

KEEPING IT “REAL”: MAKING A CAREER IN PITTSBURGH’S RAP MUSIC SCENE

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SCENE

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How do aspiring artists in the Pittsburgh rap music scene propel themselves onto the national stage? Through interactions with others in the local rap music scene, artists develop the skills, practices, and dispositions that allow them credibly to “do hip-hop”. Through ethnographic interviews of 25 aspiring artists and 2 years of observation of live performances, studio recording sessions, social media interactions, and other events, I trace the process of accountability through which artists demonstrate that they are in and of the culture of hip-hop: They assess themselves and others according to the rap music credo of “keeping it real,” and enforce adherence to this central criterion of artistic and personal integrity. Rappers hold themselves and others accountable for their ability to cite hip-hop – and realness – as a norm. Despite artists’ desires for a unified scene and literature that conceptualizes scenes as nurturing musicians’ careers, Pittsburgh’s rap scene is rife with instances of horizontal hostility; artists see others in the scene as threatening their success. I analyze the diverse pathways by which artists develop their ambitions to pursue rap music as a career. I uncover social, economic, and cultural forces that guide artists into their aspirations in music. I catalog a set of strategies artists deploy as they try to “make it” in rap music, with a particular focus on how they transition from amateurs to professionals. As artists attempt to “make it” and accountably “do hip-hop,” their interactions are shaped by the ways race, class, and gender organize expectations, standards of realness, and possibilities for success in the rap music industry. This study enriches the literature on cultural

production by showing how local music scenes can both hinder and help the careers of artists trying to break into the mainstream. Additionally, my findings and analyses add to sociological and cultural understandings of how race and gender shape and reinforce not only individual identities and career trajectories but also the limits and possibilities of creativity and what it means to “do hip-hop.”

Keywords: Authenticity, Hip-Hop, Gender, Ethnography, Professionalism, Identity

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PREFACE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop culture, and rap music specifically, permeates American culture. Hip-hop emerged in the Bronx during the 1970's with MCs (“master of ceremonies” or “microphone controller”) taking the microphone and rapping over music a DJ (Disc Jockey) is mixing on two turntables. Rapping and DJing, along with breakdancing and graffiti, comprise the four elements of hip-hop culture.¹ The hip-hop/R&B music genre was the second most-consumed musical genre in terms of record sales and online music streams in 2016 (Nielsen 2017). Individuals can encounter hip-hop cultural artifacts and aesthetics in myriad ways: from educational CDs that teach children multiplication to commercials for various products using hip-hop fashion and aesthetic.

The ubiquity of hip-hop artifacts, fashion, and aesthetics—and their commercial appropriation by the mainstream marketing and culture industries—sheds an interesting light on “authenticity” in the cultural production of rap music. The character and status of “authenticity” has been especially vexed in the context of the rap music element of hip-hop culture. The salience of and criteria for authenticity are further complicated by rap music’s position, since the

¹ While I use the terms “hip-hop” and “rap” interchangeably, it is important to note some nuances about the two terms. First, “hip-hop” is often used to address the larger cultural movement that includes at least four elements or pillars—graffiti, breakdancing, MCing, and DJing—outlined by Zulu Nation founder, Afrika Bambaataa (Chang 2004). Others have included more elements, such as “knowledge” and “style.” “Rap,” then, is a reference to the musical component of MCing. When referencing the larger culture, I will use the phrase “hip-hop culture.” Second, some of my respondents designate “hip-hop” and “rap” as two different music styles with the former relating more to “conscious” or “message” rap (see Krims 2000) and the latter referring more to “gangsta” rap (see Kubrin 2005). Because many of my respondents use “hip-hop” and “rap” interchangeably, I feel justified in doing so as well, with the above caveat.

1990s, as one of the best-selling music genres. Through ethnographic observations and interviews of individuals in Pittsburgh, PA, my research investigates how members of the rap music industry mobilize notions of “authenticity” and “professionalism” as they look to transition from the hip-hop underground to the lucrative hip-hop mainstream.

In my ethnography of the rap music scene in Pittsburgh, PA, I analyze how race and gender act as resources and constraints for aspiring artists. I find that the identities that artists try to develop in the hip-hop scene and their racial and gendered identity production are mutually constitutive. While this should come as no surprise, I say this to point out the way that I have approached my data analysis. My goal throughout my research is to show how my data, the rap music scene, and an ethnomethodological analysis of cultural production does not make sense without considering how race and gender are involved in all those processes. My ethnomethodological approach allows me to see how gender and race organize social order, social action, and power as they occur. In doing so, I also am showing how race and gender come together in these processes.

Throughout this investigation, I focus on three related production processes: community production, cultural production, and career production. I focus on the processes of community production by investigating how people in Pittsburgh attempt to create and grow a hip-hop music scene. Race and gender are resources in these processes; the androcentric and often racist organization of Pittsburgh leaves those trying to grow the scene without the power to do so. Additionally, as artists arrive on the scene, they engage in processes that (re)produce differences that correspond with the racist and androcentric organization of the rap music industry of which they are often critical. In terms of cultural production, I look at the process of creating music, performances, and personas in the rap music industry. As artists do this, they hold themselves

accountable and are held accountable by others in terms of what it means to do hip-hop properly, which has significant racial and gendered components. Lastly, I also investigate the production of careers in the rap music industry. As artists try to move from amateurs to professionals in the industry, they learn and interact with the expectations of those in the industry, which often rely on expectations of race and gender. Artists describe how they draw on race and/or gender as a resource in their career advancement and presentation of self as a professional. All of these processes also show how talent is of tertiary importance in these three processes. That is, rap music, rap music scenes, and rap music careers do not simply develop from natural talents of individuals, but from the ability for individuals to understand how to do these things according to the expectations of race, gender, and hip-hop culture. Not unlike Gladwell's (2002) "talent myth," artists believe that artists receive recording contracts and catapult to stardom based little on the talent of their performance. Artists do not need to be the most gifted at their art form, but instead must learn how to navigate the expectations of the rap music industry.

1.1 RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this ethnographic research was to understand how aspiring artists in the rap music scene of Pittsburgh, PA engage in cultural, community, and career production. I collected in-depth interviews along with observational data from live music performances, social media sites, recording studio sessions with artists, and other events to analyze how formations of racial, gendered, and hip-hop identities constitute and are constituted by these types of production. I

analyze the local hip-hop scene ethnomethodologically to see social order, social action, and power in action as artists navigate the music industry.

1.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Data come from interviews with and observations of the behaviors and interactions of 25 individuals involved with the underground² rap music scene in Pittsburgh as they engage with rap music's commercial industry. I have observed individuals as they engage in creating music, booking, planning, and performing concerts, "building their brand" through online interactions and content, and various events meant to bring together individuals involved in this scene. Through in-depth interviews with and extended observations of members of this community and their practices, I examine the impact that feedback related to "authenticity," "realness," and "professionalism" has on the process of establishing an identity within hip-hop culture. I examine individuals involved in this community as rappers, producers (or beat-makers), managers, and promoters to highlight the collaboration involved in the creation of rap music, its performance, and its distribution. I view community participants' constructions of professionalism, realness, and authenticity on multiple levels of the industry, from fan reception to artistic creation to corporate production (all from the perspective of aspiring artists). My approach addresses a methodological concern for scholars of rap music in that it focuses on the

² I use the term "underground" to refer to the music that is not funded or connected to major music corporations. Harkness (2013) describes three tiers in the Chicago rap scene. His independent and underground tiers refer to individuals not tied to major music corporations, with the latter being relative newcomers to the scene. All of my observations come from artists with the characteristics of these two tiers, with many looking to crossover from the underground or independent industry to the mainstream industry (See also Oware 2014).

processes that go into creating products in the rap music industry. In most cases, these products (songs, performances, videos, etc.) act as the starting point rather than the ending point of analyses.

I address limits in much of the research on rap music by analyzing individuals who have multiple roles in the rap music industry for the mechanisms through which they use accountability for “authenticity,” “realness,” and “professionalism” as an idiom of symbolic interaction. The members of the rap music industry in this study are at a stage where they are actively trying to break into the industry. The artists that comprise my research would be considered “underground” (Harrison 2009, Morgan 2009) due to their participation in the local music scene without having a record deal. However, these artists do not identify with or embrace a typical “underground” ethos that values independent music production and views those signed to major record labels as “sell-outs.” In fact, all but three of those I interviewed said that their goals included bring signed to a major record label.

1.2.1 Description of Respondents and Research Setting

In this dissertation, I draw on ethnographic data from eighteen months of participant-observation in Pittsburgh’s underground rap music scene. I describe and analyze my research site in depth in Chapter 2. Here, I describe my entry into and previous experience with the scene. Prior to beginning this research, I had little understanding of the scope and scale of the underground rap music scene in Pittsburgh. I was familiar with the two major artists that came out of the Pittsburgh scene, Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller, but little else beyond that. I initially befriended a local DJ and owner of an internet radio station that played only hip-hop music with the intent of

using him as my primary informant. However, he came into some legal trouble, halting our communications.

I then saw an article in a local newspaper highlighting a local hip-hop collective. I got in touch with a member of that collective, Scrollz,³ who acted as my primary informant. After meeting me, Scrollz invited me to hip-hop functions where he would introduce me to other artists. After about 4 months, I began attending events on my own I used a snowball sampling technique from there to find artists to interview and observe. I estimate that I informally and formally talked with close to 100 members of the rap music scene throughout the 18 months I was in the field. While every artist with whom I discussed my research was receptive, it proved difficult to secure interviews. This was partially due to the busy schedules that these artists have (as I will explore in Chapter 5, being an aspiring artist is essentially a second full-time job for many). It was also the case that many artists would only grant interviews to individuals that could give them exposure to an audience that would advance their careers. Some lost interest in being interviewed when they learned that I would not be able to use their names due to my IRB protocol.

Pittsburgh's rap music scene is comprised of mostly black men, but both the artists and the audience are noticeably diverse. In some instances, I would be the only apparently white member of the audience, but in others there would be nearly equal numbers of apparently white and apparently black people in the audience. Some events were open to individuals 18 years of age and above, while the rest were 21+ because they were at establishments that served alcohol.

³ All names found in this chapter, aside from Wiz Khalifa, Mac Miller, Chevy Woods, and Boaz, are pseudonyms. Likewise, I have changed the name of the central performance space, the Beat Box. Pseudonyms protect the safety, confidentiality, and dignity of human subjects in accordance with my research protocol approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Some events had crowds physically divided, with a special area for those above 21 years old. My observations indicate that there was roughly an even split in those under and over 21 at those locations. At 28-29, I was among the oldest people at most events; the occasional parent of an artist would be older than I am. The audience was typically comprised of both men and women, but almost all performers were men.

1.2.2 Interview Data

The interview data in this analysis come from 25 interviews of individuals working in Pittsburgh's underground rap music scene. The majority of respondents are male (21) and identify as persons of color (20). These individuals occupy multiple roles in the rap music industry. Nineteen respondents are rappers, 4 are producers, 1 is a manager and one was the owner of the popular music venue, the Beat Box. Individuals ranged in age from 18-38. As previously stated, all but one of my respondents indicated that they are attempting to make a career out of rap music, but fewer than a quarter are close to this ambition: rap music is the sole source of income for only 8 of the 25. The remaining 18 are still attempting to make themselves break into the commercial rap music industry and all described one of their goals as being able to support themselves and their families off of rap music alone.

Interviews ranged from 1-3 hours in length with most interviews lasting close to 2 hours. Interviews took place at sites of the individual's choosing, mostly in their homes or recording studios. The interview schedule began with questions about the individual's fandom of rap music, their favorite artists, and what s/he likes/dislikes about rap music. Next, individuals were asked about their involvement in the rap music industry. This included discussions of her or his

path to entry into the industry, her or his exact role (listed above), her or his goals in relation to rap music, and the rap music scene in Pittsburgh. Respondents were then asked about their creative process or, if in the case of the managers, were asked what role they play in the creative process of the artists they manage. Questions then focused on the individuals understanding of the terms “hip-hop” and “keeping it real” adapted from Touré (2011) and McLeod (1999). Last, individuals were asked to talk about their racial and gender identifications and how/if they see these identifications playing a role in the rap music industry.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo 10 software to code the data according to the themes present in this study. Initially for this analysis, I approached the data coding thematically for the orientations, assessments, and enforcements related to accountability as described in Hollander (2013). During this process, I inductively discovered that respondents were describing, creating, and referencing a hip-hop subject position. I concluded that this subject was the result of “doing hip-hop” and relied on the reiterative citation of regulated norms as described in Butler (1993, 2004), which is the focus of Chapter 4. All other chapters are the result of a grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008) coding process in which I analyzed the data in relation to concepts relevant to my study, like the concept of the “scene” in Chapter 3, or concepts that emerged from frequent usage by my respondents, like “professionalism” in Chapter 5. I continuously compared my respondents’ descriptions to build theory, writing memos that eventually formed chapter sections or entire chapters themselves.

1.2.3 Observational Data

Observational data come from one year of attending live performances of aspiring rappers and other events put on by members of the hip-hop community (N=31). For each interviewee, I conducted an observation of him/her engaged with their music or role at least once. This included attending live performances of the interviewees, observing them recording studio sessions, attending meetings between artists and managers, and attending events in the company of various respondents. These events ranged in nature from poetry slams to artist showcases to meetings of a citywide hip-hop collective with a goal of building Pittsburgh's rap scene. I attended events as a spectator and often had informal conversations about Pittsburgh's rap scene with attendees. These data helped me understand the "fragmentation" of Pittsburgh's rap scene that many of my respondents discussed and the general feelings about the current status of the scene. Events were often in different locations, even if organized by the same groups or individuals. These spaces also gave me an understanding of where and how hip-hop artists create and perform in the city.

Additionally, I spent over 30 hours in recording studios observing artists creating music. Some recording sessions were what I would call "transactional" in nature because the artists were paying for the use of the studio time and personnel (i.e., sound engineers, in-house producers). Other recording sessions were "collaborative" in nature with artists and producers working together in studios for mutual benefit, like working together to produce an album, without payment for services rendered. I also observed what I would call "informal" recording sessions where artists and producers would simply "hang out" at the studio, occasionally recording, but mostly listening to beats and brainstorming ideas for songs.

During my observations, I used a variety of methods to capture data. At public events, I would jot notes in a notebook or in a notepad app on my iPhone. I would similarly use my iPhone to capture notes at recording sessions, often also taking a picture of the physical space to help jog my memory. I always wrote small reflections after leaving public events about what occurred, with whom I spoke, and any individuals interested in being interviewed.

1.2.4 Other Data Sources

In adherence to the notion in grounded theory that “all is data” (Glaser and Strauss 1973), data were collected from multiple other sources. I collected other forms of “supplementary data” (Lofland et al. 2006) from online resources and web-based applications. The most informative of these sources was a group text message I was invited to join by Scrollz on the web-based application GroupMe. On this application, Scrollz, his manager Ben, their business partner Justin, and I could communicate freely. Over the 8 months I was in contact with them, I was able to observe their day-to-day operations as they coordinated shows, worked through the song order on an upcoming album, and discussed other artists associated with their collective. I kept a log of information I deemed important while often asking clarifying questions and being a general participant in the conversation. Overall, I documented 163 messages over that timeframe.

Additionally, I actively monitored the Twitter accounts of my respondents. I used NVivo10’s N-Capture feature which allowed me to compile the tweets from my respondents over the period of time I was in the field. Overall, I captured 48,616 tweets from my respondents. While I did not code these tweets individually, I ran text queries to search for terms I coded in interview data relevant to certain concepts. For example, by searching the tweets for references

to “Pittsburgh” and “Scene,” I was able to get a more accurate understanding about how artists thought about and discussed the local scene in Pittsburgh. I used this to supplement my discussions in Chapters 2 and 3. In order to maintain confidentiality, I refrain from detailed, direct quotations from these accounts because they are public and searchable.

I also listened to as much of the music made by my respondents as possible, either through their online music sites or self-produced mixtapes or albums they provided me. I made an attempt to listen to as much of the music I could find from each artist I interviewed before I interviewed them. This was partially done to create a rapport with my respondents by familiarizing myself with their music. I also did this to learn a little more about each artist including their rapping proclivities, typical lyrical content, and prolificacy as artists. Lastly, because I understand that they are judged by their peers, their fans, and industry executives on how much their music is played, listening to their music was a way of “giving back” to my respondents. I also “gave back” by purchasing tickets to the shows that I attended and purchasing CDs if they were available. Artists often wanted to give me free access to their shows, which I initially accepted. However, after my first interviews, I learned about the “pay to play” system I outline in Chapters 2 and 5. I then decided to pay artists for every ticket, often buying from them directly to ensure that they received the money from the ticket sale.

To understand the history of Pittsburgh’s rap scene before my involvement, and to supplement my interview with the former owner of the Beat Box, I gathered newspaper articles about the space from major local newspapers through a LexisNexis search. Newspaper articles allow for me to see how individuals in Pittsburgh reacted to the closing of the Beat Box and to trace continuity and change in media reporting on the scene. I read the articles (N=33) in order to understand the space itself and the types of events hosted there. I also collected other sorts of

supplementary data by reading online reviews of events, public social media posts from artists, and a book published by one of the founders of the collective of my initial informants that described the collective's formation. While I reference these sources sparingly in this dissertation, they provided a wealth of information to help me interact with my respondents and become fully immersed in my research setting.

Over the course of my time in the field, I transitioned from being a relative outsider on the scene, to being a recognizable quasi-insider or "regular." The fact that I did not make music kept me from achieving full insider status. However, my knowledge of hip-hop culture and, particularly, my fandom of rap music allowed me to blend in with individuals in the scene. My friendship with my initial informants allowed me to branch out into other networks through their introductions, or my ability to reference our relationship.

1.2.5 Significance of Methodology

It is important to note the highly-localized context involved in this research. Rap music is "appropriated and embedded into specific individual, familial and community fields of reference" (Kubrin 2005: 366) with local music scenes, vernacular, and tropes (see Bennett 1999, Rose 1994). I analyze this context as it pertains to individuals pursuing careers in the rap music industry in Pittsburgh, PA. Through ethnography, I address three methodological concerns.

First, many studies have investigated rap music through content analyses of the cultural objects (song lyrics, music videos, etc.) and listener attitudes (misogyny, political rage, etc.) it produces. Depending on who is analyzing what material, content analysis leads predictably to researchers' finding that rap music is both helpful and harmful. I am not interested in engaging

with this debate. Rather, my research aims to provide a fresh perspective on hip-hop and the processes of cultural and identity construction by focusing less on *what* messages exist in rap music, and turning instead to the micro- and macro-level forces that explain *why* these messages persist and *what they mean* to artists and audiences.

Second, research on music scenes often neglects to study the impact that a scene has on the careers of artists within a scene. With a few exceptions (e.g., Kruse 2003, Hracs et al. 2011), researchers of music scenes are more concerned with observing the patterns of those participating in music scenes as fans. Those that appreciate and consume music within a scene can do so because artists produce and perform that music. By gathering and analyzing artists' narratives, I gain a better understanding of the forces that shape and are shaped by this music scene.

Last, this research will add to the theoretical attempt to explain why rap takes the form that it does. I investigate how artists, fans, and the music industry relate to one another and produce a system of interaction. While studies on cultural industries discuss the importance of looking at the whole system of production, studies on rap music typically only focus on either artists, fans, or the music industry. The emphasis on the forces that shape ideas of "authenticity" requires a framework that can account for multiple sources of boundary creation and maintenance. In terms of identity in rap music, more research needs to be done that focuses on the intersection of multiple power relationships.

1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I review the literature that underlies the majority of this dissertation. My ethnomethodological project draws from the literature below broadly throughout this dissertation. In each chapter I draw on additional literature as a result of my “abductive” (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) research process. Rather than adhering to a strict inductive or deductive research process, I moved from the literature to the data freely. While I entered with these theories shaping my worldview on this topic and my research site, I did not attempt to apply these theories to my setting nor was I necessarily “looking” for them. However, as I discuss below, these theories shaped the questions I asked and my interactions with my respondents. I also allowed for an inductive process with my data where, after recognizing themes, I would seek out relevant literature in order to aid my data analysis process. Key concepts like “scene” (Chapters 2 and 3), “accountability” (Chapter 4) and “professionalization” (Chapter 5) all emerged from the data and caused me to synthesize the literature on those concepts, which I present in those chapters rather than here. By taking what I found as “surprising” in my data and comparing it to what has previously been said on those topics in the academic literature, I call into question some widely held beliefs about music scenes, rap music, and cultural production research in general (Peirce 1931, Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

I begin my broad overview with the literature on “boundary work.” This research provides the basis for my views on the interactions of individuals engaged with cultural production. I then review the literature on the rap music credo of “keeping it real,” the intended focus of this dissertation. Next, I present theories of masculinity and blackness as they relate to authenticity in cultural production and interaction. Last, I briefly describe the political economy

of the rap music industry to show how artists in the rap music industry relate to the dynamics of culture industries.

1.3.1 Boundaries and Rap Music: Keeping it Real in Cultural Production

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu (1993) presents a theory directed at understanding how class positions are reflected in the relationship among producers, consumers, and cultural products. Bourdieu describes the field as a “space of positions” and a “space of position-takings.” That is, the field is just as much about the available positions that one might take as it is about the position that one occupies. In this regard, the field is a tool to understand how the production or consumption of certain cultural goods by an agent places that agent in relation to other agents in terms of class distinctions.

Bourdieu (1993) theorizes the structure of the field as largely based on two oppositions. One opposition is between the consecrated avant-garde and the avant-garde (the established figures and the newcomers). The other opposition is between the two sub-fields of restricted and large-scale production (Bourdieu 1993: 53). This struggle is important in Pittsburgh hip-hop as artists attempt to crossover from independent, underground musicians to artists with mainstream recognition. In addition, this tension is present in the horizontal hostility that exists among members of the Pittsburgh music scene that I analyze in Chapter 3.

In terms of popular music, Bourdieu’s analysis offers little insight into recent trends in Internet file sharing and media consolidation. Restricted production has now developed in a way that mimics large-scale production in terms of availability (file-sharing, social media) and control of the means of distribution (ownership of ‘indie,’ or independent, labels by media

giants). Here, the boundaries between Bourdieu's (1993) concepts of heteronomy (*demand*) and "the sanction of an autonomous *market*" are a bit blurred (45-6). Bourdieu's conceptions related to large-scale production seem to be nested largely in polarized ideas of supply and demand. For artists in Pittsburgh, internet sites like SoundCloud, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube create a new struggle over the availability of their art. On the one hand, artists can easily make their music available to consumers, but on the other, competition from other artists and the ability to create false demand through fake Internet accounts creates an unpredictable and complex market logic. Additionally, artists lament the oversaturation present in Pittsburgh as a result of the ease of distribution created by these sites. They argue that consumers are now bombarded with a large supply of artists of worse quality, making consumers unwilling to try to find new music. Artists find it hard to create a demand for their music because consumers have a nearly endless supply of new music from others in the scene.

Hesmondhalgh's (2006) critiques of Bourdieu's (1993) work allow him to suggest a new direction for field-based organizational studies, which I feel fit with my research. He suggests, "Organizational studies informed by political economy might investigate what forms autonomies take in modern media organizations, across both mass and restricted production, and might examine how autonomy is being affected by commercialization and marketization" (Hesmondhalgh 2006: 229). Roberts (2010) suggests a similar project. The intended move for conceptualizing cultural production, these authors suggest, should be away from one-sided accounts towards a more complex network of relationships.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) understanding of the "field of cultural production" is mainly focused on how cultural consumption is linked to class distinctions. That is, the theory offers an understanding of the producers, consumers, and cultural products in terms of how they reflect

dominant class positions. The production and consumption processes are largely ignored. Audiences cannot simply “be *anticipated* or *ignored*” (Bourdieu 1993: 46, emphasis in the original), as Bourdieu suggests, but should be examined for the way they (or at least their expectations and “tastes”) contribute to the production process. Bourdieu’s theory is largely helpful in understanding how producers and consumers are situated in relations among one another, but does not get at the result of the interactions of those groups on processes of production and consumption. The production process is not the focus; rather, Bourdieu seeks to understand how the production of products organizes the field of cultural production. This theory allows me to understand how these groups are/can be related in fields of power, economy, politics, and cultural production, but I look outside of it to understand how these roles shape each other. Rather than understanding the class distinctions of rap music, I seek to understand how levels of autonomy and heteronomy are reproduced and challenged. That is, I analyze the link between production and consumption, an area that Bourdieu leaves highly simplified.

Lamont (1992) describes the class-based distinctions members of the upper-middle class make to separate themselves from other social positions. She describes this process as the creation of “symbolic boundaries” which are “conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (9). The establishment of boundaries and how people interact with them brings insight into how people understand their position in society, or, the case of my study, the rap music industry. By studying these boundaries and the various forms of “boundary work” I investigate the interactions between members of the rap music industry and how consumers, artists, and producers position themselves and one another in a stratified cultural field. Presumably, the creation and maintenance of boundaries helps establish what each member of the industry understands as being “good” or “bad” rap music. In the

discussion below, I also consider how boundary work can conceptualize the mechanisms behind what is considered “real” or authentic.

As Lamont asserts, “boundary work” is essential in the understanding of defining and regulating group membership. “Boundary work” is a process by which members of groups “patrol the borders” and create relational distinctions based on collective norms. Also, “it creates bonds based on shared emotions, similar conceptions of the sacred and profane, and similar reactions toward symbolic violators” (12). People in the rap music industry engage in boundary work at all points of the production-consumption process. My research in Chapter 4 describes and explains the different boundaries that are involved in categorizing judgments on the quality of an artist, song, etc., as well as the content and structure of boundaries and the work of establishing, maintaining, and shifting them. Making these judgments requires holding these objects accountable to normative expectations.

1.3.2 Keeping it Real in Rap Music

Considerable research has been done on the dimensions of authenticity policed within the rap industry. In rap music, the credo of “keeping it real” has been an essential form of authentic existence (Basu 1998). The extent to which one is able to “keep it real” is related to the extent to which one is able to possess and display relevant forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Armstrong (2004) asserts three characteristics of authenticity as it pertains to rap music: being true to oneself, having a strong local allegiance, and establishing and maintaining the requisite relation and proximity to the original source of rap. Rather than the educational skills that can transfer into higher economic status in mainstream cultural capital, rap’s cultural capital relies

heavily on knowledge and expression of local and hip-hop culture. Armstrong (2004) furthers this analysis by suggesting that rap's cultural values develop as an identity mainly in opposition to normative culture. He suggests, "Three...central semantic dimensions of rap authenticity are the racial, gender/sexual, and social location" (Armstrong 2004: 338). Rap is from "the streets" (impoverished, urban communities), and male dominated. To be authentic is to display these characteristics, therefore demonstrating the requisite knowledge and skills associated with those locations.

Kembrew McLeod's (1999) discussion of authenticity in hip-hop provides reasoning for understanding the necessity of boundaries of authenticity in hip-hop culture. He suggests that boundaries must be established in hip-hop culture because it is threatened with potential assimilation into mainstream culture. Through interviews of popular rappers and a systematic examination of discourse related to "keepin' it real" and authenticity, McLeod discovered six dimensions through which hip-hop culture demarcates boundaries to maintain what he calls a "pure" identity (136-7). In his discourse analysis, McLeod found six semantic dimensions through which authenticity was conceptualized by mainstream rappers.

McLeod found social-psychological, racial, political-economic, gender-sexual, social locational, and cultural semantic dimensions used to symbolize what is considered "real" and "fake" in rap music and rappers' presentations of self and behavior. On the social-psychological dimension, authenticity is exemplified by "staying true to yourself" and contrasted with associating oneself with mass trends. McLeod does discuss a racial dimension with blackness being authentic and whiteness contrasting it, but recent research refutes this claim (cf. Dawkins 2010, Fraley 2009, Harkness 2011, Rodman 2006). The ability to distance oneself from the label of "selling out" associated with commercial rap acts and remaining "underground" or aligned

with independent distribution defines authenticity on the political-economic dimension. The fourth dimension, gender-sexual, relies on reflecting heteronormative dimensions of black masculinity (being “hard”). The fifth and sixth dimensions require artists to make appeals to the “streets” or inner-city communities and to utilize working knowledge of the “old school” of hip-hop. McLeod asserts that the boundaries established by these semantic dimensions can be and often are “contested by those whose identities are primarily constituted of elements that authenticity is defined against: suburban blacks, white fans or artists, feminine women, artists who sold millions of records, and the like” (146). While I find support for the McLeod’s first dimension concerning honesty and integrity, artists in Pittsburgh strongly reject the necessity of the other five dimensions, often saying that those dimensions are “outdated.”

Rodman (2006) agrees with the aforementioned points of McLeod, and adds that other forms of music need to do these things, but rap must do it in a way that is “autobiographical” (105). The path to obtaining this capital is to have lived those experiences, and not just acknowledge that they exist. White rapper Vanilla Ice came under heavy scrutiny not only because he was white, but also because he made claims to a disadvantaged origin, which were later revealed to be false (Rodman 2006; Armstrong 2004). The judgements of others and the emphasis on autobiography is further explored in Chapter 4.

Despite the importance of “keeping it real” being tied to honesty and integrity, my data also reflect an understanding that “realness” can be performed. A great deal of research underscores rap as an authentic cultural creation (Armstrong 2004, Basu 1998; Delgado 1998; Fenster 1995; Oliver and Leffel 2006; Negus 1998; Rehn and Skold 2005, 2007; Rodman 2006, Watkins 2001). In this sense, rap originates from the “hood” and the content found within it is a product of the culture. Holding on to the creative process is essential in the rap community. As

Basu (1998) argues, “the cultural codes and badges of cultural authenticity embodied by the hip hop credo of ‘keeping it real’ can survive the circuits of commodification,” or more succinctly rap can survive the process of “selling out” (372).

However, this industry is said to have commodified the music, turning it into a formulaic piece of popular culture in order to make as much money as possible (Basu 1998; Fenster 1995; Negus 1998; Oliver and Leffel 2006; Rehn and Skold 2005, 2007; Watkins 2001). Of course, these assertions put the integrity of the whole genre into doubt by challenging the essential rap credo of “keeping it real.” Basu (1998) asks, “Is rap’s code of blackness being exploited for commercial purposes by the white-dominated culture industries?” (371). She ultimately concludes that rappers can maintain a sense of realness, “even as [they] oil the wheels of commercialization” (Basu 1998: 385). However, it seems that this “oiling” would be antithetical to an authentic and localized production, because one would effectively be working to make their “realness” mechanically accessible.

The idea of mechanically (re)produced “realness” echos Theodor Adorno’s “Culture Industry” perspective, which discusses the standardization and formulaic nature of the music industry and popular culture in general. Adorno (1991) argues, “The whole structure of popular music is standardized, even where the attempt is made to circumvent the standardization” (197), meaning that attempting to assess the authenticity of a rapper may be problematic from the beginning. The ideas of authenticity are produced by the industry itself and then transferred to the culture. It seems that claims to “realness” are complicated by Adorno’s conception, especially when taking into account that “as one particular song [scores] a great success, hundreds of others [spring] up imitating the successful one” (Adorno 1991: 202). Authenticity is not necessarily equated with originality or uniqueness, but a potential standardizing of songs and

content would complicate Rodman's (2006) suggestion about the autobiographical nature of rap music.

In his oft-cited analysis of rap music, Adam Krims (2000) suggests that genres in rap music rely on certain forms of content, delivery, and style to identify who exhibits authenticity. Krims breaks down the genre of rap music into four sub-genres: Party rap, Mack rap, Jazz/bohemian, and Reality rap. His genre system is meant to show that rap music:

in some sense transcodes the social dynamics that are otherwise considered external to it; and a relational map of the social world is charted within the genre system...invoking African-American traditions, pre-existing genres, gender relations (and gender domination), class relations, and the possibilities more generally of (especially American) urban life. (Krims 2000: 46)

While Krims' characterizations of rap music genres are helpful in showing that what constitutes "representing" and "keeping it real" is context- and genre-specific, the actual genre descriptions he provides may be out of date. He admits that his analysis is relevant to the current state of rap music and that the subject matter, genres, and criteria for authenticity are constantly in flux (Krims 2000:48).

Krims' genre system is not far removed from Bourdieu's notion of the field of cultural production. The relational nature of identity assertion in both the genre system that Krims puts forth and the field of cultural production described by Bourdieu require an examination of the identities expressed and their relative value to others. As these genres develop, and artists and identity expressions fill take their positions, they can affect the production and consumption process. As Krims (2000) notes, "A genre system may be performative, feeding back into production and thus crossing the line between audience and artist, consumer and producer" (92). In other words, genres create boundaries for both the artist and audience, facilitating expectations

of what the music should sound like, the topics that should be covered, and the identity that should be performed.

Negus (1998) explores the contradiction of rap's production by examining both how "*industry produces culture*" and "*culture produces an industry*" in rap music (490). The "black experience" voiced in the music could have been easily calculated by industry executives. Negus (1998) argues that the "actions of recording companies are a direct intervention into and contribution to the way in which different cultural experiences are separated and treated unequally" (488). That is, what it is to be "real" is often the result of a selective focus on specific aspects of cultural experiences perpetuated by recording companies. Myer and Kleck (2007) employ a political economy perspective to show that rap music has fallen to commodification. Corporatization has taken control of the cultural product that Basu (1998) suggests still lies in the hands of its artists. Myer and Kleck (2007) discuss this shift, noting, "Music has long served as a form of cultural resistance to mainstream values and beliefs, but as corporations gain more control, true diversity in music suffers for the sake of multiplicity and homogeneity" (147).

