

Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hop's Persona Artist

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This paper studies two specific examples of the rap artist persona as resistance strategy, and builds upon several theories of hip-hop identity and resistance. Using Tricia Rose's concept of rap music as hidden transcript, and Russell A. Potter's idea of rap's postmodern play-as-resistance, I argue that certain hip-hop acts intentionally split or obscure their artist identities to subvert material conditions for the rap performer, and to negotiate their own position within the conflicting standards of authenticity and marketability put forth by the ghetto and recording industry.

Hip-hop authenticity is a commercial value that grew in importance as the music gained a substantial market share of commercial radio. By 1990, with MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice albums at number one on the *Billboard* pop charts, increased mainstream interest began to foster among hip-hop artists challenges to the authenticity or "realness" of acts making money from rap music and marketing their music to an ever-expanding audience. Scholars such as Tricia Rose, Christopher Holmes Smith, and Adam Krims have theorized the performance of authenticity as necessary to establishing credibility as an artist within hip hop, which values a discourse of lived experience, and has roots in oral traditions of testimony and bearing witness. A successful performance of hip-hop authenticity is one which positions the artist as experienced knower, as in Ice Cube's claim "I'm from the street, so I know what's up" on the NWA song "I Ain't Tha One." This focus on performed authenticity was complicated by the crossover of rap albums, such as MC Hammer's *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* (1990), to the *Billboard* pop charts. Even such a dance/pop-oriented album as Hammer's, which spent twenty-one weeks at number one, included the track "Crime Story," which centered its subject matter on the artist's lived experience in the ghetto. And Vanilla Ice lost all credibility after *The Dallas Morning News* (Perkins) revealed several discrepancies between his label's official artist bio, which claimed Ice had grown up in a poor, urban neighborhood, and the artist's lived experience growing up in suburban Dallas.

A theory of hip hop's seemingly conflicting concerns of authenticity and marketability may work to reframe W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness in commercial terms as artists work to produce marketable music for mainstream listeners yet at the same time to maintain a necessary level of authenticity to a place of cultural origin. Paul Gilroy situates rap music as one of a series of modern black cultural forms that draw special power from "a doubleness" through artists' understanding of their practice as "autonomous domain," and of "their own position relative to the racial group and of the role of art in mediating individual creativity with social dynamics" (73). Smith, illustrating such doubleness for rap music, positions the ghetto as both crucial signifier of authenticity and a marketable aspect of self, arguing that the ghetto becomes "simultaneously commodity and safe-haven" as MCs market themselves through narratives of their place as other within mainstream commercial culture (348). In light of Smith's theory, Ice Cube's claim to be from the streets can work to authenticate his image and at the same time market it to an audience not from the streets. Krims argues that, for a rap act to achieve credibility and marketability, the performer must be symbolically collapsed onto the artist, so that, when O'Shea Jackson performs as Ice Cube, the experiences Ice Cube reports are accepted as Jackson's "speaking from authentic experience" (95).

A consistent performed identity here seems crucial to credibility, but Krims' theory of the collapsed identity ignores hip hop's persona artist. Like David Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust or Garth Brooks performing as Chris Gaines, certain hip-hop acts perform a second artist persona. This phenomenon can take shape, through costumes, playfully evasive lyrics, and samples, as resistance to the material conditions of the musician. Rose and Russell A. Potter each explore the often subversive politics of hip hop as it grew from an oppressed culture, and cite forms of communal resistance through musical performance. Rose applies James Scott's investigation of power relationships through social transcripts to acknowledge rap music's "hidden transcript" of resistance, which plays a key discursive role, outside the music's direct critique of oppression in the public transcript, in engaging in "symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans" (100-01). Potter explores rap music as radical postmodernism, and he synthesizes Theresa L. Ebert's dichotomy of ludic and resistance postmodernism to argue that hip-hop culture often stages resistance through play itself. For Potter, rap music's resistance through play can become "the mask for a potent mode of subversion" (2).

