da Hood – was marketed as firmly entrenched in the trap life. Forman (2002) and Quinn (2005) argue that rappers work exhaustively to commodify their geography and the symbolic spaces they occupy, adding that the creative genius of rap music is often seen in a rapper’s
ability to blur reality and fiction. But the hood story is not just the rapper’s to tell. The production houses, creative managers, and major labels are also actively involved in selling the real. For Jody, it meant having both his management and his labels push the street narrative, distinguishing him from other “phonies” by talking up his trap credentials.

As Stay Fresh illustrates, Jazze Pha, who had become popular in the early 2000s for his upbeat production and his “discovery” of R & B talents such as Ciara, tried to market Jody as a classic gangsta rapper. At the time of his album release, Jazze said, “Jody is pure hood lyricism at its finest. I think he truly just defines the views of a real young street hustler. A lot of rappers rap, but he gets it. He understands what makes rap work” (www.nationmaster.com). Similarly, Bad Boy and Block Entertainment’s marketing of Boyz N Da Hood as a true-to-the-streets rap group and a “Southern N.W.A” represented a conscious attempt to create both street buzz for the group and brand recognition in the mainstream, based on N.W.A’s commercial success and longstanding impact in the gangsta rap genre. This production and marketing approach relates to Ryan’s (1992) idea of formatting cultural production, since the sales generated from the “hood nigga” and “thug” images in rap music created a mold by which Jody’s labels were able to “fit” him to. As Ryan notes, “despite the fact that they are unable to exert total control over cultural workers…corporations can administer the creative stage in a manner which systematically supplies them with the originals they need to expand in an unpredictable and competitive market” (Ryan, 1992: 184). Because of Jody’s prior drug dealing activities, Sho’Nuff and Block Entertainment did not have to invest much in creative marketing to fit Jody into the gangsta mold.
This format is not only evidenced in the music, but in the distribution of images as well. In the videos analyzed in the previous section, Jody uses signifiers as a means of maintaining a close connection with the trap and identifying his masculinity with the gangsta and thug tropes. However, the image circulation – and cultural industries’ investment in pushing images – is not limited to the cultural texts they produce. In Jody’s case, his labels sought to have indirect control of cultural texts outside of their direct production through the use of hip-hop magazines and websites, which often work to legitimize the label and artist’s efforts to “build the story.” Ryan calls this part of the cultural industries’ publicity regimes, and publicists such as Tahira Wright or marketing experts such as Shawn Prez are instrumental in making the artist more visible and sellable. In publicity photos, Jody is depicted as a street hustler and, with his long braids and ski caps, often looks similar to legendary gangsta rapper Eazy E of N.W.A. Whether this similarity in image is intentional or coincidental is secondary to the idea of whether Jody can successfully sell himself to the hip-hop consumer through this similarity, particularly since Bad Boy’s marketing of Boyz N Da Hood emphasized the N.W.A. comparisons. The circulation of these images, particularly through hip-hop publications and the labels’ media managers, is meant to buttress the cultural texts produced. Even after Jody left Sho’Nuff and Warner Brothers, Block Entertainment and Bad Boy still had a financial stake in his development. This stake, however minimal, undercuts some of Negus’s (2004) claims that rap’s production was dictated by ethnocentric values of white executives. Indeed, while Warner Brothers and Warner Music Group executives might not be comfortable with Jody Breeze in one-on-one meetings, they are separated by enough intermediaries such as Sean “Puffy” Combs, Shawn Prez, and Jazze Pha, to invest
capital into signing and keeping Jody on their labels. To ensure that Jody has the most opportunities to sell, publicity managers such as Wright are vital to ensuring that the various forms of hip-hop media have access to him, and that the interviews he conducts continue to depict him as an authentic trap star. However, as the final section will attempt to show, the commodification process is also impacted by Jody’s self-conceptualization.

“I’m just a real nigga”: The role of self-conceptualization and agency in cultural production and commodification

As this chapter has highlighted, the cultural industries do not have sole control in Jody’s cultural production and branding. Through such outlets as mixtapes and web pages, Jody has been active in his own commodification. Toynbee (2000 & 2003) points out that artists such as Jody are as much invested in this process as the labels, since they gain financially and in other aspects (street credibility, widespread reputation) through successful story- and image-building efforts. Part of this process involves buy-in into the image the label is trying to promote. As filmmaker Byron Hurt (2006) argues, Black men in hip-hop often feel as if they must project an “in-the-box” image that conforms to patriarchal ideals of hypermasculinity, hypersexuality, violence, and domination. “Every Black man that goes into the studio, he’s always got two people in his head,” says Conrad Tillard, a hip-hop minister featured in Hurt’s documentary, Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes. “Him, in terms of who he really is, and there’s the thug that he feels he has to project” (Hurt, 2006). While such a dichotomy may exist with other rappers, there are indicators that, to a certain extent, Jody believes in the image he is selling. Part of this, as the interview section highlighted, might have to do with Jody’s assertion that what he
speaks of in his music embodies a lived experience. In other words, there might be more pressure for Jody, as a trap artist, to present the “thug that he feels he has to project” as the real.

One reason for this projection might also be due to Jody’s reliance on his consumers, a base that has more direct access to him because of his regionality. As Condry (2007) and Matthew Dowdy (2007) note, the commodification of the rapper is not just limited to the production studio or the corporate offices of the label or video distributor; it also takes place in a more direct interaction between rappers and their primary consumers. Jody’s self-conceptualization as a “real nigga” has served as a platform for his music career, helping him to gain legitimacy in the mixtape circles and win praise among hardcore and gangsta hip-hop fans. The hip-hop webzine SixShot boasted that Jody was the game’s “best kept secret” and that “it’s no surprise that he is developing a heavy buzz with his recent mixtapes. His street stories and gritty sound are receiving a warm welcome amongst a music industry filled with ring tone rap” (Michael, 2008). Consciously distancing himself from the ringtone rappers, Jody sees himself as an authentic narrator who is relating his trap lifestyle and the dynamics of Atlanta’s streets to a larger audience, though many of his consumers are likely to be familiar with the trap story. Though aware of the cultural industries’ attempts to make him into a more sellable product, which he says has kept him from being a more successful solo artist, Jody claims he has resisted others’ efforts to make him something his is not.

All I wanted to do was rap…and just be me. As long as I was doing that I had no problem with nobody telling me that, you know what I’m saying? I can accept criticism, you know what I’m saying? If I needed to do something different, I would try it. But basically at the end of the day I would do it the way I wanted to do it. And that’s really
what kept me going, because no matter what anybody said, like I’m going to listen to you and I’m going to take word of what you’re saying, but I got to be me before anything (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

A big part of Jody's own stated narrative is that the music he makes and the image he projects in music videos and promotions are grounded in his real life. He states that he does not believe the labels he has worked with or the media managers who have helped him get access to wider consumption markets have influenced the way he sees himself. In other words, for Jody, the cultural production process of his music and related texts is merely reflecting who he is and how sees himself. His insistence on being real, he says, has hurt his career because he is not as commercially appealing. “That’s been my biggest problem, because I don’t turn on and I don’t turn off, do you know what I’m saying? If you see me on camera, when I’m off camera I’m the same way, you know what I’m saying?” (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009). In this way, Jody's story of himself is centered on authenticity: rap is not just performance, and the “true” rappers are relating their autobiographical experiences to people who can relate. That, he says, is what separates authentic rappers from those who “front” and move away from the ghetto narrative, especially other Atlanta rappers who have sold out the trap.

…I mean, regardless of all the talk, or what people might say. It’s real. It’s still there, it’s just another word for being real. There’s only one way to be real, you know what I’m saying? They try to make it all kind of words, you know what I’m saying? Just be yourself (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

Jody’s stated self-conceptualization is a powerful factor in the cultural production process, because it results in a commodification that focuses solely on selling the real. This seems to conflict with Tahira Wrights’s claims that rappers have a firm
understanding of who they are outside of the studio and the music video shoots. However, it could also be indicative of the fact that Jody has struggled to make his image more nuanced in order to gain a wider audience, a notion that will be explored in further detail in Chapter 7. This blurring between performative identity and how he sees himself potentially serves to make him more appealing to hardcore and gangsta rap fans. He says the realness he exudes in his music have cultivated a loyal following among those who believe he has not sold out to more mainstream interests. For instance, in late 2008 and early 2009, numerous hip-hop blogs criticized T.I. for “going soft” as a result of making his more music more positive-themed and more pop radio-friendly. Jody says his realness creates an intimate connection with his fans, whom he says know that he is who he claims to be in his music and in other cultural texts.

...That’s why a lot of people always fucked with me. My fans always stay loyal, and I mean whatever I do I always get love, ‘cause I never change, you know what I’m saying? You can talk to me now or you can talk to me later, it’s the same thing, you know what I’m saying? I think that’s what makes me different. I just want to be different. If you all got to turn on and turn off, I’m just going to turn on and stay on. I want to be different, I don’t want to do what everybody else is doing (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

Here then Jody presents consistent persona and non-commercial difference as keys to the authentic. He offers as evidence of his own authenticity that he is "the same thing" no matter the situation. Jody’s idea of “what everybody else is doing” is what many rappers refer to as “going commercial.” As Watkins (2005) notes, despite many rappers’ unease with corporate recording contracts and image circulation dictated by corporate distributors, many continue to enter into such deals while claiming that they
have not sold out the streets. However, Jody sees fellow Atlanta rappers such as T.I. and Young Jeezy adjusting their style and image while de-emphasizing their ghetto narrative as following the commercial route.

But does the consistency between self-conceptualization and commodified cultural text necessarily lead to increased agency in the cultural production process? Jody’s conflicts with his label management, as well as his willingness to do most of his promotions via the mixtape circuit, seem to at least support Ryan (1992), Toynbee (2000) and Hesmondhalgh’s (2007) idea that artists cannot be directly controlled by the corporations that pay for their labor. While intermediaries such as Jazze Pha, Block Entertainment and Rico Brooks might have tried to steer Jody in a direction that was more in line with corporate demands, those efforts – at least evidenced by Jody’s stated views of himself and his lack of a solo recording deal – appear to have fallen short. Jody says tensions with Sho’Nuff and Bad Boy, as well as their parent companies, arose because they would try to try to change him or ask him to separate himself from the image he depicts in songs and videos:

…They would tell me, Jody, turn it on, you know what I’m saying? When you’re doing such and such you got to turn it on, but I’m not that type, I’m just me. So sometimes they tell me, I might need to be a little bit more flashy or a little bit more talkative, but it’s just me. I don’t know how to be something else, I don’t know how to turn myself into a character, you know what I’m saying?

While Jody’s self-conceptualization conforms to Hurt’s “in-the-box” thesis of Black masculinity, his presumed buy-in of the street image does not necessarily preclude him from exerting agency or power. On the other hand, Jody’s activity in commodifying the texts he produces – whether through mixtapes or through labels such as Block
Entertainment and Bad Boy and video distributors such as Viacom – is not an indicator of increased agency in the cultural production process. Jody emphasizes a belief that realness – not SoundScan numbers – is the key to being a successful rapper, and that his boasts of being connected to the streets of Atlanta and his hypermasculine posturing in music videos and other visual texts are important markers to signify his realness. Jody’s claims of independence could also be seen as a reason for friction with other Boyz N Da Hood members, particularly over Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s decision to invest in the careers of other group members over him.

At first it was good, because I was pretty much doing everything, you know what I’m saying? It was really damn near all me, it was just more niggas, you know what I’m saying? And that really fucked me up a little bit too because I should have tried to take more of a spot… for what I was doing, you know what I’m saying? But being the type of person that I am I don’t, if you did what you wanted to do and that’s how you want to be, go ahead. But I’ma still do me, though. I just can’t portray something that I’m not, you see what I’m saying? And the group, when you’re dealing with four different personalities, four grown men, you know what I’m saying? I learned a whole lot from it, but I just would never do it again (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

Jody’s comments highlight some of the issues of working within a group, particularly one assembled by a creative manager such as Block Spencer, but one important point to take away is the notion that none of the rappers in Boyz N Da Hood could apparently escape the “me-first” structures of hip-hop that placed heavy emphasis on a rapper’s solo career. The statements also indicate Jody’s regret that he vested too much in working in a group and not enough on doing more for himself. He also seems to resign himself to the idea that the music business is not as prone to loyalty and familial
tendencies as he originally thought it did. As he notes, “I know I’ve helped a lot of people get into certain situations, you know what I’m saying? And it sort of backfired on me” (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009). In this comment, it can be inferred that by helping fellow rappers such as Yung Joc and Gorilla Zoe make names for themselves, Jody put his own career on hold and that such loyalty -- which he centers in his original small-town upbringing and street authenticity -- often goes unrequited.

Jody’s struggles to sell music as a solo artist and get wider distribution also indicate that commercial success is not guaranteed for those who fit into a certain image mold. Indeed, as the gangsta trope has become increasingly overused in recent years and has turned away both cultural industry executives and mainstream consumers, “realness” has been marketed more for a niche audience. Jody’s lack of commercial viability and mainstream recognition contrasts with the Boyz N Da Hood members who used the street narrative to expand into other types of performance and image circulation. Young Jeezy, for example, increasingly collaborated with R & B artists, briefly dated R & B singer Keyshia Cole, appeared on Saturday Night Live and helped campaign for Barack Obama in the 2008 Presidential Election. Such efforts were not only vital in helping to sell his music, but they also helped generate buzz to make him into a more consumable commodity. This buzz, which has been backed by the marketing department and publicity regime of Def Jam/Universal Music Group, has helped Jeezy become more than a “trap artist” and no longer binds him to Atlanta as his place of cultural production. But Jeezy’s success might also be indicative of a rapper’s willingness to relinquish agency and control in favor of a corporation’s desire to make him more marketable and viable in the long run. This involves acquiescing to the control over the creative managers and
publicity regimes tasked to make the commodity (the rapper) in demand. Underscoring this point, Kenny Burns (2008) says that rappers such as Jody are victim to corporate labels’ lack of investment into a rapper’s artistic and image development. Without any direction or resources invested into their development, Burns says, Jody and other dope boy rappers are stuck on an image that is divorced from the economic realities of the cultural industries and the changing marketplace of consumption.

I mean back in the day you had an A&R department, you had a marketing department, you had all these things to prepare artists to be artists. Now you got these one-hit artists that get paid all this money and then they go to jail ‘cause they want to carry gun to the club cause they don’t have the mentors. … If you look at the business, it’s not a business; it became a melting pot of sink or swim, you know what I’m saying? And it … gave the dope boys, the drug dealers the ultimate opportunity, because look, I got this money I can’t put into nothing else, let me put it into my music shit, let me buy jewelry. And that is now the new culture of hip-hop. And it’s like at the end of the day, how far is that really going to go? (K. Burns, personal communication, December 30, 2008).

Burns notes that rappers such as Jody who buy in to the dope boy image and refuse to change with consumers’ tastes fail to grow as artists, and as a result, do not become commercially viable. His critique also seems to support Jones (2003) and Gibson’s (2003) idea that the cultural industries can use deep reservoirs of labor, particularly if artists are unwilling to change according to the corporation’s demands. Jody’s fellow Boyz N Da Hood members, who appeared more willing to work with labels’ demands on branching out and changing their styles and image, enjoyed solo success and signed more lucrative distribution deals that enhanced the prospects of future leverage in the cultural industries. Meanwhile, Jody Breeze remains on the fringes of
success and visibility, thriving on the mixtape circuit and claiming to connect with hardcore hip-hop fans because of his unwillingness to stray from the street-as-authentic narrative. He has been more active in his own commodification, seeking to differentiate himself from the sellouts and marketing himself as “talking straight to the street niggas” (J. White, “No More Secrets,” 2008). Perhaps insecure about his upbringing in Griffin or aware of Atlanta’s brand appeal, he also more strongly identifies with the city in his cultural texts than many of his peers, appealing to the “Down South” listeners who identify with his regional distinctiveness. However, Jody has neither the backing of a major distributor nor the support of the cultural industries that are vital for mainstream production. If self-production and self-commodification are then the results of necessity, agency in these processes becomes more circumspect. This dynamic will be explored in greater detail in the last chapter, when Jody’s career is placed within a broader examination of the cultural industries involved in his production and commodification.

As the next chapter will show, a label’s investment into an artist, as well as the artist’s willingness to understand the dichotomy between self-conceptualization and performative identity, can be the difference between commercial viability and invisibility. A second case study of a more commercially viable rapper highlights these relationships.
“Hood Figga” and upward mobility from the trap

As shown in Chapters 4 and 5, a major label deal and the various cultural industries are significant factors in wider distribution for the artist. The corporate parents of majors have a direct influence in how a rapper is commodified and where he is distributed, particularly since production and distribution have been increasingly coordinated by corporate conglomerates (Fox, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). While cultural work fuels the output of the cultural industries, the corporate structures tasked with overseeing production and distribution are important gatekeepers in a rapper’s commodification. Block Entertainment is an important on-the-ground intermediary for Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group, not only because it is in Atlanta and rooted in the trap, but because Block Spencer serves a primary scout for recruiting and signing up-and-coming talent. As Shawn Prez (2009) notes, Block Entertainment feeds Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s demand for cutting-edge acts while helping to fill the reservoir of creative labor. Boyz N Da Hood is an example of this reservoir approach, as the group replaced Young Jeezy with Yung Joc in 2006 and Yung Joc with Gorilla Zoe a year later. Such a practice of replacing group members in an effort to keep the brand alive can be best described as corporations’ “fishtank” approach when it comes to developing and replacing artists (Jones, 2003; Toynbee, 2003).