The discrepancies between an industry produced by culture and a culture produced by an industry rely on the location of the forces that shape the cultural object. In order to take claims like those of Negus (1998) seriously (which I do here), it is essential to uncover how these forces are constructed and utilized in cultural production. Of course, gender, race, authenticity, and cultural status are all implicated in this process.

1.3.3 Blackness, Masculinity, and Authenticity in Hip-Hop Culture

Masculinity and racial authenticity are theorized as major parts of “keeping it real” for male rap artists. The authors below provide background on the complicated constructions of identity at work in the rap music industry. The work presented here is what I initially set out to test through my ethnographic research. The following theories are important because they helped build my interview schedule and were influential in creating the lens through which I observed and analyzed my data. By focusing my inquiry with these theories, I have uncovered some of the way in which race acts as a resource for those in the Pittsburgh rap music scene. Additionally, by using these theories as the lens through which I have viewed my data, I am better able to understand how race and gender constitute the horizontal hostility I analyze in Chapter 3, the processes of accountability I cover in Chapter 4, and the creation of professional identities and the strategies used for career advancement in Chapter 5.

Touré (2011) asserts that there is a multiplicity of black identities. While he acknowledges that this may be quite obvious to some, he argues, “there are many who are unforgiving and intolerant of Black heterogeneity and still believe in concepts like ‘authentic’ or ‘legitimate’ Blackness” (4). Touré draws on interview data from a wide range of prominent black Americans—from politicians, to visual and recording artists, to academics—to assert that the US is in a “post-black era” where “the definitions and boundaries of blackness are expanding in forty million directions” (2011:12). Touré suggests that black cultural production, specifically rap music, has also begun to show the complexity of black America with artists, such as Lupe Fiasco, Jay-Z, and Kanye West, who perform identities with a mixture of class signifiers among other differences. The variety of lifestyles and expressions of black Americans portrayed in black

cultural production, Touré believes, has caused many to emphasize these differences in suggesting we are in a “post-black” America.

Touré, analyzing his conversation with Michael Eric Dyson, discusses three “dimensions” of blackness brought on by historical forces. Over time and through the recognition that there are many black identities, Touré suggests that an individual’s relationship to blackness may be classified as either “introverted,” “ambiverted,” or “extroverted” (Dyson uses “accidental,” “incidental,” and “intentional,” respectively). Each of these “dimensions” deals with the level to which individuals avoid or celebrate signifying their blackness. Touré classifies Condoleezza Rice and Clarence Thomas as introverted public figures, saying that they signify their relationship with blackness is a matter of happenstance. On the opposite end of this spectrum, those Touré considers extroverts, are figures like Malcolm X, Dr. King, and Jay-Z. The degree to which one can express his or her black “language,” as Touré asserts, is a product of understanding in what context it is being received. The “self-made hellbox” I describe in Chapter 4 is no doubt one way that artists interpret their experiences with seeing themselves as others see them.

Touré acknowledges that ideas of black authenticity limit the expression of multiple black identities. He also points out that the search for “authentic” blackness in a way that separates black culture from American culture suggests that, “[Black culture is] this object that can be studied but is so alien and foreign that only black people can understand it and white people have no relationship to it” (Touré 2011:41). With the prevalence of hip-hop in mainstream culture, binaries of cultural ownership of rap music are contested. In terms of hip-hop culture, I agree with Touré’s assertion that “the mainstreaming of Black culture has led to many whites seeing Black culture as a palette they can draw from” (2011:41). Authenticity in rap

music, which is a largely black male-dominated medium, does not need to be linked to notions of “black authenticity” because, as Touré asserts, “black authenticity” fails to recognize the existence of multiple ways individuals express their blackness. Touré’s discussion fuels my analysis of authenticity in rap music and hip-hop culture by highlighting that hip-hop culture exists at the intersection of multiple identities. Also, these identities have multiple ways to be expressed and signified. This reality is ever-present in the discussions of race I had with my respondents that I describe in Chapter 4.

R.W. Connell (2005) discusses how gender relations have developed a hegemonic structure that contains a variety of types of masculinities. She argues that masculinity is a location in which individuals engage with gender relations and the practices with which they engage with gender relations. To understand masculinity in its entirety, Connell (2005) believes that interrogating “gendered places in production and consumption” is necessary (71). In many ways, hip-hop culture, and rap music specifically, can be considered what she calls a “gender project” whereby displays of masculinity are configured according to certain hegemonic “starting-points” (Connell 2005:72).

Connell’s project sets out a gender structuring process of practice that produces many types of masculinity that have a relationship similar to positions in Bourdieu’s notion of the field. Connell suggests that hegemonic masculinity is context-specific, which calls for understanding how specific masculinities are valued in hip-hop culture and how the hegemonic position is contested or affirmed. Hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees...the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 2005:77).

Connell asserts that racial dynamics often play into the dynamic of establishing a variety of acceptable displays of masculinities. Because masculinities are established relationally, “white men’s masculinities are constructed in relation to white women, but also in relation to black men” (Connell 2005: 75). The importance of understanding masculinity as both a relational and hegemonic product is that it necessitates the establishment of boundaries and how those boundaries are authorized.

Michael Kimmel (2012) explores manhood through a cultural history of its representation and identities in the American public. Kimmel’s discussion of manhood includes analyzing aspects of economic autonomy, masculinity, and the body. While Kimmel discusses manhood as it has historically developed, Kelley (1997) suggests that adopting a “cool pose” is essential in asserting authentic masculinity for many black men. “To achieve cool,” Kelley (1997) asserts, “simply entails learning to lie and putting up a front of competence and success” (24). In his memoir *Losing My Cool*, Thomas Chatterton Williams (2010) discusses the linkages between “authentic blackness” and being “cool” in terms of his family and peer groups. For Williams, blackness was an identity that he had to perform, and perform correctly, because “it was not enough to simply know and to accept that you were black—you had to look and act that way too” (2010:8). He recounts that hip-hop culture and rap music was a primary source of education on what it truly meant to be black, a great deal of which came from the imitation of “cool pose” of various rappers and how they displayed being “hard,” or tough.

For many discussing masculinity, there is a certain connection to male physicality that is unavoidable. Kimmel (2012) suggests that as masculinity developed, the separation between masculinity and femininity was highlighted through the body, specifically an emphasis on male muscularity with the growing popularity of gymnasiums and athletic clubs. Most importantly,

“the body did not *contain* the man, expressing the man within, now, that body *was* the man” (Kimmel 2012:94, emphasis in original). For Kelley, black men are engaged in the entertainment industry specifically because of the fetishization of the physicality of the black male body in performance. There may be little wonder why artists such as 50 Cent and Tupac Shakur are often depicted shirtless. As Fleetwood (2012) asserts in her discussion of performing blackness, the black male body stands in for the hegemonic masculinity found in many descriptions of the “gangsta” and “thug.” Williams (2010) provides anecdotes describing how skin color was equated with the “thugs” and “gangsta” portrayed in the mass media. His and others’ ability to not contradict the masculinity inherent in the equation of black skin with “gangsta” and “cool pose” cultural figures, allowed them to easily seem “hard” in relationships with non-blacks.

“Authentic” identities have a great deal of complications and contradictions inherent within them. In investigating if these ideas still work hegemonically, as Touré, Kimmel, Williams, and Kelley would assert, I investigate how these culturally produced constraints can affect the creation and content of cultural objects. Drawing on Connell, I am also interested in how, despite its ability to produce counterexamples and contradictions, hip-hop works to reaffirm hegemonic notions of masculinity and authentic blackness.

While boundaries regarding authenticity may be highly racialized, it is evident that these boundaries do not merely rely on blackness or simulated blackness to constitute “realness.” One way researchers have avoided the reductive nature of equating authenticity with blackness, and therefore embodied cultural capital, is by looking at the success of white rappers.

Todd Fraley (2009) explores how white rappers, to various degrees of success, have contested the boundaries discussed by McLeod. Fraley reviews literature on whiteness and media studies to emphasize the sociohistorical construction of race. Through a process of

communicated performative acts, dominant racial actors make whiteness and race appear natural and material. Fraley asserts, “Popular culture and media are implicated in this process [of naturalizing race] as they provide texts reinforcing and maintaining these essentialized differences that continue to separate the races” (2009: 40). Like others in media studies, Fraley sees hip-hop as a site where whiteness is contested and articulated as a property of the “other.” It does not ignore whiteness or leave it unmarked; rather, it exposes whiteness as a set of socially constructed, visible practices of power in attempts to move toward liberation.

For white MCs to be successful, Fraley argues, they must establish an expression of whiteness that does not parody or mock the predominantly black art form of rap music. He suggests that hip-hop offers “the potential to redefine racial boundaries” and that white MCs can be a useful object of analysis because they “challenge notions of authenticity linked to certain black identity [*sic*] without denying the material consequences of a racial reality privileging Whiteness” (Fraley 2009: 42). The aforementioned dimensions of authenticity discussed by McLeod (1999) further highlight the how white MCs contest, interact and grapple with symbolic boundaries. For Fraley, these dimensions come together concerning the rap credo of “keeping it real.” Fraley suggests that white MCs construct their identity in opposition to white suburbia, through their avoidance of selling out to commercialism, and through establishing themselves as “hard.” However, this is a complex construction because they must avoid mimicry and appropriation of black culture and also because “selling out” was for a while an alternative way out of poverty – one that some artists no doubt perceived as more accessible than elite-level athletics.

In rap music, gender, race, class, and other relations of power intersect in the academic discussion of “realness.” Ideas surrounding “realness,” directly applied to masculinity and

femininity, are present in the use of terms “sissy,” “ho,” “punk,” and other oppressive, gendered identities. As Rose (2008) famously discusses, commercial rap music relies on the circulation of “the trinity of...the black gangsta, pimp, and ho” (4). Embedded within this trinity lies a set of expectations that rely on racist gendered and (hetero)sexualized norms of behavior. The “gangsta” and “pimp” figures rely on performances of masculinity that embody a violent, unforgiving demeanor and heterosexual prowess coupled with the subordination of women, respectively. Being an authentic “gangsta,” for example, requires a certain display “toughness.” 50 Cent famously lived after being shot nine times after exiting the drug trade. He regularly performed in a bulletproof vest as a signal and reminder of this fact. 50 Cent’s reminders of his previous experiences with violence were ways in which he could avoid being asked to account for his masculine “gangsta” persona.

Likewise, male rappers are often asked to account for their heterosexuality through the adoption of personas that mimic the “pimp.” This requires the open discussion of “hoes” or “bitches,” which in turn promotes a sexist and demeaning view of women. Listeners, producers, and artists often expect rappers who are men to mimic Snoop Doggy Dogg’s sentiment that gives title to the 1992 Dr. Dre song, “Bitches Ain’t Shit.” In the same vein, the sexual imagery in rap music relies on males recounting their sexual “conquests.”

Men also enforce conformity through the application of the term “fag” or “faggot” to those not displaying a form of masculinity that conforms to heteronormative expectations. While rappers like Frank Ocean, Macklemore, and MURS and the entire subgenre of “Homo Hop” have recently addressed homophobia, the rap music industry remains a highly heteronormative space. Macklemore admits in his song “Same Love,” that “If I were gay, I would think hip-hop hates me” (Haggerty 2012). Macklemore points out how rap music works to orient masculinity

towards heteronormativity as he takes a controversial, or at least non-normative, position, in terms of hip-hop, supporting same-sex marriage. He supports homonormativity while clearly marking himself as both not gay and not black.

Conflicting orientations of gender and race allow for the possibility of multiple acceptable identities, images, messages, etc., to circulate within hip-hop culture. These conflicting orientations result in accounts through which members of the rap music industry attempt to assess, orient, and enforce how to “do,” perform, or represent “hip-hop.” How and to what extent these agents influence each other and their conceptions of authenticity require different data and analyses than even the most thorough content analyses and case studies.

1.3.4 The Political Economy of Rap Music

Although rap music has been viewed as an art form resistant to the ideals of the hegemonic capitalistic order, much has been written about how it has been affected by capitalism. Scherzinger (2005) argues, “The valuation of music’s partial histories, minority discourses, and local politics...has failed to prevent a paradoxical new totalization that marches in step with ideological demands of late capitalism” (26). As the discussion below will confirm, despite rap music’s traditional position as being in opposition to late capitalism as symbolized by “the man,” it is strongly influenced by capitalist principles. The materialism and celebration of wealth that characterizes much of recent rap music (Rehn and Skold 2005, 2007) makes rap music’s relationship with capitalism no surprise. Rap music’s traditional position in opposition to the mainstream music industry (Chang 2004), however, makes the question of how this shift occurred worth investigating.

Keith Negus (1998) provides a thorough assessment of how corporate control of the black music industry, and rap in specifically, has affected the produced content. He asserts that the corporate ownership and concomitant strategies of record companies shape creative activities. Production and cultural consumption should not be thought of in terms of “corporate control” or as an industry responding to something “out there,” but rather as related and mutually informed processes. His discussion focuses on how corporate strategies work to divide up the company into different genres and labels. Cultural changes of the early 1970s provided economic feasibility for record companies to create black music divisions (Negus 1998). When independent rap or black music labels appeared, and were profitable, they were vertically or horizontally integrated. Thus, “there are very few senior black executives within the corporate hierarchy who are above the black division and hence involved in the decision about closing business units or re-staffing existing departments” (Negus 1998: 369). In a genre that primarily consists of black artists, it is potentially problematic that outsiders make decisions about the staffing and future of their divisions. This is not to say that non-black executives will seek to destroy black music divisions explicitly. It is important to note, however, that non-black executives are making decisions about music that is said to convey a “black experience.”

Kelley (2005) suggests that there is a glaring problem with the fact that, “rap, like most black music, is under the corporate control of whites and purchased mostly by white youths” (8). Lena (2006) describes an example from Rose (1994) that highlights the complexities of the above arguments, stating that during the height of gangsta rap, “Carmen Ashhust-Watson described the development strategy of rap label Def Jam: ‘Right now gangsta rappers are a big thing. If [a hypothetical rap group] look like the kind of group that has the capacity to do that, then [our label] might suggest they do some gangsta-style songs” (480). The fulfillment of

market and, perhaps, public stereotypes is a way in which certain forms of rap music may prosper. Just as important is the relationship between the lack of black ownership and the vertical and horizontal integration of major media companies. Kelley (1999) further asserts, “While there are black-owned production companies...these black-owned companies do not control a key component of the music-making nexus, namely distribution, and they respond to the major labels’ demand for a marketable product.” (8). The potential “run-in” with stereotypes and prejudice is certainly not limited to rap music. However, the proximity of rap music to racial representation perhaps changes decisions about the music’s marketability. As my respondents show throughout this dissertation, a racialized evaluation enters into the assessment of the marketability of rap music genres and artists.

A pervasive theme in the literature about the effects of political economy of mass media on rap music is that creativity is limited in favor of the pursuit of profit (Blair 1993, Fitts 2008, Johnson 2008, Negus 1998, Scherzinger 2005). Scherzinger (2005) suggests that marketing theory has interrupted the creative process of hip-hop because now “marketers settle priorities, make aesthetic judgments, and select musical forms” (25). As McChesney warns of other media, corporate control of rap music allows for a formulaic rendering of “what works.” What works in this sense is whatever form is selling the best at the time. Artists must conform to these templates, or risk never signing. Or, once signed, those with the corporate control will attempt to change the act to fit the industry’s desires. Even if artists are given creative control of their material, there are often times other obstacles that influence artists to conform to industry standards. For example, McChesney (1999) discusses the importance of the “payola” system of radio play, “whereby music companies paid radio stations to play their label’s artists...[which] has become legal today, as long as there is an over-the-air acknowledgment of the practice” (43).

The legality of labels paying radio stations to play their artists allows for capital to remain powerful within the industry, and control what gets broadcast when and where. Also, artists may be more likely to sign with, and conform to the standards of, larger conglomerates because they have the ability and capital to engage in this “payola” process. This corporate structure could potentially have drastic effects on the ability for rap music to achieve its self-imposed standards for authentic creation.

1.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have outlined the majority bodies of literature that will inform my project on the rap music industry and hip-hop culture. In studying this industry and its related culture, it is imperative to understand the relationships among all its members. The sociology of culture provides insight into producing and consuming cultural objects. From this literature, I take the stance that the rap music industry is situated in a field of power relations that establishes boundaries and constrains artistic creativity. The boundaries, however, are created in a relational manner, that is, there is constant feedback and reshaping of boundaries that are the product of interaction among producers, consumers, and rap artists.

I examine the mechanisms that establish and reify boundaries by investigating the rap music credo of “keeping it real.” This credo suggests that there are certain forms of “authenticity” that industry players legitimate and establish. “Keeping it real” is salient in relation to how rappers display their identities. Ideas of hegemonic masculinity and authentic blackness shape the field of power relations that set the boundaries for “realness,” further

showing how race and gender can be used as resources for those within the music scene. While these ideas are potentially more concerned with how the artist, or his/her product, is created and received and how individuals establish identities, the economic structure of the rap music industry must not be ignored. By distributing and funding certain displays of “realness,” producers of rap music also engage in the reification of certain identities. When discussing how rap music content is formed, it is essential to interrogate those whose institutional clout back certain products and how that selection process is carried out.

My research analyzes how artists establish and maintain identities. Important in this process is the salience of boundaries created by members of the rap community. It would be naïve to think that the content and culture produced by rap music (which is always the subject of controversy) is a mere function of the creative process of the artist, without outside influence. While previous research on hip-hop culture and rap music is not guilty of naïveté on this scale, the research fails to consider a holistic approach to identifying influences and sources of influence on the cultural object. I am interested in how those working to establish themselves as “authentic” or “real” in rap music understand the criteria required to do so. I believe that these monikers are connected to ideas of hegemonic masculinity and authentic blackness. Feminists and anti-racists, respectively, criticize these notions; yet, hip-hop culture and rap music establish them as organizing identities.

Rap music is a vehicle for multiple, often contradictory identities. This analysis is meant to build a toolkit for the analysis of authentic identity construction. Even with considerable variation, hip-hop relies on stereotypical constructions. In my project, I investigate the costs of establishing identities not consistent with hegemonic masculinity and authentic blackness. In doing that, I analyze other aspects of authenticity and build an understanding of what it means to

be an authentic rap artist while showing how race and gender constitute these processes involved in establishing these authentic identities.

2.0 SETTING THE SCENE IN PITTSBURGH RAP MUSIC

In this chapter, I set in context the local underground rap music scene in Pittsburgh, PA where I conducted my fieldwork. My ethnographic understanding of underground rappers in Pittsburgh calls attention to two gaps in research on music scenes. The main way previous observers made sense of music scenes is through conceptualizing how they unify scene members. This first gap, the emphasis on unity, leads to the second gap where researcher do not analyze the full range of conflicts present in music scenes, especially as they pertain to the trajectory of artists' careers.

In their general emphasis on unity, researchers observe that music scenes create bonds among scene members. They characterize conflict in music scenes as centering on behaving and belonging; conflicts establish insider/outsider dichotomies and differentiate one local scene (e.g., rap) from another (e.g., folk). In contrast, I find a different kind of conflict in the Pittsburgh rap scene: Artists engage in horizontal hostility over access to limited resources. As aspiring artists in Pittsburgh attempt to use the local scene as a pathway to achieve success in the commercial rap music industry, they see other artists as obstacles in the way of their success.

My analysis demonstrates the value of focusing on micro-interactions in studying the development of music scenes. By observing and asking questions about the everyday talk, actions, and decisions of aspiring rap musicians, I map the complex relationship between local music scenes and national music industries as emerging local artists understand and seek to

exploit it. On the one hand, as researchers on other scenes have noted, local music scenes provide opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals in a way that creates community, increases social networks of potential business collaborators, and marks and maintains cultural boundaries. On the other hand, these connections put aspiring artists in direct competition and conflict as they attempt to demonstrate market viability to the broader commercial music industry. My attending to this competitive environment among artists exposes a type of conflict that other observers have neglected but I argue is characteristic of many music scenes. Examining participation in music scenes uncovers how scenes provide cultural resources for artists, but also how they constrain social mobility and career advancement. By examining how artists engage in horizontal hostility, I add to the study of the career advancement of workers in cultural industries. Scenes are not only generative sites; scenes also create interaction rules and norms that constrain possibilities and aggravate as well as manage conflict. Throughout this chapter and the next I further analyze the cultural, community, and career production within music scenes while reflecting on how racial and gendered identity constitute these processes and act as resources for those involved.

2.1 PITTSBURGH'S UNDERGROUND RAP SCENE IN THE MID-2010S

My respondents and those commenting on the scene give contradictory descriptions of the state of the underground rap music scene in Pittsburgh. While many of my respondents believe that the scene is thriving, some also agree with the suggestion from Pittsburgh's *City Paper* that the scene has a "cloudy future" (Cooke 2015). The optimists see the talented group of artists that

they encounter daily as members of the music scene. The pessimists see the local hip-hop infrastructure faltering after Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller⁴ used it to catapult themselves into the national spotlight. At times, some of my respondents make both arguments, sometimes even in the same sentence. I begin here by analyzing how artists describe the Pittsburgh rap music scene as being on the verge of the national spotlight before analyzing their criticisms of the local infrastructure available to the scene.

Rapper T-1000 describes the rap scene by saying, “I think that this scene is, it's building. We have our couple of artists that made it. Wiz and Mac, which is great and it helps to push our agenda forward as Pittsburgh artists. It let people know here that you can make it” (Interview, 3/29/15). Not only have Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller found success, but other artists like Chevy Woods and Boaz have used their popularity in the Pittsburgh scene to catapult them to national recognition. While neither Woods nor Boaz yet equaled the enormous success of Khalifa and Miller, aspiring artists believe that the path they blazed is a viable road to success.

In this section, I introduce three dimensions of the Pittsburgh underground rap scene. First, I discuss the pervasive feeling among my respondents that Pittsburgh is on the cusp of a “Pittsburgh Renaissance,” which will thrust Pittsburgh hip-hop into wider mainstream recognition. Second, I highlight how members of the scene have adapted to the changes in the local infrastructure. This local infrastructure was vital to the success of Miller and Khalifa, and artists are now finding new ways to grow and utilize their scene. Last, I present what my respondents cite as a persistent problem in the growth of the scene. These artists assert that the

⁴ According to Forbes, Khalifa and Miller were the 12th and 20th highest earners in hip-hop in 2014, earning \$13 million and \$7 million, respectively (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2014/09/23/cash-kings-2014-the-worlds-highest-paid-hip-hop-acts/>).

biggest hindrance to their success comes from the horizontal (lateral) hostility (Lorde 1978) from other chasing success.

2.1.1 The Pittsburgh Renaissance

“Right now, it’s sorta like a Pittsburgh Renaissance,” Scrollz tells me as we drive across town. He goes on to tell me that the success of hip-hop artists like Mac Miller and Wiz Khalifa has made the artists in Pittsburgh “hungrier to get on [to a major record label]” (Field notes, 3/21/14). While the national success of these two Pittsburgh rappers has stoked local hunger, it has not been enough to convince the commercial record industry to view Pittsburgh’s underground as an ongoing source of the Next Big Thing in hip-hop. The “renaissance”—an image steeped in the history of this gritty city⁵—will come, Scrollz and others believe, when the indisputable talent of the artists working in the city is matched by institutional organization of the hip-hop scene.

Another rapper/producer/sound engineer, Swiss (who refers to himself as the “Swiss Army Knife of Pittsburgh Rap”), tells me:

It’s a very exciting time in Pittsburgh. You know those old-school popcorn makers with the silver foil? That’s Pittsburgh hip-hop right now. Every artist is a kernel that is popping and adding mass that is about to break open the dish that it is made in. It’s just a matter of time before that shit blows! (Interview, 10/22/14)

⁵ Several artists invoked this imagery throughout my research. They are referring to the era when Wiz and Mac exploded on the national hip-hop scene as the earlier glory into which they hope the scene will be reborn. The use of “renaissance” also signals many artists’ awareness of Pittsburgh’s deep history in American music. It is fitting that one of the main performance spaces now utilized by the hip-hop scene bears the name of jazz composer Billy Strayhorn, who collaborated with Duke Ellington and Mary Lou Williams while residing in Pittsburgh. Finally, mainstream political and corporate developers in Pittsburgh have a long history of referring to local urban renewal efforts as driving a “Pittsburgh Renaissance” and to Pittsburgh itself as the “renaissance city of America” (see e.g., 1956 Chamber of Commerce “Pittsburgh, renaissance city of America”).

His enthusiasm about Pittsburgh’s underground rap scene stems from his daily collaborations in his music studio with artists that he believes can be commercially successful based on the quality of their music. For Swiss and other artists, the music scene in Pittsburgh is ready to become the next hotbed for commercially successful artists, similar to Atlanta, Houston, and New Orleans.⁶

Independent music scenes have long been a resource for mainstream record companies looking for the Next Big Thing (Kruse 2010). Rather than seeing their lack of lucrative recording contracts (or other successes) as due to the larger industry’s inability or unwillingness to search everywhere for talent—an explanation with an external locus of control—hip-hop artists in Pittsburgh invoke and act on the explanation that encourages them to control their collective destiny. They understand the hoped-for “Renaissance” as mostly a matter of making the Pittsburgh scene impossible to overlook—not only in terms of talent but also in terms of cultural infrastructure to nurture and showcase the talent and thus draw the attention of the recording industry.

Proponents of a Pittsburgh hip-hop “Renaissance” do not think the city is overlooked by the commercial music industry because of a lack of talent; all of the artists, managers, producers, etc., I have spoken with say the talent level of individuals in Pittsburgh is on par with anywhere in the United States. Despite this high level of hip-hop talent in a highly-motivated pool of artists, the city of Pittsburgh, in my observation, has weak infrastructure to support the hip-hop scene. This emphasizes the many sociological processes that can influence the career

⁶ Aside from being consistently mentioned by my respondents for comparison, these three cities gained recognition on the national rap scene with artists like OutKast, Goodie Mob, and T.I. in Atlanta, Geto Boys, UGK, and Scarface in Houston, and Jay Electronica, Master P, and Lil Wayne in New Orleans. I say this to indicate a sort of next “wave” of cities to become hip-hop hotbeds after New York and Los Angeles, cities associated with the birth of hip-hop in the 1970s and 1980s (Chang 2004). A later section describes the comparisons my respondents made to these cities.

advancement of hip-hop artists that extend beyond the narrative of a talented artists being discovered and plucked from obscurity. Pittsburgh is missing a central location where artists can connect with both fans and industry executives. From 1999-2013, a venue I call the Beat Box filled this vital role for the underground rap music scene. This venue helped shape and was shaped by the scene; both Khalifa and Miller began their careers performing there. The artists, producers, fans, and promoters I interviewed all see the demise of the Beat Box as a damaging blow to the rap scene in Pittsburgh. Additionally, artists point out that the only radio station that plays hip-hop and rap music, which was sold in 2009 and then reacquired in 2011, provides limited support to aspiring local artists. Rostrum Records, while founded in Pittsburgh, has since moved to Los Angeles, CA, leaving the city without a record industry presence. This record label launched the careers of Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller while also helping mentor other aspiring artists as they attempted to navigate the record industry. Rather than focusing on this weak infrastructure, artists point out that competition amongst themselves and a lack of unity within the scene is the most detrimental obstacle the scene faces.

Is the weak infrastructure causing the temporary delay of the inevitable (according to artists like Scrollz) “Pittsburgh Renaissance”? The music critic writing in Pittsburgh’s *City Paper* opines that “until the infrastructure finds its way back, local talent might rest on the brink of a wider spotlight” (Cooke 2015). My own bias, fueled by literature on the success and failures of music scenes (Hracs et al. 2011, Glass 2012, Drysdale 2015, Finch 2015) also led me to this initial diagnosis. However, artists in my sample stress that any faltering in the progression of the scene is not due entirely to the local infrastructure. Rather, they blame the lack of unity, and, at points, outright competition among artists is largely responsible for keeping Pittsburgh’s rap scene from reaching its full potential. In the next section, I provide an introduction to the

state of hip-hop infrastructure in Pittsburgh. In later sections, I elaborate on these descriptions to analyze how the scene's infrastructure relates to my larger points about Pittsburgh's rap music scene.

2.1.2 Hip-Hop Infrastructure in Pittsburgh

In this section, I provide relevant background on the infrastructure supporting members of the Pittsburgh rap music scene. My respondents discussed three aspects of the rap music infrastructure.⁷ First, my respondents talked at length about the importance and demise of the Beat Box, the main performance venue for the hip-hop scene. I use their comments to supplement the history of this venue as it was described to me by its former owner in my discussion of the impact of this venue's presence, and now absence, on the hip-hop scene. Another focal point of my subjects' comments on the local infrastructure leads me to describe the history of the local hip-hop radio station. After being sold in 2009, it was reacquired in 2011; currently the station broadcasts such a weak signal that parts of the city get only static when they tune in. The station's most popular DJ was suspended for a short time for posting what many saw as racially insensitive material to social media, a post which drew a great deal of criticism from the hip-hop scene. Last, my respondents discussed the presence of a local record label responsible for the rise of both Mac Miller and Wiz Khalifa. While local artists try to win the attention of this label, they ultimately feel that this label is looking elsewhere to source most of its talent, as evidenced by the label's move to Los Angeles, CA. I focus on these three aspects of

⁷ In Chapter 5, I discuss the barriers that prohibit some artists from accessing certain performance spaces that include racism and economic exploitation.

the local infrastructure to highlight the impacts of live performance, local exposure, and access to the record industry on the careers of aspiring artists.

2.1.2.1 The Beat Box

In 1997, Mike Tors was a college student who, like many, liked to throw parties. Although he began throwing parties “just for there to be something to do,” the parties became so frequent that they began to take over the house Mike rented. Freestyle rap battles in the backyard, DJs in the living room, and various other musicians giving impromptu concerts eventually encroached too far into Mike’s living space. In an effort to provide a space where his friends, and others like them, could congregate to share their artistic and musical interests while preserving his residence, Mike sought to rent a space for his parties. This search lasted for 2 years and took Mike from the student-heavy residential and commercial district where he was living to a neighborhood to the east. When he found a spot, and more importantly, a real estate agent willing to work with a party-throwing 21-year-old, the Beat Box was born.

The Beat Box was divided into three rooms, each intended to have its own “feel.” One room was the main performance space, another was a low-key lounge, and the third was intended to have a more bar-like atmosphere. “It kind of brought everybody in,” Mike explained, “all walks of life. All demographics, socially [and] economically. It was that common bond” (Interview, 1/29/15). The walls were adorned with tapestries and unframed art that mimicked the interiors of many college houses in which regular parties occurred. Mike furnished the place with furniture acquired from maxing out two credit cards at local Goodwill stores.

Mike Tors also took advantage of local liquor laws that allowed customers to bring their own beverages to shows. He initially sold blueberry muffins from Sam’s Club along with

Arizona Iced Teas as refreshments. He also had a small coffee bar that was popular. The open space and ability for individuals to bring their own alcohol facilitated a steady stream of events lasting all hours of the day and night. Eventually, Mike acquired a liquor license, a landmark event that arguably precipitated the eventual downfall of the Beat Box. Mike and his friends had no experience in the service industry, something they thought might be a problem when they began. However, it was not their lack of expertise in actual service provision that caused the Beat Box to falter. Rather, it was their lack of savvy in the face of neighborhood gentrification and regulations of establishments with liquor licenses that made Mike vulnerable to local government efforts to close the Beat Box.

The story of the Beat Box mirrors the story of the neighborhood. Over the next 13 years, both would flourish. Mike Tors, and others I have interviewed, believe that the gentrification of the surrounding area ultimately led to the downfall of the Beat Box. As the Beat Box grew, acts like Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller used it to catapult themselves to stardom and foster a vibrant hip-hop scene. Other members of the scene could experience the growth of the venue and its importance to the scene, which is why all of my respondents see the scene as Prof-a-See does: “scattered” and without a “central point” because “that’s what the [Beat Box] was for [them]” and its demise was a significant step back for the scene (Interview, 1/27/15).

At the Beat Box, more established artists interacted with and provided formal and informal feedback to aspiring artists. The Beat Box grew from parties involving Tors’ friends into a full calendar of events requiring artists and sponsors to book well in advance. Events ranged from open mics that allowed artists their first experience in front of a crowd, to DJ nights featuring hip-hop and other styles of music, to impromptu jam sessions. Eventually, “You could not say you were an MC in Pittsburgh unless you rocked the [Beat Box]” (T-1000, Interview

3/29/15). The Beat Box was the major venue where artists announced their arrival on the scene and learned how to perform. The Beat Box was also a place where artists and audiences learned how to interact within the scene.

The space fostered various social interactions among diverse people and was important to several music scenes. Mike Tors told me that some Fridays you would find a deep house music night with a rave-like atmosphere starting at 2am. The next day could include an all-you-can-eat waffle bar with down tempo music, which the Beat Box called “Crash.” As the Beat Box expanded, it featured a bar service and a lounge area. Artists were able to go to the Beat Box to network with other artists in their genre and experience music from different genres as well. Artists often worked the crowd to find a graphic artist for their album cover, singer for the hook on their next song, or extras in their videos. The Beat Box served as an important site of exchange and a valuable resource for many facets of the underground music scene in Pittsburgh, not only hip-hop; musicians from the folk, jazz, and singer-songwriter scenes played live music gigs backing up rappers and sharing ideas across genres.