I argue that such play can take the form of a mask itself, as rap artists obscure, confuse, or split their identities to subvert the often conflicting standards of authenticity and marketability. The persona artist constructs a second, distinct identity that goes beyond a change in name. Although a mainstream artist like Eminem may alternate names to form his trinity of Eminem, Slim Shady, and Marshall Mathers, none of these is an entirely separate persona as much as an aspect of the same MC. Neil Drumming discusses this distinction between naming and

performing in persona, by which rap artists experience “much more dynamic character arcs” (1). In one example of such identity play, Greg Jacobs performs in the group Digital Underground both as Shock-G and MC Humpty Hump, distinct artists with individual personalities, vocal styles, and physical images, their identities distinguished visually through Humpty’s trademark mask. Jacobs preserves in Shock-G a traditional, “collapsed” identity, which is presented as authentic both to the performer’s experience and to hip-hop culture, while at the same time he performs through Humpty Hump a comic-sexual persona which has proven appeal for the mainstream listener (see Diehl 125–27). Digital Underground uses the Humpty Hump persona to increase the group’s commercial appeal and at the same time to criticize mainstream emphasis of image over rhyme skill, thereby aligning themselves with an “underground,” “hardcore,” or “real” hip-hop aesthetic even as they enjoy widespread commercial success.

Hip hop’s ideology of authenticity extends from rock’s in that, while rock’s live performance works to authenticate the recording, as both Theodore Gracyk and Philip Auslander have argued, rap instead centers live performance as one of a set of cultural values by which the artist’s authenticity is judged. As I will discuss in a later section, a live rap performance can often focus on creating musical content onstage through traditions of freestyle rhyming or the MC battle, rather than rock’s focus on “re-creating” the music as it exists on record (Gracyk 77). In recorded rap lyrics themselves, power to speak is often negotiated through rhetorical claims to *realness* and through narrative evidence that those claims are rooted in lived experience. Simon Frith explains the popular music listener’s judgement of authenticity as “a perceived quality of sincerity and commitment. It’s as if people expect music to mean what it says” (71). Rap music is unique in the extent to which it makes overt claims to such sincerity and commitment in lyrics. Smith explores the use of the term “real” in rap lyrics, and I would add that this term often is extended to the qualities of sincerity within the artist or the recording itself in common lyrical claims to perform “real hip hop” (e.g. Defari) or to perform as a “real MC” (e.g. The Lootpack), or even to be a “real nigga” (e.g. NWA, Nas, Jay-Z, Nelly and the St. Lunatics). Even Eminem claims himself “the real Slim Shady”. Hip hop’s concepts of realness form a discursive spectrum founded upon standards of authenticity to narratives of hip hop’s cultural origins within poor urban neighborhoods with predominantly black and Latino population. Today, more than twenty years after the advent of rap music, to maintain realness is, at one end of the discursive spectrum, to perform dedication to making music rather than making money and, at the other end, to perform an outlaw identity by which the act of selling music is framed as a criminal act well within the bounds of rap’s ghetto origins. In this sense, rap artists often argue their realness or authenticity through their skill in performing live, through their skill in selling albums, or through some combination of the two.

Yet this ideology was not always in place, and is in fact rejected by today’s underground hip hop, which draws strict lines between performance and commercialism. In that sense, Defari’s claim to perform *real* hip hop excludes the

commercial: “Don’t mistake this for no pop rap, Pop/But that raw deal feel, that real hip hop” (“Focused Daily”). Standards of authenticity within rap music have often challenged commercial success, as artists and listeners maintain allegiance to a nostalgic authenticity of the culture’s brief existence outside the recording industry, which S. H. Fernando Jr. contains to 1975–1979, the period of rap’s existence as a distinct musical form before Sugarhill Gang released “Rapper’s Delight”, the music’s first nationwide (and worldwide) radio single, in 1979. Fernando cites tension between the streets and the radio even with this, rap’s first radio single, as the group was put together by a record label, and did not write their own lyrics, which is crucial to rap credibility. Grandmaster Caz of the pioneering rap group Cold Crush Brothers claims the group stole the “Rapper’s Delight” lyrics from him, and he argues that Sugarhill “didn’t really represent what MC-ing was or what rap and hip hop was” (Fernando 21). This notion that authentic hip hop exists in the streets mirrors the authenticating of recorded rock music through live performance that is discussed both in Auslander and Gracyk, but live vocal performance alone has never been enough to link a rap artist to street credibility.