In these contexts, it would appear that corporations and their creative intermediaries have the upper hand when it comes to dictating how an artist should be produced and commodified. As Jody Breeze’s struggles with solo success indicate,
conflicts between the artist and his creative management and the corporate parent can hinder an artist’s career trajectory, often preventing him from gaining access to a wider consumer market. While Southern rappers have been glorified for their entrepreneurial skills and their independence from (New York-based) corporations, the reality of hip-hop production is that no artist can build a story and generate long-term success without some backing of the corporate cultural industries (Kelley, 2005a; Grem, 2006).

In the case of Gorilla Zoe, however, recognition of this reality has helped him grow from an instant “street” hit with “Hood Nigga” into an artist with long-term backing from Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. This chapter not only interrogates the role of agency in the cultural production process, but how an artist’s discursively constructed self-conceptualization serves as a gatekeeper to wider distribution and commercial success. In other words, does a rapper have a better chance to gain access to the wider marketplace of consumption when he understands his role in the cultural industries? As this chapter seeks to show, Gorilla Zoe has gained a degree of upward mobility within the cultural industries by acknowledging his limitations as an agent of cultural production and accepting the dynamics of production and consumption that have dictated the trap music genre. Moreover, Zoe’s own conceptualization of masculinity has played a significant role in his commodification and his development as an artist. Zoe’s understanding of his place within the cultural industries has led to him trying to strike a balance between his own views on authenticity with what his label and fans believe is authentic. As he says, “I must understand that I have to express myself in ways where everybody feels like I’m expressing themselves for them too” (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008). This comment will be interrogated more
later in this chapter, particularly as it relates to Zoe’s discursive self-construction and how he negotiates authenticity.

The first section of this chapter sketches Zoe’s early life in Atlanta and how he was “discovered” by Block Spencer as a replacement for Yung Joc in Boyz N Da Hood. The section examines how Zoe fit a mold that Block Entertainment and Bad Boy were looking for to replace Joc and to help keep the Boyz N Da Hood brand alive. The section also shows how Zoe used “Hood Nigga,” his debut single, to establish his own brand identity. The second section explores the evolution of the Gorilla Zoe brand by analyzing lyrics from two of his songs, “Hood Nigga” (2007) and “Lost” (2009), and the music videos for each. These music videos were played on shows such as BET’s Rap City and 106th & Park, increasing Zoe’s visibility as both a trap artist and a name recognizable beyond the Atlanta hip-hop scene. These texts are analyzed to show how Zoe signifies his masculinity and sense of place. Moreover, these texts are compared to argue that Zoe’s image reflects an increasing comfort level of his place within the cultural industries. The third section details how creative and media managers have been active in commodifying Zoe and helping to build his story to a growing number of consumers, discussing how these managers worked to produce Zoe as a trap artist and then helped to develop him into a more mainstream-friendly rapper in the months before the release of his second album. This section investigates notions of cultural work, particularly how creative workers and decision-makers factor into Zoe’s commodification and whether their involvement in the cultural production process is motivated purely by the economic bottom line. Elaborating upon notions of cultural work and agency, the final section
explores how much of a role Zoe has in his cultural production, particularly in presenting his masculinity for mainstream consumption.

The Making of a Hood Nigga: Alonzo Mathis to Gorilla Zoe

Atlanta music journalist Sonia Murray (2008) says that one of the region’s strengths as a site of cultural production is that rappers do not necessarily need to feel compelled to claim a block or a specific neighborhood to get validation. “Atlanta is not New York. There is a lot of diversity in the music, and Atlanta rappers don’t have to go out of their way to give props to their neighborhood” (S. Murray, personal communication, December 19, 2008). Because the trap is not limited to a particular neighborhood or street corner, rappers from Atlanta have been able to proclaim their proximity to the trap without needing to be specific about where they are from. Though Jody Breeze has tried to build his career centrally on his trap lifestyle, the trap has more diffuse symbolic value for most rappers in the city. Atlanta rappers such as Ludacris and Yung Joc, who grew up in middle-income neighborhoods outside of the city, can use the trap as a reference point without being seen as fake. More importantly, Atlanta’s hip-hop scene has not relied on the trap and specific street corners to become commercially viable, making one’s physical relation with the trap secondary to the symbolic value of the trap. For Gorilla Zoe, the trap has become an important steppingstone in his commodification within Atlanta, but like many other Atlanta rappers, he has relied on its symbolic value as a means of getting more recognition outside of the region. But unlike artists such as Ludacris and Yung Joc, Zoe has been able to better position himself as a
trap artist because of his upbringing, which has helped to authenticate the streets-to-
studio narrative.

Alonzo Mathis was raised in East Point, a city bordering Atlanta’s Southwest
neighborhood and the hometown of fellow hip-hop figures such as Andre “Big Boi”
Patton of Outkast and Block Spencer. His father was a former college football player who
died when Mathis was still a boy, leaving his mother to raise him. “I grew up in the hood
and I didn’t have a lot of, my dad passing and my mom raising me by herself. I didn’t
have a lot of money, so I didn’t go to a private school,” he says (A. Mathis, personal
communication, October 28, 2008). Though Mathis grew up in what he describes as a
stable home, he became attracted to the idea of making money at a younger age. “I went
to school doing things I was supposed to do, but I had to become a man. I left home and
started my own life,” he says (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008).
Mathis links his masculinity with being able to make his ends meet, a common refrain
among rappers who measure their manhood by their material acquisitions. For Zoe,
becoming a man meant getting a job and making money (Newman, 2007). After dropping
out of school in the ninth grade, Mathis enrolled in a Job Corps training program in
Kentucky, where he earned a diploma in culinary arts. When he returned to Atlanta in
1999 at the age of 18, he began working numerous odd jobs, including a cleaning job at
Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. According to XXL magazine, Mathis
supplemented his hourly wages by “by hustling weed on the city’s drug-infested west
side” (“Next Up,” 2007). He says he realized that being a small-time drug dealer and a
service sector employee did nothing to further his life goals. “I decided that the streets
wasn’t the way I wanted to live and I took interest in music. I took interest in music and
listened to music and I decided I wanted to get into the studio” (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

While Mathis’s personal epiphany mirrors Jacoby White’s, his path to becoming a rapper was more deliberate and took longer to develop. Mathis went into the music retail industry, working with a friend who owned a small CD shop. As a result of his experience selling different types of music, Mathis says that he had “seen the changing dynamics of music five years ago. I was in retail before I even got into it so I understand the sound of music, the way it was going” (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008). Selling music only fueled his desire to make music and take advantage of the city’s burgeoning rap scene. Ironically, Mathis did not want to be a rapper, but rather a producer who would get paid for making beats and renting out studio time. Such a desire likely reflects Mathis’s understanding that creative intermediaries are the ones with more power than the artists.

I wasn’t making no money off CD’s. So I opened up a studio right next to Tip’s studio and DJ Drama’s studio. I’m thinking I’m gonna sell studio time, but the shit didn’t work. It actually turned into a hangout. So I was like, Fuck it, I got all this equipment, I’m finna learn how to work this shit. I learned Pro Tools in 30 days (“Next Up,” 2007).

With his aspirations to be a creative manager dashed, Mathis adopted the name Gorilla Zoe and began recording songs in his studio, hoping to compile a demo CD to distribute to local labels and get signed to a recording contract. His fourth recorded song, “Hood Nigga,” a “catchy ode to the everyday pleasures of purple smoke, 24-inch rims and women of varying hair color” convinced Block Spencer to add him to the Block Entertainment roster, which by then featured platinum-selling artist Yung Joc (“Next Up,” 2007). Spencer, who, as president of Bad Boy South, was tasked with recruiting
Atlanta talent to sign with Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group, signed Zoe as both a solo artist and member of Boyz N Da Hood. Zoe says that Spencer “gave me a chance, a deal, that eventually changed my life. He gave me the opportunity to make something of myself, so that’s what I did” (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008). With two deals that allowed him to develop solo albums and work as a member of Bad Boy’s already established quartet, *XXL* raved that Zoe “is connected to more marketing departments than billboard.biz” (“Next Up, 2007).

Since Zoe had recorded most of the material for an album in his studio using his own money, Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group did not need to invest much into producing Zoe’s first solo effort. Prior to releasing his debut album, *Welcome to the Zoo*, the labels distributed “Hood Nigga” as a radio single and produced a low-budget music video that garnered frequent airplay on BET and Internet views in the weeks after its premiere in the fall of 2007. Zoe attributes the success of “Hood Nigga” to the support of the labels and from Yung Joc, who was Block Entertainment’s first platinum-selling artist. Joc appeared in the video for “Hood Nigga,” and Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group added Zoe as a guest on two of Joc’s singles, “Bottle Poppin’” and “Coffee Shop,” both of which were made into music videos. “Yung Joc helped me,” Zoe says. “He had a sense of mass appeal” (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008). As shown in Chapter 5, brand building by using more established artists as testimonials is common in hip-hop, and Zoe took advantage of Joc’s widespread popularity. Moreover, unlike Jody, who appeared to resent the success of his fellow Boyz N Da Hood members, Zoe’s comments reflect his understanding of how rappers use each other to build names for themselves.
Joc’s promotion and the success of “Hood Nigga” helped Zoe debut No. 18 on the Billboard 200 chart with 35,000 units sold. Zoe’s album sold more than twice the number of units as Boyz N Da Hood, whose second album, *Back Up N Da Chevy*, sold fewer than 16,000 units in its debut (Crosley, 2007). *Welcome to the Zoo* sold more than 165,000 copies in its first year of release. In an interview with *Billboard*, Spencer said Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group were more vested in distributing Zoe because of the popularity of “Hood Nigga” as a single. The companies’ decision to market and distribute Zoe over Boyz N Da Hood will be explained further in the next chapter, but it should be noted that Zoe’s presence in Boyz N Da Hood did little to increase his visibility.

In fact, Zoe says, he had to work harder to establish an identity as a rapper, especially at a time when labels were not eager to make long-term investments in non-established artists. Zoe says that he was willing to use the trap and Boyz N Da Hood as platforms for his solo career because he wanted to convince Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group of his value. He began promoting himself in accordance with the companies’ marketing vision, which was primarily directed at hip-hop magazines such as *XXL*, *The Source*, and *Vibe*, and on the hip-hop web sites that help to legitimize an artist’s street credentials. Boasting of his early success following the debut of “Hood Nigga,” Zoe told *XXL* that “I’m No. 1 in the trap, I’m No. 1 in your dope hole, I’m No. 1 in your strip club—I ain’t gotta be No. 1 on radio and TV. But because I’m signed to Block Entertainment, Bad Boy and Atlantic, I will be” (“Next Up,” 2007). While this boast helped to give Zoe brand recognition, it also showed his willingness to be a good soldier and work to advance the labels’ interests. Zoe also began to record
tracks for mixtapes in an effort to create a solid following in Atlanta and other parts of the South. These songs helped to promote an image consistent with the “Hood Nigga” identity that Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group sought to project for Zoe. However, he says he also sought to expand his style, but management at the label resisted out of fear that he would not be able to sell as well straying from the trap narrative.

When you, you start a movement, and you put all your work in and the people don’t believe in it… it’s frustratin’ but – you know, it’s like your parents. You know, once – they don’t believe in everything that you say. You gotta’ prove it to ‘em. So, you know, they make me prove it to ‘em, you know what I’m sayin’? When they, once I prove, show and prove, then they come in one hundred percent, you know what I’m sayin’ – but, it’s like dealing with parents, you know what I’m sayin’, like, they don’t, they don’t believe everything you say. You gotta’ show ‘em. And then once you show ‘em, they’re one hundred percent behind you (A. Mathis, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

Zoe’s statements indicate that he understands who ultimately controls his distribution, likening his relationship with the label to that of a parent and child. Moreover, his statements seem to conform to Rico Brooks’s assertion that the corporation will not provide support for an artist until he has proven he can return their investment. However, Zoe was able to “prove” himself to his “parents,” and as a result, was rewarded with increased commitment in his solo career. Shortly after helping to promote the Boyz N Da Hood sophomore effort, Zoe returned to the studio in hopes of creating an album that reflected his desire to be more eclectic. He says his desire to branch out of the trap image has to do with his own love of different styles of music. “I read and listen to every kind of music. I can do any kind of music now. I can’t put that out yet, because my fans
might not understand, the fan base that I have built might not be ready for that, cause the last thing they heard was ‘Hood Nigga’” (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008). This comment highlights Zoe’s willingness to “self censor” in order to maintain and build brand credibility and is a tacit acknowledgement that he had not yet achieved the leverage needed to move too far outside of the trap artist persona.

Underscoring this notion is that fact that while Zoe experimented with new sounds in the studio, he also used the mixtapes to further his connection with the trap and “hard” narrative pushed by his labels. At the end of 2008, Zoe toured with New Orleans rapper Lil’ Wayne, whose multi-platinum success over the past decade has transformed him into a brand and a celebrity beyond the hip-hop base. Zoe also collaborated with Wayne on a remix of “Lost,” Zoe’s first single of his second album, Don’t Feed Da Animals. Though the album was due to be released in March 2009, the “Lost” remix was leaked on the Internet in the fall of 2008, helping to create more buzz for Zoe. The song, which had little radio play, was accessed 40 million times on MySpace and downloaded 2.5 million times on I-Tunes and file-sharing networks such as Limewire, according to Digital Music News (Robinson, 2009).

By early 2009, both Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group had invested their marketing and distribution resources into Zoe’s sophomore effort. The “leaked” remix and Zoe’s music video of “Lost,” which premiered on Internet sites such as www.sohh.com, helped the album debut at No. 8 on the Billboard 200 and the Nielsen SoundScan, selling 31,300 copies, the most among new hip-hop releases (Caulfield, 2009). After two weeks, Zoe’s album had sold close to 50,000 copies, putting it on track to equal or surpass sales of Welcome to The Zoo. Moreover, the album also
landed in the Top 10 of digital sales, a number that is not included in SoundScan’s calculations. While *Don’t Feed Da Animals* had some of the same trap narratives emphasized in *Welcome to The Zoo*, Zoe also sought to de-emphasize the trap and focus on building a more diverse image. Seeking to partially distance himself from the trap lifestyle that Boyz N Da Hood and fellow group members such as Jody Breeze promote in their songs, Zoe says, “I ain’t about the gangsta shit and the drugs and the guns. ’Cause we was raised with that shit. It’s about how to stop that shit” (“Next Up,” 2007). His efforts seemed to be noticed by some mainstream music critics. The *San Diego Union Tribune* noted that Zoe “tweaked his raspy tune…delivering a clearer message to digest by becoming a harmonizer. The Atlanta-based rapper’s new approach flourishes on top of well-produced tracks” (“Albums in Review,” 2009). As the chapter will show later, Zoe’s development as an artist and his symbolic departure from the trap is intertwined with his creative managers’ desire to expand his brand name and build upon his commercial success. The next section will analyze two of the prominent texts in Zoe’s short career, highlighting his transformation from a “Hood Nigga” to a multifaceted artist whose masculinity is no longer solely defined by his proximity to Atlanta and the trap.

**Movin’ Up Outta Tha Hood and Getting “Lost”: Analyzing Cultural Texts**

Zoe’s emergence as a trap artist in 2007 was due in part to the “hotness” of Atlanta’s trap music scene, which had produced platinum artists such as T.I., Young Jeezy and Yung Joc within a two-year span. With the release of “Hood Nigga,” Zoe and his creative management took advantage of consumers’ demand for trap music and the cultural industries’ willingness to circulate the trap image in music videos and national
promotions. But Zoe has also shown subtle but noticeable changes in his image, particularly in how he presents his masculinity and symbolically distances himself from the trap. This growth is reflected, both lyrically and visually, in the key texts he has produced as an artist. While Jody reveled in and largely relied upon the mixtape scene, Zoe used mixtapes as a means to an end. His goal, like most artists, was to “build a movement” among Atlanta and Southern consumers by reaffirming his connection to the trap in songs such as “Bite Down” and “Tryna Make a Jug,” both of which featured verses from fellow members of Boyz N Da Hood. The songs, laden with drug references and allusions to violence, positioned Zoe as being hard and attuned to the streets. In *Welcome to the Zoo*, the trap figures prominently as Zoe’s home base, conjuring up images of a hustler who is combining autobiography and the well-worn hyperboles of gangsta rap to convince the consumer of his authenticity.

This section illustrates how Zoe’s texts relate to his image and reflect his attempts to become more commercially viable as an artist. The songs “Hood Nigga” and “Lost,” as well as their music videos, are analyzed to show how Zoe presents his masculinity and his place.