The space became not only a spot for those looking to perform and appreciate music, but also just a place to “hang.” This put artists and their music into a larger network of social exchange. Tors described the major result of this cosmopolitan place, saying:

If you had some people coming in that don't know how to deal with different looking people, because in this atmosphere you're going to see every shape and type of person, so, if you're [a rapper and are] going to see some blue-eyed, blonde chick and you're going to cop an attitude, then we can't have you in here, and vice versa. (Interview, 1/29/15)

Tors points out that the Beat Box provided artists and fans with a place to interact not only with music but also with others they consider “outsiders.” If either of these hypothetical groups—“blue-eyed, blonde chicks” and “rappers” (whose gender and apparent race Tors treats as self-

evidently contrasting)—failed to respect or welcome the other, they would be cast out. This was one way the Beat Box could patrol and maintain its expansive social boundaries. Members of the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh who frequented the Beat Box were taught to be accepting of difference, and those not willing to learn, quickly found that this was not their scene.

However, some in the scene were not initially comfortable with attending events at the Beat Box, highlighting how the fragmentation of the underground rap scene in the post-Beat Box era also characterized the famously diverse place. Rapper Miz Taken explained that when she and her crew would drive by the Beat Box, “the crowd outside did not seem like [their] scene” (Interview 5/11/15). She observed “a lot of people wearing backpacks,” indicating that they were “backpackers.” Backpack rap is a hip-hop subgenre known for socially conscious material and eschewing commercial hip-hop tropes like the promotion of violence and conspicuous consumption, topics that Miz Taken’s crew, more associated with “Trap Rap” or “Hood Rap,” sometimes featured in their music. Over time, Miz Taken attended events at the Beat Box, even performing there on a few occasions. Perhaps taking a lesson she learned from the Beat Box, Miz Taken took the microphone at an event after the Beat Box closed and said, “Backpackers and Trappers are segregated in this city. We need to bring them together!” (Field Notes, 4/4/14).

The Beat Box allowed artists to interact with the community as well. Local newspapers promoted the space when it was used for various social benefits and fundraisers, such as the party for an exonerated death row inmate after his release or the fundraisers for Occupy Pittsburgh, Japanese Tsunami victims, homeless shelters, and anti-mountaintop removal mining activism. Some benefits even supported the artist themselves, such as the fundraiser to help cover the growing health care costs of a local artist struck by traumatic illness.

The Beat Box featured more than rehearsed performances, including freestyle rapping competitions. One event, a game show called “Rhyme Calisthenics,” involved rappers spinning a wheel to determine the style in which they were required to deliver their freestyles (improvised rap verses). Competing in a round-robin tournament, individuals were judged against a competitor over several rounds until a winner for the evening was crowned. Rapper Mac Miller was a regular at these events and his ability to freestyle on demand has been credited as a major catalyst in his emergence in the commercial industry.

The Beat Box also provided a location for new artists to gain their first experience in front of a crowd. Through open mics, artists could perform their music for the first time in an environment that encouraged development. As Mike told me, “We’d have open mics with a band, so MCs had to rock with a band. That’s where folks learned stage presence and crowd control and delivery. And they got better” (Interview, 1/29/15). Artists learned strategies for performing and collaborating with a band to produce live music—a set of skills impossible to perfect alone or in a studio. Likewise, those attending open mic nights could experience new artists for the first time, or new music from more established artists being tested for the first time. Wiz Khalifa had one of his first performances at the Beat Box. The Beat Box provided initial “practice” for artists forming their careers and identities as artists. Straw (1991) notes that such interactions validate and positively (and negatively) sanction aspiring artists’ practices. At the Beat Box, artists of all levels were able to use experience and interaction with peers and audience members to learn which aspects of their performances, from lyrics to delivery to style, worked—and which did not.

The Beat Box also supported artists’ career advancement. Artists could use the Beat Box as they pursued prestige and status. It was common for artists to hone their craft through open

mic events until they were ready to make their own album. The Beat Box would then serve as the site for that artist's album release party. After artists established themselves in the scene, it was common for them to then host local showcases of new artists with whom they collaborated. "It was just kind of this domino effect," Mike said, "just having the platform there and allowing people to express themselves, you brought tastemakers and scene makers to the stage and then they became the ones to bring in other people into the fold" (Interview, 1/29/15).

In addition, as the Beat Box grew financially, the owners were able to book higher-caliber acts stopping through on national tours. This gave artists the ability to interact with and even serve as opening acts for nationally recognized artists. Artists could get the experience of performing in front of the larger crowd that these artists drew. This would give their art more exposure and allow them to have their music heard by artists for whom they opened, who were working in the national industry. This opened possibilities for networking, future tours, and possible collaborations with these artists.

The success of the Beat Box coincided with the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood. High-end apartment buildings, retail and grocery stores like Whole Foods and Target, and upscale dining spots began to move into the neighborhood. Soon, Mike Tors recalls, the police began showing up at the Beat Box claiming they were receiving noise complaints. Mike's landlord contacted him saying that the businesses that occupied the floors above had also complained.

Mike Tors feels that the Beat Box was being unfairly targeted because of its promotion of the hip-hop scene. As the neighborhood changed from one of the only places where real estate agents were willing to talk with Mike because any tenant was better than no tenant, to one with

major real estate developmental opportunities, Mike realized his business was not seen as compatible with their business. He took an imagined position of those agents and explained:

You can do the math. Value is defined by the contents of its surroundings. How are you going to convince someone that [a one bedroom apartment is worth] \$1400/month if they look outside and see predominately black folks outside having fun? Enjoying their scene. That doesn't say \$1400/month to me. That says, eh, maybe \$700. (Interview, 1/29/15)

Mike believed that racism—specifically, negative stereotypes about the association of black musicians and fans with criminal activity and the fear that visible black people in the neighborhood might derail gentrification-prompted local investors to pressure his landlord to not renew his lease on the Beat Box. By 2009, the last of the three Section 8-funded public and low-income housing high rises in the area were demolished in favor of what are now luxury apartments renting studios for around \$1200/month. In an area of the city where the “value” of property was rapidly changing, the demise of the Beat Box shows what sort of “value” the hip-hop scene brought with it. The black bodies that occupied the areas enjoying the entertainment provided by the Beat Box were seen, according to Mike, as value-negative.

This was confirmed for him when an officer who frequently brought noise complaints appeared around the start of business one night. Mike recalls that the event that night featured a string quartet and when the officer arrived, she informed the employees of a noise complaint. When they showed her the quartet performing she became a bit confused. As she left, Mike recalls her pointing to the new apartments under construction across the street and saying, “When that opens up, you guys are going to be in trouble” (Interview, 1/29/15). Mike interpreted both the baseless noise complaints and the police response as harassment with complex racist over tones. The valuable resource in the careers of aspiring artists that was the Beat Box was

colliding with the gentrification of an area that was trying to increase property value by driving out working class and poor black residents in favor of middle class white residents.

Later, a zoning officer contacted Mike to explain that the liquor license he had obtained for the Beat Box did not have the clearance for live music at his establishment. However, Mike had amended his license and received this clearance, which he faxed to the officer, highlighting the statement “Live Music: Approved.” Mike Tors then started receiving citations from the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board (PLCB) for noise violations. It was explained to him that with his permit, any noise that traveled beyond his property was a violation. To demonstrate, an agent on the scene held the door handle and said that the vibrations on the door handle he was feeling were enough to constitute a violation. Mike sees these laws as an attempt to regulate “undesirable folks” in the hip-hop scene. After being slapped with a few fines, and his landlord’s billing him for another tenant who ended their lease agreement early, Mike was losing the ability to keep the Beat Box afloat financially. Soon, the landlord informed Mike that the lease for the Beat Box would not be renewed and the Beat Box would be closed. The landlord believed that the transformation of the neighborhood meant she could rent the space to a new tenant for much more money. The business that now occupies the space of the Beat Box is an upscale cocktail bar that charges over \$10 per drink. Mike’s former partner, a DJ, still plays at this location. “They go after the same dance parties and stuff,” he said, “But now they are able to control the amount of melanin content that comes in” (Interview, 1/29/15).

Outside of the Beat Box, artists struggled to find venues that would allow them to perform. Rapper Rydah said that after the Beat Box closed, “nobody wants to book us [rappers]...They don’t want to hear it. They are like, ‘No hip-hop. No rap. No. No. Rap music is violent’...So, then it’s like where do I perform? I’ve got fans [that want to see me perform]”

(Interview, 10/7/14). Without the Beat Box, artists have been missing out on what they see as a vital portion of their career, live performances. The Beat Box gave them an opportunity to engage with the scene in person through live performances of their music. Additionally, artists rely on live performances for income and as a revenue stream to help offset the costs of recording and distributing their music. At worst, members of the hip-hop scene are the victims of racist practices of exclusion from owners of music venues and performances spaces, as Mike Tors points out, and at best, they are victims of these owners' stereotypical association of rap music with violence.

One of the biggest draws of the Beat Box, according to artists and fans, was that the space was open to and accepting of hip-hop culture. For many artists, not only was booking a show a difficult task; dress codes and other venue restrictions often kept hip-hop fans out. Signs were often posted with "dress codes" that denied entry to individuals wearing baggy pants, oversized t-shirts, baseball caps and other head coverings, and sneakers. These dress codes exclude everyone whose taste included the latest hip-hop fashion trends, popular largely among black males, and their enforcement maintained racial segregation in mainstream clubs. Mike Tors pointed out the contradiction of the institutional racism of these venues:

They would play that music [hip-hop], but they wouldn't want those people in there. I always called it "Diversity à la Carte." It's kind of like, I'll take your language, your music, your dance, your dress, but I don't actually want *you* there. You could be like, "Hold up, you are playing my song, but you're saying my pants are too big to get in?" (Interview, 1/29/15)

Other venues were seen as attempting to co-opt or take advantage of the rap music scene while the Beat Box was seen as a place where people wearing the markers of hip-hop culture felt comfortable and welcome. More importantly, the Beat Box did not use a dress code to enforce racial segregation. Dress codes are "ways for venues to limit the amount of melanin" in their

space, according to Mike, as they prohibited styles popularized by black members of the scene (Interview, 1/29/15).

Actshawn took to Twitter to voice his concern about these matters. He expressed his frustration with racism he has experienced in Pittsburgh. In one tweet, he asked, “How many times [have] you went out with a group of friends dressed to their standards and they [still won’t] let you in?” In another tweet, he asked, “Why can’t we go where they play our music?” Actshawn expressed his frustration with his experiences going out in Pittsburgh’s South Side neighborhood and not being allowed in to certain bars and clubs. Even if he and his friends “dress to their standards,” meaning avoiding wearing things against dress codes, they are still refused service. He and Mike Tors point out that Pittsburgh hip-hop music may have a home in the bars and clubs that play local music, but members of the hip-hop scene themselves are frequently barred from these establishments. Their race and affiliation with hip-hop culture acts as a barrier for them to be able to move freely about the city. Venues can engage in extremely exploitative practices like using an artist’s music to entertain the patrons of the establishment while barring the artist from being a patron. In other words, this shows how racism inhibits the production of communities in Pittsburgh, contributes to segregation, white privilege, and surveillance of black men in particular, while also constraining the development of careers of artists.

The perception that hip-hop music and hip-hop crowds lead to violence or wrongdoings and should therefore be grounds for exclusion from many venues in Pittsburgh has been met with retorts of hypocrisy in recent years. Most summers, Pittsburgh hosts country music artist Kenny Chesney for a concert in the football stadium, Heinz Field. These concerts are of note because thousands of (mostly white) people congregate in the parking lots of Pittsburgh’s North Shore

neighborhood to tailgate before the concert. In 2013, 73 people were arrested and parking lots were left with mounds of trash after Chesney played for 58,000 people at Heinz Field (<http://www.wpxi.com/news/massive-clean-begins-following-kenny-chesney-conce/289637369>). People in Pittsburgh formed a “Ban Kenny Chesney from Pittsburgh” Facebook page over the mess and chaos that came with that concert. Chesney has since played other shows with fans still leaving a mess in parking lots, but not to the extent of 2013. After a brief hiatus, when Chesney was allowed to perform again in Pittsburgh, Ben, the manager of rapper Scrollz, took to Twitter to make the observation, “Kenny Chesney allowed back in [Pittsburgh] after the mess of his concert. I ask if a hip-hop show caused that destruction would the city allow its return?” Many hip-hop fans made similar observations, noting that the amount of trash left by these mostly white country music fans and the number of arrests attributed to his concert far outnumber those of Wiz Khalifa’s concerts in Pittsburgh. In fact, I was unable to find any such instances pertaining to Wiz Khalifa’s performances. While those dress codes and exclusionary practices exist for those wearing clothing related to hip-hop culture in the name of safety, it seems unlikely that there would ever be a dress code banning cowboy hats, large belt buckles, or other items of clothing readily found at these destructive Kenny Chesney concerts.

Mike Tors feels that had he owned the building the Beat Box was in, he would have been able to afford to soundproof and would not have been evicted by a landlord who was chasing top dollar. He eventually was unable to pay the fines that accumulated from what he feels was unfair and racist targeting of his establishment because of its association with black culture. Mike summed up his experience with a teaching moment for aspiring artists and the hip-hop scene:

So that’s why I tell people it’s really a story of a lack of ownership. And that’s what I’m really preaching now: we can try to own our own business, we can have our own space, but, try to own the building. No matter how terrible the building

is, you can still own it. And that's even within the hip-hop scene. Own the rights to your music. There's a lot of old hip-hop pioneers, even rock, jazz, blues, that got screwed because they didn't own the rights to their own music. So, when you don't own, you know, you gotta get the fuck out sometimes. (Interview, 1/29/15)

The Beat Box closed in 2013 after being a hub for Pittsburgh's hip-hop scene for 13 years. As a result, the rap music scene fragmented across smaller venues throughout the city (which I discuss at length in a later section).

I devote this much time to discussing the Beat Box to reflect the amount of time my respondents spent discussing this venue. In all but two of my interviews, the conversation turned to the Beat Box at least briefly, often to point out how the scene has changed since the closing of the Beat Box. Rapper Aubrey Loud described the impact of the Beat Box:

“The [Beat Box] was this almost, like, epicenter for everyone [in the hip-hop scene] coming together. I performed there the first week it opened and I performed there the last party. It was, like, so heartbreaking to know that was gone, to know *why* it was gone, to see the continued gentrification of the area. I think that's a primary issue [in Pittsburgh's hip-hop scene]. We've lost something really important to our culture.” (Interview, 10/16/14)

Here, Aubrey Loud touches on several topics covered by many of those with whom I discussed the Beat Box. The Beat Box was a hub for the hip-hop activity of the city. While there were other venues that promoted hip-hop, they did so inconsistently. The Beat Box was the only venue that primarily catered to the hip-hop scene, and members of the scene thought of it as a home. Its demise, Aubrey Loud once told me, created a group of “Beat Box orphans” searching for a new home for Pittsburgh hip-hop.

While the Beat Box was not the only place for members of the hip-hop scene to perform and consume hip-hop music and culture, it was the venue respondents cited as being most important in producing community among members of the hip-hop scene. Aubrey Loud told me that she has “done shows in probably like 250 venues in Pittsburgh and I don't think that's an

exaggeration.” The difference between these venues and the Beat Box is that “there was nowhere that was consistently, like at least once a week, supporting the hip-hop community” (Interview, 10/16/14). T-1000 echoed this sentiment, saying, “But, when we lost the [Beat Box] we lost a stable venue that promotes primarily hip-hop music” (Interview, 3/29/15). Individuals in the rap music scene feel that the closing of the Beat Box, once a reliable and stable “home” for Pittsburgh hip-hop, has thrust aspiring rappers and the scene itself into precarity.

Rapper One Stop, when asked to describe the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh, said, “with places like the [Beat Box] being gone, it has truly disrupted what you would call a ‘scene’ in Pittsburgh” (Interview, 1/27/15). Miz Taken highlighted the venue’s importance saying, “A lot of time when people think about Pittsburgh hip-hop, they think about the [Beat Box]” (Interview 5/11/15). Fortunately, in the years since the Beat Box closed, other music venues that cater to the hip-hop scene have emerged. They are not as popular or consistent as the Beat Box, as they have performances only a few times per month, in smaller spaces and with smaller crowds than the Beat Box. Members of the scene still believe that because a place like the Beat Box has not emerged, the once unified scene has fragmented across these smaller venues.

2.1.2.2 100.1 FM: WAMO Radio

“Pittsburgh’s Home for Hip-Hop and R&B” is the tagline for 100.1 FM WAMO. The station’s callsign pays further homage to the city with the letters “A-M-O,” an acronym of the three rivers that define the city (the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio). However, depending on where you are in the city, dialing into the station on your radio may only produce static. The station is broadcast on an AM signal with an FM signal translator. For the consumer, this means that the signal has frequent interference. In addition to the station’s shoddy signal, my

respondents criticized the station for what they see as the station management's having a limited interest in the local rap music scene in Pittsburgh. In this section, I discuss how this radio station adds to and detracts from the local music scene.

In 2009, WAMO radio was found on the dial at 106.7 FM. On September 8, 2009, the radio station was sold to Catholic Broadcasters who shut it down after serving the urban community for nearly 50 years. The September 9, 2009 issue of the *New Pittsburgh Courier*, the modern incarnation of the city's once-thriving black newspaper, carried a story about the shutdown of the station. Pittsburgh citizens lamented that they were "saddened that the only Black radio station in Pittsburgh was unable to be saved from obscurity" and "outraged and no one has stepped up to the plate to bring in another urban radio so far" (*New Pittsburgh Courier* 2009). Black Pittsburghers were not upset simply because they lost a radio station that played music they preferred. Rather, they felt WAMO "was the only thing that we had. Now our communities have become more divided than ever, due to the lack of knowing what's going on in the city" (*New Pittsburgh Courier* 2009). Another Pittsburgher opined:

WAMO not only played music but also helped the urban community. WAMO has helped me meet many people that I would have otherwise never met if it wasn't for them. It saddens me that the younger generation will not be able to listen to WAMO as I did when I was younger. (*New Pittsburgh Courier* 2009)

The radio station provided a way for urban communities in Pittsburgh to be connected and learn about or discuss issues important to them. When the station disconnected its signal, these communities were left without a vital resource for information and entertainment.

In 2011, it was announced that WAMO would be returning, this time at 100.1 FM. The station would keep the rhythmic contemporary format, a format that plays mostly Top 40 hip-hop and R&B hits, with occasional genre crossover with pop and EDM (electronic dance music).

The signal would still be a translated AM signal, which meant the spotty reception around the city would continue as well. While the rap music scene was happy that a radio station that played the music they consumed and produced was back in Pittsburgh, many in the scene are now lukewarm on the significance of the station's return.

“Pittsburgh radio is terrible. It's embarrassing,” Mike Tors told me when I asked him about other things that could help the rap music scene grow (Interview, 1/29/15). Many respondents expressed displeasure with the local rap music station. Some, like Miz Taken, said that people in the scene “don't listen to [WAMO] because the music is just like, not good” (Interview, 5/11/15). The decline in respect for radio station is evidenced by the rapper Burner, who told me about his goals in the rap music industry: “My second goal was to get on WAMO, but that was when WAMO was 106.7, not what it is now” (Interview, 4/28/15)

Burner achieved that goal, having a song of his played during the local showcase. However, his pride in that achievement is not what it could have been because of the most common complaint about the station from my respondents. WAMO has a “Future Flavaz” segment that lasts for 30 minutes beginning at 10pm on Monday nights. This draws a lot of ire from local artists, as Rydah explains:

WAMO plays [local music] at 11:30 [*sic*] at night. How many people do you know that listen to the radio at 11:30 [*sic*] at night? Almost nobody. Instead of taking that one hour of rush hour traffic and mixing in a couple of independent songs here and there. But, they don't do that because they think that they are supporting when they put you on close to midnight when nobody has the radio on. (Interview, 10/7/14)

While WAMO does make an effort to play local music, artists feel that they do so at an inopportune time. As independent artists, they feel it is important to get their music heard by as many ears as possible, so a Monday night showcase gives them little hope that this will advance

their careers. Very rarely, the station will program music by a local artist during the rush hour mix, but as Rydah points out, this is not WAMO's typical protocol of showcasing local music.

Actshawn added that WAMO places many stipulations on the music artists send (e.g., recording quality, "clean" music without profanity, etc.), which makes it hard for artists to get their music played. He added:

I've got a better chance of hitting up *Shade 45*⁸ and getting my joints on there! Y'all giving me all these stipulations and stuff...I'm like, you know what? I'm good. Thank you. I'm doing what I'm doing and getting placements everywhere else. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Actshawn believes WAMO creates too many hoops for artists to jump through in order to get their music played on the station. Artists have moved from local radio to the internet and satellite radio to get their music heard and to broaden their fanbase. When artists do submit music to "Future Flavaz," they will often send out reminders to their friends and followers on Facebook and Twitter to remind them to tune in to WAMO that night.

Aside from not supporting them by playing their music, members of the rap music scene feel that WAMO does not provide the cultural support it once did. Miz Taken summed up this stance as she hypothetically spoke to WAMO:

You're supposed to represent Pittsburgh hip-hop on the radio, but you guys don't play local music except for half an hour every week at a weird time. You don't come out to events unless you are paid to be there. So, this is an example of them not being a part of the culture, so people kind of resent that. (Interview, 5/11/15)

Members of the Pittsburgh rap music scene feel a disconnect with WAMO as "Pittsburgh's Home for Hip-Hop and R&B" because the station is not "part of the culture." To be a part of the culture would be to show support for local artists by playing their music or attending events they

⁸ *Shade 45* is a Sirius satellite radio station featuring uncut hip-hop music owned by rapper Eminem.

throw. By exclusively playing commercially-successful music, while asking for payment to attend events put on by the scene, rather than promoting the culture for free, WAMO undercuts the aspiring artists in Pittsburgh. Instead of working inside or with the hip-hop culture of Pittsburgh, artists believe that WAMO works against it.

All of this came to a head when a popular DJ for the station, Mike Jax, posted a picture on his Instagram feed about Freddie Gray, shortly after he died in police custody in Baltimore, Maryland. The picture depicted a photo of Gray that was being used by many media outlets. However, next to this picture was a list of 22 dates and crimes alleged to be Gray's criminal record. Jax posted the picture with the comment, "He was pretty busy before he was unjustly killed by the Baltimore PD." At its very best, this post was deemed to be insensitive for making light of Gray being "unjustly killed." At its worst, this post was deemed to show Jax (a white man) as a racist by insinuating that Gray's death did not deserve sympathy. Jax was suspended by the station for two weeks. Police violence and the incarceration of black men are concerns of the community that WAMO is believed to represent and members of the rap music scene felt that Jax's post was another example of WAMO's disconnect with the community it was trying to promote. The fact that the station only shows up to events for which they are paid is an often-cited example of how there is a disconnect between the station and the community. Artists want the station to support their music as well as the issues that matter to them. Rappers from Pittsburgh like Prof-a-see were in Baltimore protesting the death of Freddie Gray while station employees were being suspended for making light of the situation.

Ultimately, 100.1 FM WAMO fails to meet the standards set by members of the rap music scene in terms of their desired support from the station in both their music and the social issues they deem important. On one front, the station provides few avenues to aid in the

advancement of the careers of aspiring rappers here. Their focus on Top 40 hits comes at the expense of the local artists not yet in the mainstream. Their weak signal strength means that even for those local artists that make it onto WAMO airwaves, the station's reach to potential fans is limited. Culturally, WAMO "doesn't support as much as they could" (Flow-er Child, Interview, 2/11/15). By not coming to events, or charging the events when they do, WAMO staff give many artists the impression that the station is outside of the culture rather than infrastructure for artists and community. As evidenced by the insensitive Mike Jax social media post, the station also has been criticized for being disconnected from the culture emotionally. In the next section, I provide a brief history of a prominent record label that began in Pittsburgh to further show the disconnect and depletion of the rap music infrastructure in Pittsburgh.

2.1.2.3 Rostrum Records

In addition to performance spaces and a more locally-focused hip-hop radio station, artists wish that the commercial recording industry had a larger presence in Pittsburgh. "Where are the other [record] labels? Where's the infrastructure?" asked Prof-a-See during our interview, "I just feel like, Pittsburgh, when it comes to the level of talent, we will always rival any other major city. We're just missing the industry. Chicago has the industry, Atlanta has the industry, New York [and] L.A. have the industry. And Pittsburgh just has to continue to develop that" (Interview, 1/27/15). Rappers working in Pittsburgh are eager for the local industry infrastructure to support the talent in the city by providing space for the recording industry and artists to interact. For Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller, Rostrum Records provided them with a pathway to their now enormous commercial success.

According to the company's website (www.rostrumrecords.com/about), Rostrum Records was founded in 2003 by Benjy Grinberg. Grinberg, Khalifa, and Miller all attended the same high school, Taylor Allderdice, in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood. Connected through their high school alma mater, Grinberg was introduced to Khalifa, who was 10 years his junior, who then began releasing popular internet mixtapes under the Rostrum label at the age of 16. While recording with Khalifa at Pittsburgh's *ID Labs*, Grinberg met Mac Miller (14 years his junior). In 2011, Wiz Khalifa released the #1 hit "Black and Yellow," while Mac Miller released *Blue Slide Park*, the first album from an independent record label to debut at #1 on *Billboard's* Top 200 list since 1995.⁹ While Wiz Khalifa remains affiliated with Rostrum Records, Mac Miller has since left the label for Warner Bros., while beginning his own record label, REMember Music.

The immense success that Khalifa and Miller found with Rostrum records highlighted a path for other rappers in Pittsburgh hungry for mainstream success. On Twitter, some artists still contact Grinberg, almost to the point of harassment, asking him to listen to their music in hopes of getting signed. The buzz created around Khalifa and Miller also created an opportunity for scammers, according to Burner and Miz Taken. They described to me that at around the time Miller and Khalifa were hitting the peak of their popularity, individuals claiming to have connections in the commercial recording industry would approach local artists with the promise of lucrative "record deals." However, these deals often involved the artist paying money upfront, sometimes in the thousands of dollars, with the promise of a large return on investment. They claim that these deals never panned out for those involved, and they themselves were too savvy

⁹ This timeline was reconstructed from an online interview with Grinberg found here: http://www.hitquarters.com/index.php3?page=interview/opar/interview_BGrinberg.html

to fall for what they saw as “shady” business practices. The incredible success of two artists from the scene explains why some artists fall for this type of scam. After all, through Rostrum Records, Grinberg used his industry connections and knowledge to catapult Khalifa and Miller. These were not just the most recent success stories of rap musicians in Pittsburgh, but really the *only* success stories many aspiring artists had. Those who may have fallen for these scams probably just thought they were following suit. Even though I heard this story several times, I never encountered a victim of one of these scams firsthand.

Actshawn indicated that many believe that the pathway out of the Pittsburgh’s underground is through Rostrum. This way of thinking, he argues, inhibits the success of local artists, because they only see one pathway to success. He explained:

People be like, “I gotta get signed to Rostrum!” No you don’t! I said that [publicly] on Twitter one day...I’m not trying to down them, I’m just saying, you all want to be signed to this one person. But, guess what? Guess how many labels is out there? Expand your mind! (Interview, 2/18/15)

Actshawn points out the flawed thinking by many of his peers. He asserts that just because one pathway worked for Miller and Khalifa, it is not necessary, nor is it feasible, for all others in Pittsburgh to take the same path. Rostrum’s success established the label as *the* Pittsburgh hip-hop label. However, artists like Actshawn have been able to find success elsewhere. In 2016, Actshawn signed with a different local record company and is excited about his career trajectory.

Rostrum Records has recently left Pittsburgh, moving its offices to Los Angeles, presumably to be closer to the pulse of the mainstream recording industry. They recently signed another Pittsburgh rapper, Boaz, further feeding the belief of local artist that they could be the next to join Rostrum’s roster of artists. However, Prof-a-see does not see Rostrum’s biggest impact on the scene as being their potential of signing more Pittsburgh artists. Rather, he says

that “having Rostrum here was a good thing because it gave you a model with which you can build the next Rostrum” (Interview, 1/27/2015). Just like the Beat Box and potentially WAMO, artists in Pittsburgh do not use the limited infrastructure as an excuse for their delayed success. Rather, they believe that these pieces of infrastructure have given them the drive to do it themselves. They have turned to social media and satellite/internet radio to get their music into the public, instead of focusing on avenues solely in Pittsburgh, which I analyze in Chapter 5.

2.2 MUSIC SCENE STUDIES

Scholars focusing on the connections among space, place, and interactions have increasingly moved toward a discussion of the role of scenes in the production and consumption of culture. Discussions of cultural scenes have emerged from efforts to analyze the variety of practices and identities otherwise absent in discussions of concepts like “communities” and “subcultures.” In contemporary usage, scholars conceptualize scenes not only as sources of data but also an analytical tool. In this section, I examine the literature on music scenes across five major fronts. First, I describe how researchers define what scenes are, beginning with the seminal work of Will Straw (1991). Next, I analyze how the concept of a “scene” grows out of, and is a response to, previous theories on popular music and subculture. I then examine how researchers have conceptualized music scenes as largely positive, productive spaces. I argue that this focus on unity results from a false understanding that those participating in local music scenes seek to remain in that local scene. For aspiring artists, local music scenes are a step toward a larger goal

of gaining recognition in the commercial recording industry. Last, I describe how scenes are created and how, in some cases, they decline in popularity or fail entirely.

2.2.1 What is a Music Scene?

Scenes are sites where cultural codes circulate and structure audiences, environments, and interactions. Will Straw's (1991) analysis provides the basis for much of the recent scholarship within the scenes perspective. While Straw began with an analysis of popular music, the scenes perspective has since broadened to include other forms of cultural production. Straw (2004) advocates the broad (if not extremely vague) study of "the excesses of sociability that surround the pursuit of interests, or [that] fuel ongoing innovation and experimentation within cultural life of cities...[in] one of the city's infrastructures for exchange, interaction and instruction" (412-413). While Straw advocates for a vague study of the activities involved in the "pursuit of interests," he specifically defines a "music scene," which I examine in regards to Pittsburgh hip-hop, as "that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization" (373). Scenes establish sites of interaction and exchange, but also come into being through those interactions and exchanges.

While scenes may focus on one cultural product (e.g., a musical or artistic genre), researchers point out that there are many types of cultural production associated with that product. For example, the rap music scene is made up of rappers, audience members, producers, videographers, managers, DJs, breakdancers, graffiti artists, and graphic designers, among others. Researchers tend to focus on how individuals identify with a scene and how scenes create

common bonds among members (the focus of a later section in this chapter). As with an “art world” (Becker 1982), a scene requires multiple forms of labor in order to persist. Likewise, depending on how an individual contributes to the scene, they may have various outlooks on what the scene means and how it is enacted. In this conception, not only do fans, artists, venue owners, band managers, etc., make up a scene, their respective positions give them different points of entry in terms of participation along with different viewpoints on the scene itself. While researchers acknowledge the existence of other positions within a scene, most of the literature that describes the unity within and identification with music scenes focuses on audience members. This, of course, can lead to contention among members (the focus of another later section).

Scenes also are linked to a certain space. Those interested in studying scenes examine how localities influence, and are influenced by, the cultural production in scenes. In addition to a focus on the geographical locality of a scene, researchers also stress the importance of scenes in relation to interaction. As Woo, Rennie, and Poyntz (2014) describe, “Scenes are not only places to do certain kinds of activity, but places to be seen doing them by significant others” (2-3). In their conceptualization, scenes are not just spaces imbued with locally specific characteristics; spaces scene members frequent become synonymous with the scene itself. *CBGB* and *Studio 54*, for example, were important places for scenesters in New York’s punk and nightclub scenes, respectively, not just because scene members congregated there. The places themselves became legitimized to the extent that visiting them helped aspiring scene members also gain legitimacy. The importance of the Beat Box in the Pittsburgh rap music scene I describe above is an example of how a place can become synonymous with the scene and how a place can be used to legitimize scene members.

It is important to note that scenes can link a wide variety of spaces rather than being tied to one specific space. Bennett and Peterson (2004) famously conceptualize local, translocal, and virtual scenes. Their point is to show that scenes create connections through spaces, but are not the places themselves. In what they conceptualize as translocal scenes—“widely scattered local scenes drawn into regular communication around a distinctive form of music and lifestyle,” members of scene exchange ideas and products with similar local scenes (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 6). The authors cite the “Beatlemania” of the mid-1960s as an example of how fans of The Beatles around the world became linked with one another via the band’s style and music, but also selectively drew from cultural codes associated with The Beatles in order for the band to fit in with the cultural experiences of different localities.

Increasingly relevant today, Bennett and Peterson (2004) point out that scenes no longer need a link to a physical space, either, with the emergence of virtual scenes. Researchers use their concept of virtual scenes to describe and analyze how electronic communications allows for scenes to grow via the internet. Chat rooms, online role-playing games, fan sites, and a plethora of other ways individuals come together online to produce and consume culture all draw attention to the fact that the “space” to which scenes are linked may not physically exist in the analog sense.

Lastly, scenes are tied to a given musical genre, artistic style, or form of cultural production. Music scenes refer to the “contexts in which clusters of musicians, fans, and other participants share their common musical tastes thereby collectively distinguishing themselves from others” (Heine 2012: 201). As I will describe in later sections, scene members engage in a great deal of boundary work surrounding their claims to one music genre over another. For example, McDowell (2014) describes how the artists in the “Taqwacore” punk scene encode

their Muslim faith into their music to differentiate themselves from less marginal punk rock scenes.