Rap’s ideology of authenticity centers also on audience. In 1988, gangsta rap group NWA warned of artists who “forget about the ghetto and rap for the pop charts”, and expressed their own pride in being banned from several radio stations (“Express Yourself”) even as their album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) sold more than one million copies. The audience dichotomy emphasized in such lyrics maintains that an authentic rap artist must direct his or her performance to the ghetto listener rather than to the mainstream. Smith further illuminates the pressure on artists to remain authentic as he asserts:

rappers “keep it real” by foregrounding the duress within which they wage their struggle for visibility within and against the terms set by the incessant hails of the mainstream marketplace. In this respect, a rapper’s desire to “keep it real” implies a strategy of engagement with American commercial culture in which they attempt to become human valves that regulate the cultural flows streaming from the ghetto to the outside world, and vice versa. (Smith 346)

While several artists (like NWA, Paris, or The Coup) have engaged in a more public transcript of resistance to commercial radio through their musical style, subject matter, and lyrical content, another hidden transcript of resistance through the identity play of persona may allow rap performers to challenge the dichotomy of authentic vs. marketable music. Auslander finds significant the fact that 1970s rock artists like David Bowie “were more concerned to create spectacular stage personae than images of authenticity” (89), but, while Bowie’s “strategy of mutations,” according to Auslander, may have foreseen the devaluation of rock authenticity (90) MC Humpty Hump and MF DOOM are personae that specifically critique the existing ideologies of authenticity and marketability within hip-hop music of their specific eras.

This article studies two specific examples of the persona artist as a strategy of Potter’s ludic resistance, and extends Rose’s work in studying rap music as hidden

transcript: While a growing number of rap artists perform in persona (e.g. RZA as Bobby Digital, Kool Keith as Dr. Octagon), I will examine two specific artists, Digital Underground and MF DOOM who each have used identity play to obscure performer identity, and to form multiple artist personae that they, at least initially, do not connect. While RZA titled his 1998 album *RZA as Bobby Digital*, and has gone on to use the personae almost interchangeably on 2003's *Birth of a Prince*, Jacobs in Digital Underground maintains two distinct personae, still appearing on albums like Murs' *End of the Beginning* (2003), billed as both Shock-G and MC Humpty Hump. My second example, MF DOOM, has performed more of an identity shift from Zev Love X of the early 1990s group KMD to his current incarnation, DOOM. As MF DOOM, Daniel Dumile performs strictly in mask and refuses to be photographed out of his costume, thereby avoiding a physical connection to his earlier artist. By intentionally splitting and obscuring performer identities, Digital Underground and MF DOOM both sidestep Krims' concept of a necessary symbolic collapsing of the artist onto the performer. Through hidden transcripts of play as resistance, they subvert commercial presentation of the hip-hop artist and the standards by which his or her marketability and authenticity are judged.

Performing Persona: Shock G and MC Humpty Hump

Before rap music became assimilated with the corporate record industry and rap singles proved themselves more than a novelty on commercial radio as both their frequency of presence and their chart positions increased in 1990–1991, vocalists were judged more by their rhyme skill than by a sense of performed authenticity. MC battles, in which two vocalists challenge each other to rhyme over a DJ's live turntable routine, were won based on crowd reaction, and lyrics generally centered on the rhyme style and skill of the performers involved. In one famous example from 1981, Kool Moe Dee defeated Busy Bee with a direct reference to his overuse of his signature Diggy-Dang routine. Pioneering Top Forty rap act Run DMC's song "Sucker MCs" (1983) issues this challenge to the unskilled rap vocalist:

You can't rock a party with a hip and a hop
 You gotta let em know you'll never stop
 The rhymes have to make a lot of sense
 You gotta know when to start when the beats come in

In the early 1990s, however, after both MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice spent several consecutive weeks at the number one position on the 1990 *Billboard* pop album charts, rap lyrics began to shift to a focus on authenticity as possibly more important than skill. Eazy-E attacked his former NWA bandmate, Dr. Dre, on his 1993 EP *It's On (187um Killa)*, sampling a self-contradicting anti-marijuana lyric from one of Dre's past recordings. Eazy included in his CD liner notes a captioned photo of Dre in very non-gangsta attire from his 1980s performance with the dance group World Class Wreckin Cru, then completed his challenge to Dre's authenticity by calling Dre's new partner Snoop Dogg a "studio gangsta," borrowing a tactic from old

country-western stars who often discredited each other as studio cowboys. None of Eazy's attacks address Dre's musical skill, but only his credibility as hip-hop performer. Eazy's implication that Dre follows trends is a serious charge as hip-hop culture struggles to maintain its identity in the face of commercialization.