*Hood Nigga*¹³ (2007)

As noted earlier, Zoe’s first single was “Hood Nigga,” which he self-produced and used as the primary pitch to get signed by Block Entertainment. Besides its commercial appeal and catchy hook, “Hood Nigga” is the single that firmly establishes Zoe’s identity as a hard and hypermasculine rapper who revels in the conspicuous consumption of cars and women. The song beat is like many Southern rap songs that use a driving bass as a means of capturing a listener (Grem, 2006). Zoe’s hook conjures up

¹³ The song was renamed “Hood Figga” for its radio and music video versions
both the trap lifestyle and the hypersexuality that gangsta rappers must reference as a means of asserting their masculinity. The “hook” of the song is as follows:

Man she say she want a hood nigga

I keep the purp by the pound

The trunk stay bumpin’, y’all know we run the town

Hood nigga

And I keep a bad bitch around

Thick bitch, long hair, yellow, white, red, brown

Hood nigga

And my Chevy sittin on 24’s

Flats look like flapjack, pancake you ain’t know

This verse plays upon common tropes of hip-hop masculinity such as conspicuous consumption of women and cars, but Zoe also tries to introduce his Southernness through the use of lingo such as purp. Zoe affirms his claims of hypermasculinity through repetition (Hood Nigga) and by going more into detail about the type of women he consumes and the type of rims on his Chevy. In the video, Zoe rides through Atlanta in a 1970s Chevy Monte Carlo with 24-inch rims, and in several shots, the camera focuses on the rims or on the Latina sitting in the passenger seat as Zoe drives. Atlanta is featured prominently as Zoe drives by locations that signify his proximity to the trap. The neighborhoods are depicted as the hood, though only Atlanta residents would recognize the street names and make the connection between Zoe and

14 Purp has two meanings, both of which are commonly used among Southern rappers. It can either mean a type of marijuana that is supposedly purple in color, or it can mean an alcoholic mix of cough syrup, soda, and vodka. The latter reference is more common among Atlanta rappers because it is a geographically specific variation of syzzurp, which is more commonly referenced in songs by Tennessee rappers such as Three 6 Mafia and Young Buck.
areas such as Southwest Atlanta and East Point. As noted earlier, Zoe also uses Boyz N Da Hood and Yung Joc in the video as a means of name recognition, and their presence indicates that Zoe is “worthy” of being consumed by both the hardcore and mainstream audience. Joc’s appearance gives Zoe more mass credibility becomes of his mainstream success, while Boyz N Da Hood affirm Zoe’s connection to the hardcore base of listeners. Zoe attempts to build up his hood credentials by rapping:

    And I don’t need a scale for the work
    I can eyeball purp, I am not you jerk
    Hatin’ on me will make your situation worse
    You don’t wanna take a ride in that long black hearse
    All eyes on me, shawty I’m a bomb first
    I’m the truth and they say the truth hurts
    Hustle mean hard work, hard work
    If you scared go to church
    Man this rap shit is easy, every beat I get I murk

Zoe’s implied violence towards his enemies (referencing the hearse) and his affirmations of the trap lifestyle (“I don’t need a scale for the work”) are underscored in the images in the video, in which he often wears a hooded sweat shirt and mugs menacingly at the camera. Zoe positions his masculinity both lyrically and visually within the trap, seeking to legitimize his street credibility to his consumers. But Zoe also makes it clear that his violence and his trap dealings come second to his consumption of women, a claim he repeats in the song and reinforces through the video. In the song, Zoe boasts of the different type of women he consumes, a common refrain among rappers
seeking to validate their masculinity (Collins, 2005; Jhally, 2006; Fitts, 2008). But in the video, Zoe’s women are juxtaposed into the trap, which symbolically merges fantasy (modelesque women of different ethnicities) into a claim of reality (the streets of Atlanta). For Zoe, this positioning of women seems to support his claim that he does not have to leave the trap to consume beautiful women and that they come to him. Zoe boasts that his consumption of women is not limited to ordinary women, but that he will be:

Watchin out for gold-diggers like Kanye,

But I will play Beyonce or Ashanti,

Maybe Keyshia Cole, said she should've cheated if she eva come my way,

Get some head from Fantasia on the highway,

Trickin' out Magic City every Monday,

It ain't trickin' if you got it dat's what I say, you say?

I say and what I say goes.

Zoe’s name-dropping reflects his bravado as he makes claims about his chances with singers such as Beyonce and Keyshia Cole, both of who were romantically linked with other rappers. The Keyshia Cole reference is especially striking, since she had been at one time engaged to former Boyz N Da Hood member Young Jeezy. Zoe also references Magic City Mondays, which, as noted in Chapter 4, has significant brand recognition in hip-hop culture. At the end of the video, Zoe is in a nightclub with women in the VIP section sitting next to him and drinking alcohol. He and his crew are dressed in all black, while the women wear club dresses. The video’s last frames seek to reaffirm Zoe’s status as a player and a hustler entrenched in the trap.
The song’s lyrics and visual images illustrate how Zoe seeks to make a name for himself. Rather than trying to deviate from the trap style, Zoe appears to rely upon the well-worn tropes that have worked for fellow Atlanta rappers and underscores them with images that are somewhat common in other music videos (Perry, 2004; Jhally, 2006; Ogbar, 2007). By emphasizing place and creating a symbolic space in which the trap and material excesses are merged, Zoe appears to be seeking to show that as a newcomer, he is in a position of power. The video is consistent with Zoe’s lyrical claims, emphasizing the three primary themes he identifies with: money, street credibility, and conspicuous consumption. As Vernallis (2004) notes, the video’s effectiveness is often predicated upon its correlation with the lyrics. The video is a reinforcement of Zoe’s lyrical claims, positioning him as a “Hood Nigga” whose presence in the trap enables him to drive customized cars and consume women. The video’s use of well-established signifiers of masculinity and consumption underscores Fitts’s (2008) claim that “the overwhelming display of women’s bodies are a requisite component of self-promotion” (p. 212). But as the analysis of “Lost” will show, Zoe’s changing identification with the “Hood Nigga” image and the trap is a way to get credibility among consumers while building a more distinct and eclectic artistic identity.

Lost (2009)

If “Hood Nigga” established Zoe’s identity as a trap artist and budding mainstream commodity, “Lost” represents a marked divergence from trap music’s story-building process. The song neither references the trap nor conspicuous consumption of women, and there is no mention of Atlanta. Instead, as Zoe himself notes, “Lost” is more of an introspective ballad that articulates a man’s struggles with his masculinity and the
pressures of maintaining an image for the purposes of celebrity. The single, which is sung by Zoe, begins slowly and moves faster as the song progresses, focusing more on a treble background than bass. Because of its lack of radio play, “Lost” was distributed as an online music video, making the visuals in the single more important to its popularity than the lyrics of the song. In the video, Zoe walks past adoring fans, looking confusedly at them as he receives adulation from women and approving head nods from men. For most of the video, Zoe drives through different parts of Atlanta at night. The images of Atlanta’s skyline and the streets of downtown are the only references to the city, since Zoe makes no mention in the song. Zoe begins the song – which, in the video, corresponds to his abrupt departure from his posse and the adoring backstage fans – by rapping:

Walking around looking for a way

But no one tells me which way to go

I'm caught up in a world

A labyrinth, a maze

Where yes men could easily be known.

I ask them no questions

They give me no answers

Following the wise

But they're walking in pampers

Give me a cigarette
Zoe pleads for direction, telling the listener (and viewer) that he has taken wrong turns looking for a right way. The lyrics also seem to critique the “follow the leader” mentality of the hip-hop industry, which, as Ogbar (2007) notes, is replete with reproductions of the same images and texts. Zoe appears to question the independence of these wise men – presumably the rap executives who are tasked with building careers – when, in the larger picture of the hip-hop industries, they are not much more “grown up” than the rappers. Zoe’s laments might seem like an indirect critique on creative managers such as Spencer or nominal label heads such as Puffy Combs, but the lyrics are presented in such a way that provide for multiple interpretations of those lines. The lyrics, when put into the broader context of the song, also help to push along the narrative of self-reflection. To highlight these inner conflicts, the video includes a brief scene in which Zoe is in a motel with a prostitute, but after the night is over, he washes his face and stares blankly at the mirror. The hook of the song repeats as Zoe drives through the city, and stops at a traffic light. As he waits, a young girl in a green sweater holding a teddy bear walks in front of him, looking tentatively at him as she passes his car. Zoe then drives on, rubbing his eyes and checking his rearview mirror. The camera then focuses on the girl as she crouches against a wall, holding the teddy bear. As the next scenes show the city scenes in fast motion, the chorus in the song repeats, “I’m losing my mind.” As Zoe drives, the images of the young girl and the prostitute blur together, as do images of Jesus, Buddha, the Virgin Mary, and Ganesha. In this succession of frames, Zoe appears
to interrogate his relationships with women. In these scenes, one can interpret Zoe’s conflation of the prostitute and the young girl as his attempt to question how gendered hierarchies have shaped his own masculinity. Zoe’s use of religious deities also reveals his desire to find salvation, particularly since the trap has been represented in popular culture as being beyond hope and saving. Ultimately, as the rap’s last verse indicates, Zoe is in a war with himself, between the man he thinks he is and the man he really is. The song culminates with Zoe rapping:

*I'm makin’ this money*

*Just to go spend it*

*Livin’ the good life*

*Hope nobody ends it*

*But who are you kidding?*

*Ay who are you lying to?*

*You know if they want you*

*Best believe they will find you*

It is unclear just who “they” are, but it appears that Zoe makes multiple connections here. The first can be on the micro level, where Zoe’s lyrics imply that no matter how successful he is (living the good life), his personal demons will catch up with him. In this sense, these lyrics can be taken as a caveat. However, if interpreted in another way, Zoe’s lyrics can also seem to imply that “they” are the cultural industries, which act as Big Brother. Such an interpretation might also conform to Zoe’s earlier statements about how he sees the corporation and how he views issues of control in the cultural production process. But the video seems to underscore the first interpretation. In the
video, Zoe is alone on the top level of a parking garage, confronting a hooded man. The hooded man reveals himself to be Zoe, and the two men are staring at each other and appearing “lost” in their quest for self-discovery. As the hook repeats, the video returns to the opening sequences and Zoe’s interaction with adoring fans. But instead of escaping, Zoe walks confidently towards a curtain, pulling them apart to reveal a light. The video ends on a more positive note than the song, implying to the viewer that Zoe has “found” himself on stage as a rapper. But the song and the video underscore an identity conflict that Zoe appears willing to share with his audience, similar to the candid self-reflections of more “conscious” rappers such as Common, Talib Kweli, and Kanye West. In the song and in the video, Zoe is unsure of his masculinity and uncomfortable with the celebrity that has accompanied his rise as a rapper. More importantly, his critique of how he is supposed to act versus of how he wants to be reflects a stark contrast between self-conceptualization and performative identities. The song is candidly introspective, and more importantly, the video embodies the eternal postcolonial struggle that Fanon (1967) has detailed and reflects his thesis that the Black male “is forever in combat with his own image” (p. 194). Moreover, “Lost” also appears to be Zoe’s effort to contrast the “Hood Nigga” image that gave his career traction. To reflect Fanon’s (1967) view, it appears that Zoe is acknowledging that Alonzo Mathis must embrace Gorilla Zoe, as “the Other will become the mainstay of his preoccupations and his desires” (p. 170).

When comparing both songs and the music videos, it is apparent that Zoe is seeking to show growth as an artist. The significant difference between both is unusual, given that many rappers have first established a record of sales before changing their style. Though Zoe continues to identify himself as a trap artist, he is also appearing to
engage in a critical self-examination that has likely broadened his appeal among consumers. Whether this introspection is meant to sell more albums and generate more downloads for “Lost” is moot in relation to the bigger picture: that Zoe would stray from a street narrative that proved to be successful in his first album. Moreover, the visual imagery in “Lost” neither reflects the trap nor the typical gangsta rap video formula. While political economy scholars such as Kelly (2005a) and Fitts (2008) argue that rap music videos reproduce common tropes of Black hypermasculinity and hypersexuality, Zoe’s “Lost” appears to partially undercut that claim. “Hood Nigga” could be viewed as an important foundation for building a base, but “Lost” is, from a viewer’s standpoint, a conscious attempt to expand a consumer base while giving Zoe a brand identity that is not solely dependent on the trap. While expanding the brand ultimately helps Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group sell more of Zoe, it is important to note that Zoe’s introspection in a song such as “Lost” might not only be driven by the bottom line. As the next two sections will show, the production of cultural texts involves Zoe’s negotiation with both his creative management and consumers.

**Trappin’ because you want me to be: The Cultural Production of Gorilla Zoe**

As the previous section showed, Zoe’s songs and music videos are consistent with an artist and his label’s efforts to grow a brand while maintaining the street credibility and proximity to Atlanta as a means of appealing to an established consumer base. While he continues to appeal and promote aspects of the “Hood Nigga,” Zoe’s self-described diversity and versatility have given him more opportunities to move outside of the trap music category. From his start in 2007 as a plug-in member for Boyz N Da Hood and
solo trap artist, Zoe has allowed his creative management to expand his brand name to more mainstream consumption markets, particularly through the Internet, which has helped to collapse the regionality of hip-hop production markets (Chang, 2006). The cost-effectiveness of expanding one’s brand through the Internet cannot be understated, especially since it does not strain a corporation’s marketing budget or require the artist to exhaustively self promote. However, given the savvy of Bad Boy and Warner Music Group’s guerilla marketing efforts and the label’s support for Spencer’s street teams, Zoe has been able to project a more entrepreneurial, hustler-type image. As XXL raved, “Gorilla Zoe himself is the strongest force behind his candidacy for stardom in the Southern rap capital.”

“Ain’t nobody gonna promote me harder than me,” says Zoe, whose song “Hood Nigga” is gaining momentum on national airwaves. “You wanna know why I got a street buzz? I did nine mixtapes this year… Why do you need a label to show you how to promote your muthafuckin’ self? If you’re working harder than everybody, you’re going to make it.” (“Next Up,” 2007).

Zoe’s street and self-styled hustler image, which is part biography and part media management, helps to appeal to hardcore hip-hop fans who do not trust rappers signed to the “majors,” but his bravado belies the corporate forces that have helped to move him beyond the Atlanta rap scene. Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s dual deals with Zoe as a solo artist and as a member of Boyz N Da Hood allow the companies and Zoe more flexibility to cultivate a multi-pronged approach to his commodification. On one hand, Zoe’s affiliation with Boyz N Da Hood and the trap music scene has helped him continue to build a base on the mixtape circuit and in strip clubs throughout the South. Here, Block’s street teams and creative management help to
push Zoe within Atlanta and in Southern cities where he is likely to receive a strong reception. This localized marketing approach helps to secure the support of Atlanta rap fans eager to consume homegrown and “authentic” products and also gives Zoe legitimacy among the city’s various cultural gatekeepers (strip clubs, local radio and hip-hop media, and night clubs). The marketing campaigns in cities such as Atlanta affirm Zoe’s connection to the trap and the creative managers tasked with making Zoe sellable seek to underscore the link. As Zoe’s songs and his music videos show, his image has been meticulously crafted and strategically distributed by Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. The strategic distribution begins in the South before moving to other cities. Prez (2009) says Bad Boy can develop its marketing and distribution efforts more slowly and deliberately because it is not as burdened by the short-term demands of SoundScan numbers. Instead, he says, artists such as Zoe provide opportunities for the label to develop loyal consumers in the South while the wider distribution efforts take shape. The success of “Hood Nigga” gave Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group enough evidence that Zoe could follow the solo career trajectory of Yung Joc, Young Jeezy and T.I., fellow trap artists who have not only sold well commercially, but have expanded their brand recognition in other aspects of the cultural industries.

But Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s marketing and promotion efforts also highlight some of the pitfalls of “traditional” distribution such as radio. While “Hood Nigga” received significant airplay on urban format stations, “Lost” did not have much airplay beyond Atlanta and other Southern cities. As one music reporter asked: “So why isn't Urban radio all over this record? The song, an introspective
ballad that cuts against the grain of overflowing Cristal and flossy bravado, is a bit unusual for the format. Whatever the reason, programmers are stopping short of top 25 or even top 50 rotation” (Robinson, 2009). Part of this, as noted in Chapter 4, has to do with corporate relationships between parent labels and corporate radio conglomerates such as Clear Channel and Radio One. Radio programmers and managing directors might be skeptical of the “sellability” of a song such as “Lost” – which contradicts many of the hyperbolic claims of conspicuous consumption and gunplay that have been a staple of hardcore rap – because Zoe does not have the name recognition of more prominent Atlanta rappers such as T.I. or Ludacris. Still, the song’s Internet success has raised the possibility that Zoe’s creative management chose to push on the web over the radio to generate a more widespread buzz and higher demand. The labels did this with the intent of moving Zoe out of the trap and into mainstream consumption, particularly among tech-savvy consumers who rely more on the Internet than television and radio to consume cultural texts. As Digital Music News, the web trade publication that tracks trends in the cultural industries’ move to the Internet, reported, “Whether ‘Lost’ fits the current definition of Urban ‘stationality’ appears a major issue for Urban PDs, though radio stations risk becoming late-movers on a song with major mass appeal” (Robinson, 2009). Interestingly, urban and Top 40 radio stations that ignored “Lost” regularly played T.I.’s “Dead and Gone,” an introspective ballad featuring Justin Timberlake, perhaps cognizant of the crossover appeal that both artists had among music consumers.