In summary, scenes, and music scenes in particular, are comprised of a variety of producers and consumers, are linked to a certain space, be it physical or virtual, and are tied to a musical genre or type of cultural production. Consolidating the music scene perspective specifically, Andy Bennett (2004) writes that analyzing scenes “offers the possibility of examining musical life in its myriad forms, both production- and consumption-oriented, and the various, often locally specific ways in which these cross-cut each other” (2004). This specificity mixed with ambiguity has led to critics of the concept (such as Hesmondhalgh 2005) saying:

Collectively, work done under this rubric has offered useful insights into the role of place and space in musical production and consumption. But [I argue] that scene is a confusing term. It suggests a bounded place but also has been used to refer to more complex spatial flows of musical affiliation; the two major ways in which the term is used are incompatible with each other. (23)

Straw (2014) attempts to clarify this in a piece entitled, “Some Things a Scene Might Be,” where he describes six things that a scene might be: collectivities marked by some form of proximity, spaces of assembly, workplaces engaged in the transformation of materials, ethical worlds shaped by the maintenance of behavioral protocols, spaces of preservation, and spaces of mediation that regulate the visibility and invisibility of cultural life (2). Straw’s catalog points to several different aspects of scenes worth investigating. However, Straw’s descriptive list does not respond satisfactorily to Hesmondhalgh’s critique of the concept.

I agree with Hesmondhalgh that the concept of scene is a descriptive catch-all. The goal of the following sections is to demonstrate that, atheoretical incoherence notwithstanding, the concept of scene facilitates the study of musical production and consumption processes. Along the way, I highlight what I see as two major weaknesses in the concept by discussing the

concept's inability to explain a full range of conflicts that may be present in the scene, and how conflicts over social mobility can speed up or slow down a scene's growth.

2.2.2 Music Scenes as a Response to Previous Concepts

The discussion of cultural scenes grows out of journalists' discussions of the marginal lifestyles often associated with jazz in the 1940s (Bennett and Peterson 2004). The concept of scene also grew out of discussions of community. Bennett (2004) describes two main applications of "community" specifically to music, which set the stage for the growth of the scenes perspective. In one application, locally produced music creates a means for individuals to situate themselves within a locality and the local music style becomes a source of social solidarity (Bennett 2004). Bennett (2004) describes the second application as a much more "romantic construct...as a means through which individuals who lack the commonality of shared local experience can cast music as a 'way of life' and as a basis for community" (224). While this community metaphor emphasizes the shared understandings and connectedness of individuals through culture, here, specifically to music, it lacks a focus on broader sets of practices and relations often found in scenes.

In fact, the concept of scene seems so indebted to previous conceptions of community that researchers often present the two practically as synonyms. Glass (2012) describes a scene as a "unique, local identity that transforms regional members into a community" (697). Straw (1991), as he attempts (with eventual success) to popularize the use of scene in Cultural Studies, asserts that important objects of analysis for those studying music scenes are "the ways in which particular musical practices 'work' to produce a sense of community" (373). My point is not to

argue over semantics or attempt to distinguish “scenes” from “communities.” Rather, I underscore the importance of what the word “community” evokes—a group sharing common characteristics that are set apart from a wider society—and its importance to the concept of “scene.” Straw (1991) indicates that the key difference between the two concepts is that while a “music community” has a relatively stable composition, a “music scene” is comprised of a wide range of practices and processes of differentiation and change. Both concepts emphasize a sense of belonging experienced by their members and researchers do little to effectively distinguish between the two. I argue that both community and scene emphasize belonging, leading analysts to ignore a set of practices found within scenes relating to the production and advancement of artistic careers.

Both the Chicago School and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s used the concept of “subculture” in ways closely related to Straw’s innovative conceptualization of music production and consumption in terms of scenes. “Subculture” added *gravitas* to the ethnographic studies of white, working-class masculinities associated with these two traditions; for example, Hebdige’s (1979) famous *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* argued that members of a subculture share racial and class backgrounds as well as countercultural values and practices. What was “sub-” about “subcultures,” in this tradition, was white, working-class men’s resistance to dominant culture through fashions in dress, slang, and music. Noting the roots of the concept of subculture in this tradition is not to say that challenges to dominant culture are not important objects of study. Rather, it is to show the limited scope of focusing on dress, slang, music, etc. as white, working class men’s idioms of resistance. As Bennett (2004) points out, the unexamined baggage of “subculture” included race, class, and gender homogeneity that induced subsequent scholars to reject subculture in favor of

alternative ways of understanding the significance of music in the everyday lives of individuals, not strictly as a form of white, working-class resistance. The Pittsburgh underground hip-hop scene is relatively heterogeneous, with individuals from many racial and class backgrounds, which makes me hesitant to employ “subculture” as an analytical tool because of its connotations in the Cultural Studies tradition.

Problematic assumptions about race, class, and gender homogeneity notwithstanding, classical conceptualizations of “subculture” inform the scene perspective, specifically encouraging analysts “to think of scenes as a kind of social group and not only a place where one hangs out” (Woo, Rennie, Poyntz 2014: 3). Additionally, those interested in studying subculture are interested in the codes that circulate among members and how those members define themselves in relation to style and taste (Fox 1987, Hebdige 1979, Moore 2004, Thornton 1996).

Glass (2012) argues that “subculture” is “monolithic and homogeneous,” whereas “studies of scenes consider how members connect with each other, and how these connections generate new identities, spaces, and forms of art and culture” (698). Like Glass, many researchers who adopt the scenes perspective describe the productive and generative aspects of scenes. In the section that follows, I outline how past research on music scenes characterize them as productive spaces for the creation of common bonds, identities, ideologies, activities, and forms of cultural expression.

2.2.3 Scenes as Productive Spaces

Scene analysts define their object of study as local entities that bring together a variety of people around a particular music style and “how members connect with each other, and how those

connections generate new identities, spaces, and forms of art and culture” (Glass 2012: 698). In his seminal work, Straw (1991) argues, “the cosmopolitan character of certain kinds of musical activity...may endow [those activities and those who participate in them] with a unity of purpose and sense of participating in ‘affective alliances’” (374). Nearly twenty-five years later he characterizes scenes as “collective unity” (Straw 2014:3). Others characterize scenes as “a kind of social group” (Woo, Rennie, and Poyntz 2014:3), “affective communities” (Bennett and Peterson 2004:9), or “a unified collectivity” (Glass 2012:704) that create and are created by shared interests, ambitions, values, and/or outlooks (Bennett 2004). Using slightly different verbiage, researchers all indicate that scenes create bonds among those within the scene. All these analysts, across more than two decades of cultivating the concept of scenes, discuss these bonds as positive. Researchers posit scenes as benefiting members by highlighting the ways they “create community” (Lena and Peterson 2008) and receive a “sense of place” (Kotarba, Fackler, Nowotny 2009: 319), among other things. Griffin (2012) describes the bonds produced by scenes in his auto-ethnography of the DIY punk music scene by saying, “members will never physically meet all of the people that consider themselves part of the ‘scene’...I feel part of an ‘imagined community’ and I, at least partly, constitute my identity through my involvement in it” (69).

Scenes are exceptional to researchers because they produce a sense of unity, as well as common bonds among members, relating to style, ideology, and identity. The transformative power of scenes that Glass highlights emphasizes how scenes bring individuals together. Often times, researchers discuss how various music scenes create spaces for marginalized identities (Gallan 2012, Glass 2012, Mullaney 2007). However, Woo, Rennie, and Poyntz (2014) rightly point out that scenes “can be utopian in moments, especially when scenes allow otherwise ignored or disappeared communities and subject to find a home, but problems of

institutionalization and coordination often push back against utopian aspirations” (4). My next section focuses on the conflicts that “push back against utopian aspirations” of music scenes as scene members police behaviors of those within the scene and differentiate themselves from other scenes.

2.2.4 Scenes as Sites of Conflict

Researchers often present music scenes as sites of two varieties of conflict: conflict over establishing the boundaries of acceptable behaviors within the scene and conflict that distinguishes scenes from one another. According to Woo, Rennie, and Poyntz (2014), “scenes enable, mediate, and constrain action, emphasize the relationality of their members, and have an emergent decentralized order” (6). Scene members often patrol the boundaries of belonging in order to create a cache of acceptable behaviors and distinguish themselves from other scenes. Researchers demonstrate how age (e.g., Mullaney 2012), gender (e.g., Ramirez 2012, Griffin 2012, Schippers 2002), class and race (e.g., Burdick 2008), and the body (Bennett and Driver 2015) are all among the many dimensions along which scene members are constrained in their performance of identity. Scenes create a “certain way of doing things,” which helps establish who is really a member of the scene versus who is a poseur—one who is pretending to be something they are not.

Glass (2012) and others argue that scenes members collectively invoke cultural symbols in order to create an insider/outsider dichotomy. In this sense, Glass’ (2012) example of punk rock style serves to symbolize the wearer’s resistance to mainstream culture, while “such symbols become markers of togetherness” to those within the scene. Scene members focus on

preserving the scene and banishing the “outsider” according to agreed-upon boundaries. Those who pass whatever “tests” needed to be accepted within the scene are, we assume, in relative harmony with other scene members due to the descriptions of scenes as “unified collectivities,” “affective alliances,” and “imagined communities.”

There are multiple ways that those within a scene have their behaviors shaped and shape the behaviors of others. Griffin (2012) analyzes the DIY punk and hardcore music scene and finds that women in that scene “may feel pressure to assume more masculine characteristics, (such as posture, clothing, etc.) to prove their commitment to the scene and to avoid being labeled as [a submissive girlfriend]” (74-5). Driver and Bennett (2015) place the body at the center of their discussion of music scenes to show that the body is not merely a product of music scenes but is in fact “pivotal to the ways in which scene identities and scene behavior are embedded in the individual to the extent that they become significant at an existential level” (112). Dupont (2014) investigates a hierarchy he finds among skateboarders, focusing on how the skaters learn to perform and demand authenticity related to their positions on this hierarchy. In these three examples, performances of gender, the body, and authenticity are means through which scene members police a set of acceptable behaviors and do “boundary work” to establish internal status hierarchies.

Analyzing conflicts that arise from the maintenance of boundaries within scenes is a mainstay of socio-cultural research. Cisař and Koubek (2012) analyze how members of the local hardcore/punk music scene in Brno, Czech Republic, differentiate themselves from one another. They find that scene members fall into one of four categories based on their approach to the scene along two axes: the axis of commodification and the axis of politicization. Silver and Clark (2015) examine New Social Movement organizations to show how members of these scenes

conflict and are differentiated along across 15 dimensions relating to three broad categories: theatricality, legitimacy, and authenticity. My point here is to emphasize that researchers that study conflict within scenes are focused on how scene members police behaviors of one another and how they establish what it means to be a “true” member of the scene.

There are times where the ethos of the scene may not be successful in shaping behavior. Griffin (2012) notes that the DIY punk and hardcore scene often denounces racism, homophobia, and sexism. However, she found that the scene perpetuates sexism through the sexual objectification of women on posters for events, barriers to women’s participating in music production, and sexist lyrics. Griffin (2012) notes that these practices “[highlight] the tensions between principles that promote equality and respect, on the one hand, and exclusive practices that ignore or deny gender issues, on the other” (74). While those in the scene may preach gender inclusion, Griffin asserts that this has little effect on men in the scene as evidenced by their gender exclusionary practices.

Others also describe the ways that scenes establish and circulate collective identities in opposition to other scenes and the “mainstream.” Of course, the very concept of a “music scene” is meant to capture these strategies and practices scene members use to distinguish themselves from one another. Aside from simply focusing on musical preference, researchers have produced excellent research on these processes of differentiation. Mullaney (2007, 2012) describes how straightedgers visibly set themselves apart from those participating in the wider punk and hardcore music scene by marking their hands with a large X. Thornton (1996) shows how clubbers and ravers distinguish their dance scenes from other dance scenes. Schilt (2003) details how a process of differentiation, through a dissatisfaction with the gender dynamics in punk rock music, precipitated the formation of the Riot Grrrl music scene. Lena and Peterson (2008)

establish “creating community” and doing boundary work “against rival musics” as defining characteristics of scene-based music genres (702).

These investigations have produced valuable insight into how communities form and function around music. However, important questions remain. Other than conflicts over belonging and demarcations of one scene versus another, which are directed at identifying those outside of the scene or seeking to structure behavior, what conflicts exist within scenes? In what other ways could identifying with a scene cause conflict aside from an attempt to preserve the values and/or ideals of the scene? How do individuals contribute to and compete over the resources developed in the scene. In the next chapter, I outline how individuals in Pittsburgh’s underground rap scene compete with one another, not over who belongs in the scene and who does not, but over the scarce resources in the scene that artists feel they can use to propel themselves to success in the commercial rap music industry.

2.2.5 Social Mobility in Music Scenes

Researchers note that participation in music scenes can have several impacts on individual scene members. As mentioned above, scenes can offer marginalized groups recognition and acceptance that they may not receive in mainstream society. Scenes create a sense of community among their members. Artists can use scenes to increase their social networks of fans and professional connections. Scenes also provide places where individuals can learn the proper behaviors and the ideals of the scene. However, researchers on scenes have focused little attention on how scenes relate to the social mobility of artists and the various forms of competition that arise from engaging instrumentally in a scene. Analysts studying music scenes shy away from assessing

how artists use scenes to advance their careers as musicians. While Straw (1991) provides room for conflicts over resources that may aid in career advancement, saying that scenes are sites of “struggles for prestige and status engaged in by professionals and others...within a given music terrain,” most scholars do not engage with issues of conflict other than over establishing authentic membership in the scene.

When researchers consider music scenes in terms of artists’ career mobility, they provide a more complete depiction of the various interactions that make up a scene. Hracs et al. (2011) describe how aspiring Canadian artists found Halifax a more desirable music scene because of the cooperative ethos of the scene members there. They compare Halifax to Toronto, which, because of its prominence on the international music scene, is a much more competitive music scene, leading some artists to avoid attempting a career there. Hracs et al. (2011) point out that aspiring musicians face several obstacles while attempting to make a career in music:

Faced with dwindling employment opportunities, low incomes, the need to secure functional live/work space, and the demands of independent music production, some musicians choose to cooperate while others choose to compete for opportunities. The risks associated with independent music production can either strengthen the solidarity and collective resolve of music communities or pit individual musicians against one another. (377)

Hracs et al. (2011) draw attention to a set of relationships that exist in music scenes that observers miss when they emphasize music scenes as affective communities whose aspiring members police behaving and belonging. For aspiring artists, music scenes are also a pathway out of economic precarity and into the commercial music industry; music scenes are the foundation for interactions based on cooperation or competition. I discuss how the conditions in Pittsburgh have created an environment of competition in the rap music scene in the next chapter. This is important because, as Kruse (2010) points out, “Indie music scenes provide

recruiting grounds for the mainstream music industry and markers of identity for music scene participants” (625). Competition in music scenes can create a barrier for artists to realize their dreams of financial success and social notoriety in the rap music industry.

Artists sometimes assume competition between aspiring artists within a scene is zero-sum. Straw (2005) asserts that this is not the case when describing the structures of cultural transmission within scenes. He writes, “The ‘vertical’ relationship of master to student is transformed, in scenes, into a spatial relationship of outside to inside; the neophyte advances ‘horizontally’, moving from the margins of the scene towards the center” (Straw 2005: 413). This implies that not only are new members looking to learn the cultural codes of conduct within a scene, they are also looking to gain prominence, or move to the center of the scene. Straw does not imply that only one artist can occupy the center of the scene. However, the evidence from Hracs et al. (2011) implies that at least some artists believe that to be the case and therefore take up a competitive ethos as they attempt to occupy that center point of the scene.

Members of Pittsburgh’s underground rap music scene are more like the competitive artists in Hracs et al. than the cooperative artists Straw theorizes. The horizontal hostility that I find occurring among members of this scene helps understand how individuals perpetuate or resist this perception of a zero-sum game among artists in a music scene.

2.2.6 The Success and Failure of Music Scenes

Research indicates that scenes succeed or fail based on the hard work and cohesion of those within the scene coupled with favorable structural conditions. That is, people need to be dedicated to making and maintaining the scene and require necessary conditions in their locality

for a scene to thrive. Scholars working in the same vein as Florida (2002) have discussed the social and economic dynamics that make some regions more amenable to the “creative class” of aspiring artists, innovators, and entrepreneurs. In this section, I analyze the ways researchers have discussed social and economic relations that allow scenes to flourish or deteriorate.

As mentioned above, Hracs et al. (2011) compare and contrast the music scenes of Halifax and Toronto to show that Halifax fosters a cooperative group of musicians, while Toronto’s scene is more competitive. Their research helps illuminate the conditions of city-regions “that help attract, incubate, and retain [musicians]” (Hracs et al. 2011: 366). One reason Halifax’s music scene is growing, their respondents indicate, is that the city is more affordable than Toronto. Also, the scene goers in Halifax are often more appreciative of aspiring artists and make better audiences. Toronto, however, is able to maintain its music scene because of its status as the center of the Canadian music industry and a potential stepping stone to other major music scenes like New York, L.A., and Nashville (Hracs et al. 2011: 372). Toronto is home to major record labels, recording studios, and professional associations, institutions that may at least partially offset the higher rent and studio costs as well as the more competitive relationships artists have with one another in Toronto. Hracs et al. (2011) attribute the migration of artists away from Toronto and toward Halifax to the belief among artists that despite having a strong music industry presence in Toronto, Halifax is a more desirable location for Canadian musicians due to its cooperative music culture and the affordability of living in the city.

Mark Finch (2015) analyzes the “Cultural Renaissance” in Toronto to show how a city’s infrastructure changes in response to demand for facilities for music production. Contrary to Hracs et al. (2011), Finch (2015) asserts that while Toronto does have a strong presence of media and distribution outlets for musicians, the Toronto DIY music scene exhibits a highly

cooperative environment. He provides an account of how the municipal government of Toronto sought to fashion the city as a “creative city,” drawing their idea from Florida’s (2002) book and related concepts. The dedication of both the city and the musicians in the city to developing a music scene in Toronto helped build the city’s cultural infrastructure and establish its position as a center for Canadian music. Finch (2015) also assembles convincing evidence that the top-down approaches of the city need to be met with the bottom-up approaches from independent artists for the scene to continue to develop. The scene is potentially floundering in Toronto because of the failure of the two approaches to engage with one another.

Researchers also point out that scenes are formed and endure after people invest, financially, emotionally, or otherwise, in the scene. Drysdale (2015) analyzes the drag king culture in Sydney to show that for scenes to form, there needs to be an investment of material resources, in this case, the main performance space of the Sly Fox Hotel, as well as the “personal, social and political investment in the idea of a connective phenomenon” (349). Drysdale (2015) refers to the time commitment scene members take on to fill late-night shows and the time invested by performers in preparing their acts as “less-tangible investments” essential in the success of a scene. Glass (2012) describes how a group of individuals transformed a rental home into “The Pirate House,” a punk rock space, by imbuing the space with punk meanings and imagery, and by managing how individuals act within the space. These cases describe a group of committed individuals that invest in starting and maintaining scenes by creating a social, cultural, and economic infrastructure based in “sweat equity.”

Glass (2012) and Drysdale (2015) also discuss the decline of these scenes. While Glass (2012) did not witness the downfall of his research site because this occurred after he left the field, he theorizes that gentrification, the inability of maintaining the house as a “punk space,”

and the inability for the occupiers of the space to continue managing the space all could have played a role in the “Pirate House” reverting back to a “typical” rental home. Drysdale (2015) describes how competing events drew crowds away from the Sly Fox Hotel, leading to insufficient cover charges and tips to pay performers. Drag king culture in Sydney declined as a whole, Drysdale (2015) asserts, and many of the promoters, organizers, and performers withdrew from the scene and the scene simply lost momentum. A lack of commitment by those within the scene or changes in infrastructure can cause scenes to decline. As I will discuss in a later section, competition among scene members may also be to blame for a scene’s stagnation or decline. While Drysdale (2015) does show how competition affects the progression of a scene, she is talking about competition from other scenes that pulled crowds from the drag king scene, not competition within the scene. I add to this body of literature by focusing on the aspects of the scene that create a lack of unity among scene members. That, coupled with the lack of infrastructure at the disposal of the scene, creates an exceedingly difficult environment for rap artists from Pittsburgh to try to make it in the rap music industry.

2.3 CONCLUSION

The Pittsburgh music scene has limited infrastructure available to aspiring artists. This creates some limits on the possible exposure artists can receive for their music. At one point, the Beat Box acted as a central location where hip-hop fans could develop and grow their scene. After it closed, the scene scattered throughout the city. This phenomenon, coupled with what artists see as a lack of support from the city’s hip-hop radio station and the limited presence of the record

industry in the city, left artists struggling to find ways to develop a scene and create a following for their music. In terms of music scene studies, the struggles experienced by these artists highlight a deficiency in the conceptualization of music scenes as productive spaces. Further research should investigate how scenes can both hinder and help the careers of aspiring artists. Additionally, those interested in scenes should look at the conflicts that arise between members of the scene as it relates to the creation of community and careers. I analyze the Pittsburgh hip-hop scene on both fronts as it pertains to instances of horizontal hostility in the next chapter.

3.0 “IT’S LIKE CRABS IN A BARREL”: HORIZONTAL HOSTILITY IN PITTSBURGH RAP MUSIC

When asked to describe the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh, artists often used words like “fragmented” and “disjointed.” The literature on scenes drew my attention to this fragmentation of the Pittsburgh scene and the precarious industry infrastructure exhibited by WAMO and Rostrum Records as explanations for why this scene has not produced another “star” since Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller. Physically, the infrastructure of the hip-hop scene shifted. During the time when the Beat Box was operational, the majority of hip-hop shows and events took place there, and a small smattering of other shows took place at various locations around the city. When this space closed, a variety of smaller sub-scenes popped up throughout the city as fans were relocated to these other venues. Fans and artists that formerly came from all over the city to congregate at the Beat Box now began to find shows near where they lived in the city. Alchemist described the fragmented scene in terms of live performances:

There’s only so many spots. Most of the good venues are on the South Side. That’s like a 15 to 30-minute drive for most people. Especially when it comes to people who support hip-hop, like I said, most of these people come from nothing, so, where do you think they are going to allocate their money? To go to a show that not many people are going to go to on the other side of town? No. They can’t just walk there...Pittsburgh isn’t set up for hip-hop. (Interview, 9/12/14)

For whatever reasons, be it financial or physical, Alchemist believes that the lack of a central location with a consistent turnout of hip-hop fans is what now keeps the local scene scattered throughout the city.

However, my respondents believe that this physical distance was not as detrimental as the psychic distance created by this shift. The unified scene that was present at the Beat Box became one of competition, with rappers becoming more and more unwilling to support one another. One hip-hop vocalist, Leena, describes the scene where “we [Pittsburgh artists] need to learn how to support each other. It's really more like a crab in a barrel type of thing. Everyone is trying to get out and you're just holding everybody else down instead of everybody working together to come up together” (Interview, 4/12/15). Like Leena, other respondents believe that the unity within Pittsburgh hip-hop, which existed at the Beat Box and helped propel Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller, has been replaced by competition. Ironically, this competition may have arisen from the success of these artists. With Khalifa and Miller as examples, aspiring artists in Pittsburgh now see success as a more realistic possibility. At the same time, they see success as zero-sum. Consequently, aspiring artists see the success of others in the scene as threatening.

A producer, Greazy, echoed this sentiment and said that for aspiring artists in the city, “Pittsburgh is seen as this barrel full of crabs where once a person gets out, it's a city you got to get out of, you kind of don't lend a hand to the next person. You just get out and run away” (Interview, 10/27/14). Greazy's comment illustrates a sentiment among artists in Pittsburgh that in order for them to achieve success in the rap music industry, they have to make it out of the

“barrel” of Pittsburgh.¹⁰ Greazy also emphasizes the individualistic nature of the goal of escaping the barrel. While an artist may understand the plight faced by other Pittsburgh artists, they are not willing to help. This leads to a complicated set of interactions and conflicts among artists in this scene. The artists, as the literature on scenes discussed in Chapter 2 highlights, realize that other members of the scene share their goals of achieving mainstream commercial success in the rap music industry. However, the “affective alliances” or “community” produced by this scene is one of competition and distrust, precisely because of the shared ethos among scenes related to achieving success.

Leena and Greazy’s¹¹ imagery of “crabs in barrel” is important to understanding the types of conflict that characterize the scene. A single crab, it is said, when placed in a barrel, will attempt to make an escape by climbing out of the barrel. However, if two or more crabs are placed in a barrel, they will pull each other down as they attempt to make an escape. The crabs, if unified, could help one another escape the perils of the barrel, but they do not. While it almost certainly predates this, the phrase “crabs in a barrel” is often attributed to Booker T. Washington’s characterization of black Americans’ treatment of one another during Reconstruction. Marcus Garvey cites a lecture from Washington when he describes this crab mentality in “The Negro’s Greatest Enemy” (1923).

This is an instance of what Audre Lorde (1978) have referred to as “horizontal (or lateral) hostility.” Lorde uses the concept to describe the relationships between black women and black men as well as among black women. She describes that, “in discussions around hiring and firing

¹⁰ In a later section, I discuss how individuals describe their desires to “get out” of Pittsburgh and what that would mean for their careers.

¹¹ These two artists were the only two to directly use the phrase “crabs in a barrel” in their interviews. However, 21 of 26 interviewees used imagery I coded as thematically similar to this imagery as exemplified in the remainder of this section.

of black faculty at universities, the charge is frequently heard that black women are more easily hired than are black men...[and] they are only 'taking jobs away from black men'" (Lorde 1978: 33). Lorde (1978) also asserts that "in the interests of separation, and to keep us out of touch with our own power, black women have been taught to view each other as always suspect, heartless competitors for the scarce male, the all-important prize that will legitimize our existence" (34). At the heart of this concept are the conflicts that arise among members of marginalized and oppressed groups over what they perceive to be scarce resources available for their advancement. What this ignores, Lorde (1978) argues, are the possibilities "of joining together to fight for more" (34). In Pittsburgh hip-hop, what this leads to, according to Wheels, is a mentality in which "everyone looks at this [scene] as a race. [They think,] 'I got to get signed before so-and-so gets signed. They [i.e., record labels] got to see me first'" (Interview, 10/28/14). Actshawn similarly points out that in Pittsburgh conflict among rappers exist "more or less because of an internalized fear [of one another] and the whole adage of I would rather nobody went anywhere than me support someone to get anywhere" (Interview, 2/18/15).

More contemporary scholars have defined horizontal hostility as "a prejudice shown by members of a minority group toward members of a similar minority group that is perceived to be more mainstream" (White and Langer 1999:538). Horizontal hostility has been studied among minority groups of non-meat eaters (Rothgerber 2014), reform, conservative, and orthodox Jews, college athletes (White and Langer 1999), political parties in Greece, Ivy League students (White, Schmitt, and Langer 2006) and nursing students and staffs (Alspach 2008, Curtis, Bowen, and Reid 2007, Longo 2007).

Often, the concept of horizontal hostility has significant racial and gendered components. For example, Fanon (1961) in *The Wretched of the Earth* describes horizontal violence as the

oppressed attempting to use the tools of oppressors on their peers. Freire (1968) extends this in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* saying that the oppressed strike out at their peers out of their desire and aspirations to be among the oppressors. While it is important to note the origins of this concept in literature on racial and gendered oppression, my respondents typically¹² did not explicitly conceptualize the horizontal hostility they experienced in racial or gendered terms.

Pittsburgh's hip-hop artists typically form small collectives of artists, managers, and other kinds of support staff (e.g., videographers, photographers, publicists, etc.) that they refer to as "teams." In this context, artists and their teams exhibit or experience horizontal hostility when they perceive, or are perceived by others, as being closer to the mainstream rap music industry. As artists gain more mainstream recognition, through things like touring outside of Pittsburgh or being recognized in the local media or on internet blogs, they are met with unfavorable attitudes from others in similar positions. In a career where individuals are attempting to move from the margins of being an underground artist to the mainstream, this creates a struggle among artists and also creates an internal struggle for artists. Scrollz described the dual nature of this struggle:

I mean, yeah, it's a competition. Hip-hop is a competition. It's a competitive sport. If one person does good, yeah, we applaud it, but, it's like deep down inside, you want that. When we got on the *City Paper* and it was like [people were saying] "Congratulations, but, damn, I wanted that." Or like [another artist] is on tour. It's like damn, *I* want that. And [a different artist] has been doing stuff with Wiz, and it's like damn, *I* want that. Everything is really cool [among artists in Pittsburgh], but at the same time it is still competitive. You can [congratulate] things all you want or you can just stay quiet. And I think that a lot of people choose to stay quiet because if you speak it, especially with the way social media is, that's a cosign. (Interview, 4/24/14)

¹² Later in this section, I describe a situation where gender was discussed in relation to horizontal hostility. However, the respondent does so to explain how and why horizontal hostility does *not* exist among female rappers in Pittsburgh.

For Scrollz, there is a struggle between bringing light to the achievements of others and the recognition that others' successes bring them closer to a goal you have for yourself that you have yet to accomplish. To "cosign" these achievements are to give them recognition as such and thereby placing another artist above you in the pursuit of scarce resources. While artists in the Pittsburgh scene may still be "cool" with one another, that is, they do not express outward disdain for each other, they are not willing to unify and boast of the achievements of those outside of their teams.

Additionally, in the GroupMe text messages that I shared with Scrollz and his team, he described how the artist on tour that he mentions in the above quote initially asked him to be on the tour with him. Scrollz was excited about the opportunity because he had an album coming out and the tour would be a good opportunity for him to play music from that album and get a larger buzz about the release. Days before the tour was scheduled to begin, Scrollz was contacted by the artist saying that he no longer wanted Scrollz on the tour. While Scrollz was upset about the decision, he explained that he understood why it was happening. The other artist stated that he did not want others to associate Scrollz with Pittsburgh as well, because that would diminish his product. The other artist wanted a monopoly on any potential new fans and to optimize his association with Pittsburgh. Scrollz' presence on the tour would be a threat to that. While Scrollz understood why he was not able to be on the tour, he expressed extreme frustration because of what positive effects on his career the tour might have had that he would now miss out on.

Rappers in Pittsburgh engage in horizontal hostility out of an understanding that careers in the rap music industry are not developed only on talent and merit. For artists in every genre, talent is highly relative, is appraised by many gatekeepers, and is part of a highly competitive market (Menger 1999). As discussed earlier, the perception among artists is that they and their

peers have immense talent. As these artists minimize the importance of talent in their attempts to make a career in rap music, they are left looking for other ways to make themselves “stand out” in the crowd and maintain the myth of meritocracy. The sense that opportunities are both scarce and zero-sum leads artists to compete over performance slots, media attention, and fans as well as resent those who begin to stand out. Competition in turn breaks the unity typically found in music scenes as individuals shared experiences in the quest for these resources necessary for career advancement become threats rather than allies or sympathizers. Artists marginalized from the mainstream recording industry focus their attention on horizontally attacking other artists because of this perceived threat rather than questioning the structures that exclude them from the mainstream music industry.

In the sections that follow, I analyze how my respondents eschew discussing the city’s weak infrastructure for hip-hop music in favor of discussing horizontal hostility as the main obstacle to the predicted “Pittsburgh Renaissance.” They believe that there is a sense of unity missing in the local hip-hop scene that is present in successful scenes elsewhere. They also claim that the success of Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller have defined the rewards for those who make it out of “barrel” of Pittsburgh into mainstream success. This has created, in their opinion, a scene that is oversaturated with new artists looking to mimic the success of Pittsburgh’s superstars. This saturation has created an intense competition among artists in Pittsburgh where artists engage in horizontally hostile practices. In order to succeed, Pittsburgh artists believe that it is more important to eliminate the horizontal hostility among scene members than it is to strengthen the city’s hip-hop infrastructure.

3.1 “YOU CAN’T THROW A ROCK IN PITTSBURGH WITHOUT HITTING A RAPPER”

While members of the rap music scene in Pittsburgh recognize the horizontal hostility and competition are a part of the scene, they do not view it as an inevitability. As individuals discussed the things that hold artists back from breaking into the mainstream, they also discussed how they see themselves and others resisting these barriers. According to my respondents, the success of Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller brought with it a steady influx of artists into the scene looking to mirror that success. On the one hand, scene members see this as a positive because it allows artists to interact with others in the city they feel are talented. Some also feel that more artists in the scene bring with them more exposure and potentially creates a more commercially viable scene in the eyes of record executives. On the other hand, artists express a displeasure with the lack of quality artists in the scene. Just as an increase of “good” artists may bring more exposure to Pittsburgh, an increase of “bad” artists may keep record companies from being interested in the scene.

Music scenes have been described as relatively “open” spaces, that is, “open to potential participants who simply want to be there” (Kortarba, Fackler, Nowotny 2009: 330). While many researchers have investigated the pathways into music scenes and the necessary barriers to being considered an “insider,” they have not fully explored the potential consequences of the “include ‘em all” (Císař and Koubek 2012) attitude often found in music scenes. As this section shows, that the ability for many to engage a music scene as artists can create problems for artists as they attempt to make a career out of music. Artists may have trouble differentiating themselves from a sea of other artists of similar quality, or, what’s worse, they may find themselves being reduced

to artists of lower quality that have flooded the scene. Because they feel there are few barriers to get into the scene, with the rise of online music distribution and the ability to “pay to perform” in Pittsburgh, artists resort to horizontal hostility as an attempt to weed out others they feel are obscuring their limelight.

Many members of the rap music scene in Pittsburgh describe the scene as being “oversaturated” with artists. Miz Taken said that she “think[s] the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh is oversaturated...you can’t throw a rock in Pittsburgh without hitting a rapper” (Interview, 5/11/15). For fans of local hip-hop music, this can be a bit overwhelming. I found myself often leaving shows with demo CDs, business cards, fliers, and other handouts from artists canvassing the crowd all widely varying in quality. Miz Taken explained that consumers may not be willing to seek out new music from “good” artists in Pittsburgh because they have been bombarded with “bad” music. After enough “bad” music circulates, consumers characterize all Pittsburgh hip-hop as being bad and may stick only to a few artists or may stay away from it entirely.