Rap's mainstream marketability during 1990–1991 prompted a widespread lyrical shift from claims of performer skill to concerns of crossing over, selling out, and keeping it real. As rap music grew into a viable industry, MCs began to question which artists were in it for profit, especially when these artists came from areas outside the black neighborhoods where the culture originated, and even more so when these new artists were white. As streetwise performativity became the music's strongest selling point, artist Vanilla Ice's claims of ghetto credibility did not match the background of performer Robbie Van Winkle. Vanilla Ice's claim to authenticity was attacked as a marketing strategy, which cost him the respect of the majority of the hip-hop community, and ultimately cost him his mainstream marketability. Fellow white hip-hop artists 3rd Bass directly challenged Vanilla Ice's contribution to rap music in their single "Pop Goes the Weasel," taking the insult further by claiming to have followed Vanilla's "formula" to ensure their response song would be a hit even as it criticized his success (Diehl 125):

Hip hop

Got turned into hit pop

As soon as his album was number one on the pop chart. (3rd Bass)

The era of rap's initial incorporation into the recording industry has been a subject of interest for scholars like Smith, Murray Forman, Kembrew McLeod, and Greg Wahl, who traces rap's move into the mainstream through key groups like Run DMC, Public Enemy, and the Beastie Boys, who during 1983–1987 gave rap a consistent, if not overwhelming, presence on the pop charts and on MTV, and surpassed the commercial success of what Tom Terrell identifies as rap's "second wave" of talent in the years 1980–1983. Dipannita Basu and Pnina Werbner's study of ethnic entrepreneurship in the culture industries and Mark Anthony Neal's examination of black-owned popular music labels both recall David Hesmondhalgh's chronicle of indie rock as anti-corporate enterprise. Hesmondhalgh argues that "indie proclaimed itself to be superior to other genres not only because it was more relevant or authentic to the youth who produced and consumed it (which was what rock had claimed) but also because it was based on new relationships between creativity and commerce" (34). Ultimately the independent record labels of Hesmondhalgh's study have been annexed into the corporate music machine, but the buying of rap music occurred over a much shorter period of time. Rap was not as deliberately anti-corporate as indie, and Wahl cites "the constant tension between succeeding in a commercially driven art form and retaining the oppositionality that engendered the form's success in the first place" (109). Keith Negus examines a similar tension in his article "The Music Business and Rap: Between the Street and the Executive Suite", in which he articulates rap's "deliberate attempts to maintain a

distance between the corporate world and the genre culture of rap" (1), an argument that is complicated by the music's recent focus on the figure of the rap CEO in releases like Jay-Z's *The Black Album*.

I will discuss in a later section the pride certain artists take in their very ability to *sell* rap music, a lyrical development which coincided with the commercial emergence of two artists, Wu-Tang Clan and Master P, each of whom prided themselves on the alternative marketing and distribution skills which had earned them reputations outside the corporate record industry. When Wu-Tang did sign with a major label, RCA, to release their 1993 album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, they negotiated an unprecedented contract which would allow each separate member of the group freedom to record albums as a solo artist with labels other than RCA. In 1994, Master P released his third album, *The Ghetto's Tryin' to Kill Me!*, on his own No Limit Records, initially eschewing major media outlets to sell the album from the trunk of his car, and ultimately signing a distribution deal with Priority Records. Such artists challenged industry structure, and, while ultimately both Wu-Tang and Master P have affiliated themselves with corporate record labels, each has carved out a space for more artist control over musical content and the terms of recording contracts.