But radio play is not always indicative of what’s “hot,” and the labels and their creative management teams must ensure that Zoe’s lack of air time on radio does not hinder his exposure to other sites of consumption. To do this, the publicity regimes tasked
with expanding the brand have gone outside of hip-hop media in order to make Zoe into a more consumable product. Tahira Wright (2009), who coordinates publicity efforts with the Warner Music Group marketing staff in New York, secured an interview for Zoe in a tattoo magazine and helped Zoe to start a web site, www.dontfeeddaanimal.com that detailed the rapper’s weight loss efforts. Wright says the weight loss challenge, which is shown in video clips on the web site, is meant to give Zoe an added dimension as someone fans can relate to.

People across all genres can relate to weight loss and getting thin so that’s kind of helped expose him to different markets. When you have urban artists or a southern artist or a rapper, they’re trying to reach different markets, you kind of have to look at certain things maybe about their personality or their interests that could help expose them to a broader audience. Where it’s not just let’s just get this rapper on this late-night show, but is there a certain interest, say he has like technology or it could be just something really neat that could help branch him in another way (T. Wright, personal communication, January 23, 2009).

The weight loss challenge is among the highlights of Zoe’s web site, which also has the Bad Boy South and Block Entertainment logos featured prominently on the home page. The web site also features a web-only movie titled after Zoe’s second release, which highlights “the struggles and drama Alonzo Mathis went to become Gorilla Zoe the rap star” (www.dontfeeddaanimal.com). The web site’s high quality appearance, which includes video clips from Zoe’s workouts, appearances with Puffy Combs, and studio sessions, helps to promote an image of Zoe as more than a trap artist. In fact, while the “cover” image of Zoe smoking a cigar and sitting behind stacks of money is the first prominent pic on the web site, a picture further down on the page has a side shot of Zoe
with his stomach hanging out, reminding the viewer that Zoe is taking part in the weight loss. When taken together, the images highlight Zoe’s appeal to his base (through the hypermasculine imagery that seek to show a “Hood Nigga” in control) and his efforts to reach a broader audience (the self-deprecation of the stomach shot might be appealing to those not interested in his music, but his weight loss efforts). The weight loss picture then links to Zoe’s blog, in which he offers weekly updates on his quest to lose weight and health tips for those seeking to do the same. Creative managers such as Wright and studio executives such as Spencer believe that Zoe can maintain the hard image that gave him the street buzz while appealing to more mainstream consumers using humor and introspection. More importantly, the web site, in contrast to interviews he has done in hip-hop publications such as XXL and The Source, focuses on his solo career and does not reference his affiliation to Boyz N Da Hood.

As noted earlier in this section, the web is a low-cost way to generate more exposure for an artist, particularly one who needs to rely on formats other than urban radio to widen his appeal and distribution. Zoe’s web site and other forms of distribution such as MySpace and Bad Boy’s blog have helped to circulate him to mainstream and worldwide audiences. This, as Digital Music News (2009) points out, has created enough buzz for Zoe to bypass radio into the mass consumption market. As Williamson and Cloonan (2007) point out, the download appeal of songs and the direct access music consumers have to their favorite artists have changed the way cultural industries market their products. Zoe’s success is indicative of Bad Boy and Warner Music Group’s understanding of the limitations of terrestrial radio and the potential of the Internet as a medium to mobilize mass consumption. The web buzz helped Zoe’s video for “Lost”
rank in the top five in BET’s 106th & Park, the television program considered one of the primary indicators of a rapper or rap group’s success. Once Zoe makes it to the mainstream market, however, the labels’ appeal to the base does not end. In fact, as Spencer has said in previous interviews, Block Entertainment intensifies its outreach to Atlanta gatekeepers in order to affirm Zoe’s proximity to the city (“Block Commandments,” 2007).

Block and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s marketing strategy conforms to Spencer and Prez’s claims that an artist and his creative management must work to create a movement from ground up. Prez (2009) says that Bad Boy is steeped in the mixtape culture, adding that “one of the things Bad Boy has always prided itself on is our ability to recognize the curve and the trends. [We] see the trends before they become something in the mainstream. … The streets are always going to dictate what’s hot. And I think that if you keep your ear close enough to the streets you’ll know” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009). Perhaps sensitive to Atlantans’ perceptions that music produced in New York and Los Angeles had long been pushed upon Southern consumers, Block Entertainment’s localized efforts act as a way of maintaining Zoe’s connection to a base. As Spencer points out, Atlanta rappers must resonate with the region and “speak to its streets” and serve as “the broadcasters from the hood” (“Star Maker,” 2006). This is why Zoe, through the publicity management of Wright, continues to do promotional interviews in magazines such as Southeastern and Down, which have geographically specific audiences. In these interviews, Zoe talks up his connection to specific parts of the Atlanta region, and the publicity images often reflect Zoe’s proximity to and positionality within the trap and the streets of Atlanta. In Southeastern magazine,
for instance, Zoe’s publicity photo was taken in front of an abandoned factory in East Point in order to emphasize his connection to the poverty and blight of his hometown. Wright is tasked with ensuring that Zoe keeps speaking to the Southern listeners who view him as an authentic trap artist.

To make Zoe relevant in markets such as New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Chicago, the labels use the Warner marketing staff to expose him to target audiences. In these efforts, marketing efforts are tied to Zoe’s connection to the “symbolic” Atlanta and his record deal with Bad Boy. Prez (2009) notes that having Bad Boy attached to an artist’s name increases his visibility and gives him instant brand credibility among non-hardcore fans. Signing with Bad Boy, he says, is the sign that the artist has moved up to the “big leagues” of the cultural industries. “Bad Boy, that’s like the New York Yankees; it doesn’t matter if you grow up in LA everybody wants to play in the house that Ruth built” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009). In addition to having the prestige of the Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group during national marketing and publicity tours, Zoe benefits from a corporate structure whose bottom line is to make money – for him and the corporation’s shareholders. This is why Zoe’s creative management team in Atlanta defers to New York when it comes to strategic decisions that involve more than the on-the-ground approaches to commodification. Spencer credits “the machine at the record label” for organizing cultural work in a way that stresses efficiency and effectiveness in commodifying Zoe once he records his album.

You can have a good record, but if the right people aren't around you, it doesn't matter. People need to learn to do their research and hire the peeps who are going to get the job done. It's nice to take care of your homies, but it they can't help you sell records, it's not going to matter ("Star Maker," 2006).
Ultimately, for the corporations in charge of producing Zoe, his street credibility and popularity in Atlanta come second to his ability to sell to a broader audience, which impacts Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group’s hold on the hip-hop consumption market (Basu, 2005). But commodifying Zoe and broadening his appeal is not just a corporate decision handed down from Warner Music Group’s executive offices in New York. The creative managers in Atlanta, many of who have become close with Zoe, are vested in his success. Wright, who has been tasked with promoting Zoe in advance of the second album release, says she has bonded with her client and says she works to make sure he succeeds.

My relationship with him, for instance, is not always, “Zoe you have interviews, Zoe let’s do this,” you know what I mean? It’s not always workable, I know how to say, well I have this little break from my work, let me go to my studio and just sit back, relax, and listen to what he’s working on. … It’s going to come off really fake and it won’t be authentic, so I try to definitely work in projects that I believe in, and with him it’s almost like a Cinderella story. Like him coming in to Block in May and then replacing Joc, a star rapper right now. …I can really see the growth stage, and so that just makes me excited to want to tell everyone else about his story (T. Wright, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

Wright is not the only cultural worker who seems to believe in Zoe. The street teams tasked to create buzz for him in the months before his album release must also be fully behind the artist. As a result, the guerilla marketing campaigns spearheaded by Block Entertainment at the behest of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Groups are carried out by fans who have a strong emotional tie-in to Zoe’s success. The support that Wright and the street teams have given Zoe is not necessarily tied to the bottom line (though
Wright’s exposure as a publicist would likely increase and the street team members might have other opportunities arise as a result of better sales), which lends credence to Banks’s (2006) idea that cultural work is not necessarily tied to the industries that govern production. Similarly, managers such as Spencer and Brooks are tied to the artists they produce and manage; their careers are shaped by the success of rappers such as Zoe.

While Spencer has offered familial support to Zoe and has had a hands-on approach in developing his career, he notes that such loyalty is part of his business operation. Making Zoe into a superstar is not only good for Spencer’s reputation, it is good for Block Entertainment’s future deals with corporate parents such as Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. Spencer admits this was his primary rationale for establishing Boyz N Da Hood and plugging in Zoe when Yung Joc left.

> When I built [Boyz N Da Hood] it was meant to be a center for new artists to come in. Everybody was signed to a one album deal. Everybody. Whoever made it first should come up. I wanted to take four artists and blow them up. If I could make four unknown kids I knew I’d be in the game forever. When I first came up with Boyz N Da Hood I made 8 or 9 records with T.I., Sean Paul from Youngbloodz, Jody Breeze and Big Gee (Bad Boy Forever, 2006).

But Spencer is more vested in Zoe’s success because Zoe, unlike former Boyz N Da Hood members Young Jeezy, Yung Joc, and Jody Breeze, remains signed to Block Entertainment. Because of this, Block Spencer’s reputation as a producer and talent scout for Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group is tied to Zoe’s development as a solo artist. Thus, while Zoe’s wider distribution benefits Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group, Spencer must also ensure that Zoe is marketed in a way that is consistent with his image. As a result, Zoe is positioned as moving beyond the trap yet spatially and symbolically
close to it. His promotional photo shoots are often done in front of places of geographical and cultural significance to Atlanta’s hip-hop scene while the interviews he does with hip-hop magazines boast of his connection to the trap even as he seeks to carve out an image that does not rely merely on his street credibility.

But in the dynamics of cultural production, Zoe realizes that the trap is not only significant for the base of his consumers, but a major factor in his creative management’s support. If he were to stray too far from the street narrative and the “Hood Nigga” image, he would no longer be a Block rapper and would likely lose support from Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. While more successful rappers such as T.I. have been able to move from the trap – and Atlanta – as a result of getting new deals, Zoe’s placement in the hip-hop world and his career outlook remains tenuous. As the next section will show, Zoe’s understanding of these dynamics and his role as a content creator within the cultural industries significantly shape his views on agency and authenticity in the cultural production process.

**What’s keeping it real? Self-conceptualization and agency in the commodification process**

While rappers such as Zoe give Spencer credit for finding them and giving them a space to develop as artists, Spencer is clear about the distinction between artist loyalty and friendship. He says blurring these lines often undercuts the operations of a business. Keeping it real, the worst part is if you get personal, turning your artists into friends. You can’t be real friends in this game, it’s worse than the street game, trust me. It’s hard to
turn business partners into friends and it is hard doing business with family – being business partners with family (Bad Boy Forever, 2006).

Spencer’s comments contrast what Zoe states about viewing the relationship between an artist and the label as similar to that of a parent and child. In other words, while Zoe sees aspects of family in these dynamics, Spencer makes it clear that these dealings are strictly business, and that a label’s investment into an artist are motivated primarily by the bottom line. Accordingly, many rappers quickly understand or are forced to learn that beneath the cliques, the parties, and the media messaging, hip-hop is a business (Basu, 2005; Kelley, 2005a). Making music is work and must ultimately be recognized as labor for a corporation. Spencer’s caveat about mixing friendships with business defines the nature of cultural work in the hip-hop industry, and for a rapper such as Zoe, understanding his position in an organizational hierarchy and his role in the cultural production process are tied directly to his development as an artist and distribution as a brand. Zoe says he understands that his production of music is only one aspect of the commodification process, and that in order to get wider distribution, he must cede control of his music and his image to his creative managers and the corporate labels. When he first signed with Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group, Zoe says the companies were more interested in developing him as a street artist. But in producing his first album and beginning to take on wider distribution, Zoe says he began to understand how the cultural industries work and how corporate forces in New York impact him as a rapper in Atlanta.

I see the big things, it’s a corporation now. Puff is a corporation, he has [inaudible] the rock going on, and we’re also part of the Warner/Atlantic/Elektra, which is all in New York. And … we’re based in Atlanta, so I do think about that, and I say it’s a positive
and a negative, double-edged sword like. Opportunities are bigger because we’re dealing with a big corporation, but they’re so big that they might not see the movement at the bottom. So you’ve got to make the movement big and so that’s why you have to take two months before they understand what’s going on, it might take two months to grow something. That’s what, it’s such a big corporation that they show so much love to me that, it’s like once they catch a song and that’s a blessing (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Zoe’s comments seem to hint at the fact that he understands the limits of the familial relationship that labels have with artists. Moreover, his statements also confirm the idea that the corporation will invest more money if it is getting a good return on its investment. Once Welcome to the Zoo sold over 100,000 copies, Zoe says executives at Bad Boy/Atlantic/ Warner Music Group began communicating with him and the management at Block Entertainment to begin developing an image that was more consumable to a wider audience. He says that once he passed the litmus tests in Atlanta and got more recognition outside of the city, “that is when they come in. You know…when you start growing and you get wherever, they … come in and start maneuvering, you know. But that’s what the parent label does” (A. Mathis, personal communication, January 22, 2009). Zoe says that because the parent label controls much of his access to wider markets, he often accedes to their wishes. However, he says, conflicts arise when he feels that he is being pulled in different directions from where he wants to go as an artist. He implies that differences over his commodification sometimes lead to a tug of war between the New York offices and the creative management in Atlanta. But Zoe says these conflicts are minimal and that his commodification has been handled in a way that allows him to maintain a core identity as an artist. Zoe says that as
a Block artist, he must keep some connection to the streets and appeal to the audiences that validate his legitimacy as a rapper. For Zoe, keeping it real is important even as he develops more eclectic musical styles and embraces more diverse images beyond the trap.

But how does Zoe conceptualize authenticity? Realness is not only connected to identity, but the relationship the rapper has to his work and to his audience. He says he is aware that the images and music he produces are meant for mass consumption, and that his identity as an artist must be consistent with the buy-in from fans.

I can do any kind of music now, like rock music or techno, but I can’t put that out yet, because my fans might not understand, the fan base that I have built might not be ready for that, ‘cause the last thing they heard was ‘Hood Nigga.’ If you move as fast as your music moves, then you’re going to lose the fan base you already have. You might obtain a new fan base, or a bigger fan base, but your hard core die hard fans are going to be lost if they’re not with it (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

For Zoe, keeping it real – which includes positioning himself in close proximity to Atlanta (“I am Atlanta,” he says) – is also vocational. Rappers, he says, are paid to keep it real and that authenticity is tied to one’s realization of the kind of work he does. Realness, he says, is about making the music and presenting an image that will sell records, advance one’s career, and create more opportunities for future success.

Let’s keep it real. We’re rapping … we’re paid to do so, and we get paid to make music and do interviews, and, you know, it’s a job. That’s keeping it real. That’s what I say, I keep it real myself and I understand that it’s a job. Now I’m glad it’s a job that I love to do and I can express myself, but I must understand that I have to express myself in ways
where everybody feels like I’m expressing themselves for them too (A. Mathis, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Zoe’s comments seem to reflect his understanding that his creative expression is tempered by both corporate expectations and fan demands, and that his desire to grow as an artist must be reconciled with an image that has been cultivated through a multi-pronged commodification process and embraced by consumers. The comments also seem to strike at the heart of a tension between what Zoe wants as an artist and what he must do to fulfill his obligations as a laborer for the cultural industries and as a commodity for the consumers.

Zoe says that while he would like to have more creative freedom and experiment both musically and visually, he understands that the “Hood Nigga” – and the hypermasculine image he exudes on camera – must remain as part of a core identity that fans identify as real. Moreover, as noted earlier, being connected to the trap is vital for the continued backing of Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. The “Hood Nigga,” he says, is an image by which he can continue to maintain his base. However, Zoe says understands that his realness is in many ways performative. He makes a distinction between his realness as Gorilla Zoe the rapper and Alonzo Mathis. What people need to know about Gorilla Zoe as an artist and/or Alonzo – do not put, do not judge or think that you know anything or know it all about either one of them guys because the sky’s the limit for both of them. And I’m, I’m a character. I’m funny. I’m not as serious as people think I am…until it’s time to get serious. Then I’ll tear a motherfucker’s head off (A. Mathis, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

These comments seem to indicate that Zoe must cater to an audience and “assume a role” in public performance. Zoe says that he must go into character during recording
sessions, video shoots, and publicity photos in order to maintain a “hard” image an appeal
to fans who buy his authenticity. He says once the cameras go off or when he leaves the
studio, he makes jokes and does not take himself seriously. While in the studio during my
visit to Atlanta, Zoe appeared to feel at ease among the young men who had come to his
informal listening session with a California DJ. He danced and cracked jokes while
drinking a bottle of malt liquor. Zoe’s behavior away from the site of cultural production
conforms to Conrad Tillard’s belief that rappers do differentiate between their “real”
selves and the image they project to a mass audience. For Zoe, being part of the rap scene
has meant acknowledging the limits of his creative expression and giving up control of
his cultural production to creative management teams whose job is to make him – and the
corporate labels he is signed to – successful. As he has gained more notoriety as an artist,
he says that he has been able to get more say in how he is commodified. Because of the
success of “Hood Nigga” as a single and the labels’ belief that Zoe would be a lucrative
artist, he says he was able to give his creative management direction in how he wanted to
produce the music video for “Lost,” which he calls:

The best rap video I have to this day, and it’s what I want. I don’t wanna’ stand in front
of no more Chevys. I don’t care what I’m talkin’ about. You will not get me to stand
there and rap. ‘Cause nobody wants to see that. Let’s make a movie. Let’s make it
interesting (A. Mathis, personal communication, January 22, 2009).