Rapper Kerve described the Pittsburgh scene as having “a lot of oversaturation out here, too. A lot of people are rapping for the fun of it and it kind of makes it hard for people that are taking it seriously” (Interview, 6/13/15). While I fully analyze “taking [rap] seriously” in a later chapter, Kerve makes an important point about visibility in the above quotation. He believes that he must differentiate himself from those rapping “for fun” so that he can get the exposure he needs to advance his career. He went on to explain that many artists who may be rapping “for fun” will post their songs many times a day on social media sites. He also relies on social media for exposure, so, if a consumer follows both Kerve and a less-serious artist on social media, they may not see his posts because the other artist may “clog up” the consumer’s online feed. Artists like Kerve often said that they would rather their music be heard by potential consumers even if

they do not like it (many artists are quick to admit that their music “isn’t for everyone”) than to have their music go unheard.

The oversaturation of the music scene coincides with the progression of digital technology. As Kerve indicated earlier, consumers have access to a wide array of music which can lead to some artists being overlooked or obscured. Burner indicated that this has led to the increase of rappers of poor quality entering the scene:

In this day and age, I mean, MySpace changed everything. As soon as you could put music up on the internet, it was a wrap. Everyone wanted to be a rapper. So, the seams that you had to go through in the early 90s, with the record labels [were more direct]. Biggie Smalls didn’t upload his songs on SoundCloud and try to get plays off of that! You had to be a spitter [a talented rapper] to get somebody’s attention. You had to grab someone’s attention. (Interview, 4/28/15).

Burner feels that the emergence of social media and the internet has led to an increase of less-talented artists entering the mainstream. Instead of relying on talent, artists can now rely on becoming a “viral” sensation on the internet, again obscuring the spotlight from artists like Burner. Whether or not “unworthy” artists are gaining recognition as Kerve, Burner, and other artists believe is unimportant. However, it is important to see how judgements of worthiness can manifest as more and more artists enter the scene. Instead of potentially pointing out how the scene is growing, artists are quick to point out how the presence of new artists negatively influences their pursuit of a career in music. This horizontal hostility stems from artists feeling an inability to assert their distinctiveness from other artists that they feel are not as talented or dedicated as they are.

The ability to disseminate one’s music on the internet coupled with the recent success of Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller has led to a growing number of rappers in Pittsburgh that many in the scene feel are attempting to emulate those two artists. Typically, horizontal hostility occurs

when a minority group evaluates another minority group and deems them to be “closer to the mainstream than the typical group member” (Rothgerber 2014: 2). For reasons I explain in Chapter 4, members of the Pittsburgh rap music scene valorize originality. Chef told me that he “feels there are more lanes in other places,” or that Khalifa and Miller as the major success stories has led to an inevitable emulation of content and style (Interview, 5/13/15). While artists recognize this, they are still quick to criticize it as Wheels does:

I would say that [the scene] is oversaturated. I think that with the success of Wiz and Mac, I think that it has, I don't know, I think there is still this level of hope in anyone that may want to take a stab at rapping. What that does is increase the amount of people rapping. That could be a good thing or a bad thing. I think that it is a bad thing in this city. (Interview, 10/28/14)

By artists associating themselves with Khalifa and Miller through emulation, they are associating themselves with the mainstream, commercially successful artists rather than taking a “purer” path to success like artists seeking to be original. This is particularly vexing considering that the goal of these artists is to break into the mainstream industry. What this implies however, is that the pathway an artist takes toward this goal is important and a pathway deemed improper opens an artist up for criticism.

Artists believe that this oversaturation of the scene with artists that are similar, not only to Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller, but also to themselves keeps the scene from gaining more national attention. Virus characterized the scene thusly:

I think that [the scene] is a mix of diverse, talented, and oversaturated. Unfortunately, so many rappers, and I think this is accidentally and on purpose, so many rappers have the same story. People kind of get tired of reading the same book. In Pittsburgh, you get a lot of rappers that tend to sound the same. For instance, because of the success of Wiz Khalifa, you'll get a lot of weed smoking rappers, because they think that's what sells. So, you have a lot of people who follow each other. Then, you have those distinct ones that have the motivation to be different. (Interview, 6/5/14)

The mentality expressed by Virus gives little wonder as to why a “crab mentality” may exist and proliferate in a scene like this. Here, we have many artists attempting to exit the barrel of the underground rap scene, while noticing the strategies that those who have made it out have employed. However, they must come up with a new way out of the barrel that is distinct from others and showcases their talent. While forging this new path, they are constantly surveilling others in the scene to make sure they are not encroaching in their lane, tainting the entire scene with an inferior product, or obscuring their visibility. One would expect that the unified concept of a scene would lead to a more group-focused mentality rather than this obviously individualistic one.

Of course, not all of discussion surrounding the “oversaturation” of the Pittsburgh scene with artists is negative. Some artists view the upsurge of artists entering the scene as a good thing because they bring more talent, fans, and exposure to the scene overall. Swiss related the increase of artists in Pittsburgh to his points about the “Pittsburgh Renaissance”:

These next five years are going to be, to be an artist here, especially an artist that has already laid the groundwork for themselves, it’s going to be hard if you get in in five years. It’s going to be really hard. There’s going to be a motherfucker on every corner selling a CD. There’s going to be like 200 studios. Now is when you get in. Now is *actually* late! You should have gotten in five years ago before the Wiz shit. If you can, right now, tomorrow, literally figure out what your role in the local music scene is, I think you have a good chance of making a living off of it. As long as you’re legit and you can really offer something to the scene. (Interview, 10/22/14)

Swiss echoes the problems artists would face in an oversaturated market, but believes that Pittsburgh is not quite there yet. He believes that now is a good time for artists in Pittsburgh because the city has exposure via Wiz Khalifa and the number of other artists is not overwhelming.

For a producer, like Greazy, the small-town atmosphere of Pittsburgh coupled with an overabundance of talent artist with whom he can work is ideal. He feels that the scene in Pittsburgh is not like other scenes because:

One of the simple reasons: Pittsburgh is really small. It's really not that hard to run into these artists that you might express a liking for on the internet or something. I guess for me, being a producer, it didn't take long to work with many of the big players on the scene because it's small and ratio-wise, the number of rappers in Pittsburgh compared to the number of rappers in New York. It would definitely take me a long time to try to grasp the scene in New York. (Interview, 10/27/14)

Consequently, Greazy is one of the most respected producers in the city, drawing national attention for his productions. Because of his proximity to the mainstream, he may be less inclined to exhibit horizontal hostility and view the abundance of rappers in the scene as a good thing. His open, accepting, and overall friendly nature along with his talent perhaps keeps him from becoming the target of horizontal hostility. Many of my respondents praised him and singled him out as a person in the scene I should contact. I point this out only to show that horizontal hostility is a common attitude among individuals in Pittsburgh's rap music scene, but that attitude is not all-encompassing.

In this section, I have shown how the open nature of music scenes does not always lead to harmony among scene members. As more individuals enter the scene and seek to occupy similar roles, scene members begin to see one another as threats and not allies. I argue that this highlights a deficiency in conceptualization and operationalization of music scenes. The role of the artist or performer in a music scene is under-examined and undertheorized. While individuals gain affective alliances and social bonds when entering scenes while also having their behaviors policed, those who seek to utilize the scene to advance their careers can face a different set of challenges. There seems to be no acknowledgement within the scenes literature that producers

and consumers within a scene are chasing after different things and therefore face different struggles. Fans seek acceptance and community surrounding a shared music interest and face conflicts over how to “fit in.” Artists seek to make a career in the music industry and face a competition over career advancing resources available within the scene, which results in horizontal hostility and is the topic of the next section.

3.2 COMPETITION IN PITTSBURGH HIP-HOP

The perceived saturation of artists in Pittsburgh’s rap music scene, along with an internalized “crab mentality,” gives way to a competitive music scene. The nature of this competition is tied to artists’ desires to be seen as the best artist in the local scene while viewing other artists as threats. The scene is then fragmented, with artists forming cliques across the city rather than a more cohesive scene. The competition is detrimental to artists’ careers and it also disrupts their creative process. By examining how artists describe and analyze this competition, it challenges structural explanations for the faltering of the music scene that focus on the diminishing scene infrastructure in favor of cultural explanations that focus on the workings of horizontal hostility. While the two are most certainly working in concert, it is the latter that the artists within the scene emphasize the most often.

It is important to note that hip-hop culture has a long tradition with competition. Scrollz called hip-hop “a competitive sport,” Wheels said that “there’s always competition in rap,” and others gave narratives of hip-hop’s beginnings on the street corners of New York as evidence that the art form is practically synonymous with competition. In fact, hip-hop’s beginnings found

DJ's competing with their sound systems over who could produce the loudest music. As MCs rose in popularity, so too did their boasts of their greatness over other lyricists, eventually taking form in "rap battles" between two or more artists (Chang 2004). Breakdancers often battle one another to "protect the block" (Lee 2009). Graffiti artists will paint over other artists' tags or murals in competition or simply try to be the first to access hard-to-reach places for their art.

Artists in Pittsburgh acknowledge these forms of competition but describe the competition in Pittsburgh as qualitatively different. Studio owner, producer, and rapper Swiss described the difference:

I don't get [the type of competition here]. I guess it stems from rapping on the corner and spitting your freestyles and being hotter [i.e., a better rapper] than him, but I feel like we've twisted that to such a negative form of competition where it's like [you have to] completely push the guy out to where he doesn't have a chance. I know that it is business, and that business is brutal, and life isn't fair, but in music, last time I checked, you could probably input something to help the scene. (Interview, 10/22/2014)

Swiss acknowledges that some of the hostility that circulates among artists in the scene is driven by the nature of the recording industry as a business. He, however, rejects the notion that to succeed in the rap music industry one must do so at the expense of others in the scene. He envisions a cooperative scene where scene members work together to strengthen the opportunities for artists. Aubrey Loud also provided a description of this competition that exemplifies how others both describe and admonish the competition commonly present in Pittsburgh:

I always hear people say that there is so much hate [in Pittsburgh]. There is just an epidemic in hip-hop in general when someone is making it. It's part of the game of it. You battle. But I think that the battle was never meant to be where you leave and you just say, "I fucking hate that dude." It's more about practicing and the competition was beautiful and fun and you always respected each other. I think that it doesn't seem like it exists as much anymore. It's more about what I have and what you don't have or what I'm doing and you're not doing and that sort of

competition. I'm just not a fan of competition in general because I think that [the necessity of competition in hip-hop] is a total myth...There is this thing where you can't support...If we're a scene, then we need to respect everyone that's in the scene. (Interview, 10/16/14)

Aubrey Loud points out the collegiality she feels that was present in the "Golden Era" of hip-hop before its commercialization in the 1990s. Pittsburgh, to her, has completely lost that collegiality which has led to a lack of "respect" and "support" among artists. Ideally for her, Pittsburgh artists would harbor enough respect for one another they would not harmfully criticize each other's works. Like Kerve above, Aubrey Loud admits that her music may not be liked by everyone, which she is okay with, but she points out that a scene should be a supportive environment and those in the scene should at least respect her efforts. This lack of support provides further evidence that the Pittsburgh rap music scene provides a case that indicates that conceptualizations of scenes as unified and supportive should be reexamined.

Artists describe how the competition found in the Pittsburgh rap music scene is a relatively recent phenomenon. Swiss said that Pittsburgh artists should "just work together to write a great song," like they once did and then asked, "Where did we lose that mentality at? I don't know. Somewhere in the past decade we've gotten so competitive that we don't even like each other and that doesn't make sense to me" (Interview, 10/22/14). Again, artists in the Pittsburgh music scene are faced with the perplexing conflict brought on by horizontal hostility, which they see as both counterproductive to a music scene's aims and contradictory to the support and collaboration they, and those who theorize about scene, feel should be a part of the scene.

Swiss and Aubrey Loud indicate that the competition endemic of the music scene in Pittsburgh is different in nature than that typically found in hip-hop culture. Rydah described the

conflict in the scene in an interesting way that incorporates both traditional notions of competition in hip-hop (e.g., braggadocio) as well as notions of horizontal hostility:

The way I look at it, because [his collective has] even had backlash from it, if you rap, you can say you're the best all day. But, if I say it, then I'm the wrong one. And that's how a lot of these rappers take it. We had somebody that said, "You guys aren't that good. Your heads are in the clouds..." and I'm just like, when you said you were the greatest rapper out, it was okay, when we say it, you have a problem with it. Now, is it because you're afraid that we might be? Or, is it that you're tired of hearing us talk? Or, [is it] because you're tired of hearing people talk about us? Because, we've gotten to a point where people are starting to mention our names. That's the thing, the egos in Pittsburgh. (Interview, 10/7/14)

Rappers claiming to be "the best" or "the greatest" is a common practice; however, Rydah points out that this common practice is met with hypocrisy rather than acceptance. Artists critical of Rydah may latch on to his and his colleagues' claims of their superiority out of horizontal hostility despite making similar claims themselves. Rydah posits that this horizontal hostility likely stems from the insecurities of these critics or their jealousy.¹³ The competition is notably not about who is actually the best rapper, that is, the most talented rapper, in this scenario. Rather, it is about artists' exposure within the scene. Artists that "people talk about" are closer to the mainstream and therefore more likely to be the targets of horizontal hostility with peers striking out because of their desires to occupy their position of prominence in the scene. This is another set of interactions that shows how the career development of aspiring musicians is not reliant on talent alone.

The conflict that arises from this competition highlights how artists criticize one another, but it also helps explain the division that many artists describe within the scene. In a scene that

¹³ A further explanation could be that critics are making a statement about the quality of the music that Rydah or others produce. In responses like these, artists never question the quality of their own music except for making minor admissions that their music "may not be for everyone" as I described earlier. Also, I would posit it is debatable as to whether or not rappers claiming to be "the best" actually believe such an ontological status exists or if they are simply using the statement as a rhetorical device that is normative in hip-hop culture.

they see as oversaturated with artists who are competing for limited exposure, artists develop small cliques of friends and supporters. Competition and mistrust among artists in the scene, rather than the closing of the Beat Box, is a more likely cause of the fragmentation in the scene. The nature of the conflict leads to the fragmentation of the scene. Or, as Swiss tells me: “There’s so much division, Jeff. I see it so much, especially running a studio. They love asking me, ‘You think I’m hotter than him? Do you think I’m hotter?’” (Interview, 10/22/14). The nature of the conflict within the Pittsburgh rap scene is one of individuals or groups attempting to establish themselves as “hotter” than the other individuals in the scene. This internalized notion of competition coupled with the “threats” of other artists in an oversaturated market leads to a scene where artists are unsupportive of one another and remain scattered throughout the city rather than establishing themselves as a cohesive music scene. For studio owners like Swiss, this can be detrimental to his business. Because these cliques form, and one clique may not like another, if Swiss works with one clique, he may lose the business of another clique.

The fragmentation of the scene caused by competition is detrimental to the scene’s progress. For aspiring artists, seeing their peers succeed can bring forth feelings of anxiety and doubt about their own career. Rubble described a hypothetical situation that may cause this emotional reaction among artists:

Like Wiz might come back and be like, “Oh, I’m going to work with this artist.” And that might make some artist feel some type of way,¹⁴ but they got to understand and support that artist that got to work with him. You ain’t have to feel no type of way about him. At the same time, it creates these divisions that ain’t

¹⁴ It is important to note that the top definitions for “some type of way” on UrbanDictionary.com highlight that this phrase can mean both positive or negative emotions, but also refers to a set of emotions that are “confusing” and “complex.” While I am positive Rubble is using the phrase to signify negative emotions, I am also sure that he is referring to something more complex than jealousy or envy. This phrase, and its usage in common vernacular, highlight the complex interactions involved as artists evaluate their careers in relations to others in the scene.

necessary. We're all after the same thing. We're all after the same thing. Why wouldn't it make sense to work together? (Interview, 2/18/15)

Aspiring artists understand that their careers do not exist in a vacuum. As members of a scene, they see themselves and are seen by others in relation to other artists in the scene in terms of their success and exposure. These comparisons are tough for many artists because like Scrollz describes above, and like Rubble describes here, seeing others achieve goals or desires in the music industry highlights the fact that they in turn have not achieved those goals. Rubble states that this often produces feelings of animosity or horizontal hostility, which is detrimental to the progression of the scene.

Rubble also indicated that this occurs “from the top coming down” arguing that “they’ll [record companies] separate you!” in order to keep artists competing against one another. He believes that industry executives attempt to manufacture conflict among scene members to keep them alienated. If scenes unify, they pose a threat to record companies because artists could gain the ability to produce, market, and distribute their own music. Record companies reinforce the belief that they are necessary for artists in scenes by selectively signing or giving recognition to only a few artists in a scene. Actshawn, who I interviewed with Rubble, agreed with this conspiracy and both, like others I interviewed, believe that instead of trying to get attention of record labels, artists should try to band together to build that industry infrastructure in Pittsburgh. This anecdote shows how, because of a lack of industry infrastructure, the recording industry can help perpetuate a crab mentality among artists. They only see one way out of the barrel, through being “discovered” by a major label. They understand this as an individual process where other artists simply limit their ability to be plucked from the barrel of Pittsburgh to mainstream

success. However, my respondents indicated there are other ways to achieve that success if artists would be willing to drop these negative forms of competition.

The competition found in music scenes has an adverse effect on artists' careers. Mostly, it inhibits collaborative efforts to strengthen the quality of music within the scene and maximize Pittsburgh's exposure on the national scene. Scrollz said that Pittsburgh "could get an identity" if artists would band together and make music together. However, he feels that "nobody wants to see everybody win" because they view participation in the local scene as zero-sum, which he described as follows:

I don't think that some [other artists] want to [work together]. They are like, "But, if I kill you on this track [i.e., perform better than you], what are your fans going to think? If we drop this track and all they are talking about is me, how's that going to affect you?" And I think that people think about that. I don't because I feel like no matter whose song I'm on, I'm going to shine. If I got on a track with Jay-Z, I would be able to hold my own. That's just what it is. People don't want to go the extra mile with other people because they don't want you to get some of their fans. Or even, they'll risk not having some of your fans because they don't want some of their fans to get on your music. And that's just sad. (Interview, 4/24/14)

Scrollz points out the potential downfalls of working with other artists is that fans will begin to compare you to the other artists. While the artists may not compete over having a "hotter" verse on a song, they recognize that fans will force that competition upon them. It is common to hear hip-hop fans describe collaborative songs in terms of who had the most memorable verse, lyric, punchline, or reference on the song. Gaining this recognition can gain an aspiring artist new fans. In the mainstream rap music industry, it is common for bigger artists to feature lesser-known artists whose great performances catapult them into their own stardom.¹⁵ The hypothetical artist that Scrollz quotes believes that any new fans an artist may receive from the collaboration with

¹⁵ Recent examples of this type of success are Eminem, whose featured verses on songs by Dr. Dre propelled him into fame, and Drake, whose featured verses with Lil Wayne had the same effect.

negatively impact their career goals. The perception among artists is that the most likely pathway out of the barrel of Pittsburgh is through individual efforts that are untainted by others in which they emerge as the figurehead or the “best” in the scene. Perhaps because artists like Scrollz, Actshawn, and Rubble have been trying that pathway for years without reaching the mainstream industry (all of them had been pursuing a music career for at least 5 years), they are beginning to question those tactics in favor of a collaborative music scene.

The competition among members of the music scene not only keeps individuals from working with one another in the production of music, it also inhibits the sharing of knowledge and strategies among scene members. Rubble said that when he was first starting out in the music scene he would ask others for advice:

I would be like, “I’m trying to be an artist, how do I do this?” [Imitates someone who is exasperated] “Oh man, you ain’t better than my artist, so you gotta get up out of here!” There’s no ability to share knowledge without [them] feeling like, “Are you going to do more with this knowledge than I can? Because, if you can, then I’m not giving it to you. No.” That’s how I see it as far as the underground scene. (Interview, 2/18/15).

Scenes have typically been conceptualized as sites where individuals obtain the very knowledge that Rubble sought. However, this is large because the scenes literature focuses more on how individuals are indoctrinated into the scene’s culture rather than how individuals learn how to access and utilize the scene to benefit their career. Because the role of the aspiring artist in the music scene is different from other participants, they experience this type of unique conflict. Consumers in the scene (audience members, fans, etc.) are likely to encounter informal education on how to behave and belong in a music scene. Other members of the scene are quick to point out how the scene has a “certain way to do things.” However, producers in music scene face the

opposite reality where individuals withhold this information that may allow them to thrive in the scene because of the potential threat their success may have on their own.

Competition in music scenes inhibits the collaborative production of music in a manner I describe above, but it also detracts from individual creative processes of artists. Wheels, a believer that rap is naturally competitive, differentiated between positive forms of competition and negative forms of competition. He said that a positive form of competition is more akin to inspiration and is when an artist in the scene makes an interesting new song that may push the boundaries of what he thought of as a typical rap song and inspire him to think outside of the box. Although he “get[s] inspired by listening to a lot of dudes around here,” he laments that many artists fall into a pit of trying to compete with each other. Rather than using an artist that pushed against previous boundaries to push against other boundaries in the genre, Wheels says that people will instead try to push against those same boundaries in an attempt to outdo the other artist. This mimicry does not lead to the scene progressing, in his opinion and stifles the creativity of artists within the scene.

Rapper Grey Test agrees with Wheels that the competition in Pittsburgh is not helpful for artists' careers:

I just think that at the root of it all there's not really a healthy competition level. I think that some people are kind of discouraged by other people sometimes. So, they ride with the wrong energy and they are trying to outdo someone. Your iron should be sharpening someone else's iron. [You should be] pushing someone to be their best, not better than you. (Interview, 4/12/15)

Grey Test encourages aspiring rappers to continue to focus on their own careers rather than getting caught up in the trap of competing with others. When artists are focused on competing and outdoing one another, they may not be pushing themselves and others to be their best

creatively. Any competition should be productive and “sharpen someone else’s iron” to avoid the mimicry discussed by Wheels and ensure progress.

Rappers that are too focused on what others are doing run the risk of being discouraged by others’ successes or their inability to measure up with them. Artists typically describe their styles and sounds as their “lanes.” This metaphor can also be helpful in thinking about the pathways artists use to move from the underground to the mainstream. Rappers like Grey Test and Wheels advocate for artists to create their own lanes rather than try to compete in a lane already established by another artist. As one lane succeeds, the other lane attempts to compete while “staying in their lane.” This commonly used phrase among my respondents refers to a productive competition where artists seek to strengthen their positions without interfering with their peer’s progression. In the “crabs in a barrel” metaphor, this is a way of allowing others to climb out of the barrel, albeit by themselves, without impeding their pathway.

Artists that remain focused on the careers of others in the scene not only limit their own progression, they run the risk of burning out of the scene. Actshawn pointed out how limiting this mindset is for artists and how it can erode an artist’s motivation:

It’s like, if y’all are so gung ho about what the next man is doing and [are saying,] “I want to be like him. I want this. I gotta go through them...” you’re going to make yourself tired out. And you’re going to get to a point where you’re like, I don’t want to do this no more. You’ll go on your “this city ain’t fucking with me, they’re haters.” That’s because you was with the not right mindset! (Interview, 2/18/15)

For artists in a music scene, horizontal hostility can come from focusing on the careers of others in the scene. Despite artists advocating for an approach to music that ignores other artists in the scene, it seems these artists find it hard to escape comparisons to others in the scene. Whether the artists compare themselves to each other or they assume that fans will do so, these comparisons

can lead to competition that stifles the creative process and inhibits the career advancement of aspiring artists. This highlights that when music scenes are theorized as productive and as communities it fails to take into consideration these conflicts that can have detrimental consequences on artists' careers or cause them to leave the scene completely. Just as the scene member finds solace in a scene because participation in the scene connects them to a community likeminded individuals looking to experience the scene, the artist in a scene enters a competition with a community of likeminded individuals chasing the same goals.

If artists believe that the most advantageous thing for scene members to do is to support one another and engage in competition that motivates rather than discourages, why do they engage in these practices of horizontal hostility? As Scrollz described above, if artists give vocal support, they may advance the careers of others at the expense of their own. Actshawn described another possibility:

If I say, "Shout out to [another artist] man, he's working hard!" They'll take it as, artists that are looking on the outside, they'll take it as, "Oh, you're circle jerking him." It's like what? I can't give him his props because he's doing his thing? When you give artists props for doing their thing, people on the outside look at it as "Oh, [Actshawn] is circle jerking." I can tell a circle jerker from a mile away, and it's like, nah man...I don't care if a younger dude is in front right now, people are looking up [and saying, "Actshawn], you're doing it [i.e., doing well]. You're doing it." Thank you, but you're doing great too! I see you! It's not always about me. Yo, give that man his proper due. That's all that it is about. And then it's like, yo, you can make it. Everybody's in this race. It's a marathon. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Scrollz's manager, Ben, also described the fear of being called a "circle jerker" when explaining why artists that attend other artists shows may choose to stand against the wall rather than engage with the artist at the stage. In both cases, individuals do not provide support for their fellow artists out of being accused of engaging in "circle jerking," which is the name given to the act of mutual masturbation. Artists that engage in praising their peers are only doing so to

receive reciprocal praise. In a heteronormative space like hip-hop, this is also a derogatory term because of its association with a homosexual sex act. The heterosexual and masculine norms of the hip-hop scene work as a barrier to keep artists from giving each other the support that they feel is necessary for the scene's advancement. On one hand, congratulating a fellow artist is a disingenuous attempt to gain promotion for yourself. On the other hand, congratulating a fellow artist disrupts the heterosexual, masculine cool pose that the artist feels they must maintain. Scene members like Actshawn, Rydah, Scrollz, Ben, and others talk about how they actively push against these expectations by supporting each other on social media by sharing videos and songs from their peers.

While norms of masculinity may drive competition and keep male artists from supporting one another, female artists in the Pittsburgh seek to create a more supportive environment with their fellow female artists. While horizontal hostility may still exist among female rappers as well as toward their male counterparts, those I interviewed insist that the female rappers in the scene are generally supportive of one another. Admittedly, rapper Miz Taken described a "diss song"¹⁶ she wrote about another female rapper in the scene where she questioned her authenticity and voiced her displeasure for her music. However, she also described the support among female rappers when it comes to the type competition artists described above:

We [female rappers] don't really have the need to compete because we are all so different that we have our own lanes. We're actually able to congratulate each other and say good job. I really like that. It's totally the opposite of what people think it is. I think that men think that we are catty and competitive, when that may not be the case. (Interview, 5/11/15)

¹⁶ A "diss song" is a song directed at another artist with the intent to criticize and demean their career. I analyze Miz Taken's description of this song and her reasons for making it in my next chapter.

The desired variation of “lanes” described by the male artists is present, according to Miz Taken among female artists, which allows them to remain focused on their own careers without worrying about the threat of their peers like the male artists above describe. Miz Taken also points out that female rappers defy the gendered expectations that women are more likely to exhibit horizontal hostility toward one another. Perhaps female artists are more willing to support one another because, compared to their male counterparts, they are so few of them in the Pittsburgh scene. While male rappers may see so many others that may be threats to their “lane,” female rappers can distinguish themselves from one another. Female artists are open to congratulate and support one another without the conflict that others expressed as counterproductive.

Female rappers cite an external pressure that creates hostility toward their female counterparts. While these women do not want to compete with other women in the scene, preferring rather to work together, they feel that they are ultimately judged in relation to other *female* artists in the scene rather than the other (non-gender specific) artists in the scene. They feel that artists who are men their music based not on how good it is, but on how good it is “for a girl” and in relation to other female rappers. This is a similar sentiment I heard from my white male respondents (i.e., their music is good “for a white guy”), but ultimately their music is being compared to black male rappers as well. So, white male artists can be judged in relation to the normative identity of the black male rapper, whereas women are compared only to other women (not to men of either of the two biggest racial categories in Pittsburgh). What this does, then, is create an environment in which women are placed into competition with one another and their only mechanism to be noticed is to emerge as the “top dog,” or “queen bee,” in this fabricated competition.

While this imagined competition happens among male artists in Pittsburgh, it is on a different scale. To refer to the “barrel of crabs” analogy, the success of breaking out of the barrel for these artists is to gain recognition in the mainstream rap music industry. Women face these same struggles, but their barrel, then, is nested within the barrel in which the male artists are competing. To emerge from their barrel allows female artists to then emerge onto the Pittsburgh scene, and into the barrel described by the other male artists.

However, Miz Taken said that women in Pittsburgh are able to avoid this crab mentality as they their careers:

We don't really have to compete [with one another] because we're all so different that we have our own lanes. We're actually able to congratulate each other and say good job. I really like that. It's totally the opposite of what people think it is. I think that men think we are catty and competitive, when that is not the case. (Interview, 5/11/15)

The “disadvantage” men describe when talking about the crab mentality in Pittsburgh is that the male artists ascribe to the ideal that there are only a few “viable” representations of hip-hop masculinity. As Miz Taken points out, the women in the scene can avoid this trap by embracing difference and allowing for multiple pathways out of the barrel.

Miz Taken said that one thing she would change about the rap music scene in Pittsburgh is that:

[I] would make it more acceptable for there to be more female rappers because [the scene] tends to push the idea that there can only be one main one. And everybody falls in rank below them...I think that it is just because it is so male dominated. I think that men tend to think that women are catty and competitive by nature. (Interview, 5/11/15).

Miz Taken recognizes the ways that female rappers are evaluated is based on the idea that there can only be the “chosen one” who can then hold her own in the male-dominated industry. While she feels that women would be perfectly fine with other women in the scene, the negative

stereotypes of women as being catty and competitive suppress that opinion. The competitive nature of the Pittsburgh scene, and the horizontal hostility it entails, is often attributed to the masculinity engrained in the hip-hop industry. While the act of horizontal hostility in the Pittsburgh scene is often criticized, its critics (especially men) seldom question the masculinity that causes it. In hip-hop, a man who does not respond to challenges or competition is more likely to be called a “pussy” than to be lauded for an attempt to create unity (Belle 2014). However, women in Pittsburgh are being placed in competition with one another in a way that seems to stem from negative characterizations of their “catty and competitive” nature as women. Miz Taken attributes the perception that women are “catty and competitive” to men. In this way, she is pointing out that men are the gatekeepers for representations within hip-hop as well as the androcentrism of the standards people use, not only for assessing the art and artists, but also for attributing motives and explaining competition.

Because rap music is so male-dominated, female artists feel they are never given a fair chance based on their gender. One-Stop said that there is an inherent bias against female rappers in the industry:

As you can see, there are plenty of female rappers [in this city]. Amazing. You could compare them to a lot of men. If you needed to compare them, they [would] hold their own. And I know a couple of people, a couple of young guys, who are like, "I don't listen to female rappers. I just can't do that." I'm just like, Why? I think that it's maybe they have a certain type of, when they listen to rap, they want to hear a certain tone of emotion and they feel like maybe that's something that's real only if it comes from a man. So, they don't want to hear a female saying everything that Tupac Shakur is saying, but they would love for Tupac to say it because he's a man. (Interview, 1/27/15)

One-Stop rationalizes certain individuals' inability to appreciate the talent of female artists as relating to their perceptions of authenticity in rap music. For the “young guys” she knows, the ability to emotionally connect with an artist is tied to their gender. One-Stop believes that female

rappers do not get a fair chance even if listeners would laud their talent, lyrical content, or “emotional tone” if they were men. While women may be able to perform at the same level as men, they are inhibited from reaching that level because those who consume rap music feel that men are more authentic.

Miz Taken and Aubrey Loud describe how they make attempts to bring together female artists in the Pittsburgh scene. However, they feel that some female artists have bought in to the idea that only one female rapper can be viable in Pittsburgh. Miz Taken wants to provide a showcase for female artists called “PMS (Promoting My Sisters).” The event is made up of entirely female acts, even the DJ accompanying the performing artists. While many showcases like this charge performers, these events are free for artists to perform. Miz Taken said that she sometimes gets artists who decline her invitation to perform at these events because they do not want to share the limelight or would like to receive top billing for the show. Miz Taken says she is fine with those artists not performing because she feels they fail to understand that the point of the show is present each female artist as equal in attempts to break from the competitive and hostile culture.

Miz Taken said that another reason for her PMS events is that she feels that she is often excluded from other events in the city. She finds it hard to collaborate with others in the scene when she is not organizing the event herself. As a very active member of the scene, Miz Taken is associated with many hip-hop-related collectives and businesses (which she refers to as “brands”) which are typically the types of organizations asked to help co-sponsor and co-promote events. She feels that because she is a woman, and because she “keeps it real” by telling people exactly what is on her mind, others in the scene do not approach her to help them out with events:

Probably 99% of the events that I'm not involved with, nobody hits me up and asks if my brands want to sponsor it. And I represent like five or six brands. That's easily five or six logos that could go on the bottom of your flyer to make it look like you have more friends. But, nobody ever really hits me up. They always have the same [sponsors] and they are all dudes. (Interview, 5/11/15)

Miz Taken feels like a “good ol’ boys” club has developed in Pittsburgh that privileges male headed brands over female brands like her own. She even points out that she could provide assistance in monetary form or in the symbolic form by having her logos on the flyer so that it looks like a more professional and legitimate event. Her PMS events subvert the androcentrism of hip-hop events in Pittsburgh, but also allow her to bypass these gatekeepers and get her logos out on flyers.

However, even Miz Taken's PMS events are not without an ironic dose of horizontal hostility. When describing the events, she said:

When I do a PMS event, I don't put anybody's picture on the flyer, unless it is mine because the idea is that no one of them is better than the other. It's that we're all the same, we're going to support each other. (Interview, 5/11/15).