While such industry developments have worked lyrically to extend claims of credibility to the act of self-marketing, or operating a successful, artist-owned record label, several rap songs also relate a mistrust of the record industry through stories of shady dealings with record executives, A&R staff, and concert promoters. This historical and ongoing tension creates an anxiety, or doubleness, for the rap performer, who must at the same time market himself and maintain ownership and control of his identity. A hip-hop persona may be composed in response to the notion of selling one's identity as artist, and may allow the artist behind the mask to perform as a more marketable alter ego while at the same time performing as Krims' collapsed performer-artist. The persona artist often is marked by a mask or costume that can obscure identity or distinguish between multiple characters. Digital Underground's Humpty Hump is identified by his trademark Groucho Marx-style novelty glasses with an oversized brown nose, yet his playful appearance and vocal style are counterbalanced within the group by the more serious Shock-G. Although Jacobs performs both characters, his identity as performer is collapsed only onto Shock-G, and is distanced from the Humpty Hump persona. He can preserve a level of authenticity in Shock-G while selling records to the mainstream listener through Humpty's "broad, bug-eyed humor," which Diehl cites as a selling feature of pop rap in the early 1990s (125).

Digital Underground reached number eleven on the *Billboard* pop charts with their 1990 single "The Humpty Dance," a song that showcased Humpty as the sole MC. The track was the second single from *Sex Packets*, one of only three of 14 tracks to feature Humpty, and the only song to showcase his vocals exclusively. The song's video depicts a live Digital Underground performance in which Humpty takes center stage, in full costume, while Shock-G and the several other members of the group take the position of backup singers. Subsequent DU singles have been very

Humpty-centered as well ("No Nose Job," "The Return of the Crazy One"). "The Humpty Dance" pushed *Sex Packets* to sell platinum, but Shock-G's use of persona goes beyond sales gimmick. Interestingly, Jacobs often uses his Humpty persona to speak against the importance of physical image for the popular hip-hop artist. "The Humpty Dance" begins with a rhyme in opposition to a uniform, stylized appearance for top forty rappers: "All right, stop what you're doin, cause I'm about to ruin, the image and the style that you're used to. I look funny, but yo I'm makin money, see?"

Potter views hip hop as a "collective work" comprised of several characters rather than attributed to a single author. For Potter, the costume is central to hip hop's ludic resistance, and performers stage characters through their fashion, just as gold chains, untied Adidas sneakers, black leather jackets and fedoras mark Run DMC. Through performed characters, hip hop "stages the difference of blackness, and its staging is both the Signifyin(g) of its constructedness *and* the site of its production of the *authentic*" (121-22). This analogy, while compelling, fails in that rap musicians perform characters very differently than do dramatic actors. Namely, these musicians cannot step out of character without risking a central element of their credibility. But, as MCs split their identities to perform in persona, Potter's idea of staged blackness becomes more relevant. The costume then goes beyond identification of character to take on an additional role as disguise. Digital Underground videos often show Humpty and Shock-G performing side by side, which further confounds the identity of the two MCs, and an Ernie Paniccioli photograph features Humpty and Shock-G standing together, presumably through use of a body double who wears Humpty's very identifiable costume. Humpty Hump's nose and glasses also play a crucial role in Digital Underground's live show, as Shock-G sneaks off stage to change into his Humpty costume, which can also include a feathered headdress and leopard-print mini-skirt. As Humpty stages his difference, his oversized nose does "look funny", but at the same time is a tactic of resistance to the commodification of black bodies in music videos.¹

In "No Nose Job," Humpty argues against plastic surgery at both a literal and figurative level as he struggles to maintain black features of his identity in the face of mainstream success. The 1991 single, from DU's second album *Sons of the P*, opens with a verse from Money B, who recalls Humpty's success with "The Humpty Dance":

People say, yo Humpty now that your records is sellin
 Ain't it about time for you to be bailin
 Out of the race and community you come from
 Yo, your face has gotta change, Hump!
 Ice Cube says you're making more than Donald Trump
 So yo, go on and get your nose fixed, Hump

The dilemma presented in this verse speaks for a wider crisis for the hip-hop artist: does acceptance by mainstream culture mean the hip hop artist should embrace the dominant culture entirely, reconcile his identity by stepping across the boundary of blackness? To do so would be to ensure commercial success at the cost of losing

credibility in his culture of origin, but, through the Humpty Hump persona, Digital Underground is able to straddle this boundary, to participate in and profit from mass commercialization of hip hop even as they make their listener more critically aware of its dangers.