Despite his understanding of how to “play a role” to fulfill the demands of
creative management, the corporation and consumers, Zoe’s comments appear to reflect
his discomfort with defining his masculinity in proximity to the trap and the conspicuous
consumption (standing in front of Chevys) associated with the lifestyle. However, Zoe
says he is gaining more leverage because “musically, I got the streets right now, you
know what I’m sayin’ – I got…Atlanta” (A. Mathis, personal communication, January 22, 2009). He states that his quick rise in the marketplace of hip-hop consumption, fueled by marketing strategies that targeted both Atlanta listeners and more mainstream audiences, has given him increased say in how he is produced and commodified. He says more album sales and more exposure will afford him the same opportunity to change his style and give him more negotiating power in future recording and production deals. For Zoe, the trap image and the hypermasculinity he exuded early in his career was a down payment on being able to exert more agency in the future. But he says that he must establish a brand name and quantify his commercial success before being in a position to have control in the cultural production process. As he balances his own identity with the demands of his label and the wants of his fans, Zoe predicts his increasing role in the cultural production process will be on pace with his growth as an artist. Until he reaches a more stable position within the cultural industries, he says Gorilla Zoe must cater to the whims of creative management and consumers.

My time is, is gonna’ be like elastic because this, they, this, they, they – you give them what they, what they eat. All that they know. And all they know is Gorilla Zoe. You know, and after so many years – five or six years of Gorilla Zoe, you get Lambo Zoe, and then you get Alonzo Mathis. See like, it, it never stop - I’m a make music. My music is always gonna change, so, you know, right now I give ‘em what they want of Gorilla Zoe. But I got a whole another album. I got a CD over there. It’s crazy. It sounds nothing like what I got. Like, I got… European techno, crazy shit, you know what I’m sayin’, but you won’t hear that until Gorilla Zoe is done, you know (A. Mathis, personal communication, January 22, 2009).
Zoe’s projection of his career appears to reflect his understanding of place within the cultural production process, and that his needs as an artist often must take a backseat to the demands of a label or what consumers perceive to be authentic (“all that they know”). As noted in previous chapters, believability is a precursor to buyability in trap music, and Zoe has worked to present himself as an authentic product. While Zoe might understand the limitations of agency and his role in the cultural production process, his self-awareness is perhaps exceptional in a genre where others believe they have more authority and control than they do. Zoe is, as Toynbee (2003) would argue, active in his commodification through his use of the blog and his attempts at self-promotion (“Ain’t no one gonna promote me harder than me”), but his activity stems more from understanding his position in the field of cultural production and the specific labor he must perform as a worker in the cultural industries. Zoe states that authenticity is a negotiation among the artist, his creative management and the corporate parents, and consumers who ultimately decide his commercial viability. Unlike Jody, whose conflation of his performative identity and his real self has limited his exposure beyond the trap, Zoe seems to believe in a pragmatism that re-defines realness in terms of vocation. Zoe’s self-conceptualization and his willingness to relinquish control of cultural production and his commodification to his creative management has likely helped his career, a notion that will be explored more in detail in Chapter 7.

The next chapter will compare the careers of Zoe and Jody and how each has fared in attempts to build a story for consumption and dealt with the cultural industries. In doing so, the chapter will seek to examine and articulate the ongoing tension between agency and structure in the cultural production process.
7

Knockin’ The Hustle: How Cultural Production, Corporate Interests, Masculinity and Agency Converge at the Trap

As Gorilla Zoe, a former airport cleaner and small-time drug dealer-turned-rapper enjoyed increased visibility from his two hit singles, Jody Breeze struggled to get recognition beyond the Southern mixtape circuit and gain more of a following outside of his “base.” Zoe, thanks to the support of his creative management, was able to expand his brand recognition, relying less upon the trap as his sales grew. But as chapters 5 and 6 showed, the commercial sales of one artist and the struggles of the other are not solely dependent on the quality of their songs.

The commodification of Jody and Zoe – including the symbolic construction of their masculinity and the role of place in that construction – has relied upon a combination of factors that converge in the cultural production process. As the interviews from both Jody and Zoe show, their involvement in the cultural production process may be linked with their degree of interaction with and acceptance of the cultural industries. Jody’s desire to keep it real and maintain a connection to the trap of Atlanta has possibly hindered his development as an artist and his recognition as a product in the mainstream. Zoe has tried to negotiate notions of authenticity and agency within a corporate structure, acknowledging the limitations of both when dealing with the demands of creative managers and consumers. In different ways, both artists have demonstrated the role of place, space, masculinity, and agency in the cultural production process. This is why comparing and analyzing their experiences as hip-hop performers and laborers in the
cultural industries is vital to understanding the dynamics between agency and structures. Moreover, their experiences highlight the dynamic processes of symbol creation and cultural work that take place within larger economic systems of production and distribution.

This project took on multiple issues of identity, focusing on the roles of race, masculinity, and space/place in the cultural production process, tying these factors in with the “big picture” of commodification, distribution, and brand signifying that take place within corporate cultural industries. In the case studies of Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe, five major themes emerged as factors in their cultural production: (corporate) label support, artist self-conceptualization, artist negotiation with creative management, representation of masculinity and importance of Atlanta and the trap in the artist’s commodification. These five themes will be explored and interrogated in this chapter, which seeks to tie the artists' careers to the theoretical frameworks – particularly as arising from issues and debates in political economy – outlined in Chapter 2. These themes are interrelated and have significant overlap, particularly in how Jody and Zoe have constructed their masculinity and have identified themselves in proximity to the trap. In connecting these themes to the superstructures of production, this chapter seeks to analyze the degree to which masculinity, race, and space/place have been industrialized and if/where agency can be enacted in the cultural production process. The chapter concludes by mapping out the theoretical and practical consequences of this project, and how scholarship on the cultural industries, hip-hop, and Black masculinity can find more points of intersection.
In comparing the careers of Jody and Zoe, the most striking disparity is in how each artist has benefited from the support of corporate labels. Jody began his career with Sho’Nuff and Warner Bros. Records, and as a result of being “hot” with the release of “Stay Fresh,” was added to Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music’s roster as a member of Boyz N Da Hood. But Jody never released a solo album for mainstream distribution, relying instead on the mixtape circuit and his reputation as a member of Boyz N Da Hood to build his story as a trap artist. As a result, Jody has remained a regional artist, supported by fans in Atlanta and other parts of the South, and as of early 2009, he was still unsigned by a record label. Zoe, on the other hand, signed deals with Block and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group as both a solo artist and member of Boyz N Da Hood, giving his creative management team more of a stake in his development. While Jody’s career has floundered in terms of sales and name recognition beyond Atlanta, Zoe has become rap’s “next big thing,” and his creative management has invested more in his development as an international commodity. Zoe is no longer solely tied with the trap, and his commercial success has allowed him to embrace a more mainstream-friendly image.

Jody and Zoe’s experiences with the cultural industries reveal much about them as artists, but they tell more about the nature of the cultural industries when it comes to the support of creative management and how creative managers influence the commodification process. Jody’s responses in Chapter 5 highlighted his frustrations with
Sho’Nuff Records/Warner Brothers and Block Entertainment/Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. Because Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group expected Jody to fulfill his contractual obligations to Boyz N Da Hood, his aspirations for a solo career took a backseat. But as Block Spencer himself has acknowledged, Boyz N Da Hood was primarily a steppingstone for its group members to pursue their own deals and a brand through which Bad Boy could extend its share in the Southern market.

To a degree, Block Spencer’s admission conforms to the idea that building a band is tantamount to building a brand that can sell in the marketplace and create enough of name recognition for the corporation to expand its sales. Ryan (1992) argues that creative managers such as Spencer, whose role it is to find “what’s hot” and funnel the sounds to the corporate entities in New York, are primarily responsible in the story and brand-building process. As he notes, creative managers are tasked with “positioning cultural commodities, of constructing their identity and promoting them to a position of significance. Under these conditions, stars and styles come to function in the market like brands, serving to order demand and stabilize sales patterns, allowing the corporations of culture to engage in a degree of planning” (Ryan, 1992: 185).

Ryan’s assessment of the role of creative management in the cultural production leads to a larger issue in the brand building of Jody Breeze: the role of corporate support. While it might be creative managers who work as the primary gatekeepers and image builders, the corporation’s financial investment into an artist such as Jody is what ultimately determines how and where he is distributed. When Sho’Nuff/Warner Brothers and Jody parted ways, Jody had no corporate backer to invest in his development as an artist and his image building in the marketplace of consumption. Although he might have
insisted on keeping it real (an idea that will be explored more later in this chapter), it is clear that his notions of authenticity did not prevent him from seeking another corporate backer to sign him.

Zoe, on the other hand, had significant build up even before the release of “Hood Nigga,” and his creative managers worked to create a street buzz that helped to give him name recognition almost immediately after the debut of his first album. Appearing on Yung Joc’s album provided Zoe with enough buzz in the months before the release of his own album that Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group decided that he was merited more of a marketing investment. Beyond the street teams and the Atlanta cultural gatekeepers, Zoe’s branding and name recognition came as a result of significant marketing investment by Warner Music Group. In the case of Zoe, the local buildup took place simultaneously as the national buildup, thanks to the support of the corporation overseeing his production and distribution. In marketing Zoe, Warner Music Group chose to invest its resources in building him as a solo artist over building the brand recognition for Boyz N Da Hood in their second album, which debuted the same week as Zoe’s Welcome to the Zoo. Spencer told Billboard that Zoe was more of a priority for Warner Music Group, which believed that “Hood Figga” (the radio-friendly version of “Hood Nigga”) would sell better than Boyz N Da Hood’s single “Everybody Know Me.”

When you have a [regional] group like Boyz N Da Hood, you need that label machine to take it to different regions like Los Angeles and New York. …Zoe taking off the way he did took much of the focus away from Boyz N Da Hood. There’s only so much a label can focus on at a time (Crosley, 2007).

Spencer’s comments uphold the idea of bottom-line considerations in the marketing and commodification process while, at least to a certain degree, undercutting
claims of independence by Southern labels. Spencer, as a creative manager, is constrained by the money allocated for marketing an artist or group. This makes the decision to develop artists and build their stories as an either-or proposition when it came to choosing, in this case, between Boyz N Da Hood and Gorilla Zoe. While Boyz N Da Hood might have been more established, the group had failed to build on its buzz as the “NWA of the South” following its debut. Moreover, trap music – with its drug-dealer connotations – appeared to be more geared towards solo artists such as T.I., Young Jeezy and Yung Joc instead of groups such as Boyz N Da Hood that had no clear “main” star. Given the limited marketing budget that a label such as Bad Boy has, it must, as Shawn Prez (2009) claims, act as a “boutique label” that uses alternative marketing methods to build hype. With Boyz N Da Hood’s limited viability and visibility outside of the South, it became clear to creative managers at Block and executives at Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group that they had more to work with and more to cash in on with Zoe.

To expound upon this notion, it is clear that the labels’ decision to promote Zoe over Boyz N Da Hood was impacted by global marketing considerations and the potential of an artist to reach the most consumers. Could a group such as Boyz N Da Hood or an artist such as Jody Breeze, whose narratives are based in the trap, reach a mainstream audience and bring a good enough return on Warner Music Group’s investment? Based on SoundScan numbers from Boyz N Da Hood’s first album, coupled with the defection of the group’s most well-known members, Young Jeezy and Yung Joc, Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group wagered against that prospect. Instead, the corporation relied upon the feedback of Spencer, the creative intermediary whose role was to provide the corporation the commodities that could sell the most.
Spencer justified the decision by noting that “for such acts as Boyz N Da Hood and Young Jeezy, Block frequently uses regional performances and mixtapes to build buzz in the Southeast” (Crosley, 2007). Spencer acknowledged the geographic limitations of Boyz N Da Hood, noting that story-building efforts outside of the South seemed to disappear after the first album. As a result, the buildup for the group’s second album was targeted for a niche audience, making the corporate investment minimal. On the other hand, the label decided that Zoe’s potential to sell records and have a significant market reach outside of Atlanta was worth investing in. Eric Wong, the senior VP of marketing for Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group, told Billboard that the corporation “had a long time to set up ‘Hood Figga,’ especially with Zoe being featured on Yung Joe's ‘Coffee Shop.’ We also put him on the Screamfest tour” (Crosley, 2007).

Wong’s comments reflect the importance of having corporate backing in the story-building process. By being “introduced” via a proven commodity – Yung Joc – and having national recognition among hip-hop fans as a result of the “Screamfest” tour, Zoe was positioned to have better sales and more buzz around his image. Though the story-building process for Zoe did have some similarities as Jody’s, particularly in creating buzz in Atlanta through the cultural gatekeepers mentioned in Chapter 4, Spencer and Wong allude to a more systematic marketing effort for Zoe that relied heavily on brand recognition. Both Ryan (1992) and Hesmondhalgh (2007) argue that corporations will invest more in artists they deem to be star-worthy. As Ryan (1992) notes, “like all marketing strategies, the making of stars is a pre-emptive strategy” (p. 207). This strategy
is essentially a cost-benefit analysis done by the corporation’s creative managers, who
dem whether the corporation’s investment into star-making and brand-building can
generate returns. Jody’s limited reach outside of Atlanta and the trap, and Boyz N Da
Hood’s waning popularity following their single, made them unsound investments for long-term star and brand-building efforts. Zoe, on the other hand, was not only boosted by his connection to the trap, but by the corporation’s efforts to make him more visible in the months before his debut album and his second release. Zoe’s buildup fits with Ryan’s semiotic argument that:

The conventionalized relation between name and image, signifier and signified, turns them into a Saussurian sign and the whole package of object and image into a text, operating in and through the grammars and vocabularies of marketing. Thus the name and image of the artist is ready for promotion within the existing hierarchy of talent, to be presented to the audiences as a star (Ryan, 1992: 205).

In this case, then, the sign-power of the trap and Atlanta, coupled with Zoe’s earlier (and thus inter-textual) appearance in the single of an already-established star, made Zoe into an easily consumable and familiar commodity-sign in the mainstream, especially as reinforced as these signs were used in his early songs/videos such as “Hood Figga/Hood Nigga.” As Chapter 6 argues, these larger sign systems (trap, Atlanta) were in turn signified by more specific words and images in the lyrics and video – all ultimately associated with, signifying and branding, Zoe.

The buildup for Zoe was significant, and it tells the impact of the corporation as a gatekeeper for its artists. The artists who have the best chance of being lucrative commodities are promoted and packaged, while those that are more niche-oriented are either dropped or relegated to limited (or no) marketing efforts. Although scholars such
as Condry (2007) have argued that corporate backing does not dictate commercial success, and the fact that the Internet has given more independent artists a forum through which they can boost their name recognition, having corporate support in rap continues to be a significant factor in predicting an artist’s long-term visibility (Ordanini, 2006; Williamson & Cloonan, 2007). The corporation provides the capital for the artist’s development, and the marketing teams that were used to promote Zoe’s album and image not only helped to boost his visibility, but helped turn him into a brand in the marketplace of popular culture. Jody might see his success determined by his proximity to the trap, but his lack of corporate support and the fact that Boyz N Da Hood was unable to generate any buzz following its debut has limited his career trajectory. Jody’s lack of mainstream visibility affirms one of the primary tenets of the political economic approach to the cultural industries; that an artist is dependent upon the financial investments of corporations in order to gain access to the widest consumer base possible.

The support of corporations, particularly in artist distribution, is likely what made Zoe more of a mainstream artist than Jody. Moreover, the backing of corporations in the cultural production, creative management and commodification processes seems to undercut the idea that rap artists can somehow extract themselves from the corporate structures they need for broader recognition. Both Jody and Zoe relied upon the trap narrative to give them brand identification, but as noted in Chapter 4, brand building and commodification involves more than just the trap as a symbolic commodity. As the careers of both artists show, these processes involve endorsement from creative and corporate decision makers. Ultimately, this process is driven by increasing the artist’s global distribution and the shaping of his image into a brand, which impacts the
corporation’s chances of higher returns on its investment. Zoe had both his creative management and a multinational corporation’s resources vested in his commercial success, while Jody relied primarily on self-promotion and self-production to make himself visible in the hip-hop marketplace. Jody can claim that he is keeping it real, but his distribution has been limited by the unwillingness of the key gatekeepers – his creative management and the corporation – in commodifying him the same way as Zoe. Even though venues such as the Internet and hip-hop media have allowed Jody to sustain his career, Zoe’s visibility in the mainstream stems from the ability of his corporate distributor to saturate various forms of media with his music and his image. Based on the interview responses from Jody, Zoe and the creative managers in the cultural production process, it is clear that corporate backing is a factor in determining the outcome of an artist’s commodification and wider distribution.