The intentions of these events are to advocate for the equality of female artists in Pittsburgh and respond to the male dominated structure of performance whereby it is difficult for women to secure spots in concert lineups. They are also meant to reject the idea that there can and should only be one prominent female rapper in the scene. Miz Taken's self-ascribed role as the “Mother of Pittsburgh Hip-Hop” can certainly be seen as her placing herself as the wiser and more reputable artist in the scene. Furthermore, the fact that she prominently displays herself, and only herself, on a flyer that is meant to promote unity can only be seen as hypocritical. While she actively speaks out against the “queen bee” image in hip-hop, her actions show that she has perhaps internalized this discourse. In our interview, she pointed out how her assertions of being the symbolic “mom” of aspiring rappers and then talking about her PMS event made it seem like

she was “talking out of both sides of her mouth,” and attributed it to the engrained image perpetuated by the male dominance in hip-hop.

Aubrey Loud described what she believes is the source of the hostility among female artists in Pittsburgh. She told me:

I’m pretty much friends with the majority of female hip-hop artists in Pittsburgh. I’ve found them through one way or another and they are usually the lone soldier [i.e., lone fan of hip-hop] in their crew of women. And there’s not many people like me that are trying to connect them. And it’s very difficult [to connect them because] they’ve fallen into the trap of comparative analysis with each other: needing to be harder and sexier than the next [artist]. (Interview, 10/16/14)

Because female hip-hop artists in Pittsburgh tend to socialize with others who are not into hip-hop culture (i.e., are “lone soldiers”), Aubrey Loud feels that they are unaware of the expectations female artists have for one another. The “catty and competitive” image that is pervasive through the “top dog” or “queen bee” narrative is what becomes the only image of the hip-hop scene for female artists. Aubrey Loud points out that this “comparative analysis” is a “trap” because it ultimately causes female artists to fight among themselves for supremacy rather than working against the patriarchy that establishes the belief that there can/should only be one female artist at a given time.

In this section, I have described how scenes create conflict among artist because they see others occupying their same positions as threats to their success. This highlights the importance of understanding the motivations behind individuals as they enter and participate in the scene. For those looking to appreciate music in a scene, other scene members can serve as members of a community with whom they share a common bond. However, those producing music in a scene are face with a different set of challenges that question whether music scenes are positive spaces. While gaining recognition in a scene can certainly benefit an artist’s career by helping to create a

buzz that record companies may find desirable, artists realize that they are not the only ones attempting to achieve this goal. Studies of scenes should take the role of the aspiring artist into account when analyzing the behaviors and attitudes circulated in these scenes and how scene members can stifle the pursuits of other scene members (in this case, the pursuit of transitioning from an underground to mainstream artist). In the next section, I show how this competition and related horizontal hostility of the “crab mentality” in Pittsburgh creates a desire for artists to leave the music scene to be considered successful within it.

3.3 “IT SEEMS YOU’RE DOING BETTER FOR YOURSELF WHEN YOU’RE NOT SEEN IN PITTSBURGH”

Because of the challenges described above relating to horizontal hostility, competition, and a scene that they feel is oversaturated with other artists, rappers in the Pittsburgh scene feel that to be successful, they need to reach fans outside of their city. It is obvious that artists that seek mainstream success must capture an audience outside of their city to achieve that goal. It would seem reasonable for artists to attempt to gain a following in their local scene and attempt to expand from there. However, artists believe that they must first be successful *outside* of their city to be successful *inside* of their city. In this section, I analyze how artists feel they must “think outside” of the Pittsburgh scene to be successful within it. This is in part because of their goals of being successful in the mainstream industry and in part because of a belief that fans in Pittsburgh are not interested in an artist with only local aspirations. I then discuss how recognition from

audiences outside of the local scene influences the strategies of artists in their pursuit of mainstream success.

The competition and crab mentality described above manifests in the desires of rappers to “get out” of Pittsburgh and the local music. Artists have somewhat of a disdain for the local music scene, feeling that it provides little help in advancing their careers as artists. Again, this results in artists taking on an attitude of individuality at the expense of strengthening the local scene. Scrollz said, “Everyone wants to be the next person out [of Pittsburgh]. When, like, really, we could all be good if we just come together and kind of mob out” (Interview, 4/24/14). Scrollz emphasizes the desire for artists to be the next one to break through to the mainstream music industry comes at the expense of growing the scene. On the one hand, Pittsburgh artists believe that growing the local music scene through support and collaboration is a way to increase the visibility of the city in the national recording industry thereby creating more opportunities for more artists in the scene.

Thinking outside of Pittsburgh, on the other hand, is what many in the scene describe as a necessary mindset for an artist wishing to break into the mainstream. In fact, Alchemist believes that artists who focus on becoming the center of the Pittsburgh scene are doing so at the detriment of their careers:

Don't be so absorbed in Pittsburgh. If you are trying to be a global act, but you are comparing yourself to acts in your city, there's no room for growth...So, like, I never compare myself to another Pittsburgh artist. Never. I compare myself to people that are in the Top 40. I compare myself to people that are not in the Top 40, but are making money off this shit. That's who I see myself next to. I'm not trying to compete with my own city...I think that most people from Pittsburgh have that mindset where it's just that they get frustrated with people from the 'Burgh that are doing this and that. Most of these people have been doing this for six or seven years and you are just now thinking outside of Pittsburgh?! There's only a window of time where you can make a move in hip-hop; it's a young person's sport. (Interview, 9/12/14)

Alchemist pushes against the competition found in the Pittsburgh scene in a slightly different way. He focuses on the goals of aspiring rappers, which is to make it into the mainstream, to indicate that attempting to best those in your scene will only result in the limited recognition that can be found within a scene. By competing with those where you would like to be (i.e., the Top 40), rather than where you are (i.e., the Pittsburgh scene), artists open themselves up to greater and more rapid success. Alchemist adds that artists must do this quickly as the window for success is not open forever with a perception that the recording industry values youth. Later in this section, I analyze how other artists describe the importance of thinking outside of the Pittsburgh scene.

As I expand on in a Chapter 5, for many aspiring artists in the Pittsburgh music scene, “getting out” of the “barrel” of Pittsburgh is not only a reference to a desire to get out of a local music scene and into a space where one can gain broader recognition, it is also the desire to get out of Pittsburgh is also a desire to get out of economic struggles and precarious work. Kerve explained:

A lot of rappers that you see, a lot of us come from the hood. A lot of us are trying to do something. A lot of us in the hood ain't trying to be in the hood. A lot of us are trying to make it out of the hood. A lot of us don't want to be there because if we wanted to be there, we wouldn't be working so hard to get up out of there.
(Interview, 6/13/15)

For many artists, they are attempting careers in the music industry to escape the disadvantaged situations from which they originate. Without breaking into the mainstream industry where they have an opportunity to make a substantial living off of their music, remaining solely in the local music scene keeps them tied to those conditions. In addition, many artists desire to have a music career that takes them outside of the city because it allows them to realize that they are not “trapped” in Pittsburgh.

Artists in the Pittsburgh hip-hop scene believe that their mindset should expand beyond understanding their position within the local scene in favor of understanding their position in the music industry as a whole. Rapper Maverick said that for the scene to progress, artists should have goals that expand beyond Pittsburgh:

So, I see a lot of people getting together, but I want more from them. I'm like, you're so good! That's such a good song! Push it! Push it! Let's not just focus on, oh, I got a show at [a local venue], I'm good. Let's take it outside of the city! (Interview, 4/14/15)

Maverick believes that the Pittsburgh scene is beginning to come together in a manner of which many of the artists above would approve. However, to truly strengthen the scene, artists must “push” their talent and songs outside of Pittsburgh to gain wider recognition. In this comment, he shows that artists can, and in his opinion, should, use the local scene as a springboard into wider recognition. Furthermore, as I have emphasized above artists’ motivations and actions in music scenes are best understood when taking into consideration their understanding of the scene as it pertains to their career goals.

Virus explained that thinking outside of Pittsburgh may help overcome some of the frustrations artists feel in the local music scene. One of the most commonly cited frustrations among aspiring artists is that they feel fans in Pittsburgh are not eager to consume new music. Virus says that artists should try to release their music to a wider audience:

People in Pittsburgh might not fuck with it, but like I said, the world is smaller. You might not be big in Pittsburgh, but Taiwan might love your shit! Who knows? You might get picked up on some random Asian hip-hop blog and you blow up. Who knows? But, the point is to put good work out there. (Interview, 6/5/14).

Virus picks up on what Bennett and Peterson (2004) refer to as both translocal and virtual scenes. Artists not only realize that they are part of a local scene, but also that they are connected

to other hip-hop scenes across the world. Also, using the internet, artists can utilize the resources of virtual scenes¹⁷ to help break into the mainstream. Kerve agreed with this notion saying, “I keep my mind focused on many things because I know that the world is bigger than Pittsburgh” (Interview, 6/13/15). Scrollz echoed this sentiment on his Twitter account, stating that being at the top of the music scene in Pittsburgh should not be anyone’s goal in the scene. He urged others to think outside of Pittsburgh because the world is “big as hell” (Tweet 1/8/2016). For artists, this focus on audiences outside of Pittsburgh saves them from the pitfalls of horizontal hostility that comes from individuals comparing and competing with others in the local scene through imagining other pathways to success.

The horizontal hostility that artists describe above is also a major reason that artists develop a focus on establishing themselves outside of Pittsburgh. Alchemist warned that those who do not think outside of Pittsburgh will get distracted by the competition there. Similarly, Swiss believes that “people are always trying to get out of Pittsburgh, like young kids. [They are] talking about, ‘I gotta get out of here, it’s holding me back, people are holding me back’” (Interview, 10/22/14). Swiss believes that individuals feel that Pittsburgh hinders their careers because of the crab mentality found there. These complaints parallel the findings of Hracs et al. (2011) regarding Halifax and Toronto. The competitive nature and horizontal hostility found in Pittsburgh makes artists look for ways to distance themselves from the scene. As artists drop their associations with the local limits the ability for the scene to strengthen and grow. Artists are less likely to collaborate or support other artists because of the perceived role these other artists play in inhibiting their success.

¹⁷ In Chapter 5, I expand on this notion to analyze how artists use the internet to advance their careers.

To gain prominence in the local scene, artists believe that they must gain recognition in other parts of the country before hometown fans see them as legitimate. According to artists, fans in Pittsburgh are similar to record companies because they are looking for the Next Big Thing. Local artists harbor a lot of resentment for this fact because they feel that their hometown audience should be their biggest supporters. Aspiring rappers not only enter a scene comprised of other artists that show limited support for their art, but they also find it hard to gain the support of the local crowd. The struggle for artists to gain legitimacy in the scene is an aspect of scenes research that is underexplored and highlights how status operates and influences the careers of aspiring artists in relation to music scenes.

Scrollz and his manager, Ben, decided that they would be working with an artist in Detroit in attempts to boost their prominence in both markets. By working with the Detroit artist, Scrollz would get exposure there and the Detroit artist would gain exposure in Pittsburgh, a tactic they saw as mutually beneficial. Ben described the reasoning: “What we’re finding now is that fans from your city tend not to support you until fans outside of your city do” (Interview, 6/6/14). While it is unclear if this strategy worked for Scrollz and the Detroit artist,¹⁸ it is important that the perceptions of legitimacy in the local scene is tied to prominence in other scenes. As I discuss more in Chapter 5, career trajectories for aspiring artists follow several paths which make understanding the role of local music scenes in the careers of these artists complicated. While Virus described a method where artists “put their music out there” in hopes of latching on and gaining prominence *anywhere* and eventually “blow up” into the mainstream,

¹⁸ Scrollz was and still is one of the more prominent artists in the Pittsburgh scene. He formalized his relationship with the Detroit artist by adding him to his artist collective. The two have since severed these formal ties after the Detroit artist went through a brief period of “retirement” from making music.

Scrollz and Ben are looking to latch on in other places to gain prominence *locally* in hopes of then using their prominence in the local scene to catapult them into the mainstream.

Fans in the Pittsburgh scene view artists that tour and have a following in more cities with higher esteem because they feel like their career is more legitimate. These fans share the views of artists who stress that other artists should have goals that extend beyond Pittsburgh. Artists that do so are seen as having goals that include mainstream success and further exhibit that they are heading toward that goal. As Greazy pointed out, “If you’re in Pittsburgh, it seems you are doing better if you’re not seen in Pittsburgh. When you’re not seen [here, but seen elsewhere] the better you are doing, apparently” (Interview, 10/27/14). Certainly, there are fans within the underground scene that appreciate and desire underground artists for their limited exposure. Fans of underground music take pride in having artists that are their “little secret,” just as artists with a strong underground ethos eschew the mainstream in favor of what they see as a more “pure” experience in the underground (Harrison 2009, Morgan 2009). However, it is important to recognize that the artists in this ethnography are of a different variety; a variety that seeks to transition from the underground to the mainstream. It is reasonable, and the testimonies from artists in the scenes confirm, that fans in the scene share these desires. That is, instead of fans being interested in an artist because they are their “little secret,” some are interested in artists because they can then be on the ground floor or say that they knew them “before they were famous.”

Artists point out that the evidence for their beliefs regarding the above position of fans comes from their experiences watching the rise of Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller. In order to achieve his goal of success in the mainstream rap music industry, rapper Cookie has come to the realization that he must gain recognition outside of Pittsburgh:

I don't want to say [Pittsburgh is] a bandwagon city, but, they like to see you successful somewhere else before they start jumping aboard and really messing with you. Like, Wiz did it. Mac did it. You travel outside of the city, you gain a buzz, then your city starts messing with you. That's pretty much how it is here. That's the process I'm probably going to start doing here. I've got a huge buzz around the city that's pretty good. I want to make it bigger though, so I'm going to travel outside of Pittsburgh and just let them see me do me. Then, hopefully, the buzz gets bigger. (Interview, 6/11/15)

Cookie states that his career is on the rise and that he knows that to reach the position of two artists he admires from the city, he needs to follow the same path they did. Actshawn gave a similar account of this pathway to stardom adding that this is true of every local scene:

And it's always like that. It's always like that in every city. Your city is not going to love you until they see you doing things everywhere else and seeing other people mess with you. And they are going to get jealous...I saw how they treated [Mac Miller]. I said, "So, when you are talented, they ain't going to fuck with you until you leave and you get on?" And that's just how it is. Didn't nobody fuck with Mac for real, for real. Mac rocked a crowd of 10 people [in Pittsburgh]. I rocked a crowd of 3 people one time. That's just the game of it. That's just how it roll. That's how Pittsburgh is. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Actshawn and Cookie further underscore the belief that fans in Pittsburgh prefer an artist who has achieved mainstream success, or is at least demonstrates the potential for doing so. Cookie evokes bandwagon imagery to show that consumers in the local scene follow trends in music. Actshawn reinforces this sentiment by highlighting that talent does not dictate an artist's popularity in the scene. While both would agree that Mac Miller is talented (and was equally as talented as he was coming up in the scene), they feel that the buzz he was able to achieve outside of the city was what catapulted him to prominence within the scene.

Ben does not understand why people in the Pittsburgh music scene are slow to support artists who are not popular elsewhere:

Nobody is going to jump on your bandwagon until people outside of the city do. I can't tell you why, it doesn't make any sense to me. But, we're at a point where we need to decide: do we skip town and try to grab fans regionally or do we try to

grab some of these Pittsburgh people who could care less because everybody in this city knows a Pittsburgh rapper? (Interview, 6/6/14)

In posing that question, Ben touches on a potential reason for the necessity for artists to gain prominence in other markets before trying to capture fans in the local scene. As others indicated above, there is an overabundance of rappers in Pittsburgh, many of which remain deeply tied to their communities and are scattered throughout Pittsburgh. It is very likely that those looking to consume music from the local scene have either a personal connection with a rapper in Pittsburgh, or a connection through proximity based shared neighborhoods with artists. These loyalties are difficult for artists without them are difficult to overcome, especially when artists are not interested in supporting one another's music or collaborating on projects out of the fear of sharing (or losing) these fans. One way to break this barrier, Ben and others believe, is to gain more mainstream notoriety by gaining exposure in other cities.

Members of the rap music scene understand that a migration from Pittsburgh into other markets is necessary for their success in the music industry. Even if they could become the most popular artist in Pittsburgh without leaving the city, this popularity would not necessarily translate to the mainstream success they desire without also establishing themselves in other markets. Burner indicates that Pittsburgh is different from other cities because "there is no next level in this city." He further explained that:

You gotta go outside of this city to be able to get what you need [in your career]. As far as the city is concerned, you could perform until you are blue in the face. I've done over 250 shows in this city alone. But, at the same time, there is nobody that can put you in the industry in Pittsburgh. You have to go to Atlanta or L.A. or Florida to be able to really push to the next level. Everyone that made it out of the city made it [i.e., became successful in the music industry]. Everyone that is stuck in the city ain't doing nothing. Pittsburgh don't make or break you, but you definitely have to venture out. You have to go places [in order to be successful] (Interview, 4/28/15).

Burner's comments help illuminate the complicated processes and interactions that are part of artists' attempts to utilize local music scenes for social mobility in the recording industry.

Artists feel that the Pittsburgh scene lacks the social capital (Bourdieu 1986) necessary to help advance their careers. Because of the perceived lack in social capital, artists assert that it necessary for them to travel to other cities not only to grow a more regionally diverse fanbase, but also to tap into professional networks in those cities. One Pittsburgh artist announced his frustration on Twitter saying "I seriously find it crazy that I have to connect with people outside of Pittsburgh to make any moves of legitimate significance" (Tweet, 5/2/2015); a status that was "liked" by 4 other artists in the scene. This artist gets at the feeling that while individuals in Pittsburgh may help artists "make moves" (i.e., advance their careers), they are ultimately only significant in the local markets and that "legitimate" connections to the recording industry are found elsewhere.

Miz Taken, when asked what advice she would give to artists trying to make a career in the rap music industry, believes that to be successful in the commercial industry, you must interact with individuals in the industry who are outside of Pittsburgh. Instead of trying to contact industry executives or create a buzz in Pittsburgh in hopes that those in the industry come to you, Miz Taken believes artists must go "where the action is":

If you want to figure out how to get into the industry, you have to actually be able to talk to people in the industry. You can't just keep doing shows at the [Beat Box] or be here spamming Facebook all day. If there is a music conference, you need to go. You need to go and meet people. You might have to actually spend some money and meet people and network. They think, I guess, that when they say, "I'm grinding, every day, I'm grinding," just here in their neighborhood is somehow helping them. [Those artists] are missing out on the bigger picture that there are things outside of Pittsburgh. (Interview, 5/11/15)

While Miz Taken is a bit vague on a place where one may go to be in front of these record executives, she clearly believes that place is not in Pittsburgh. It is important to note that Miz Taken, along with the above tweet, highlight a problem in the infrastructure of Pittsburgh, namely that it does not facilitate the interactions between artists the recording industry. Rather than propose a solution that advocates for the strengthening of that aspect of the Pittsburgh scene, these artists advocate for leaving the local scene to access these resources. I believe that this is a result of the crab mentality of those in the scene who consistently view life and opportunities as being better “out there” rather than improving the conditions within their own scene.

Because of the perceived lack of opportunities for artists in Pittsburgh, several artists have left or have plans to leave the Pittsburgh scene to explore opportunities elsewhere. Maverick, Virus, and Alchemist have left, with the first two going to L.A. and Alchemist now pursuing opportunities in Philadelphia. These artists feel that Pittsburgh represented a sort of “dead end” in their career. One Stop articulated this sentiment when talking about how she sees herself in relation to the local scene:

My time in Pittsburgh is limited. I won't be in Pittsburgh much longer. I've [paid] my dues. I've performed in every single place, every elbow, armpit, stadium, stage, corner, bridge, in Pittsburgh. I...just don't know what I am to this scene.
(Interview, 1/27/15)

Artists that feel they have capitalized on all that the local scene can offer are faced with the decision of whether they should stay in the city. For One Stop, she feels she has put in the effort requisite for career advancement in the scene without the recognition she feels she deserves. Without this recognition, she feels alienated and unable to understand how she fits into the scene. This further highlights that as artists in the scene attempt to gain prominence in the scene, they

face a different struggle to “fit in” than is typically described in the literature on scenes. Their struggle to fit in is also tied to their quest to establish a career in music. One Stop’s comments insinuate that because she has “paid her dues” without gaining a recognition of “what she is to this scene,” she is looking to leave Pittsburgh and move to another city with more opportunities for her to establish herself in a scene and eventually realize her goals of becoming a professional artist.

For some artists, the failure to fit in causes them to leave home or abandon their pursuit of a dream job as a musician. Artists feel they must venture outside of Pittsburgh to be successful within Pittsburgh, a feeling that complicates their relationship with the city and the scene. Kerve explained his recent career decisions and described these complicated emotions:

[The limited opportunities in Pittsburgh] has been causing me as an artist to branch out. I’ve been going back and forth to New York a lot. It doesn’t feel like home. I see a lot of artists and it seems like you have to change your ways to get love out here [in Pittsburgh]. You hear a lot of people saying, “Well, I don’t care about Pittsburgh, forget Pittsburgh.” But, it’s like, deep down inside, you want to have that hometown love. (Interview, 6/13/15)

Kerve expresses his frustration with the lack of support artists feel they experience in the local scene. He, like others, understands that he must potentially prove himself elsewhere, in his case, New York, to be accepted within the local Pittsburgh scene. While artists are sometimes dismissive of the local scene because of its lack of support for artists, Kerve emphasizes that successes outside the city are bittersweet because artists like him still value local acceptance. This conceptualization of “home” is another force that is potentially keeping artists in the “barrel” of Pittsburgh. Even though they may understand that more opportunities exist outside of Pittsburgh, acceptance in the place they view as “home” has a greater significance.

In this section, I have shown that the metaphor of “crabs in a barrel” is apt for the description of the relationships of aspiring artists in the Pittsburgh local music scene. This metaphor not only draws attention to the conflict and competition previously ignored by studies of music scenes, it also highlights the roles music scenes play in aspiring artists' careers. Just as it is important to understand how artists interact with one another within the “barrel of crabs,” it is important to understand the strategies artists use to exit that barrel as well as the significance of what is outside of the barrel. Outside of the barrel of Pittsburgh lies more opportunities for career advancement. Artists believe it is important to realize that the crab mentality within Pittsburgh and limited industry infrastructure limit their aspirations for success. They believe that by working outside of their local music scene they can gain recognition within it.

How artists use and conceptualize their relationships to the local music scene concerning their career advancement underscores the importance of analyzing how music scenes accelerate or inhibit the social mobility of the artists within them. This is important for the study of cultural production because it highlights the relationship of local and translocal processes in the production of popular music and celebrities.

3.4 “THE PITTSBURGH SCENE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE AN L.A. OR ATLANTA OR CHICAGO”

The most telling evidence of what members of the Pittsburgh rap music scene feel are the major problems within the scene come from how they compare this scene to other scenes they conceive as successful. While there is a certain amount of disdain for the city's rap music infrastructure,

artists place a great deal of blame on themselves as the primary inhibitors of the Pittsburgh Renaissance. For example, many would agree with Scrollz who stated that Pittsburgh needs a “music mecca like New York [has with] SOB’s [where] everybody goes there and the sound is good and the staff is good” (Interview, 4/24/14). This, after all, is what fueled the disappointment among artists that followed the closing of the Beat Box. However, most artists feel that the horizontal hostility and crab mentality that is endemic in Pittsburgh is not present in other hip-hop hot spots and is what is keeping the scene from reaching its full potential.

Artists believe that the Pittsburgh scene is poised to be one of the top cities for rap music in the country. When asked to describe the scene, artists typically say that there is something missing, that, when found, will set off a chain reaction of artists making it into the mainstream music industry. Even the most adamant supporters of the Pittsburgh rap music scene, like Swiss, admit that “this scene is getting ready to compete on a national level with every other major city,” but is still not quite there yet. Rapper Flow-er Child gave a typical response when asked to describe how the Pittsburgh rap music scene relates to other rap music scenes:

I feel like our scene, it’s not bad. It’s not bad. It can get better. I feel like the Pittsburgh scene has the potential to be like an L.A. or Atlanta or Chicago, but we’re just not quite there yet. We’re still in the process of figuring out how we’re going to get it there...Because, there is a lot of talent in Pittsburgh, there’s a lot of talent in L.A., there’s a lot of talent in Chicago. (Interview, 2/11/15)

The fact that Pittsburgh has not become a hip-hop hotbed like the cities Flow-er Child mentions is particularly vexing for artists. They perceive the level of talent as on par with any of these major cities. As I discuss in depth in Chapter 5, artists also believe that they handle themselves in a professional manner that optimizes their exposure and marketability as artists. Despite these qualities, members of the scene believe that they are not getting the recognition they deserve.

There is a clear pathway to this sort of recognition, according to artists in the scene. It is rare for an artist to point out deficiencies in the scene at a structural level, as Scrollz does above. Rather, they believe that the crab mentality of horizontal hostility needs to be fixed among artists. For them, this means that artists need to come together and support one another. Artists are familiar with recent stories of groups of artists from cities banding together in attempts to gain national attention. Rubble believes that Pittsburgh rappers do not need to compete with one another to be successful:

Because you see it in other cities. [Actshawn] put me deep into other artists in Atlanta, like banding together like Raury, OG Maco, Makonnen, and Father. All these dudes that are equally talented, yet still they bring their gifts together to elevate all of them. And they go in different directions when they get there, but they still come back to be like, we have to pay homage to the fact that we did this together. Something like that in Pittsburgh would be great. (Interview, 2/18/15)

This sort of “do-it-together” rather than “do-it-yourself” ethos has been popping up in rap scenes across the country. Rubble also pointed out that Grammy award-winning artist Kendrick Lamar worked with a group of artists called Black Hippy while coming up in the recording industry. He believes that belonging to the same scene by virtue of being from the same city should create a de facto support system among artists because “sometimes that blind support is what you need to actually get to where you are going because you know that people have your back, especially where you’re from” (Interview, 2/18/15). Rubble’s assessment of the Pittsburgh scene further highlights its difference from supportive communities often portrayed in the music scenes literature. He asserts that the affective alliances often felt by members of scenes are replaced in this case with the competition described above.

The necessary shift for the Pittsburgh rap music scene, according to the artists, is toward a more unified scene. Artists vary on what this could look like in Pittsburgh. For some, it’s

simply sharing each other's music so that more fans are exposed to more artists from Pittsburgh, an initiative that both Scrollz and Actshawn pushed heavily on their Twitter accounts early on in my observations. Now it is common to see several local artists commenting favorably on and sharing whatever new music is released by artists from the scene. Others collaborate with as many artists in the city as possible to increase the amount of quality music associated with the scene. Regardless of the methods, it is clear to artists in Pittsburgh that the obstacles to overcome for the scene are cultural rather than structural. Flow-er Child summed this up saying, "When everybody, truly everybody, comes together and stops worrying about [themselves] and [their group] and just pushes each other whole-heartedly, maybe then, we'll be able to get to that level [of Atlanta, Chicago, and L.A.]" (Interview, 2/11/15). Artists believe that the focus on the individual, rather than the scene as a whole is a detrimental aspect of the local scene.

3.5 CONCLUSION

Despite criticisms that the local scene does not support the artists within it, contains a type of competition that inhibits artists from advancing their careers, and lacks a sufficient industry infrastructure, members of the Pittsburgh rap music scene still believe that the scene is making progress. Artists like Greazy have "high hopes for music in Pittsburgh" (Interview, 10/27/14) because they believe artists are attempting to change the aspects of the scene that they criticize as being unhelpful for the advancement of their careers. Aspiring rappers in Pittsburgh are excited about the scene because they see the conditions they describe in their interviews with me as changing. When describing the scene, they were quick to speak of the negatives I focus on in this

chapter. However, they would typically end interviews by telling me that there are signs that those criticisms are changing in favor of a more collaborative environment. I experienced the opening of several performance spaces, each of which brought a diverse crowd, underscoring the impact of the closing of the Beat Box is beginning to subside. When artists focus on these aspects of the scene, they see scene as having the potential to be the next hip-hop hotbed and that the “Pittsburgh Renaissance” is inevitable. However, the progression of the scene is likely viewed as “slow” by commenters like Cooke (2015) of the *City Paper* because of the other forces at work in this chapter than extend beyond a limited infrastructure. Artists believe that a “do-it-together” attitude of collaboration and support would help the scene advance more quickly. However, they describe how a “do-it-yourself” attitude creates horizontal hostility that inhibits the scene from progressing.

Engaging in a music scene presents a variety of barriers to the career advancement of aspiring artists. These barriers represent a gap in the literature on music scenes by highlighting the differences in roles of those participating in a music scene for leisure and participating in the music scene to advance their careers as musicians. This chapter, along with Chapter 2, provides the context for the remainder of this dissertation. In Chapter 4, I focus on more tradition conflicts in music scenes, those over behaving and belonging, to illuminate a system of accountability that governs the attitudes, actions, performances, and products circulated within the Pittsburgh underground rap scene. In Chapter 5, I analyze how rappers begin and grow their careers in hopes of breaking into the mainstream recording industry.

4.0 "WE'RE IN THIS SELF-MADE HELLBOX": ACCOUNTABILITY AND NORM CITATION IN PITTSBURGH'S RAP MUSIC INDUSTRY

In Chapters 2 and 3, I provided the context to establish the Pittsburgh rap music scene as a site of conflict for members of the scene. These conflicts are qualitatively different from many conflicts discussed in literature on music scenes in that they involve artists competing to secure scarce resources they believe will help advance their careers. In this chapter, I focus on conflicts more in line with those in the scenes literature, conflicts over behaving and belonging. I conceptualize these conflicts in relation to a system of accountability I observed at work in the scene. Individuals hold themselves, others, and are themselves held accountable to norms and expectations surrounding what it means to “do hip-hop” correctly in this scene. In Chapter 5, I then analyze the strategies that artists have developed as they try to break into the rap music industry. These strategies are in part a result of the norms of interaction structured by horizontal hostility and accountability.

As individuals seek to make careers in the rap music industry, they are faced with many decisions. One artist, Alchemist, described the elaborate, two-month process he went through simply to decide on his stage name (he eventually settled on using his last name). For artists, decisions like this and about things like their style of music, content, and aesthetic, among many other things, all face scrutiny from their peers, fans, and potential employers. In order to “make

it,” or find sole, lucrative employment in the rap music industry, artists feel that they must present themselves in a “proper” way.

To examine this, I show how individuals manage their impressions (Goffman 1959) and cite the norms (Butler 2004) of “hip-hop” in Pittsburgh’s underground hip-hop scene through a system of accountability (Hollander 2013). The principal organizing mechanism of this system is subjects’ abilities to make themselves legible through the successful “doing” of “hip-hop” (West and Zimmerman 1987), a process with significant gender, race, and class dimensions. The localized expectations related to the category “hip-hop” organize the behaviors and interactions of anyone and everyone aspiring to “make it” in the rap music industry. Successfully enacting behaviors associated with this category allow them to be validated as “authentic,” “real,” and “professionals” within the industry. These classifications, my respondents believe, are necessary for their transition from the underground rap music industry, one with limited financial compensation, to the mainstream rap industry, where they can find gainful employment and celebrity.

As I will discuss below, analyzing accountability in the Pittsburgh underground rap music scene is challenging. First, “hip-hop” as a norm provides an interesting puzzle. At times, individuals struggle with expectations regarding this norm. They come from different groups important in hip-hop culture and expectations of what a hip-hop artist is, and how an artist can successfully fulfill those expectations, vary depending on the site from which one interrogates them. For potential rappers, the accomplishment of “doing hip-hop” requires an understanding of the expectations of fans, industry executives, critics, bloggers, other artists, and themselves.

Second, my respondents discuss frame choices, expectations, and aspirations in terms the literature on hip-hop, rap, and recent developments in cultural production would find surprising.

Individuals in this scene discuss “realness” (as in, “keeping it real,” see Basu 1998) and its relationship to “authenticity” in ways that make me reconsider previous understandings (McLeod 1999, Fraley 2009, Harkness 2009). Empirical examples from mainstream rap music led me to hypothesize that realness and authenticity would be central to the self-understandings and discourse of participants in the local underground hip-hop scene. Contrary to this reasonable expectation, however, my respondents rarely drew on aspects of these concepts seen as important in previous research. In fact, they consider concerns with realness and authenticity to be outdated. While ideas of honesty and integrity remain central in “doing hip-hop,” individuals in Pittsburgh’s rap scene explicitly critique and implicitly downplay identification with blackness, an aversion to selling out, and masculine cool poses that previous researchers have emphasized. The norm of hip-hop in Pittsburgh involves embracing authenticity and realness; however, it does so in a way that emphasizes honesty, integrity, professionalism (a topic I fully explore in Chapter 5), and legitimacy.

Last, as scholars of intersectionality discuss, the identities produced by those attempting to “do hip-hop” constitute and overlap other identities. While I argue that understandings of what hip-hop is and how it is done are of primary importance in setting the expectations of individuals within this regime, I recognize the significant role that the racialized, classed, and gendered aspects of these interactions play. For example, one artist described other artists being in a “self-made hellbox.” He described this “box” as the result of artists fabricating stereotypical representations of black masculinity in order to be more marketable. This artist’s protest was partially against stereotypical representations of black masculinities. Mostly, though, the “hellbox” referred to how artists draw on topics that are not true to their lived experiences to appease potential fans and record executives, because, in his words, “that’s how it’s done.”