"I Only Play the Games that I Win At": MF DOOM's Ludic Resistance through Persona

The mind teases. Reality, cracked to pieces
 Nothin' eases, bein' chastised with blood baptized
 Guys revise, acknowledge past lives (Tick, Tick)

The Humpty Hump persona was an early strategy of ludic resistance to hip hop's emerging struggle with market forces that would intensify as gangsta became both villain and selling point for rap music in the mainstream. Amy Binder examines contradictory reactions to explicit content in the music of black rap groups versus white heavy metal groups on the part of moral watchdog organizations like the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) in the 1990s, yet Potter cites cases in which "negative publicity added measurable market value" (112). The 1992 controversy that arose in response to the violent, anti-establishment lyrics of Body Count's "Cop Killer" and Paris' "Bush Killa" and "Coffee, Donuts, and Death" increased sales for certain groups, while posing to others what Potter acknowledges as a "material threat" (113). In one important case, the group KMD lost their recording contract because of political messages in cover art for their second album, *Black Bastards*. Backing away from potential controversy, the Elektra label pulled KMD's single "What a Niggy Know" and refused to release *Black Bastards* because of cover art, drawn by Dumile, which depicted a cartoon blackface performer in a hangman's noose. According to Dante Ross, Artist and Repertoire Vice President at Elektra, the artwork "represented the hanging of stereotypes. It was a parody of the game hangman—you get it wrong enough times and you die" (qtd in Lichtman).

Through the very outright resistance of their album cover, KMD urged listeners to kill the stereotype, to do away with this white representation of the black man, a message that became even more powerful in a moment in which hip hop was experiencing an unprecedented level of commercialization as it embraced, through gangsta, the very stereotype of black male violence and misogyny. Elektra's refusal to release the album remains one of the more telling examples of major label treatment of rap artists. Though not one copy was officially sold, ²*Black Bastards* became an underground classic via bootlegs of early promotional copies. After the loss of his record contract and the death of his bandmate and brother DJ Subroc, KMD vocalist Zev Love X dropped out of sight. Seven years later, as a musician whose once-mainstream career had moved not only underground, but away from the music industry altogether, Zev Love X had a unique opportunity to reinvent himself and re-emerge as a new persona, MF DOOM.

MF DOOM recorded his return to hip hop on the tiny and now-defunct Fondle Em label, in conjunction with his own Metal Face Records. DOOM produced his album single-handedly, creating the beats in his home studio and writing lyrics that interact with samples to tell the story of an artist injured by commercial forces, now back in mask to seek revenge on the record industry. Brian Goedde reads *Operation Doomsday* as an “album of continuous meaning.” Lyrical narration is interwoven with samples from two specific sources: *Fantastic Four* cartoons featuring Dr Victor Von Doom as sympathetic villain, and the hip-hop film *Wild Style* (1982), in which graffiti artist Lee Quinones struggles to keep his art pure in the face of commercial forces. So hero and anti-hero are juxtaposed with Dumile’s own history as a musician to situate MF DOOM as both rap’s savior and destroyer.

Unlike Humpty Hump, MF DOOM is in some sense a borrowed persona. Greg Dimitriadis has studied performance in hip-hop culture through its connection to popular texts such as mobster movies, comic books, and martial arts films. Smith calls this “a hybrid narration based on mimicry,” and applies, through Michel de Certeau, the Greek concept *metis* to such narrative strategies (358). For Smith, borrowed narratives of the Italian mafia appreciate the gangster as pinnacle of American consumerism whose wealth was identity built outside the lines of this very society, much as the successful commercial rapper may build his career from narratives of ghetto poverty. The figure of the comic book superhero or super-villain may hold a similar connection to the MC, and the persona artist in particular. Recalling Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, Marc Singer theorizes that “[t]he idea of the split identity, one of the most definitive and distinctive traits of the superhero, is also one of the most powerful and omnipresent figures used to illustrate the dilemmas and experiences of minority identity” (113). Singer’s study of race in comic books develops the concept of the “costumed identity,” in which superheroes (and super-villains) experience “a noticeable and visually characterized division between their private selves and their public, costumed identities” (113). Singer claims that superhero identities, while not necessarily always secret, must be by nature split in that they cannot reconcile the fantastic with the everyday. Such reasoning for split identity of the comic book character contrasts with Krims’ idea of a necessary identity collapsing of the hip-hop performer and artist, who must present the everyday as fantastic.