**Self-conceptualization: What is keeping it real?**

One of the key research questions this project sought to answer was how the artists in the case studies described themselves and whether they were able to represent their masculinity, race, and geography in ways they deemed authentic. These issues of representation related to the larger issue of whether the artists present themselves as being able to maintain authenticity – keeping it real – within the cultural production and commodification processes. Jody and Zoe’s differing answers on how they viewed themselves in relation to representation and cultural production revealed much in terms of how an artist’s understanding of his place within the cultural industries can impact his
career and interpretations of career trajectories. The notion of keeping it real, which hip-hop scholars such as McLeod (1999), Forman (2002), Perry (2004), Watkins (2005) and Cobb (2007) have interrogated at length, is in many ways paradoxical in the cultural production process. On one hand, the rapper must show he is believable – which Shawn Prez (2009) says is the key to being buyable – and firmly rooted within a physical place as a means of self-identification. On the other, the artist must demonstrate fluidity in regards to that self-identification, particularly as demand for his music and his image grows to an audience beyond the base. The interview responses from Jody and Zoe indicate that they acknowledge an authentic experience and embrace the trap as a physical construct, yet they differ on how far they are willing to negotiate their authenticity.

Jody’s response to the question of how he sees himself indicates a struggle to connect his performative identity to a trap lifestyle that he claims to have lived. For Jody, keeping it real means maintaining both the symbolic and physical connection to the trap, even if it comes at the expense of wider distribution. In his texts, Jody constructs an image that he appears to believe is reflective and representative of the trap lifestyle, and he says that straying from that narrative would somehow compromise his authenticity. “All I wanted to do was rap…and just be me. …I don’t know how to be something else, I don’t know how to turn myself into a character, you know what I’m saying?” (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009). As this quote and some of the contextual interviews in the previous chapters show, rappers often must have a double consciousness – their “real” selves and their studio persona – in order to navigate through the cultural production process. But Jody’s insistence that his studio persona and the images in his
music video were his real self might have bound him to the trap narrative, preventing a more lucrative recording contract and increased exposure that would have come with a more flexible self-conceptualization. As Kenny Burns (2008) indicates in Chapter 4, an artist who is inflexible when it comes to his studio persona often becomes commercially unviable for the creative management tasked with producing him and the corporation that distributes him. Jody’s construct himself around his studio persona might have played a role in his inability to sign with a major label and expand beyond the region. However, Jody seems to believe that his texts speak to an audience that wants “real hip-hop.”

In addition, Jody seems to value the street credibility he gets for maintaining a consistency between his self-conceptualization and the trap image he projects in his texts. What is most surprising about Jody is that, unlike other rappers, he is remarkably consistent in the interviews he has done, whether for this project or for the hip-hop blogs that try to promote his mixtapes. As Jody told me, “I don’t know how to be something else” (J. White, personal communication, January 23, 2009). This belief in being true to one’s self, as well as promoting texts as biography, seems to be a factor in Jody’s following among his base as well as his inability to attract more fans. As noted earlier, this seems to highlight one of the paradoxes of keeping it real.

Another paradox is apparent when Jody’s described self-conceptualization seems to converge with the cultural production of his image. While Jody has a strong sense that what he is conveying to his audience is authentic, the texts he has produced seem to, in large part, replicate tropes of Black hypermasculinity. These texts seem to undercut his claim that he is unique.
But another paradox in the notion of authenticity stems from the fact that in cultural production, "the real" is subject to negotiation. In contrast with Jody’s self-conceptualization and his conflation between authenticity and performance, Zoe’s interview responses indicate an awareness that realness is fluid and must be negotiated with the demands of the corporation and the consumer (“I must understand that I have to express myself in ways where everybody feels like I’m expressing themselves for them too”). As mentioned in the previous section, Zoe has benefited significantly from the backing of creative management and the corporation, but that has not skewed his self-conceptualization. In fact, Zoe’s dealings with the cultural industries seem to have heightened his self-awareness, particularly in how he represents his masculinity and identifies with Atlanta. Zoe, like Jody, has built his rap narrative from the construction of the trap as a physical location, and in interviews he has repeatedly invoked the trap as a signifier that helps build credibility for his image as a trap artist. But Zoe's responses also indicate an understanding of the limitations of authenticity, particularly when it comes to relating a life experience that is not easily or readily commodified. Zoe has rationalized how he represents his race, masculinity and geography in his texts, arguing that it is part of his job. Moreover, he acknowledges that how he constructs himself in these texts is shaped in large part to the demands of creative management and corporate distributors, as well as consumers who buy into the image. In this sense, keeping it real becomes a matter of supply and demand; the more Zoe’s creative managers and fans want him to relate to the trap, the more he must construct himself as being proximal to it. However, the more both of those external pressures ease with commercial success, the more Zoe is likely to move outside of the trap. Zoe seems to believe he is representing himself in his texts, but
as Forman (2002) would argue, he appears to be more comfortable weaving in and out of a fictional narrative and biography. Zoe understands that hypermasculine posturing, images and lyrical boasts of conspicuous consumption, and hyperboles generated from the trap are all designed to sell him to as large of a market as possible, which is why he is able to clearly separate himself from his performative Other – Gorilla Zoe.

The self-conceptualization differences were not only apparent in the interviews, but in the way both rappers were represented in their texts. In Jody’s music and music videos, the consistency between his self-proclaimed life narrative and the images projected in the texts maintains symbolic proximity to both the trap and to claims of authentic experience and identity. Lyrically and visually, Jody is represented with a prominent signifier that encapsulates his masculinity and his geographical location: the street corner. In both music videos I analyzed, the street corner is incorporated into two different types of songs, indicating his desire to link his identity with the block. In his interview, Jody insisted that he had some say in how the songs were recorded and how the videos were produced, but it is clear that no matter where the ultimate power in the production process came from, Jody was happy being connected – symbolically and physically – to the street corner. As noted in Chapter 5, this might have to do with Jody’s desire to assert his proximity to the trap and to Atlanta, given his upbringing in a town 30 miles away. Moreover, as Watts (2004) and Quinn (2005) rightly note, regardless of how authentic Jody feels he is being by being proximal to the street corner in these texts, it is clearly also a way for him to sell this physical space as a symbol; the trap becomes incorporated into Jody’s brand. What is most apparent about Jody’s self-conceptualization as it relates to the texts he produces is that, while he boasts of growing
up in a small town with small town values, he needs to link his masculinity with the Atlanta ghetto. Based on the interview responses, it is doubtful that this ghettocentric narrative was solely a creative management decision, as Jody seems to buy into the idea of his identity being grounded in the street narrative. This narrative, affirmed by Jody’s numerous attempts at media exposure since leaving Sho’Nuff, appears to be his way of selling what he claims to be his real self to the consumer.

Zoe, on the other hand, appears to understand the nuances of performative identity in both his songs and music videos. What is striking about a song such as “Hood Nigga” is that it uses the same prominent tropes of Southern Black masculinity as other rappers have used, yet it was commodified in a way that made it consumable on radio (“Hood Figga”), night clubs, strip clubs, and the mixtape scene. In this sense, Zoe and his creative managers appeared to want the best of both worlds: having the street credibility of an Atlanta trap artist but the mainstream exposure that comes with being on the Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group roster. This is why self-conceptualization appears to be an important factor in image management and commodification. Had Zoe believed he was a “Hood Nigga” and insisted upon positioning himself close to the trap and to Atlanta within his texts, he might have fallen victim to the same industrial circumstances as Jody. However, as “Lost” demonstrates both lyrically and visually, Zoe is willing to portray his masculinity in a way that is not tied to a specific place or space. The evolution of image in Zoe's texts appears to reflect a desire to not be “ghettoized” by the trap narrative. While this may not be easily construed as creative autonomy, it does show that when an artist does not let his self-conceptualization “get in the way” of his
commodification, there can be sites where agency is possible, even it is behind the scenes or subtly conveyed in the textual product.

One of the most important things to be learned from Jody and Zoe’s interview responses and images is that their self-conceptualization is not an indicator of increased agency in the cultural production process. Even if Jody feels that he is keeping it real by maintaining a consistent trap narrative, he is still using tropes that have been mass (re)produced for years in popular culture to represent that realness. Moreover, based on his interview responses, Jody’s self-conceptualization and self-construction have not necessarily led to a better understanding of how the cultural production process works. Instead, the interviews paint a picture of a rapper whose belief in the providence of authenticity in hip-hop has led him to lose the support of creative managers and corporations tasked with distributing him, primarily over the vision of how he must be commodified. Jody seems to compensate for this lack of power by claiming aesthetic authenticity: that he is the best rapper from Atlanta, an assertion not backed by commercial success or the necessary affirmations from the city’s cultural gatekeepers. For Jody, failing to embrace (and perhaps even to fully understand) his role as a cultural worker, at least compared to Zoe, has not only hindered his career, but it has in many ways perhaps skewed his self-conceptualization. As Shawn Prez and Kenny Burns indicate in their interview responses, rappers such as Jody who fail to understand that hip-hop involves image management and business savvy are often left with little agency in their production and commodification. Prez and Burns state that successful rappers have business acumen and are aware of how to use their self-conceptualization as leverage in the cultural production process. Jody’s apparent failure to understand how
authenticity is represented in cultural texts has kept him from what he wants: a recognition of his skills and the financial gains that come with such recognition.

Contrastingly, Zoe seems to have a more intricate understanding of who he is and how he relates to a larger system of production. By defining authenticity as a product of a negotiation among the creative managers, fans and himself, he is able to “keep it real” on a professional level. Zoe, perhaps due to his experience as an entrepreneur and a music retailer, seems to better understand the nature of his work, and as a result, indicates an acceptance of agency constraints within the cultural production process. Such awareness of agency’s limitations may, ironically, increase agency within the creative processes. As Watkins (2004) notes, in some ways “the corporatization of hip-hop seems only to enliven rather than to stifle the struggle to control its commercial vigor” (p. 569). Zoe is aware that he must relate to a base that understands his trap experience, as well as conform to corporate expectations of how an artist in his position must perform, yet he is also using the leverage he gains from increased visibility and commercial success to build a bigger platform for himself.

As the interview responses indicate, self-conceptualization, particularly as it relates to the notion of authenticity, can significantly impact an artist’s career and his image. The way Jody represents his masculinity and place is what he considers autobiographical, while Zoe seems to better grasp the performative value of hypermasculine posturing and hyperbolic hood narratives. Their self-conceptualization, particularly in how they see themselves within the cultural industries, is key to understanding the next theme – how both men have negotiated their commodification with those industries.
Negotiation with the Cultural Industries

If self-conceptualization, or at least the symbolic construction of self-conceptualization, is important in addressing how a rapper represents his race, masculinity and place in texts, then his relationship with the cultural industries also factors in how such texts are produced. The case studies highlighted how each rapper dealt with creative managers and with the corporation in the cultural production process. Jody and Zoe’s respective relationships with the cultural industries and their understanding of their role as content producers within these industries address the role of agency within the cultural production process. As the interviews and the contextual information in chapters 5 and 6 showed, the rappers and creative management have conflicting views over how much agency the rappers enact in their representation and their commodification. But Jody and Zoe’s relationships with those tasked with producing and distributing them seems to have had an impact in their commodification and their careers as solo artists. One central issue from these interviews is whether a rapper benefits more from seeing himself as an independent artist or as a cultural worker within the hierarchical system of textual production and distribution.

In the interview with me and in other published interviews, Jody expressed surprise that hip-hop was a business, particularly as it related to others “having his back.” As he says, “I know I’ve helped a lot of people get into certain situations, you know what I’m saying? And it sort of backfired on me” (J. White, personal communication, January
23, 2009). Jody seemed to believe that, after being signed by Jazze Pha and Block Spencer, two Atlanta-based creative managers, his interests would be protected by those who shared his geography and sense of identification with the trap. Jody’s business dealings with Sho’Nuff and Block Entertainment, which were the Atlanta-based production houses he worked with, might have made him unaware of the larger corporations involved in his commodification, Warner Brothers and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. His frustrations with creative management seem to stem from Sho’Nuff/Warner Bros. Records’ unwillingness to release his solo album and the conflicts they had over his image. As Jody indicated in his interview, the label was geared towards producing and marketing R & B artists, while he insisted on producing “street shit.”

Jody’s comments seem to strike at the heart of the notion of creative autonomy, which scholars such as Toynbee (2000) and Banks (2007) argue is one of the few “spaces” artists have in the cultural production process. However, it appears that from the outset, Jody’s creative space was limited in part by conflicting visions over what kind of artist he would be. While this might have to do with Jody’s self-conceptualization as a trapper whose primary objective was to narrate a true-to-life representation of the dope boy lifestyle, it could have resulted from creative managers at Sho’Nuff deciding that Jody would not work as a trap artist on a roster featuring Jazze Pha and Ciara, whose songs have tended to be more radio and mainstream-friendly. When Jody refused to project an image and produce texts consistent with a “Sho’Nuff artist,” he was dropped so that his label could find a replacement from a “reservoir of creative labor” (Gibson, 2003).
Jody’s relationship with Block Entertainment and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group is not much better, as he has been unable to extract himself from the contractual obligations to Boyz N Da Hood, which had not released an album since 2007. In his interviews, Jody voiced regret at signing a multi-album contract and “not going for mine” when his fellow group members signed solo recording deals that gave them more recognition beyond Atlanta and the trap. Again, this is where Jody’s seeming failure to understand the hierarchies of the cultural industries might have played a role in his getting “stuck” with Boyz N Da Hood and a recording deal that put the group ahead of his solo aspirations. In his interview responses, Jody repeated the theme of family, striking a contrast between the Southern value system and the “different” set of values that those in New York supposedly had. Having no previous experience with the cultural industries and no leverage to speak of, Jody seemed to believe that he was joining Atlanta production teams that represented the city and the region, placing his trust in Jazze Pha, Spencer, and Rico Brooks to manage his career and help to give him wider distribution.

Jody’s contentious relationship with management seems to reflect Ryan’s (1992) claim that creative production is an economically irrational process, and that artists are much harder for corporations to control. Therefore, they do not easily fit in the category of cultural labor. Jody protests the corporatization of rap and he claims that through his music, he is re-locating rap back to the streets and back to the trap. These sentiments were expressed in Jody’s interview responses about music executives, whom he seems to believe are not connected with the streets and the “authentic” Black male experience in the trap (“[The music executives] are so sold on this bubble gum ass shit and this ringtone ass shit” and not the “street shit”). Moreover, he appears to openly resist his creative
management’s attempts to present him as a more mainstream-friendly artist, perhaps aware that there is some cultural capital to be gained from being loyal to a base. Jody also seems to contradict Shawn Prez’s claim that Southern rappers are eager to sign with Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group because of the promise of getting more visibility. In his interviews, however, Jody appears to have more loyalty to his Atlanta creative managers than the New York-based corporations who were tasked with distributing his image. While Toynbee (2000) is right to point out that artists such as Jody want to be signed by the majors and want to have activity in their commodification, Jody is voicing a common refrain among rappers about the uncomfortable tension between rap and corporatized production. His conflict with creative management also appears to stem from the fact that his Atlanta creative managers – the ones who “have his back” – answer to New York companies that are driven by the need to see the highest return possible on their investment. His difficulty reconciling the authentic cultural expression with its corporate commodification appears to have left him on the margins of the mainstream, relying on more “real” ways of connecting to consumers such as mixtapes and Internet releases.

Zoe’s interview responses, as well as the feedback other creative workers such as Tahira Wright gave, indicate that he is more willing to negotiate the terms of his commodification. Moreover, applying points made by Toynbee (2000) and Hesmondhalgh (2007), Zoe’s relationship with the cultural industries appears to be built on the idea of leverage. Zoe’s entrepreneurial ventures in hip-hop prior to signing with Block put him in a better position to negotiate the way he was commodified, though his initial “Hood Nigga” image conformed to Block and Bad Boy’s mold for a “Block Artist”
– hypermasculine and closely aligned with the trap. It also appears that Zoe benefited by working well with his creative managers and crafting an image that the corporation wanted and what he was comfortable with. As Tahira Wright’s interview responses indicate, there was a desire by his creative management team to see Zoe succeed, not only for the financial benefits that came with such success, but as a reward for the emotional investment put into his artistic development.

Zoe’s relationship with his creative managers, when contrasted to Jody’s experiences, highlights one of the major ironies in the cultural production of hip-hop: that rappers who understand the business aspect of rap and the compromises needed for career advancement are far more likely to gain access to the mainstream than those who are fixated on authenticity. Zoe seems to assert that understanding his role as a creative laborer was critical to his success as a Block and Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group. His interview responses seem to undercut some claims in cultural studies that rappers are symbolic creators who resist and subvert the cultural industries and the corporations that control production and distribution (“Opportunities are bigger because we’re dealing with a big corporation”). This is not to say that Zoe’s responses indicated an absence of conflict in the cultural production process. While Zoe states that there was tension in how he was commodified, he appeared to be more comfortable allowing his creative managers to cultivate his image as a trap artist first and then a more mainstream friendly rapper.

The interviews and Zoe’s texts seem to reflect the fact that Zoe understood the multiple levels of cultural production from the outset of his music career, as he seems to know the role of his creative managers and their place within a hierarchy of a corporate structure. When Zoe said he knew that Bad Boy was a corporation and that he understood its goal
was to make money, he triangulated his role as an artist with the multiple stages of production and distribution, processes that he acknowledged are mostly beyond his control. Whether that led to commercial success is secondary to what it provided Zoe in the long run: more financial support from the corporation to develop as an artist and begin to experiment with styles that took him away from the trap.