In what follows, I describe and interpret accountability in Pittsburgh's underground hip-hop scene as a mechanism through which individuals shape and are shaped by what it means to do "hip-hop." I present Pittsburgh rappers' understandings of hip-hop as a category to which individuals orient themselves that does not necessarily rely on the dimensions of authenticity presented in the literature. In order to be legitimized in the rap music industry one must demonstrate that s/he is "in and of the culture [of hip-hop]" in a way that is both original and what they see as stereotypical. I draw heavily from two main theoretical sources: Hollander's (2013) clarification of the concept of accountability elaborated in terms of "doing gender" by West and Zimmerman (1987) and Butler's (1993, 2004) discussion of norm citation. Individuals orient their attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors to the local expectations regarding the norms of hip-hop. This involves establishing yourself as "real," or an "authentic" member of this community. Individuals manage expectations for conformity by assessing their behaviors, and the behaviors of others, while also anticipating being assessed by others. Lastly, individuals enforce conformity through sanctioning one another's ability to cite "hip-hop" as a norm.

4.1 NORMATIVE CITATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN "DOING GENDER"

The publication of West and Zimmerman's (1987) "Doing Gender" brought with it a discussion of gender that was not solely focused on classificatory schemes, something that one "is" on the basis of traits one "has," but on iterative interactional accomplishments, something one "does." Critically appropriating Goffman's (1959) notions of dramaturgy and "display," West and Zimmerman focus on how people interactively "do" masculinity and femininity through the

theatrical metaphor of actors, scenes, scripts, and audiences. Gender is a product of social interaction rather than a set of traits or a classificatory structure with roles assigned or assumed. West and Fenstermaker (1995) extended this analysis to include race and class, arguing that “difference” is also an ongoing, interactional accomplishment. Central to these ethnomethodological analyses of both gender and difference is the concept of accountability, which is concerned with how people’s social competence is “hostage” to maintaining the congruency between individual behavior and the expectations of social categories (West and Zimmerman 1987: 136). While they argue that these categories are not natural, West and Zimmerman (1987) and West and Fenstermaker (1995) argue that racial, gender, and class categories are perceived as natural or at least deeply embedded through both childhood and adult socialization (through assumptions of genetics, genitalia, and material resources, respectively), each with a set of expectations of how a person in *X* category *should* think, dress, speak, act, etc. What happens, then, when we look at a status that is not ascribed or even achieved on the basis of life-time socialization, but rather assumed as an adult such as, behaving and belonging in ways appropriate to a cultural scene? In this chapter, I analyze what I conceptualize as “doing hip-hop” in the Pittsburgh underground rap music scene.

4.1.1 Doing Gender and Doing Difference

West and Zimmerman (1987) make an important distinction in their theory between sex, sex category, and gender. *Sex*, they argue, relies on socially agreed upon biological criteria, such as genitalia and sex chromosomes, for classification as male or female (127). Despite the fact that genitalia and sex chromosomes are not easily apparent in everyday interaction, we presume the

existence of these essential characteristics through other gender displays. That is, we assume the individual wearing a dress and long hair also has a clitoris and vagina. *Sex category* is the sex assumed of an individual based on comportment and appearance. Last, *gender*, is the extent to which individuals are able to enact masculinity and femininity in agreement with the social expectations associated with a sex category. Individuals constantly manage the configurations of their behavior in order to accomplish gender (127).

West and Fenstermaker (1995) extend this discussion to include race and class, suggesting that “difference,” their term for the relations of race, class, and gender, is situationally accomplished as well. Like sex, they argue that race and class have perceived material bases to categorical classifications. Like gender, the corresponding categories for these material bases entail sets of expectations for how perceived members of each category “ought” to behave and present themselves.

I argue that aspiring artists in the rap music industry engage in an ongoing, methodical accomplishment of belonging to the category of “hip-hop.” That is, I argue that artists “do hip-hop¹⁹” through acquiring and mobilizing the appropriate categorical apparatus of behavior and other skills required to be seen as belonging in the hip-hop community and culture. As with gender, race, and class, rappers are able to establish and affirm their membership in the category of hip-hop through interaction. When individuals successfully “do hip-hop,” they manage accounts and engage with normative conceptions of behaviors and attitudes associated with being rappers, hip-hop producers, and fans. However, hip-hop categorization is perhaps harder to

¹⁹ Similarly, artists claim to “be hip-hop” or say “I am hip-hop” in the same ways individuals talk about being or doing other identities like race, class, gender, etc.

capture because it does not have the perceived natural and material conditions of gender, race, and class.

Hip-hop categorization also differs from the forms of “difference” described in West and Fenstermaker (1995) because of the possibility to be outside of the categorization system. Ridgeway (2011) reminds us that “systems of categorizing and defining things are based on contrast, and therefore, difference” (147). As individuals “do” gender, race, or class, they manage their place within the system of categorization, never emerging as “ungendered,” “unraced,” or “unclassed.” There is considerable debate about the possibilities for “undoing” versus “redoing” gender (Connell 2010) as well as transitioning between, combining, or abandoning all together the usually polarized sex categories (Brubaker 2016). We can imagine instances where individuals may not conform to normative displays of these categories. This comes through in the social diagnosis of individuals as “tomboys” (the masculine-acting woman), “wiggers” (the white person who acts black), and “nouveau riche” (the ostentatious member of the upper class). These identities occur when they do not do gender, race, or class “properly,” or as expected, they do not fall outside of the categorization system. The varieties of gendered, raced, and classed identities can be collapsed into a relative few categories (e.g., the gender binary of woman and man, etc.).

However, accountability to expectations in hip-hop does not have analogous categorization system. While there are many categories and subgenres of hip-hop and rap music (see Krims 2000), there exists the possibility to be outside of the categorization system, and excluded from it all together. We would not expect, for example, a bluegrass artist to be subjected to the normative expectations of hip-hop comportment, tastes, etc. Further, we have

seen instances where artists attempting to “do hip-hop” were unsuccessful in their pursuits and ostracized from the hip-hop community.²⁰

Additionally, for social categories like gender, race, and class, these categorizations are done nearly instantly in a variety of situations. Ridgeway (2009) argues further that framing by sex category is not only done instantly, but this gender frame is the primary categorization we use when assessing one’s cultural competency. People are categorized according to their position within hip-hop culture after, and in relation to, their gender, race, and class frames. It is only in situations where we encounter hip-hop explicitly that we interrogate one’s ability to do hip-hop.

Despite the asymmetries of “doing gender/race/class” and “doing hip-hop,” I find documenting and interpreting how aspiring rappers strive to achieve their categorical and cultural membership is helpful in understanding the motivations and stakes at play in the self-presentation of aspiring artists. The ethnomethodological focus of “doing difference” helps scholars of hip-hop and other forms of cultural production understand the interactions and expectations that shape the products and personas that emerge in culture industries. This is of particular importance in industries like the rap music industry where the products and personas are under intense scrutiny in debates over their harmful or liberating potentials.

4.1.2 Normative Citation and “Doing Hip-Hop”

Bodies and subjects become legible through construction, or materialization. As Butler (1993) clarifies, “construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a *process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface*

²⁰ See Armstrong 2004:342 for his example of Vanilla Ice in this regard.

we call matter” (emphasis in original, 9). Through fundamental social dynamics and interactions, individuals in the rap music industry produce themselves and one another as intelligible subjects. This is the goal of those aspiring in the rap music industry. They wish be recognized as hip-hop subjects and therefore as individuals able to work within that industry. As individuals “do hip-hop” they seek to be categorized within this system through citing hip-hop norms.

Butler (2004) discusses the implicit standards perpetuated by regulated norms that set the basis for materialization of subjects. Norms, Butler argues, work to establish a set of constraints surrounding the discursive formation of a subject:

The norm governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the social. (2004:42)

As individuals in the rap music industry make decisions about their self-presentations, they engage with the hip-hop norm. Butler (2004) describes how norms are “discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce” (41). By focusing ethnomethodologically on how individuals affect and are affected by struggles over normative expectations, I describe and explain the processes that shape these aspiring artists.

Aspiring artists are eager to be categorized as a rapper or producer, that is, as someone who effectively cites hip-hop norms by doing hip-hop in an acceptable manner. For this to occur, artists must manage the accounts of their categorical membership. As I will show in my data from aspiring artists in Pittsburgh, the situated doing of hip-hop is both “an outcome of and rationale for various social arrangements” (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). The mechanism that produces these outcomes and rationales is “accountability,” which shapes and is shaped by the normative expectations of hip-hop in the process of doing hip-hop.

4.1.3 Accountability

Those wishing to use West and Zimmerman's important ethnomethodological concept of "accountability" have struggled with the fact that this concept either receives little attention from researchers or is used in a manner that does not adhere to the authors' original intention (Hollander 2013). Central to this notion is an ethnomethodological focus on "accounts" whereby individuals must "do" gender in a certain way because of the risk of having their behavior evaluated. This requires individuals to orient themselves in relation to situated gender expectations normatively appropriate for their sex category. Accountability, then, is the internal obligation one has to display gender in a certain form of impression management (Goffman 1959). As Hollander (2013) writes, "West and colleagues would say that accountability involves *my knowledge* that others will evaluate my behavior and the way that this knowledge shapes my thoughts and actions *before I act*" (emphasis in original, 8). While this notion of accountability shows how orientations impact action, gender scholars note that differing definitions of the term complicate its application in the understanding of interactions.

To understand accountability as an interactional process, and its importance in the processes of authentication that I hypothesize are at work in the rap music industry, I follow Hollander's clarification of accountability in West and Zimmerman's work. Hollander relies on a technical, ethnomethodological usage in conjunction with the everyday definition of the term (see Schwalbe 2005, Cook 2006, Hollander 2013). Hollander (2013) asserts that West and Zimmerman's use of accountability "is quite different from its everyday sense of holding someone responsible for their behavior" (7). She further cites Schwalbe's (2000, 2005) notion of "nets of accountability" to note that people often think of accountability in both an interactional

sense and an internalized sense. When discussing accountability, it is important to note that the term allows for slippages between an internalized understanding of expectations in the process of impression management and the dynamics of individuals holding one another responsible for their actions. It is both a process of the self and a process one does to others. In both cases, accountability is an interactional accomplishment and therefore at least partially accessible through ethnographic observations and interviews regarding the production and consumption processes within the rap music industry. Hollander demonstrates the necessity of viewing accountability as a three-part interactional system originally discussed by West and Zimmerman. These three parts, she explains, are interdependent and work together in the production of gender (Hollander 2013:10n4). West and Fenstermaker (1995) assert that accountability is crucial in understanding how any sort of categorical adherence is “done” (not just gender).

The *orientation* aspect of West and Zimmerman’s original conception serves as the foundation of this system. *Orientation* involves the management of one’s perceptions and behaviors in accordance to the local and societal expectations related to sex category. One’s ability to take into account the evaluation of others in his or her adherence to sex category is related to the next part of the system, *assessment*. Individuals manage their behaviors in order to control potential accounts. In doing so, individuals self-assess and are also subjected to the assessment of others based on their behavior’s adhering to expectations of perceived sex category. The final element of the system, *enforcement*, uses the everyday usage of “accountability” whereby people hold each other “responsible for their accomplishment of gender” (Hollander 2013:10). Cook (2006) discusses the power relationship here whereby one can challenge another on his or her sex category membership, which necessitates a response in order to remedy this disruption. Both authors use the example of a boy being called a “sissy” as a

strong message that he is not adhering to common conceptions of socially agreed upon criteria for being “male.” In this type of “gender project” (see Connell 2005), the boy must prove his masculinity (Cook 2006, Hollander 2013). In terms of Chu (2014), he must prove that not only is he a boy, but he is one of the boys. This three-part interactional system, in terms of gender, relies on normative understandings of gender as sex category adherence.

What is unclear about the concept of accountability is exactly what this system produces. West and Zimmerman (1987) and West and Fenstermaker (1995) argue that doing difference produces gendered, raced, and classed human beings. Hollander (2013) show how accountability for women who engaged in a feminist self-defense course creates “new expectations” (18) and “new orientations” (19) toward, in this case, gender perhaps “undoing” or “redoing” gender. At the very least these “new orientations” are pushing back against assessment and enforcement of gender norms. Accountability shapes, and is shaped by, interactions and practices involving race, class, and gender. I show not only how accountability to hip-hop as a normative category shapes interactions and expectations, but also how this process shapes the products and performances that often serve as the starting point for much of the research on hip-hop culture and rap music. Not only do I document and explain by whom, how, and with what consequences aspiring artists are held accountable for their doing of hip-hop, I also show how these expectations interact with the institution of the commercial rap music industry to create a crisis among artists. As one artist puts it, they feel they are in a “self-made hellbox” built from their desire for creative autonomy and the normative expectations to which they feel accountable.

4.1.4 Criticisms of Doing Gender and Doing Difference

While this theory represents a paradigmatic shift in the understanding and study of gender, it is certainly not without criticism. Below I identify the main critiques of West and Zimmerman's approach, along with West and Fenstermaker's (1995) elaboration of "doing difference," and provide commentary on how my analysis of the rap music industry and my conceptualization of "doing hip-hop" anticipates and avoids these critiques. The critiques of these approaches focus on two major themes, which I will discuss in order. First, critics argue that the theory of "doing gender" is so myopically concerned with interactions in which gender is produced that it neglects a discussion and analysis of the constraints imposed by macro level forces on the social environment. A second criticism involves what some believe is the inability for this theory to provide a space for an analysis of power within the process of "doing gender." This second critique is housed in feminist responses to West and Zimmerman's work that theorize sites where doing gender is a process of resistance, challenge, conflict, and/or change.

Critics argue that the ethnomethodologically-focused "doing gender" and "doing difference" fail to investigate the macro social structural forces acting on these processes. The theories, so the criticism goes, remain focused on face-to-face interactions and not "institutional arrangements, community structures, and even family systems" which can shape these interactions (Weber 1995). Patricia Hill Collins (1995) asks, "What types of directions emerge from theories stressing representations over institutional structures and social policies as central to race, class, and gender relations?" (494). While Collins and Weber point out the strengths of ethnomethodological approaches to understanding how people enact difference, they question its utility when it does not reflect back on the structures of racism, class exploitation, and gender

oppression it (re)creates. Risman (2009) believes that it is “very useful to think about gender as a structure” because of the implications that these structures have on setting the basis for the “normative expectations” that the concept of accountability, so vital to doing gender/difference, relies on so heavily (83).

Additionally, critics allege that doing gender/difference fails to account for historical changes in social organization (Collins 1995, Thorne 1995, Risman 2009). It seems to me that central to the process of doing gender/difference is context. While West, Zimmerman, and Fenstermaker may not explicitly discuss what is involved in creating and mobilizing the “normative expectations” involved in these processes, they clearly invoke historical organizations of race, class, and gender. While I agree that the origins of these “normative expectations,” as well as exactly what is meant by that phrase, are a bit obscure, the West and Zimmerman et al., certainly interrogate of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism. West and Fenstermaker (1995b) respond to this critique, saying, “by viewing [race, class, and gender] as accomplishments, however, we can see how situated social action contributes to the reproduction of social structure at any particular sociohistorical moment” (509).

My research often interrogates the relationship between social structure and interaction. I analyze interaction as it pertains to the perceived expectations of many positions within the rap music industry, from record executives to audience members. In addition, I am investigating the social organization of small-scale record companies and artist collectives (or “teams,” as they call themselves), and the local scene, to expand beyond how hip-hop is “done” face-to-face, but also in relation macro- and meso-level forces. Certainly, my analysis of the context after the close of the Beat Box into which many of my respondents entered the scene, indicates that the

expectations of what it means to be a rapper in Pittsburgh is highly dependent on historical context and social organization.

A second critique of doing gender and doing difference is that these concepts are void of an analysis of power (Collins 1995, Thorne 1995). This has led to many feminist scholars to suggest ways in which these ideas can be rethought in order to provide a space for resistance, challenge, and change. These changes manifest in what is partly an argument over semantics and partly an attempt to highlight that difference, and the related inequality, need not be taken as a given. Deutsch (2007) argues that rather than a focus on “doing” gender, we should focus on its “undoing.” This sentiment was articulated in a different way a few years prior by Judith Butler (2004) in *Undoing Gender*. Others put forth ways to “undo” or “redo” gender in order to provide a space for resistance and an analysis of power along with the analysis of gender through interaction. West and Fenstermaker (1995) themselves entitled their response to critics “(Re)doing Difference.” While I believe that the use of “doing” is meant to highlight the importance of ethnomethodology in their works, and not the static nature or inevitability of gender, race, and class inequality, as some of the more semantic arguments claim, I believe that thinking about the “undoing” and “redoing” of identity is helpful. Butler (2004), Deutsch (2007), and Risman (2009), for example, highlight the utility of going beyond looking how gender is “done” to how it can be “undone.” This focus on resistance climbs up levels of analysis to interrogate fully the institutions and structures responsible for dismantling racism, gender oppression, and class exploitation. I do believe, however, these projects are different enough in their aims that both can expose important information for the study of difference. Catherine Connell (2010) points out the utility in thinking about “doing,” “redoing,” and “undoing” gender through her analysis of “doing transgender.” She finds that interactions are a site where all three

of these things occur. And by analyzing the doing, undoing, and redoing of gender among transpeople and genderqueer individuals, she highlights the “complex task of negotiating the discordance between sex, gender, and sex category” (Connell 2010: 51).

Jocelyn Hollander’s (2013) conceptual clarification of accountability in the process of doing gender clarifies the extent to which West and Zimmerman’s original conception—specifically by focusing on doing gender because our competence as a social being is hostage to accomplishing legible alignment of gender and sex category—in fact places power at the core of the process. Hollander points out that when taken as intended, the three-part system of accountability has the ability to change or challenge existing, and create new, orientations toward gender. The examples she gives from her respondents of women who took part in a feminist self-defense course highlight how, through enforcements, women can challenge the normative expectations structuring interactions. In those enforcements, women are also recognizing and resisting the social structural and institutional conceptions of gender. I analyze accountability in a similar fashion to Hollander (2013). I also look at how doing hip-hop is not merely a performance of “normative expectations” (again, vaguely defined), but a struggle over creative control, expression, and legitimacy, which involves taking both of these critiques of West, Zimmerman, and Fenstermaker, to heart.

4.2 KEEPING IT REAL

In this section, I discuss how my respondents define and analyze what it means to “keep it real” in hip-hop. I find that respondents are in overwhelming agreement on this phrase and its current

usage in hip-hop. When asked, “What does ‘keeping it real’ mean to you?” respondents gave initial definitions that emphasized honesty and “being yourself.” In later sections, I analyze how their understanding how “keeping it real” influences the process of doing hip-hop and how it differs from the definitions presented in other literature.

My respondents consistently define the phrase “keeping it real” in a similar manner. Most respondents use some variation of “honesty” in their responses. Individuals typically invoke two major themes. One theme emphasizes the importance of keeping it real in the music artists make. Artists like Alchemist, who advocated for “staying true in your music” (Interview, 9/12/14), Flow-er Child, who advocated for “not trying to promote or portray yourself as anything you’re not” (Interview, 2/11/15), and Rydah, who advocated for “talking about only things that you know or have seen,” are placing the importance on artists being “real” with those who come in contact with their music. To keep it real in this sense is to make music that is autobiographical and involves describing your life experiences and maintaining your integrity.

In order to be “real” in this sense, artists like T-1000 indicate that it is necessary for artists to “know thyself” (Interview, 4/12/15). This involves asking the same question that Prof-a-see asks, “Who are you?” and then following through by “be[ing] that” (Interview, 1/27/15). In order to keep it real, artists need understand who they are as people, and artists, and carry out that performance of self consistently in their personal and professional careers. Scrollz pointed out that the dangers of not keeping it real extend beyond the possibility that others may criticize them for their inauthenticity. He told me that he knows people that “don’t keep it real and they are just whoever anyone wants them to be” and said that those people are often “very sad all the time” because they are never able to be who they “truly are on the inside” (Interview, 4/24/14). Keeping it real, then, is not only important for success in the music industry, it is also important

for leading a fulfilling life. It is important to note that this theory on “keeping it real” artists circulate is not a “performative” theory in the sense of Butler (1993) because they assume that there is a pre-existing self one can know and to which one can be “true.”

Artists also invoked a second theme that involves honesty in how you interact with others. Individuals also stressed the importance of “not sugar coating” (Aubrey Loud), “not bullshitting” (Burner), and “speaking what you feel regardless of the consequences” (Grey Test). These artists are referring to being honest in social interactions like when a friend or fellow artist asks for feedback on their music, dress, or actions. To keep it real in this sense is to provide honest opinions and answers to others, even if it may come in the form of potentially harsh criticism. Several respondents told me that it is essential for artists to have people who keep it real in their friend groups. Ben said that “If your music is bad and your friend tells you, then he’s keeping it real” (Interview, 6/6/14) to underscore the importance of keeping it real in an artist’s development. He said that too often artists surround themselves with individuals that do not keep it real in this way and therefore are unable to see any potential faults in their music. Artists believe that others must challenge them by keeping it real and criticizing any perceived faults in their music in order to ensure that they release the best quality music. If friends do not keep it real, they will advocate for inferior music and inhibit the artistic potential and career of the artist.

Artists also describe how “keeping it real” is important in their daily interactions about things other than music. For example, Burner described a hypothetical scenario in which he would expect realness:

Keeping it real is like me saying to [my friend], “Yo, you think that girl I was chilling with last night was cool?” And him being like, “Yeah.” Then me saying, “No, keep it real.” And he would say, “Well, she was a little weird and sat off in the corner all night, but she’s cool I guess.” Being brutally honest...you know when someone asks you a question and you answer it half-ass because you don’t

want to hurt their feelings? When they say, “Keep it real,” you have to be an ass and hurt their feelings. (Interview 4/28/15)

Keeping it real is a way to create trust and when others evoke the term, they are doing so to ensure that you are being reliable in your account.

For members of hip-hop culture “keeping it real” relies on presenting yourself in an honest and reliable fashion. Fans expect desire artists to “keep it real” when they want an artist’s lyrics to match that artist’s lived experiences, whatever they may be. Artists want fans, friends, and business associates to “keep it real” in their personal interactions and especially criticisms of their music. Swiss said that his position as a studio owner has aspects of the above, but also includes another aspect. Swiss elaborated on the equation he proposed of “Real = Honest” by saying, “If you say that you are going to do something, you better do it” (Interview, 10/22/14). Again, it is important that one keeps it real with others, in this case, by having your deeds follow your words.

Aside from honesty, “keeping it real” also involves artists embracing their individuality and uniqueness. Artists expressed this by saying that “everyone’s real is different” (Alchemist), keeping it real is “just embodying your own uniqueness” (Wheels), and “everyone is real in their own way” (Actshawn). As I discuss later, hip-hop artists have a clear disdain for those who mimic popular styles of music and try to capitalize on trends. To them, keeping it real is all about representing your standpoint. When artists attempt to be something that they are not, or when they try to represent someone else’s experiences as their own, they are not adhering to this norm of realness which makes it very hard for them to do hip-hop in an acceptable manner.

Important in this process is the ability for an artist to capture change. That is, it is acceptable for an artist’s standpoint to change over the course of their career. Several artists

discussed the scrutiny that Jay-Z faced over his album, *Mana Carta...Holy Grail*, that had come out approximately a year before I entered the field. On that album, Jay-Z makes a distinct departure from his typical narratives of the illegal drug economy in which he participated to talk about symbols of the upper class, like fashion designer Tom Ford. While some criticized him for not keeping it real, artists I talked to said that he was in fact keeping it real because he now leads a significantly different lifestyle due to the money he has accumulated from being one of the top selling rap artists of all time. They said that these criticisms of his work come from the now faulty association of realness with black street culture. Scrollz clarified how an artist's narrative can change while still keeping it real:

People change over time. Like in high school, I used to do musicals. People from high school will probably say I'm not keeping it real because they remember me in high school. And I'm a different person now. I've been a recording artist since then. So, I've seen things. I've traveled, I've been around a lot of different things. So, I'm a different person, but I'm real to who I am. It might be different to you, but I'm real to who I am. (Interview, 4/24/14).

Artists consistently point out the importance of evolution in their musical styles, and Scrollz insists that this is also part of "keeping it real." Keeping it real allows for artist to express multiple, and even contradictory, standpoints and perhaps even requires it as the credo relies on artists being truthful and accurately representing their lives and lived experiences.

Flow-er Child told me that there may be times when an individual "keeps it too real." He described rapper Kevin Gates as an example. The rapper released a video where he admitted to continuing a sexual relationship with a cousin of his for two years after learning of their familial relationship. Flow-er Child believes that he should not have publicly talked about this relationship because it could damage his career and image. Rydah also said that artists should avoid "keeping it too real" on things like social media. He said that he has seen artists sharing

pictures of drugs and large amounts of money on sites like Instagram. “These cats are just asking to be investigated by the cops,” Rydah said, “If I sold drugs, you’d never know that I did” (Interview, 10/7/14). Rydah points out that if an individual “keeps it real” by sharing all aspects of their lives, they could find themselves in legal trouble because viewers of this material will take what they see at face value.²¹ These artists assert that it is not necessary to share all aspects of your life to keep it real.

As a cultural saying, however, my respondents believe that the phrase “keeping it real” has gone out of style. Ben described it as “outdated.” Virus asked, “do people really say that?” Chef said that the phrase “has taken a hit over time.” I do not believe that because the phrase is used less among younger members of hip-hop culture that it has entirely lost its significance. Like many other hip-hop slang and idiomatic expressions (e.g., “Scrub,” “Bling-Bling,” “Psyche,” etc.) “keeping it real” has been replaced by another popular phrase of “keep it 100.” This phrase also refers to honesty and strips away the loaded term of “realness” that my respondents push back against. The emphasis is now on honesty and integrity which accepts multiple race, class, and gendered positions, rather than “realness,” which often referred only to black masculinity found in the urban ghetto.

One Stop conveyed to me why keeping it real is so important in the music industry and in your personal life. She recognized that when an individual made a claim, s/he was liable to be asked to account for the claims made:

Whatever your life is, don’t pretend, for instance, that you are an arms dealer, Jeff. Then what if my boy comes here and he knows about guns? Right? Then we start having a conversation and you’re going to get a little tight. Conversation is

²¹ While I do not address this here, Kubrin and Nielson (2014) fully discuss the recent surge in rappers being imprisoned for threats they made in their lyrics and cases that have used rapper’s lyrics as evidence against them.

going to be a little tough. At some point it's going to get uncomfortable and it is going to be apparent...that you don't know what the fuck you are talking about and you aren't keeping it real...it's kind of like a vulnerable state. (Interview, 1/27/15)

One Stop presents the inevitability of being asked to account for your claims that comes with keeping it real. Others assume that you are keeping it real, and may therefore test you on your assertions. Aside from just feeling “uncomfortable” One Stop and others implied that violence could result from situations where artists do not keep it real.

Accountability in Pittsburgh's rap music scene and the related process of doing hip-hop relies on the principles of keeping it real. Artists are expected to be themselves, be truthful in what they say, and follow through on their actions. They also understand the larger societal expectations surrounding them and the potentials of being asked to account for their claims. In the remainder of this chapter I explore how the view of “keeping it real” presented in this section relates to interactions between members of Pittsburgh's rap music scene.

4.3 DOING HIP-HOP

Respondents often discussed the struggles of aspiring artists in terms of making themselves intelligible to a wider public. As Butler (1993, 2004) demonstrates, intelligibility requires individuals invoking or citing norms through dress, comportment, speech, and other ethnomethodological elements of interaction, impression management, and everyday activity. The particular norms that regulate the hip-hop community in Pittsburgh, and the process through which the aspiring artists, producers, and other individuals in the community cite them, I characterize as “doing hip-hop.” Hollander's (2013) notion of accountability helps analyze the

means through which individuals hold themselves and other accountable to normative expectations; I focus on the mechanisms of accountability in later sections.

In this section I analyze how the reiterative citation of hip-hop norms by community member in interaction reproduces norms to the extent that norms and behavior are mutually constitutive. For Butler, norms “are invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation” (2004: 52). Bodily practices and norms are both the result and terrain of a power struggle, actions in the context of a mechanism of regulation and a set of organized constraints (Butler 2004). Typically, to make oneself intelligible involves “keeping it real.” In order to keep it real, artists described how hip-hop subjects must effectively cite norms and “do hip-hop” across three dimensions.

First, respondents problematize the importance of many of the dimensions of authenticity described in McLeod (1999), indicating that previous understandings of the “proper” ways to do hip-hop are no longer valid. Second, respondents describe the importance of normative citation when demonstrating that one is, as one respondent put it, “in and of the culture [of hip-hop].” Third, respondents emphasize the importance of normative citation when they describe their efforts to make “original,” or innovative, music. All three of these dimensions demonstrate the power of regulated norms regarding hip-hop to produce a field of intelligible subjects. It is across these three dimensions that artists express the normative expectations surrounding how those in the rap music scene “do hip-hop.”

After analyzing these three dimensions required for individuals to successfully “do hip-hop,” I analyze the importance of interaction in these processes. Because of this focus on interactions, my findings regarding hip-hop “realness” and authenticity add nuance to previous literature on this topic. I find evidence that previous conceptions of realness should be amended

to reflect the more inclusive use of authenticity by rappers today. The fact that the definitions of “keeping it real” and what it means to be “hip-hop” are changing also creates a new conflict for aspiring artists in Pittsburgh. I conclude this section by describing the “hellbox” created by differing expectations between the music industry and artists regarding the norms of hip-hop as artists attempt to gain commercial acceptance.

4.3.1 “I did not have a Run DMC Rattle Above my Crib”

When describing what “hip-hop” means to them, my respondents often noted that historically typical notions of authenticity, like those described by McLeod (1999), are no longer necessary to successfully do hip-hop. The only one of McLeod’s dimensions²² that still strongly resonates in its entirety is the social-psychological dimension, evidenced by how respondents define “keeping it real” above. Artists believe that individuals value the “Golden Era” of hip-hop (late 1980s-Early 1990s) to a point where they ignore the evolution of the genre. Just because the music and culture has changed, my respondents argue, does not mean that it is any less authentic. While artists agree that they should understand rap music’s roots, which aligns them with McLeod’s cultural-semantic dimension, they do not feel they should value that era over their own. Artists also reject that there are any racial, class, or gendered necessities to be considered “hip-hop.” An understanding that hip-hop can incorporate multiple different identities has

²² In this section, I do not touch on McLeod’s (1999) political-economic dimension because the goals of my respondents to transition into the mainstream rap music industry, which I cover in Chapter 5, highlights their lack of concern over “selling out.”

replaced McLeod's notions of hip-hop authenticity being tied to impoverished, black masculinity with his racial, social-locational, and gender-sexual dimensions.²³

Chef described how nostalgia for the Golden Era of hip-hop is used by some as a measure of hip-hop authenticity. For him, his own position within hip-hop would be called into question according to that criteria:

I did not have a Run DMC rattle above my crib, a Rakim onesie, but does that mean I can't spit? That's the beauty of battle rapping. You think I'm not hip-hop? See me on the battle platform, how hip-hop is that? How Busy B, Kool Moe Dee is that? Shut up. [People insisting you must pay homage to the "classics"] to me is like the corniest thing that happens in hip-hop. (Interview, 5/13/15)

Chef is an internationally-known battle rapper,²⁴ which he feels shows that he is able to do hip-hop in an authentic manner despite having grown up in an environment where he did not frequently listen to what is considered "classic" hip-hop of the Golden Era. He references the artists that he does (Run DMC, Rakim, Busy B, Kool Moe Dee) because they are considered part of that era. He does this to show that anyone could have grown up listening to these artists or can drop their names into conversation in attempts to claim hip-hop authenticity, but not everyone

²³ It is important to note that while members of hip-hop culture in Pittsburgh express an open acceptance of people from multiple backgrounds, I observed this scene to be heteronormative and, at times, openly homophobic. For example, when asked about mainstream artists that they did not like, my respondents often brought up rapper Young Thug. While some cited his tendency to mumble his lyrics off-beat as their reasons for disliking the artist, others point out that he has been photographed wearing skirts, lipstick, and crop tops as their reasoning. They continued by question his sexuality because of his non-hegemonic display of masculinity and insinuating that this display of masculinity was not something that should be perpetuated because it welcomes homosexuality. Some went as far as citing The Bible as a source for the problems they feel are inherent in allowing homosexuality to perpetuate. While the heteronormative aspect of McLeod's (1999) gender-sexual dimension remains, the exclusion of women does not, in theory.

²⁴ Battle rap is a type of hip-hop performance where two artists are judged against one another. Artists deliver a mixture of freestyle (off the top of the head) verses and pre-written verses over three rounds with the goal of demonstrating an artist's superior skill at rapping while humiliating their opponent. Artists are judged by the crowd or designated judges. The events are similar to boxing matches in that they have cards with more established artists getting more prominent placements and performing later at the events. There are also titles and championships to be won.

can do what he does as a battle rapper. To Chef, doing hip-hop by performing is much more authentic than merely claiming knowledge of hip-hop.

Other artists assert that focusing on the Golden Era limits what can happen in hip-hop. Rydah, Chef, Alchemist and Virus all expressed disdain for those who evoke the Golden Era as a measurement of authenticity, with Virus saying:

There are a lot of guys that are like, “Golden Era, bruh, the Golden Era!” And you’re like, that already happened. We’re not riding around in cars without airbags because that was a “Golden Era.” No, we’re not doing that. Because we’ve evolved! (Interview 6/5/14)

Artists feel that their credo of being themselves that I describe above and their desire to be original that I describe below keeps them disconnected from the Golden Era. While they certainly respect hip-hop as it existed before them, they resent that their authenticity is being examined in relation to outdated standards. Virus’ metaphor is apt in that he asserts that a love for “classic” cars should still allow for car manufacturers to realize that changes must be made, in the case of airbags, for the sake of safety. That is, in hip-hop, a nostalgia for a bygone era should not force artists to ignore the music’s stylistic evolution.