MF DOOM’s identity construction employs bricolage to connect his own artistic trajectory thematically to figures from popular culture. He borrows both a revenge narrative and disguise from Marvel Comics’ Dr. Doom. Marvel’s Doom puts on a metal mask after his face is injured in a scientific experiment. MF DOOM samples Dr. Doom’s dialogue from an episode of *Fantastic Four* in which his experiment goes wrong. “What have I done to myself? My face is...hideous....Now I must hide my face from all mankind.” Dr. Doom’s experiment blew up in his face, and MF DOOM draws a parallel to Elektra’s reaction to KMD’s pushing industry boundaries with *Black Bastards*. Dumile’s visage as the artist Zev Love X is irreversibly connected to this experiment, and to his status as industry outcast. His metal mask hides a figurative injury and allows him to stage his comeback as a new artist anonymously.

"Hey," DOOM's first single, was released to New York hip-hop stations as a debut single from a new artist, and was promoted with no connection to KMD. Further obscuring the link between his past and present artist identities, MF DOOM never performs live or appears in photographs or videos without wearing his mask. Although DOOM's vocal style and production sound nothing like his earlier incarnation, without the mask he could not have avoided critical comparison, and could not have as successfully negotiated his return to the world of hip hop.

MF DOOM's first album *Operation Doomsday* is a multi-tiered autobiography composed through persona, samples, and lyrics. At the level of samples, the performer's own musical career, aesthetic, and agenda are chronicled in Von Doom's dialogue from *Fantastic Four* and Quinones' narration from *Wild Style*. The two alternate throughout the five skits (three from Dr. Von Doom, two from Quinones) and build up to the track "Hero vs. Villain," labeled in the track listing as an epilogue, adding narrative terminology to the album's continuous narrative structure. "Hero vs. Villain" connects two narrative strands by interspersing dialogue from a seemingly victorious *Fantastic Four*, who have stopped Doom's attempt at world domination, with *Wild Style* dialogue in which Quinones argues against media exposure for his graffiti. "Yo, I'm not gonna finish my piece, man, not with this lady around. I don't want no fucking picture taken of my shit." Spoken narration from E. Mason reinforces this connection with a challenge to cultural definitions of hero and villain. Mason's spoken verse adds a third narrative voice to the album's already complex lyrical storytelling. At the lyrical level, MF DOOM plays with narrative perspective. Hip hop's standard self-referential lyrics here are delivered in both first and third person ("He cleans his metal mask with gasoline"). DOOM's lyrics are playfully evasive, and he challenges the listener to follow the narrative strand. In another third-person sequence DOOM says of himself, "He's like a ventriloquist with his fist in the speaker's back," and track 10 is especially revealing in its chorus of "Who you think I am? Who you want me to be?"

On "Doomsday," DOOM rhymes that he "came to destroy rap," and in the following verse identifies the contradictions of his character: "Definition supervillian, a killer who loves children, one who is well-skilled in destruction as well as building." DOOM has resurfaced to take revenge on the industry that injured him, that forced him to wear his mask. His grudge is with not only the record industry, but with artists and producers he feels are controlled by this industry, who are doing exactly what record companies want. KMD lost their contract for pushing the political envelope in their music. Now in this verse from "Hey!" MF DOOM calls out more complacent and derivative artists as trained monkeys to the record executive's ferret, specifically attacking pop rap's watered-down lyrics and use of existing hit music intact rather than the cut-and-paste mixes so important to hip hop:

I heard beats,
That sound like karaoke
With monkey rhymers on a lease
Like "Don't have this ferret choke me"

DOOM's disgust with commercial rappers is further evident in other tracks, such as "Rhymes Like Dimes" ("A lot of em sound like they're in a talent show"), and is representative of contemporary underground hip hop's mistrust of the record industry. Underground MCs often lyrically dissociate themselves from mainstream rap music, and claim to be not only more authentic, but more lyrically skilled than the mainstream artists they often attack for rhyiming about expensive cars and clothes (cf. Common, Sage Francis). MF DOOM's perspective as a corporate label's outcast fosters a level of authenticity to less commercial-minded hip-hop culture, and his identity play proves an effective strategy of resistance to corporate music in this new stage of his career.