Zoe’s experience suggests validation of Toynbee’s (2000 & 2003) argument that artists who have a better understanding of their position within the cultural industries and relate better to their creative management teams can have better long-term success as stars than those who have a lesser understanding. While Toynbee is careful not to overstate agency, his claims seem to re-affirm notions of self-conceptualization and negotiations within the cultural production process as keys to an artist’s viability in the marketplace of consumption. Zoe’s decision to negotiate his commodification, particularly as he gained more fame, also seems to undercut some political economic scholars’ claims that rappers are alienated from their labor and enter the cultural production process with a degree of false consciousness (Kelley, 2005; Fitts, 2008). The evidence from the interviews and the texts analyzed suggests Zoe is keenly aware of his limitations as an agent, and has consciously ceded authority to the creative managers in order to get the most out of his commodification. Ultimately, his comments, as well as those from creative managers such as Spencer and Prez, suggest that “playing ball” with creative management and the corporation is a meaningful – and understated – indicator of an artist’s success. Because this project has limited scope in terms of its subjects, it is unclear whether Zoe’s experiences with his creative management and the corporate distributors are indicative of what most rappers go through in their careers, or whether
their experiences might lie somewhere in between Zoe’s and Jody’s. However, the evidence presented in this section suggests that the relations both artists have had with those tasked with producing, distributing and commodifying them significantly shape their texts. As the next two themes will explore, the representation of the rappers’ masculinity and the importance of Atlanta and the trap – two of the primary markers of both men’s images – are a result of discourses within the cultural production process.

**Representations of Masculinity**

As previously noted, self-conceptualization and negotiations with the cultural industries play a significant role in how these rappers’ masculinity is represented. One of the stated goals of this project was to see how Southern Black masculinity is represented in the rappers’ texts and how – if at all – these representations differ from the urban Black hypermasculinity that has dominated hip-hop culture and images. As some of the interview responses indicated, both Jody and Zoe seemed to place emphasis on making money as a marker of their manhood. This conflation of material acquisition with one’s masculinity has been a commonly expressed sentiment among young Black men, as scholars such as Kelley (2004), Collins (2005), and Newman (2007) have noted. Moreover, conspicuous consumption, as Boyd (2002) and Watkins (2004) note, can be seen as a resistive and subversive activity for Black youth to flaunt material goods in spite of structural barriers such as poverty, discrimination and disenfranchisement.

But these arguments, as shown in this project, also have limitations, particularly as it relates to the subversive potential of thug masculinity. In Jody’s case, one of the key
findings was how closely his masculinity was linked to stereotypical notions of Black men, such as the expectations of promiscuity (the playa) and violence (the dope boy/thug) that have become fixed commodities in hip-hop production and consumption (Collins, 2005; Hurt, 2006). Moreover, as his interviews and music videos show, Jody’s masculinity is tied to the ghetto, which, as Kelley (2004) notes, has become the symbolic marker of Black maleness. This “ghettocentric” conceptualization of Jody’s masculinity appears to conform to what he believes is authentic (“the gangsta shit”), what his creative managers believe will sell to a niche audience, and what his consumers appear to buy into. While scholars such as Miller (2004), Grem (2006) and Richardson (2007) argue that Black masculinity in Southern rap is presented in such a way that often contradicts and challenges notions of urban Northern Black masculinity, the kind of “trap masculinity” Jody exudes relies largely upon urban and ghettocentric aesthetics.

Similarly, Zoe’s interview responses indicate that he is aware of his Southernness, but, as noted earlier, his presentations of masculinity – despite his attempts to locate his masculinity and consumption of women within the trap – appear to conform to well-worn tropes. The findings suggest that – contrary to these rappers’ efforts to present themselves as Others of Others – the representations of masculinity in these texts are similar to the constructions of masculinity in texts by rappers such as 50 Cent (East Coast/New York) and Snoop Dogg (West Coast/Los Angeles). In this sense, the representations of masculinity that both men seek to depict in their videos uphold patriarchal conceptions of manhood, particularly as they relate to the heteronormative hypersexuality of Black men (Gray, 1995; Collins, 2005). This is not to say that these representations conform to a monolithic and mass-produced standard of Black masculinity, especially since both Jody
and Zoe nuance their images in a way that helps to locate them within the South. Some of these aesthetics include their manner of dress, the types of objects they confuse, and their use of slang that affirms them as products of both the South and the trap.

Both artists present their masculinity in a way that dominates women. The conspicuous consumption of women, defined by their presence in the music videos and in the references in songs, adheres to a common trope of hip-hop masculinity: asserting one’s status through the consumption and domination of women (Fitts, 2008). Still, as some of the findings also suggest, Jody and Zoe’s masculinity cannot be oversimplified, particularly since there are ways to interpret the representations in their videos in more complex ways. Perhaps the strongest evidence of this is in Zoe’s “Lost,” which attempts to challenge the notion that rappers must assert a certainty in their masculinity. Even in Jody’s “Stay Fresh,” the consumption of white women is not necessarily grounded in sexual relations, but in historical dynamics that have led to violence and disenfranchisement of Black men. The relationship between Black men and white women, which prompted lynchings in the South and the imprisonment of young Black men, as in the famous 1930s Scottboro Boys case, continues to be a powerful source of tension in the South (Richardson, 2007). Such readings lend support to the idea that there is a “below the surface” interpretation of these representations that give both artists a stronger connection to the South, particularly since they seem to originate from and challenge historical constructions of Black masculinity in the region. As the next theme will highlight, the representations of masculinity are tied to the symbolic value of place and space in the brand-building process.
The importance of Atlanta and the trap

As stated at the beginning of this dissertation, one of the key research goals was to understand the role of place and space as it relates to cultural production and the rapper’s identity. Forman’s (2002) thesis on the role of the hood as a nexus of the rapper’s identity opened up a larger discussion on the role of geography, particularly when it came to a specific locale as a site of cultural production and commodification. From the interview responses and the texts analyzed, it was clear that Atlanta and the trap play a significant part in the identities of Jody and Zoe, but Jody is more wedded to them as markers of his identity – and masculinity – than Zoe. As a result, Atlanta and the trap must be viewed both as actual sites of content creation and as symbols that “locate” the texts produced by each artist.

Atlanta’s importance as a site of cultural production, where numerous on-the-ground industries converged to help build the story and generate buzz for the artist, is apparent in the interview responses from both artists. More importantly, it appears that Jody and Zoe feel as if they have the most creative control “at the bottom,” primarily through the mixtape circuit and among the region’s cultural tastemakers. But Jody expressed particular connection to Atlanta’s physical importance as it related to his career development. Atlanta, as Jody makes clear in both his interview responses and in the texts he has produced, is one of the primary markers of his identity, particularly since he continues to align himself with the neighborhoods that serve to validate his trap credibility. In Jody’s assessment, the trap’s physical importance equals its symbolic
value. It seems as if Jody has vested his efforts and resources in maintaining credibility in Atlanta and the region, perhaps feeling that straying too far away from his consumer base would compromise his claims of authenticity. This effort, it appears, seems to be grounded in using the trap as not only a site of production, but, in some ways, a site of consumption as well. This is why Jody, as shown in these texts, places so much emphasis on Atlanta and the trap as part of his commodification.

But Jody’s promotion of the city, as well as his desire to represent the trap, is manifested symbolically as well. While Jody emphasizes the trap as a physical construction and as an actual place, he, like other Atlanta rappers, also benefits from its symbolic utility. As noted in the analysis of his video, the trap serves as place, space, symbol, and a branding element in Jody’s commodification. As the analysis of his songs and videos show, Jody makes the trap a reference point to convey both authenticity and buyability. Lash and Lury (2007) might argue that Jody has benefited from previous rappers who have created symbolic value from the trap, making it easily recognizable in spheres of consumption. It is no longer subcultural, or as Forman (2002) would argue, just winks of recognition between an artist and his base. Instead, through its presentation in Jody’s texts, it also becomes a key signifier in brand building. Again applying Ryan (1992), the symbolic construction of the trap in Jody’s music and videos relies upon its prior distribution as a series of signs and signifiers in Atlanta’s rap scene: it is assumes an intertextual understanding on the part of the audience. As Ryan argues, “These signs speak eloquently and confidently of the commodity of which they are apart; in textualizing it, they enable the potential consumer to understand its value as a commodity. … A representation of the product is located alongside signs drawn from
discourses whose significance is already recognizable” (Ryan, 1992: 190 & 194). As noted earlier, Jody makes the “block” a physical representation of the trap, but because of the potential to sell the trap beyond Atlanta consumers, it is turned into a generalizable urban landscape, recognizable both to consumers who are drawn to the traditional rap street narrative and to the “real” fans who understand the importance of the trap lifestyle.

But while Jody emphasizes Atlanta and the trap as integral to his identity, it appears that he has become so wedded to them physically and symbolically that he becomes harder to sell to a wider audience. In other words, the local cultural filters described in Chapter 4 – such as strip clubs – have given Jody a stamp of validity locally, but their approval has done little to make him consumable in the mainstream. This fact, evidenced through Jody’s career narrative, seems to strike down my earlier thesis that cultural filters in Atlanta act as gatekeepers for an artist seeking to make it to the larger stage. I will get to this point in the last section, particularly as it relates to Jody’s creative management making a decision not to make him more than a regional act.

Zoe is also connected to Atlanta, particularly since he continues to produce music at Block Entertainment and generate enough buzz in the region to maintain a loyal base. But Zoe, despite embarking on his rap career as a trap artist and seeking to build a reputation off the trap as a recognizable brand signifier and commodity sign, is not wedded to the trap in the same manner as Jody. This is evident in the interview responses, where Zoe is seeking to separate himself from the trap as a physical construction. Instead, he uses the trap for its symbolic value, particularly in the first album. Zoe places himself close to the trap, yet it is clear that he does not define himself exclusively according to his proximity to it. From the interview responses of Zoe, Tahira Wright, and Rico Brooks, it
is apparent that Atlanta as a physical space also plays significantly in Zoe’s commodification. He needs a connection to the city to build a buzz among the base. Zoe’s commodification, as noted in chapters 4 and 6, relied upon the city’s various gatekeepers to give him the street credibility of a trap artist, and his creative management also made sure that despite his commercial success, Zoe maintained some physical links to the city.

However, in viewing Atlanta’s commodification through Ryan’s semiotic framework earlier, the city becomes a symbol by which consumers in the mainstream can readily identify Zoe. Just as Quinn (2005) argues that L.A. gangsta rappers were eager to “sell” the ghetto as a way of achieving commercial success, Zoe and his creative management understood the brand value of Atlanta and the trap in their marketing of him. But it is also clear that while Zoe places importance in Atlanta as a physical and symbolic marker of his identity, he is willing to de-emphasize it as his visibility increases. The evidence in the interviews and texts contradicted my earlier assumptions that Atlanta rappers must always place a significant physical and symbolic value in the city because of its brand recognition and because of the slights that region has received in the past when compared to other hip-hop hubs such as New York and Los Angeles.

Based on Zoe’s responses and the other data collected for the case study, Zoe is willing to de-emphasize Atlanta as the prominent marker of his identity. This conclusion, which will be examined more in the last section, raises another questions: are cities used as symbolic commodities to give an up-and-coming rapper an entry in the mainstream? It appears that from the marketing and promotion of Zoe’s _Don’t Feed Da Animals_, Atlanta’s symbolic value is not as prominent as it was in the first album. While scholars
such as Lash & Lury (2007) have emphasized how branding takes place, one major point to note is that symbolic commodities lose their prominence once their use value is exhausted. In Zoe’s case, Atlanta no longer becomes the primary brand to sell him, and as a result, his creative managers and corporate distributors focus on a larger narrative that seems to conjoin his masculinity with generalized tropes of Blackness and hip-hop.

In addition to his creative management’s efforts, Zoe, through the interviews and other media messaging (such as the weight loss blog), has attempted to portray his masculinity as being more complex than the trap. But this “disidentification” from Atlanta is not unique to Zoe, as fellow trappers T.I., Young Jeezy and Yung Joc have tried to present themselves as appealing to a global audience by de-emphasizing Atlanta’s symbolic and physical value. This is not to say that Atlanta is ignored once Zoe has achieved visibility in the mainstream. One of the other important factors in an artist’s commodification appears to be how successful he is in maintaining a base. For these purposes, Zoe and his creative management must remain grounded within the Atlanta hip-hop scene, to re-affirm his loyalty to the city and erase any doubts about authenticity. In this sense, Zoe and his creative management must use the symbolism of Atlanta and the trap to reach a wider audience, but at the same time, rely upon the physical space that Atlanta occupies to maintain his local base.

To this end, despite Zoe’s de-emphasizing of Atlanta as his visibility has increased, Forman’s (2002) thesis that place is a vital aspect of understanding rapper’s identities and their music holds true. But more could be done to analytically delineate between the role of place as a locus of creativity and lived experience and as a malleable commodity-sign. Jody has seemingly placed more emphasis on the former, despite the
costs to his career, while Zoe – perhaps as a response to his success – places more emphasis on the latter. Jody and Zoe might use Atlanta and the trap to varying degrees to assert their identities and position their masculinity, but neither can wholly escape the categorization of being Atlanta rappers and trap artists, partially due to the fact that neither has reached the transcendental superstar status of a rapper such as T.I. However, this is also in part due to the role of place as it relates to the other themes mentioned in this chapter, particularly when it comes to the pressures of creative management and corporate distributors, as well as consumers. While the symbolic value of Atlanta seems to decrease with more exposure in the global marketplace and as a corporation seeks to universalize the artist for wider consumption, the city’s role as a site of cultural production for both rappers cannot be understated. Jody and Zoe might have varying degrees of symbolic attachment to Atlanta and the trap, but without the city’s various venues as starting points in their story and brand building, neither would have had the opportunity to have access to the mainstream.

But Atlanta’s role in cultural production also highlights the role of power relations as it relates the commodification of the artist. Although scholars such as Scott (2000) and Gibson (2003) highlight the dynamics of cultural production in cities and how they relate to the various economies that are influenced by these cultural production processes, some of the key geographical hierarchies in the production and distribution process could be emphasized to a greater degree. As Sayer (2001) notes, cultural production must be viewed in a more holistic way, one that accounts for regimes of distribution that are not always located within the place of production. As argued in the previous chapters, Jody and Zoe’s creative management might have produced texts that identified the artists as
being unique to Atlanta and the South, but these same managers ultimately answered to corporate offices in New York. Furthermore, while it is true that Atlanta has been a “hot” site of hip-hop music and innovation over the past decade, few of the majors have an actual corporate presence in the city, relying instead on vast armies of creative labor to help build the artist into a commodity for wider distribution. In his interview, Prez (2009) states that “Southern rap is growing cold. …I think that they had a very successful run and although they’re still hot, don’t get me wrong, they’re cooling off some” (S. Prez, personal communication, January 29, 2009). His comments about Atlanta seem to reflect the impermanence of the city’s status as a locus of cultural production and a certainty that the South would never replace New York or Los Angeles as the corporate hub of the hip-hop industries. This statement seems to also undercut the idea that Atlanta and the Southern region can function autonomously in a global marketplace of consumption, instead relying upon the corporate centers of distribution in New York and Los Angeles for backing. If this is indeed the case, then Atlanta’s power and autonomy as a place of cultural production must be viewed within a larger context of production and distribution, one that subordinates Atlanta – and the creative labor that produce the cultural texts – to a city such as New York, which controls the distribution of the texts. This dynamic will be explored more in the final section of this chapter.

Trapping the music and the masculinity: What it all means

The important question to answer from these findings is why they are unique to from the conclusions reached in previous studies. First, too often the construction of
identity – in this case, Black masculinity – is understood as a hierarchical process that is controlled by the corporation and shaped at each lower level by the various intermediaries. If anything, this study showed that artists themselves should be considered intermediaries in cultural production, since their self-conceptualization and willingness to “play ball” with creative managers and labels play a role in how they are turned into a commodity. By illustrating this process as highly mediated and geographically dispersed, this project sought to show that there is some agency at the ground level and at the same time, top-down, centralized control over production.

The themes that emerged in this study debunked some of my assertions about the nature of the cultural production process, but these themes are also laden with contradictions about agency and the role of institutions in how an artist is produced, distributed and marketed. As noted at the beginning of this study, the evidence gathered was specific to Jody and Zoe’s experiences, but there is a degree to which these themes might be generalized to the production and distribution of rappers, their music and their image. Ironically, the evidence in this project seemed to uphold claims of both agency and institutional power, particularly when it came to the distribution of the artists outside of Atlanta. Moreover, it also re-affirmed previous scholarship on the hierarchies of cultural work, whether in the production or in the distribution processes.