Conclusion: "I Sell Rhymes Like Dimes"

In the public transcript, the political performance of rap music is often seen as a strategy of marketing and promotion, rather than as one of resistance. Several scholars have examined rap's selling in the corporate marketplace as a central dilemma of the discourse between hip hop and capitalist society at large. Rose states, "Commercial marketing of rap music represents a complex and contradictory aspect of the nature of popular expression in a corporation-dominated information society" (17), yet she and Forman disagree on issues of corporate appropriation and exploitation in the development of rap music into a viable industry. Forman complicates the relationship between hip hop and the market as he challenges Rose's idea of an appropriative, profit-driven media industry rushing to cash in. While he agrees rap music has been exploited by corporate music, Forman at the same time attributes rap's expansion into an industry to "entrepreneurs...participants and fans" from within hip hop culture itself (107).

In rap performance, the artist himself often takes on the role of entrepreneur. Rap music indeed is sold, and the process of selling records is acknowledged more directly within rap performance than in perhaps any other form of music. Through lyrical references to recording contracts, album advances, and royalties, rap artists foreground their material conditions, often as a form of resistance. Tribe Called Quest's "Show Business" takes the form of a warning to aspiring MCs not to be exploited by industry practices. 3rd Bass's "The Gas Face" follows a rap group into the industry as a record executive tells them "Sign your life on the X. Trust me," and the Beastie Boys assure the listener "If you don't buy my album I got my advance" ("Brass Monkey"). Through a similar approach, MF DOOM's "Rhymes Like Dimes" fits into a larger history of rap songs which share a metaphor of rap music as drug. In likening the selling of his art to the selling of dime bags (a \$10 amount) of marijuana, MF DOOM turns a critical eye toward the act of marketing his music, which hip hop historically has positioned as a positive, life-affirming alternative to the drug trade. Such a metaphor is articulated in several songs, such as Ice-T's "I'm Your Pusher" and the Lost Boyz' "Music Makes Me High" and "Legal Drug Money," in which Mr. Cheeks describes his group as "legal drug thugs" selling the most

addictive drug in the world, music. In these songs, selling music equals overcoming the drug trade, which a larger rap narrative tells us is the most immediately viable option for ghetto survival. Rap artists, however, traffic in the ghetto itself, as they must sell as part of their images the same material conditions that have placed them outside the mainstream. DOOM puts it this way:

Only in America could you find a way to earn a healthy buck
And still keep your attitude on self-destruct

While still rooted in this entrepreneurial artistic tradition, rap performers through persona can step outside the marketing of a performed authentic self to traffic not in the reality of the ghetto, but in fantasy via MF DOOM's artist as comic book villain or the various sci-fi identities assumed by persona artists like Dr. Octagon, Bobby Digital, or Deltron 3030. As hidden transcript, the fantasy of persona constructs a valuable commentary on hip-hop reality. The persona artist is uniquely positioned to subvert the cultural and commercial gaze by which the rap performer is judged. Jacobs constructs a Humpty Hump persona through which he can at the same time increase Digital Underground's commercial appeal and critique hip hop's concern with image. Dumile uses his MF DOOM persona to critique the industry that wronged him in an earlier stage of his career when he performed as a different artist. These personae, as they split the performer's identity, can at the same time work to strengthen and preserve the rap self that is strained by the differing criteria of the music business and a culture that grew out of the streets.

Potter constructs rap music as a counter-capitalist, rather than anti-capitalist, enterprise. He asserts that "hip hop is not merely a critique of capitalism, it is a counter-formation that takes up capitalism's gaps and contradictions and creates a whole new mode, a whole new economics" (111). Perhaps what rap has accomplished specifically is to create spaces of increased artist control that exist within the corporate industry. The persona artists discussed in this article strategize their position in relation to this industry (even if now from outside it, like MF DOOM), and, as Gilroy suggests, their lyrics and identity play reflect a sense of cultural ownership and at the same an understanding of their music as commodity. It is precisely through their construction of multiple artist identities that they position themselves to critique such contradictions, and the playful nature of their critique allows them also to benefit as artist-entrepreneurs from the contradictory economics of hip hop as business.

Notes

- [1] The same issue is addressed in 3rd Bass's "The Gas Face" and The Pharcyde's "It's Jiggaboo Time." Marla L. Shelton explores music video representation of the African-American *female* body, yet these artists, along with Digital Underground, show that concerns with black body image in video extend to the male performer as well.
- [2] Until 2001, when MF DOOM's own Metal Face Records released *Black Bastards*.

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