But this project’s findings also challenge existing scholarship when it comes to notions of representation, agency, and the dynamics of cultural production (and consumption). Part of this might be a result of hip-hop’s uniqueness as both a cultural form and global commodity, but it might also have had to do with the focus on Atlanta and the South as centers of cultural production (compared with places such as New York
and Los Angeles). First, when comparing how Jody and Zoe are represented for consumption, there are clear uses of common – and stereotypical – tropes of Black masculinity that have been exploited for commercial use. But, contrary to my assumptions, these tropes do not seem to be merely products of replicated formats dictated by corporate decision makers. These images of masculinity and the identification with place are in some way representative of a lived experience (at least as described by the artists), though they are, in their commodified form, a result of negotiations among the artist, creative management, and consumer. While scholars have often focused on the commodification process as dialogical between corporations and artists, the evidence suggests that artists’ assumptions about their consumers – particularly Jody and Zoe’s “base” – play a role in how they represent themselves. One of the major misconceptions about rap, which has been reproduced in both popular texts and academic works, is that hip-hop caters to the fetishes of white audiences and that the representations of Black masculinity are structured according to the notions that white consumers have of Blackness. Perhaps this has some validity, but it does not explain how Southern rappers such as Jody and Zoe can speak to specific experiences as Black men that resonate with their base following – primarily young Black men in Atlanta and other Southern areas whose approval is vital for building legitimacy within the Southern hip-hop scene. The commodification of these experiences as well as the use of the trap as a brand-building sign is obviously important in the story building process for these rappers, but it also speaks to the idea that no rapper wants to be perceived as inauthentic or not keeping it real. While a rapper such as Jody or Zoe might want to portray authenticity in his texts, those constructions of authenticity, whether representing masculinity or place, are
carefully produced and marketed by creative managers whose primary role it is to make a successful “story.” This story building is not, as political economy scholars such as Kelley (2005) and Fitts (2008) argue, merely replicating Black masculinity for mass audiences. The stories that Jody and Zoe sell must have resonance with the area they come from; in other words, before white consumers in Iowa can access “Stay Fresh” or “Hood Nigga,” there needs to be validation of these texts in Bankhead, Kirkwood, and East Point.

In these specific sites of production and consumption, Black masculinity cannot be generalized, as the aesthetics of New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles have limited resonance in the Atlanta region. As a result, the masculinity that Jody and Zoe represent in their texts must be, to a certain degree, localized before it is presented to a mass audience. In this industrialized process, the use of an "authentic place" to a rapper's image is both necessary for, and constructed by, the commodification process in complicated and contradictory ways. As Prez and Spencer, the primary creative management executives in the production and distribution of these artists, point out, believability must precede buyability for artists who rely on geography as markers of their identity. On the other hand, while cultural studies scholars such as Grem (2006) and Richardson (2007) argue that Atlanta and other Southern rappers are representing images of Black masculinity that are not always depicted in mainstream discourse about Black men, one could also argue that these representations – having some symbolic and cultural value to the consumers and to the artists – are produced and distributed to achieve a larger end: commercial sales and career longevity. The production of these representations and the cultural experience they originate from cannot be divorced from their economic aspect. In
other words, Jody and Zoe might be depicting Southern Black masculinity and Atlanta as a site of hip-hop culture, but they are also helping to carry out the bottom line considerations of the corporations whose investments are not in how these representations relate to authenticity, but how they much return they yield in the marketplace of consumption. Based on the evidence presented in this project, particularly how both creative managers and the rappers view hip-hop as a business driven by SoundScan numbers, Internet downloads and other quantifiable measures of success, it is impossible to divorce economics from culture; more specifically, representations of masculinity and place must be viewed from an economic lens as they relate to systems of production and distribution.

This is not to say that the commodification process in hip-hop is organized as an assembly line or is as rational as other economic systems, as scholars such as Ryan (1992) and Hesmondhalgh (2007) are quick to point out. To expound upon this idea, another key finding in this project is the notion of leverage, particularly as it relates to cultural work. If this case study is representative of the cultural production process as it relates to both hierarchies of labor and spatiality in creative management, then it is oversimplifying to view the actual process of creating a cultural commodity as completely top-down. Indeed, as the evidence shows, creative managers such as Block Spencer and Shawn Prez, and to a lesser extent, Tahira Wright and Rico Brooks, wield extraordinary power in producing the artist and his image. Indeed, while Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group may ultimately be tasked with distributing Jody and Zoe and determining their market value in a wider sphere of consumption, it can be argued that these creative managers have more of an impact in the artist’s image and how
he is represented. In this sense, creative managers are given significant autonomy in making the artist into a sellable commodity. This finding mitigates the assumption, evident in work such as Negus (2004), Watkins (2005), and Kelley (2005), that a rapper’s relationship with the cultural industries is a direct one with the corporation. Negus’s (2004) claims of a values clash between corporate executives and rappers might be outdated, given the fact that creative intermediaries have become so vital to the cultural production and commodification of the rapper. Moreover, these creative managers are not, as Basu (2006) would suggest, “tied to a colonial yoke,” but have used their positions to benefit themselves and the corporations while creating dynamic cultural texts. The most important aspect of understanding the creative manager in the Southern hip-hop scene is the fact that he/she is sensitive to the representations of Black masculinity within the South and gears the on-the-ground cultural production to reflect those sensitivities. In this sense, it is hard to buy into the idea that the creation of texts and the construction of images is simply the result of “white guys in blue suits” (P. Porter, personal communication, November 12, 2007).

But the significant role of the creative managers in the cultural production process leads to the issue of how Jody and Zoe’s agency factors into their commodification. Given what the evidence has shown about the corporation in formatting production and the significant impact corporate entities have as gatekeepers, is agency possible? This project’s framework relied upon some of the seminal works on the political economy of music and in the critical studies of Black masculinity, but rarely is the claim emphasized that agency can be nuanced and enacted within the boundaries of institutional production. From the data in this case studies, it appears that both Jody and Zoe have had some say in
the cultural production process, though the degree of agency which they have been able to enact has also related directly to the amount of leverage they have built with their creative management teams.

However, agency in these processes also can be overstated, for Jody and Zoe have ultimately had to accept the limitations placed upon them by creative management and the corporations; in the case of Jody, his failure to accept or abide by these limitations has left him without a distribution deal and a creative management team that has not helped to build his story. As Toynbee (2000) and Watkins (2005) have argued, most artists do want to be commercially successful and understand that collaborating with corporate structures ensures them the greatest opportunity to become viable in the mainstream. This project indicates that signing recording and distribution deals, working with creative management, and approving the marketing of images that portray their masculinity and their place involves a degree of awareness. In other words, Jody and Zoe were not oblivious to the consequences of making a pact with the cultural industries, though Jody might have anticipated more effectively the dynamics of how he was produced, distributed and commodified as a solo artist. To relate this to a broader assessment of hip-hop and Black masculinity, one of the problems of making claims about rappers mindlessly reproducing stereotypical tropes is that it assumes that they have no say in how they are commodified or that they have accepted these tropes. Previous studies have relied upon broad assumptions about how rappers approach the cultural production process and, with the exception of scholars such as McLeod (1999), few have actually included their voices in conceptualizing the commodification process. This project shows that the case study subjects likely reflect the attitudes of most rappers in their awareness
of how they are being commodified and the tropes they must use to sell. Reproducing hypermasculinity, conspicuous consumption, and images that suggest violence might be formulaic and conform to consumers’ stereotypes about Black men, but these texts and images have significant symbolic weight in the mainstream marketplace of consumption. In particular, sex(ism) sells, and the hypermasculine and hypersexual themes that these rappers use at the expense of women are often driven by consumer demands on what they perceived to be real. Therefore, they are unlikely to significantly change as rappers and their creative managers look for the fastest and most cost-effective paths to commercial success. Even if these representations are nuanced to reflect geographical identities, they still play to a format that has generated revenue and increased exposure for the artists and the corporations that distribute them. By understanding how these representations factor into the business of hip-hop, rappers such as Jody and Zoe make a conscious decision to use them and cede primary control over their commodification to their creative management teams. However, once the artist gains leverage through commercial success, he is, as Hesmondhalgh (2007) notes, able to use it to assert more say in how he is commodified. This negotiation for more control is not always successful, as Jody’s case demonstrates. However, what this study has shown is that agency is possible and that rappers can consciously and actively play a role in their commodification, even if the commodified texts ultimately reproduce and uphold well-worn tropes. It is important to understand that within this process, the artist as agent must understand his limitations and his role in the hierarchy of production and distribution.

Understanding the artist’s limited agency in cultural production puts the systemic processes into better context. As noted earlier, corporate institutions significantly shape
the production and distribution of the artist. However, because of their reliance on creative management as intermediaries, the role of corporations is not direct. To an extent, this diverges from Ryan’s (1992) thesis on the capitalistic production of culture, because corporations do not try to assert direct, immediate control over production. Rather, the capital these institutions invest into the broader production and commodification of artists, as well as the corporations’ role as gatekeepers, are means by which they can assert indirect control over artists. As Rico Brooks (2009) states, representatives of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group are never in the studio with artists such as Jody and Zoe, and they have very little involvement in local production and distribution. But that does not mean they are not “in the room” in other ways. Brooks (2009) also points out that rappers’ creative management must spend within the budgets given by the corporation, and even then, their access to a larger consumer base is still determined by the corporation’s decision to grant them such access. While the Internet has allowed for more artists to build buzz through the Web, the economics of the cultural industries are still driven by returns on investments, meaning that an artist’s value to the corporation will still be largely determined by SoundScan numbers and visibility on channels such as MTV and BET (Anand & Peterson, 2000; Williamson & Cloonan, 2007). As a result, no matter how much autonomy corporations give and how detached they are from the cultural production process, their desire to see returns and the potential they see in an artist to meet expectations play the most significant role in how much backing they give.

With the amount of capital that goes into producing and distributing an artist, is commercial success necessarily guaranteed by the backing of multinational
conglomerates such as Warner Music Group? Condry (2007) argues that “although record companies have a tremendous amount of power in gatekeeping, they have much less control in determining what will become a hit” (p. 103). This might be true, as rappers who benefited from major marketing campaigns and significant financial support from their creative management and their corporate distributors have flopped commercially. As shown in chapters 5 and 6, a group such as Boyz N Da Hood had the backing of Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group and debuted when trap music was becoming more commercially viable in the mainstream, but failed to sell enough albums and generate enough buzz to merit further corporate support. However, corporate backing does play a role in a rapper’s commercial success and enhances his chances of turning into a sellable commodity (Ryan, 1992; Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Thus, a rapper’s texts might be cutting edge and “speak to the streets” as well as to a broader audience, but his success as a global commodity is tied to the institutions that control access over the marketplace.

The last dynamic that needs to be summarized is the role that cities play in the cultural production process. As mentioned in the previous section, Atlanta’s importance as a site of cultural production and as a brand signifier for rappers to identify themselves with cannot be understated. However, despite the production that takes place in the city and in other areas of the South, the “buzz” generated by Atlanta artists, and the uniqueness of some of the city’s gatekeepers, Atlanta has limited power as a hub of the cultural industries. When I began this project, I assumed that Atlanta’s increased visibility as a third space in hip-hop meant that corporations moved their offices down to the city in order to recruit talent. Rushton and Thomas’s (2005) study seems to support
the claims of vibrant cultural industries in the city and the surrounding region; however, the evidence collected in this project indicates that corporate power continues to be concentrated in New York and Los Angeles. So while dynamic cultural texts are produced and Southern Black masculinity is constructed and commodified in Atlanta as a physical space, in the larger systems of production and distribution, the city has more symbolic than industrial significance. The city’s hip-hop entrepreneurs must deal with corporations such as Viacom, Warner Music Group, Sony/BMG and Universal, all of which are headquartered in New York and Los Angeles. While imprints such as Bad Boy South and Def Jam South serve to give Southern rappers brand recognition in the mainstream and the respective labels exposure in the Southern market, none of these imprints are actually based in Atlanta. Instead, decision makers in New York use the recommendations of creative management in Atlanta to determine what Southern rappers are viable on a wider stage and how they can be commodified. In the case of Jody Breeze, New York-based Warner Bros. Records denied him the opportunity to be distributed in the mainstream, and as a result, his Atlanta credibility did little to make him a commercial success beyond the South. While cities such as Atlanta can create texts that are unique to the Southern experience and turn the trap experience into a sellable commodity for global consumption, the trap’s reach is ultimately dictated by New York or Los Angeles. This does not limit the significance or influence of cultural texts produced in Atlanta, but it illustrates that even in the political economies of place, hierarchies exist and that distribution correlates where power is concentrated. This hierarchy is evident in the access that Zoe – an artist whose texts are distributed by Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group in New York – has to the mainstream compared with
Jody, who, without the backing of a “major,” is limited to his region. Understanding these hierarchies as they relate to economic systems of production and distribution are vital to a better understanding of how hip-hop has become a global commodity. Moreover, the rise of the South as a physical and symbolic hub for hip-hop could not have taken place without some facilitation from the New York or Los Angeles-based loci of power. This finding, which should be extrapolated in future research, shows that there are not just hierarchies of labor within cultural industries, but hierarchies among sites of production and distribution that significantly impact the commodification process.

**Conclusion and Recommendation for Future Studies**

Taken together, the findings in this project demonstrate some of the contradictions and complexities of the cultural production of Black masculinity and physical place in hip-hop. However, this project is only the starting point – or continuation – of examining these processes on a micro and macro level.

One area I attempted to incorporate was the feedback from strip club DJ’s, since they play such an important role as cultural gatekeepers. However, due to logistical issues, I was unable to secure an interview with any of the prominent strip club DJ’s. A study that focuses more on the role of strip clubs as gatekeepers and filters of music should incorporate interview responses from strip club DJ’s, as well as the patrons who frequent the clubs. Their insight could prove valuable in showing how certain gatekeepers mediate cultural products before they are distributed for mass consumption.
Additionally, while this project only offers self-conceptualization as a factor in the larger process of cultural production, post-structural works on Black masculinity by scholars such as Alexander (2006) and Jackson (2006) do offer some starting points for future studies that focus more heavily self-conceptualization. Another aspect of the rapper’s agency that needs to be examined on a more systemic level is how he negotiates his commodification with both the creative management/corporation and the consumers. In studies that examine agency and structures in the cultural industries, the role of place is often not given enough of emphasis. Although this study did introduce glocalization as an important context to keep in mind when it comes to understanding cultural production, future studies should examine more in detail how it relates to hierarchies of place.

While the findings in this case study cannot be universalized and applicable to all rappers, they do suggest that there are certain general frameworks from which to study the cultural production of hip-hop and Black masculinity. Using these frameworks, future studies can further interrogate notions of agency and representation within the cultural production and commodification processes, particularly as they relate to so-called “exceptional” cases. Some of the exceptions to the findings in this study and in other studies on the cultural industries might include the negotiations between rappers who act as their own creative management and the corporations seeking to distribute them. Moreover, at a time when recording and music video industries are less inclined to take artistic risks, it will be of vital importance in future studies to examine how the Internet has impacted both cultural production and consumption. This project sought to show new ways of looking at the cultural industries, particularly as it relates to privileging the voice of the artist and giving more importance to the role of place in the cultural production
processes. It is hoped that these insights provide future scholars of the cultural industries and hip-hop more options in how they pursue their studies.
Appendix A: List of Questions for Interview Subjects

Jody Breeze and Gorilla Zoe

- Tell me about your background (where you grew up, where you went to school, etc.).
- How did you get involved in the music business?
- Did your upbringing influence your decision to go into the business?
- What does authentic mean to you? Is there something you can point to as "keeping it real"?
- How has Atlanta inspired your music? Do feel that you can still represent Atlanta and still play to a global audience?
- How do you define your masculinity in your music and in music videos?
- A lot of music critics and rappers from other regions have criticized some Atlanta rappers for glorifying drug dealing and violence in their songs. What's your response?
- Do you get a lot of autonomy from your label?
- What have been some of the conflicts you've had with them?
- In your dealings with Bad Boy South, have you ever seen them as part of a larger corporate structure (since Bad Boy is owned by Warner Music Group)?
- What are some of the politics of the rap game?
- How have other rappers helped you in your career? Do you feel as if there is more of a kinship network in the South than in other regions?
- How do you see the music industry changing? Are you worried that you may not be able to have career longevity because of all of the changes in the industry?

**Rico Brooks and Kenny Burns**

- Tell me about your background (where you grew up, where you went to school, etc.).
- How did you get involved in the music business?
- Did your upbringing influence your decision to go into the business?
- What does authentic mean to you? Is there something you can point to as "keeping it real"?
- How has Atlanta inspired your music? Do feel that you can still represent Atlanta and still play to a global audience?
- A lot of music critics and rappers from other regions have criticized some Atlanta rappers for glorifying drug dealing and violence in their songs. What's your response?
- What factors shape how you produce the music?
- Is there more pressure on executives to produce hits now than five or 10 years ago? Why?
- Have you had conflicts with the rappers over how they’re being produced and marketed?
- Does answering to larger corporate structure (Warner Music Group) impact how the rap is produced?
- What are some of the politics of the rap game?
- How do you see the music industry changing?

Tahira Wright

- How did you get involved in the music business?
- Did your upbringing influence your decision to go into the business?
- How do you help maintain the rappers’ public image? Does the rapper have any say in how he is promoted?
- How do you “build the story” for the rapper, especially if he’s not yet know to the greater consuming public?
- What are some of the difficulties in publicizing and promoting the rappers?
- What are the corporate pressures, if any, you face?
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