Artists further problematize previous conceptions of authenticity by asserting that hip-hop culture has become more accepting of individuals from various backgrounds. Rydah, when asked to define what hip-hop means to him, said he believes that establishing criteria for what is authentic in hip-hop is a futile exercise:

There’s a nostalgia-type thing and there’s people that believe that only one thing is hip-hop, but that’s bullshit to me. I’ve gone to things that I’ve felt are more hip-hop than others, but for you to say that something is the standard for being hip-hop is terrible. It’s stupid. It’s not the case. (Interview, 10/7/14)

Rydah takes a somewhat contradictory position by saying that he has “felt” hip-hop being done more correctly in some places than others, but denies there are criteria for making that

judgement. Ben agreed with this point, saying, “I don’t think that you can define [hip-hop] just by looking at somebody” (Interview, 6/6/14). What these quotes indicate, and as will be echoed in other sections, is that acceptable ways of doing hip-hop are almost always found in interaction. Artists often refer to a “feeling” about a person, performance, space, etc. that makes it authentically hip-hop. The current hip-hop subject comes into being through the intersubjective practice of doing hip-hop, rather than fulfilling some established criteria.

Maverick, when asked if there are any necessary characteristics to be considered hip-hop, responded:

I think back then there was. Back then you had to have the baggy pants and the big gold chain. That was culturally how it was. Nowadays I think it’s not [like that]. You can get a guy from the streets [that is] all tatted up, but you could also get a little suburban white girl that went to private school. I think that hip-hop is what you make of it. It really is expressing yourself. It really is being able to tell a story from a perspective and being able to get your message across...From culture to money to skin tone, [hip-hop] can be anything. There is no home for hip-hop. It lives wherever you want it to live at. (Interview, 4/14/15)

Maverick believes that notions of authenticity were more monolithic in the Golden Era (“baggy pants and the big gold chain” is a clear reference to the style of that era) and that members of hip-hop culture can now come from various racial and class backgrounds. The view of acceptance within hip-hop culture is interesting when hip-hop’s artists are still mainly black men. Rubble made a similar statement to Maverick’s, saying that hip-hop culture is open to everyone, but record executives are more willing to sign those who fit the stereotype of the young, impoverished, black gangsta rapper. Maverick also says that hip-hop does not have a home, which is most likely a contrast to hip-hop’s previous home in “the streets” as referenced by McLeod’s (1999) social-locational dimension of authenticity. Artists from Pittsburgh zero in on

the notion of “the streets” to argue that previous notions of authenticity being tied to the urban ghetto are no longer relevant.

Virus made several jokes in our interview surrounding authenticity in hip-hop, all of which were attempting to criticize stereotypes surrounding hip-hop that he feels are unfairly used as ways to limited norms artists can cite while doing hip-hop. For example, he sarcastically pretended to be what he believes many would consider as an authentic member of hip-hop culture:

I’m a young black man, black man, I ain’t go to college. You know, I’m really just telling my story, I’m from the streets! [*Yells*] I’m from the streets! [*Changes to a serious tone*] Nobody wants to be from the fucking streets. That sounds terrible. Sounds terrible. We shouldn’t glorify that. (Interview, 6/5/14)

Virus recognizes that there is a common association by outsiders between rappers and “the streets” but rejects this as an appropriate hip-hop value. Likewise, he evokes race, gender, age, and education while mocking these stereotypes. While he understands that other artists feel the need to cite these norms, it is Virus’ belief that these characteristics should not be valued among hip-hop culture.

Actshawn and Rubble also criticized what they feel as a “misconception” of rap music that is often used by outsiders. The two artists insisted that previous identity- or demography-based criteria are no longer necessary and that anyone can be hip-hop. Actshawn explained when asked what hip-hop means to him:

There is a certain misconception among rap music that this is what it is. They will out it in front of you. Selling drugs, doing this, that, and the third, it’s flashy... [*Jokingly*] It’s bitches and clubs! [*All laugh*] No, I’m just playing... To me, it’s a culture. It’s a culture that everybody can be a part of. It don’t matter who you are, what race you are, nothing. There’s no filter on hip-hop. And I love where it is going right now because there is no filter. It’s a culture that everybody’s a part of. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Actshawn uses common hip-hop stereotypes to make a joke that hip-hop is about drug culture, the objectification of women, and conspicuous consumption. When I asked to whom the “they” in that quote is referring, Rubble said that it is “the industry, the tastemakers, the blogs” (Interview, 2/18/15). While Actshawn is citing these norms in jest, the reason he, Rubble, and I all laughed is because of our recognition that these are pervasive images in hip-hop culture and rap music today. The “joke,” then, is the disconnect between the monolithic portrayal of hip-hop realness the industry feels the consumer or members of hip-hop culture want, and what artists like Actshawn and Rubble really “love,” which is the openness and acceptance of hip-hop culture.

Artists in Pittsburgh’s rap music scene reject the idea that past measures of authenticity are still relevant today. Their responses indicate that many of the dimensions of authenticity outlined by McLeod (1999) have at least partially changed, if not rejected completely. However, they do so while understanding that those who may be evaluating their performances still hold these beliefs. These changing views on authenticity, combined with the next two characteristics of doing hip-hop, help outline the complex set of interactions and expectations that create the “hellbox” for artists as they try to make themselves intelligible in the music industry.

4.3.2 “To be Hip-Hop is to be in and of the Culture”

Scrollz described the distinction between someone “about that shit,” or someone doing hip-hop, as opposed to someone who may just be a “fan.” He points out that “people, they’ll just follow cues, like, hip-hop cues. Your favorite artist is wearing a bandana, so you wear a bandana. That makes you a fan of hip-hop...but you’re not one of the leaders of what you are trying to do.” He

also described some people being “halfway in and halfway out because they wanna fit something that they think is hip-hop, but it’s not that classic thing” (Scrollz, Interview, 4/24/14). Scrollz and others situated ideas like this in discussions of the idea of “keeping it real.” Individuals “keep it real,” according to those interviewed, by devoting themselves completely to their normative expressions of hip-hop and further reveal how doing hip-hop is accomplished through interaction.

Scrollz and others believe that to do hip-hop is to completely immerse yourself in hip-hop culture and practices. As he indicated above, this goes beyond simply enjoying or consuming the culture, rather, many respondents indicate that doing hip-hop is a “lifestyle.” Scrollz expanded:

To be hip-hop is to be in and of the culture. To be in and of something that’s unique, that has its own style, that has its own branding, has its own voice. It has its own thing...People like it, but not everyone lives it. So, if you are in and of hip-hop, you’re hip-hop. Like, I feel that I’m hip-hop. I feel like my crew is hip-hop even though my friends have corporate jobs, but they live in and of the culture. After they clock out, it’s all about the culture. That’s just what it is. (Interview, 4/24/14)

Scrollz creates a distinction again between those who “like” the culture and those who “live” the culture to show that hip-hop authenticity is not merely performed, but is a part of an individual’s identity. Although members of his crew may work jobs that are not associated with hip-hop culture, the remainder of their time is devoted to participating in the culture. In fact, through our group text message I observed that the members of his “crew” to whom he is referring, Justin and Ben, would often participate in booking shows, giving Scrollz feedback on new music, and other activities related to their hip-hop collective while at work.

Other rappers, like Miz Taken, also characterize hip-hop as a “way of life.” She described the fact that she “puts on hip-hop shows,” “participates in street culture,” and “appreciates things like graffiti art and different elements that make up hip-hop traditionally” as examples of how

she is in and of hip-hop culture (Interview, 5/11/15). While the activities in which Miz Taken participates have a dubious connection to hip-hop authenticity as discussed in the previous section, her insistence that to do hip-hop involves creating a whole way of life is consistent with the larger point of that section. She is specifying how her orientation toward hip-hop as a norm that shapes her interactions with the world is the important aspect of her ability to do hip-hop correctly. In other words, it is not the activities that she does that makes her hip-hop, rather it is the fact that she “tries to hold down something tangible for Pittsburgh hip-hop in everything that I do” that makes her hip-hop. Wheels had a similar outlook: “I would say that hip-hop is a lifestyle. It’s a lifestyle. It’s a culture. It’s something that you live. It’s not something that you listen to, it’s something that you live” (Interview, 10/28/14). Those who do hip-hop do so completely in all aspects of their lives. This separates them from a causal listener or worse, a poseur.

Aspiring rappers describe doing hip-hop in a way that emphasizes the learned nature of cultural practices. Individuals need to learn how to be “in and of” the culture and develop a set of practices so that hip-hop shapes all that they do. Actshawn went so far as asserting that “It’s like a second language to me. That’s all [he and Rubble] talk about,” to which Rubble gave the affirmative, “Real talk” (Interview, 2/18/15). Wheels made a similar statement when he said that hip-hop “has to be something that you respect, something you speak. There’s so many elements of hip-hop. It’s a language. [There is a] certain mind frame that comes with it” (Interview, 10/28/15). As these artists indicate here and as I will elaborate on later, hip-hop is a norm, or a “mind frame” to which hip-hop members are oriented. This orientation gives them the proper “language” to fluently speak to others in the culture.

4.3.3 “Be Original”

A third dimension comes through when respondents discuss their attempts to stand out as unique artists. As individuals attempt to make themselves legible in the rap music industry, they engage in strategic citation of norms that render them intelligible. At the same time, imperfect citation alters the norm to include their deviations. Many artists discuss their desire to “push the genre,” or engage in practices not typically found in hip-hop. Edgy, legible-yet-innovative displays for them are at the heart of “keeping it real,” which they describe as honestly representing themselves. However, they believe that these expressions are not strictly voluntary and individuals must select certain acceptable expressions. Those attempting to materialize as individuals doing hip-hop in this manner highlight the process that Butler (1993) describes as a site “in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law” (2).

Virus describes his frustration with the Pittsburgh music scene as stemming from the reliance of artists on cues from mainstream hip-hop. “Ain’t nobody really doing shit,” Virus opined, “It’s like why are you doing this? I’ve already heard this song. What about all the weird stuff, the stuff that doesn’t sound like anyone else’s music? That could sound like *your* music” (Interview, 6/5/14). His quarrel is with artists asking him to construct beats for them that are in a style similar to songs on radio airplay. His sense that no one is “really doing shit” focuses on the lack of authenticity and innovation. Earlier in that interview, Virus called these hypothetical individuals “copycats” and lamented that “everyone is a Xerox of a copy” highlighting the importance of individuality and originality in hip-hop and echoes Butler’s (1993) claim about citation with a lack of an authentic original.

However, upon explaining what he meant by “really doing things,” Virus indicated that pure opposition to normative standards is not the desired alternative. For him, people who are “really doing things” are those who are “really pushing boundaries...so, being original, but, make sure it’s peppered with enough references so that it’s not completely alien so people can get down to it at least” (Virus, Interview, 6/5/14). The process he describes is one that indicates the importance of normative citation. Should an artist want to do hip-hop, they must make sure they are both working within regulated norms so that it is recognizable as being within the genre, but not so much that it is mere replication.

When I asked why being original is important, Virus posed this hypothetical in response: “Imagine if car companies were like that. Yo, we’re going to make a car like the last Buick that came out. What? Yeah, exactly like it. We gonna call it, ‘Not a Buick’” (Interview, 6/5/14). Virus indicates that adhering to the previous standards of hip-hop, identified by those in McLeod’s (1999) study as being crucial in establishing authenticity, stifles the creativity of artists. Artists then attempt to pass off the same product, or way of doing hip-hop, that is thinly veiled as something new.

Other artists present the lack of originality in hip-hop as a sign that some individuals in the industry do not keep it real. When asked about things that he disliked about rap music, Wheels said, “Right now, the production. I wish every beat didn’t sound the same” (Interview, 10/28/15). He further expanded on this point by describing rappers that he doesn’t like saying, “I think that [they will] just do whatever for the money. It’s not necessarily a genuine expression of the art, it’s more of a business decision. That’s not real to me” (Interview, 10/28/15). While most artists desire to enter the mainstream rap music industry, they want to do so based on originality and not by attempting to cash in on the latest trend thereby “selling out.” McLeod (1999) puts

forth a dichotomy in which “real” is associated with the underground rap music industry and “fake” is associated with the mainstream rap music industry. My respondents believe that one may participate in the mainstream rap music industry, but they must do so on his/her own terms. This creates a paradox for many artists by adding to the feelings surrounding the “hellbox” I discuss below because they often realize that their desire for originality may not coincide with the most plausible pathway to achieving a lucrative recording contract in the mainstream rap music industry.

Kerve provided an interesting discussion of originality in hip-hop in relation to norm citation:

Everyone feels that because [something] works for someone else, it’s going to work for them. They are too trendy. People try to follow waves and trends instead of making their own lane. Because, you know every artist that ever started out, any legendary artist, you feel like you get some comparison these days. Oh, you sound like Biggie [rapper The Notorious B.I.G.]. You sound like Nas. Those are artists that paved their own lanes. I feel like artists nowadays are not paving their own lanes in music. The music is sounding the same. I feel like originality needs to come back to the game (Interview, 6/13/15).

Kerve asserts that artists should cite previously successful rappers, but not by attempting to emulate their style. Rather, rappers today should cite the norm of originality that allowed those artists to be successful. Like Virus said above, the most laudable music is the music that sounds original to the person making it. He and Kerve point out that individuals are not doing hip-hop correctly when they neglect the importance of being original.

Kerve and others assert that not only is it important to be original to be seen as authentic in hip-hop, it is necessary to advance your career. Flow-er Child said that “you have to be innovative” (Interview, 2/11/15) to be successful and Maverick elaborated on that point:

So, to me, if you really want this to be your career, you want people to take you seriously, everybody is looking for the new thing. So, if you can always give them something new, something original, they'll never get bored. (Interview, 4/14/15)

Maverick sums up the importance of originality in hip-hop on two fronts. First, being original is a way to get others to “take you seriously,” thereby achieving a goal of being considered authentic in hip-hop. Second, it allows artists to also hit on the fans’ and industry’s desires for “the new thing,” which will allow artists’ careers to flourish.

4.3.4 “I Don’t Like the Way They Smell”

Hip-hop produces a common standard that relies on various cues to demonstrate that one is doing hip-hop rather than just consuming it. The generic quality of norms creates a complex set of interactions through which individuals do not seek to fulfill or monitor certain criteria; rather they seek proper (that is, appropriately and normatively organized and recognizable) connections. As one artist, Scrollz, put it, identifying someone who does hip-hop is “just, like, something you know...it’s like the way you walk, talk, even like dressing has become way different in hip-hop. But you can tell when somebody kind of connects with it” (Interview, 4/24/14). Rather than relying on *what* an individual says or does, he contends that it is important *how* the individual interacts and gives cues. For Scrollz, trying to follow hip-hop cues does not make a “real” intelligible hip-hop subject. Scrollz’ comments show how successfully doing hip-hop occurs when the cues demonstrated by a person are “proper” citations of the norm, and when this citation is perceived as “natural.”

I observed this process take place during a performance of an 18-year-old rapper, Ruler. As he came to the stage, Ruler was dressed in a large, yellow FUBU jersey, with small round

sunglasses and his hair styled in mini dreadlocks that conjured an image of the 90s hip-hop aesthetic. After his performance, the emcee of the event pointed out his skeptical response to a young rapper styled in fashions popular before he was born but added, “Ruler really showed you all how this hip-hop thing is done. He came up here wearing that FUBU and really spit” (Field Notes, 10/4/2014). For this artist to gain the praise of the crowd, and the emcee, he needed to demonstrate his familiarity and comfort with, and commitment to conforming to, the regulatory norms that reproduce the boundaries of hip-hop. At the same time, his successfully citing them renders him legible and certifies that he is, indeed, “doing hip-hop.” Praise from the emcee makes Ruler’s performance and strategies of impression management performative in the grammatical sense Butler theorizes: To the extent that his “utterances” (which include dress, posture, content and style of performance, etc.) successfully cite the relevant regulatory norms, Ruler is intelligible as “doing hip-hop.” Ruler’s ability to do hip-hop was called into being through the surveillance of the emcee and the crowd and relied on the sum of his performance rather than its constituent parts in precisely the manner Scrollz described above.

Ruler calls attention to the interactions involved in demonstrating this sort of hip-hop authenticity. His ability to couple visual cues with his musical performance placed him in and of the culture and allowed him to successfully do hip-hop. Most importantly, his ability to do hip-hop relied on the normativity that resulted from the interaction between Ruler, the crowd, and the emcee. For one manager, this is the crux of authenticity in hip-hop:

You go to other shows, especially underground shows [and] everybody in the crowd is a rapper. Especially if it’s a local guy, everyone’s looking at that guy on stage and saying, “Fuck that guy, I should be on that stage.” And they are way too cool to get into that guy’s music. It could be the best music or the best live show that they’ve seen, and no way they are going to get into it. So, there’s a local rapper up there doing his thing, struggling for crowd interaction. For me, [the “cool” audience response is] not authentic hip-hop. For me, authentic hip-hop is

appreciating the art form, appreciating people that are good at it, no matter who you are, even if you are a rapper yourself. (Ben, Interview, 6/6/14)

For Ben, hip-hop authenticity is found not only in Ruler's successful hip-hop performance, but also in the social interaction between himself, the crowd (which is the object of his criticism in the above quote), and the emcee. It is important to note that the horizontal hostility described in the previous chapters creates an interaction between the artist on stage and the artists in the crowd that Ben feels is inauthentic. Audience members should not suppress their enjoyment of the performance just because they wish it were them on stage. Ben sees this "cool pose" by the audience as inauthentic because it is not an honest representation of their enjoyment of the performance. Ben sets up an interesting dynamic between the "authentic" appreciators of the music in the crowd and the "inauthentic" members of the crowd often referred to as "haters" (a concept I fully analyze below).

It is important for members of hip-hop culture to present themselves as authentic hip-hop subjects in a way that is believable by anyone that may evaluate them. The artists I observed claim having certain qualities (e.g., dress, speech, etc.) or coming from a certain background is not a short cut to hip-hop authenticity; those within the culture can easily spot someone who is not "real." Miz Taken described her ability to identify those who are not real in hip-hop saying that, "It's a sixth sense. It is! I don't know, I just say that I don't like the way they smell...I'm just saying that it is a feeling I get. There's not really a love for [hip-hop] with that person" (Interview, 5/11/15). Miz Taken agrees with others, saying that hip-hop authenticity comes through in interactions. Those who advocate for the importance of interaction in evaluating how someone does hip-hop, like Miz Taken, Scrollz, and Ben, assert themselves as authentic in this space. They rely on the popular hip-hop adage of "real recognize real," or, in other words,

because they are authentic themselves, they are able to identify who can and cannot do hip-hop correctly.

Artists tie this ability to “get a sense” of whether or not someone does hip-hop correctly to their emphasis on being yourself when keeping it real. That is, one can sense when an individual does hip-hop in a way that is inconsistent to what others perceived as their lived experiences. Taj elaborated on this when he defined “keeping it real”:

Keeping it real just [is something] you can tell. The way I walk, the way I talk, I’m a black dude. If I say that I am from a mostly white school or something, you could probably hear that. If I say that I never had a gun, I didn’t need to, you’d believe that. But, if I say that I used to be the leader of the Bloods and that my brother did this, it might be true, but you might not feel it because I don’t come off like that. So, you need to come off a way that your personality is real. (Interview, 5/16/15)

Like others, Taj points out markers that were traditionally associated with hip-hop authenticity to show their lack of importance in and of themselves. He references his upbringing in a largely white suburb where he was one of a handful of students of color and the fact that he never participated in “street” or gang culture. Taken alone, Taj may be seen as inauthentic, but because he represents himself truthfully, he keeps it real. He emphasizes the point that if he were being disingenuous about his background, falsely claiming he was a gang leader, one would be able to “feel it” in how he represented himself within hip-hop.

Taj also leaves the door open for performances of hip-hop that may not accurately represent artists’ lived experience still be considered “real.” Virus explained how artists in the mainstream rap music industry on this contradiction:

Drake is a great example of that. Drake is really intelligent...he comes out and does a rap thing, [imitates Drake] “I’m so hard, my chain, me and [Lil Wayne] out here. I’m so handsome. I’m so thugged out. I lift weights, ni**a. [Growls]” And

you're like, man, you were on *Degrassi!* Wheelchair Jimmy.²⁵ But that doesn't matter because he sells it to you. And you buy it. (Interview, 6/5/14)

Taj and Virus both grapple with the fact that an artist's lived experiences do not have to match what they discuss in their music, but the artist needs to "sell it" as if it does. Songs do not have to be first person, autobiographical, or categorically (i.e., race, sex category, etc.) consonant. There are differences between "representing" ideas or experiences in art and "pretending" those ideas or experiences are your own. Taj's inability to present himself as a gang leader, even if "it might be true," and Drake's ability to "sell" the idea that he is "thugged out" despite portraying a wealthy high school basketball player on a television series of teens, highlight the complex relationship between hip-hop and realness. To these artists, it is less important that your lived experiences match what you cover in your music and more important that you "do hip-hop" in a way that is believable.

Members of hip-hop culture are often forced into contradictory stances when talking about authenticity and hip-hop, especially when they analyze authenticity in relation to their goals of becoming famous in the mainstream rap music industry. At one point, they can discuss how previous norms related to authenticity do not matter in hip-hop culture, while also understanding that they will be measured by those norms as they try to advance their careers. They understand that they need to be original in order to be successful, but they also need to mimic previously successful music styles. They insist that individuals cannot "fake" being "in and of" hip-hop culture, but can point out individuals who have done so. In the next section, I analyze how these contradictions that stem from aspiring artists' contradictory desires create a

²⁵ This is a reference to Drake's role as Jimmy Brooks on the Canadian teen drama *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. The character, once a basketball star, is confined to a wheelchair after being shot in the back and is featured in over 100 episodes of the show.

“hellbox.” Within that “hellbox,” artists must learn how to balance their desire for keeping it real (or, representing themselves truthfully), and their understanding of the norm citation that is necessary for them to succeed in the commercial industry.

4.3.5 “We’re in this Self-Made Hellbox”

The problems artists like Virus have citing hip-hop norms are self-perpetuating. While he wishes to move beyond the reproduction of stereotypes, he realizes that these stereotypes make rappers reproducing them instantly legible. “We’re in this self-made hellbox,” Virus said, meaning that artists often rely on these harmful stereotypes to make themselves intelligible to audiences and record executives because it is a way to gain success. He further indicated that outdated and stereotypical associations with “realness” create this “hellbox.” He feels that now “keeping it real” is just an honest representation of oneself, but has been “misconstrued.” He dropped into a deep voice register and mocked those conceptions saying, “We’re real, we’re raw, we’re from the streets! [Growls, barks] Crack, crack, crack. Blood. Guns. Pussy. Murder. Liquor store. Black and Milds. That’s real, dawg” (Virus, Interview, 6/5/14). Here, Virus imitates a stereotypical rapper to criticize stereotypes perpetuated in the rap music industry²⁶ because it overshadows those relying on an expression of realness that is based on honesty and being oneself. Virus points out that some record companies, artists, and consumers have orientations toward hip-hop that valorize stereotypical representations of black masculinity, but artists and their peers typically do not want to be characterized that way. In addition, he believes that the standards of those within hip-hop culture also discourage edgy orientations. Even though artists value being

²⁶ Here Virus was specifically citing images of black masculinity associated with gangsta rap (see Kubrin 2005).

original and portraying themselves truthfully, they understand that common conceptions of hip-hop realness involves those stereotypes listed by Virus.

Other artists debate Virus' point that the "hellbox" is "self-made," claiming that the confining position artists find themselves in originates from the music industry. The rap music industry, they argue, has been corrupted by capitalistic values; they invoke a version of Adorno's (1991) culture industry thesis. Alchemist asserted that the "hellbox" is the product of record industries' attempts to appeal to what he sees as the lowest common denominator:

If you asked a 45-year-old housemother what she thinks is hip-hop, what do you think she would say? And what does that say about how the industry is pushing the culture? They're not doing what is right for the culture, they are doing what is right for money. (Interview, 9/12/14)

Alchemist references what he believes to be someone with little, if any, knowledge of rap music, a 45-year-old housewife. This is to assert that popular rap music is so monolithic and predictable that even a novice has a working definition of what is normative in hip-hop. It is no wonder that an aspiring artist would make music that is stereotypical. This stereotyped image is so pervasive, Alchemist contends, that artists see it as the most reliable way to receive financial rewards from the music industry.

Aubrey Loud criticized the music industry for promoting only music that perpetuates stereotypes of young, black men in the vein of gangsta rap:

I think that [the record industry] makes [talking about street culture] seem like it's the cool thing to do and corporate America has packaged that and fed it to everyone. And I think that's inherently disheartening and wrong. It's not the only hip-hop being made. (Interview, 10/16/14)

Aubrey Loud's point is significant on two fronts. First, she points out that the corporate music industry is responsible for limiting the variation of expression in rap music or creating the "hellbox." Second, elsewhere she indicated that the other hip-hop being made comes from those

who do not share the same identities of black male stereotypes, namely women. So, while black men may begrudgingly reproduce stereotypes of gangsta rappers, they at least have an “acceptable” norm to cite. Aubrey Loud points out that women’s position in hip-hop is almost never as the MC.

Aubrey Loud explained that she often dresses provocatively in videos and performances because, “sex sells” (Interview, 10/16/14). A self-described feminist, Loud says she struggles with the male gaze of the rap music industry, but feels she can use it to her advantage. She points out that while she does not condone the sexual objectification of women in hip-hop, she will still be appearing “almost completely naked” in her new music video, a move she admitted may be seen as hypocritical therefore not “real”. Like Virus, Loud asserts that artists’ slavish reproduction of stereotypes has less to do with artists’ desires to perpetuate these images and more with their perceptions of proper ways to do hip-hop correctly and make themselves legible. Further, these citations can be used as sites where individuals can contest these stereotypes. For Loud, this involves using the male gaze within hip-hop to send a message of female empowerment. She feels, in a sense, hopeless and forced to draw on the position typical of women in rap music videos, that of the “video vixen,” “eye candy,” or “ho” (Rose 2008), in order to make herself legible within hip-hop.

Another artist, Alchemist, described these struggles as a “trap” of the rap music industry. One practice that he and other artists see coming out of this contradiction is something that they term an “industry song.” He described an “industry song” as a song that sounds like things on the radio making the artist intelligible to the audience and potential record executives. T-1000 also described this when he told me that artists need to “feed the beast” in order to succeed:

J: When you said, “Feed the beast,” what does that mean?

T: I hate making pop songs. There is nothing I despise more. But, every once in a while you must “feed the beast.” So, you'll step outside your comfort zone and do something that you don't like to do. So, if you're signed to a label, you're feeding the beast by making a pop song. Where you'll say, “I'll give you this [in order to] put out the rest of my project the way that I want to. I'll give you something to market and promote, even though I hate this song...so that I can make the rest of my project the way I want to. (Interview 3/29/15)

Artists engage in practices they do not feel accurately represents them, thereby violating their codes of realness describe above as a means to an end. They do so instrumentally, in a bargain²⁷ for publicity, distribution support, and other tradeoffs.

Alchemist says he makes this strategic decision, “because I know that if enough people hear that song, the fun shit, they're going to dive deeper and some of those people are going to respect the more serious shit I put out” (Alchemist, Interview, 9/17/14). He explained that the “serious shit” corresponds with a “real” representation of himself and is what he would like to be known for as a rapper. However, he feels that he needs to cite more “fun shit” in order for him to be consumed in his intended way. Aspiring artists feel that it is necessary to work within the boundaries they perceive in hip-hop in order to transition into the mainstream industry as Alchemist further explained:

There is a science behind music people receive well. Like I said, 16 bar [verse], 8 bar hook. And I do other shit too, but, I'm going to have to kind of play my position within that until I don't have to anymore. I'm going to use that format until I get on. Once you get on, you can do whatever you want. (Interview, 9/12/14)

Artists like Alchemist and T-1000 realize that they must sacrifice a portion of their individuality and “realness” by doing hip-hop in a way that is formulaic. After they successfully “feed the beast” by following the normative expectations of hip-hop artists, they believe they will achieve

²⁷ See Henson and Rogers (2001) on “hegemonic bargains”

autonomy in their creative decisions. This may be where artists' animosity toward mainstream rappers who they feel are not "keeping it real" lies. They believe that when they achieve the mainstream success of other artists, they will no longer imitate trends, but rather they will push the boundaries and make music that is authentically "theirs." They harbor a certain amount of resentment for those who continue "feeding the beast" rather than just using the formula for a hip-hop hit as a means to an end.

A major part of the "hellbox" that artists face is that they feel they must sacrifice their values associated with "keeping it real" to be successful in the music industry. Rubble struggled with the realization that "keeping it real" might not be the best strategy for an aspiring artist:

And to be honest, the people that be keeping it real the most is the music that doesn't sell! I remember that at first before J. Cole got popular, people were like, "He's boring. He talks about school loans. He talks about what I go through. Who wants to hear about that?" I'm not trying to live in a fantasy all the time...music should be realistic. [J. Cole] is a nationally known artist that still talks about common man issues because he is living them. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Aspiring artists are forced into a position where their values of artistic integrity and "realness" do not align with what their potential audience is willing to buy. They must then choose between "keeping it real" and maximizing the opportunity for them to receive financial compensation for their music. Despite the now commercially successful J. Cole's ability to talk about "common man issues," to achieve commercial success with integrity is seen as the exception not the rule. Rubble believes that fans would rather "live in a fantasy," presumably through representations of ghetto culture, than hear music that relates to their experiences.

Rubble here, and Alchemist and Aubrey Loud above, describe another force that creates the "hellbox" for artists. Not only do artists have to balance audiences' expectations of what hip-hop is to them and how that relates to their own understandings of "keeping it real," they also

have to confront an industry that is run and consumed predominantly by white males (Rose 2008). In this sense, artists describe their experiences with the “hellbox” in a manner similar to W.E.B. Du Bois’ (2005) concept of “double consciousness.” Du Bois (2005) describes the “double consciousness” of black Americans as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (7). Aspiring artists must continuously look at themselves through the eyes of those who may offer them a record deal or purchase their music. Scrollz described this by saying, “There’s just so much more involved with becoming yourself in the midst of becoming what everyone wants you to be...and that’s a constant battle with any artist” (Interview, 4/24/14). Artists struggle with their reluctance to reproduce stereotypical images in their music, but understand that they are dealing with an industry and consumer base that financially rewards them. The white male gaze that fetishizes the “gangsta-pimp-ho trinity” (Rose 2008) make the boundaries of the “hellbox” even more apparent for artists.

With this sort of hip-hop double consciousness, rappers may never fully achieve their desires of being “truly themselves” in their music and performance because they are always trying to gauge the expectations of others. Miz Taken described how a double consciousness helped her learn how to perform live:

It took me awhile. You have to remind yourself, “Okay, when I get up there, people want to see me do it this way, so I can’t be nervous because I have to give them what they want. I have to put on my [Miz Taken] costume, I can’t be [Kim]. (Interview, 5/11/15)

Miz Taken feels that her identity as Kim (her given name) is not compatible with being a successful performer. She said she is “naturally introverted,” but she cannot be that as Miz Taken because the audience will not enjoy that. She says that she would be much happier “just sipping

her drink in the corner,” but her desires to be a successful rapper require that she have an engaging live act.

Kerve described an essential part of his creative process as what he calls “becoming a fan again” so that he can make a song that is more likely to be successful: “It’s all about becoming a fan again. You have to put yourself in a spectator feeling. You have to see what people are feeling” (Interview, 6/13/15). Kerve describes a strategy that differs from just “keeping it real” and presenting what an artist feels is music unique to them. He relies on Virus’ previous point of making sure that his new music is still “peppered with references” to current music. Swiss also alluded to the double consciousness required for success in the music industry:

I think that sometimes an artist’s ego only lets them see who they are in their mind. They don’t see how people see them. I need to be able to see how you see me. That is the most important thing...Someone needs to put their foot down and tell them, “No. This is what you think you look like. This is actually what you’re seen as. How can you just get your music shifted a little bit into that role of what you’re seen as?”...So just make it more palatable. (Interview, 10/22/14).

Artists are willing and feel they are required to abandon their notions of “keeping it real” in order to be what others may want them to be in order to be successful in the rap music industry. They engage in conflicts with themselves and others over trying to “be themselves” while still adhering to the normative expectations placed on them. In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze how this creates a system of accountability that relies on artists taking into account others’ orientations, assessments, and enforcements of what hip-hop as well as their own as they try to make themselves legible in hip-hop culture. This system of accountability helps explain why hip-hop music and performance takes the shape that it does.

My goal in this section has been to analyze some of the basic social dynamics that influence and are influenced by the regulated norm as individuals do hip-hop, or, engage in hip-

hop performativity. This indicates the productive effect of power involved in the normative expectations related to hip-hop. Individuals must highlight their ability to do hip-hop in a way recognizably congruent with the hip-hop norm, emphasizing their originality, while simultaneously drawing on stereotypes they see as harmful. To effectively produce themselves as hip-hop subjects, individuals struggle with these varying expectations. These expectations are at the base of, and are further complicated by, the system of accountability that is the subject of the next section.

4.4 ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE PITTSBURGH UNDERGROUND

By examining how hip-hop is “done,” as I have above, I have shown how artists describe how interaction produces a set of intelligible hip-hop subjects. Through proper norm citation, aspiring artists can be deemed “real.” In this section, I demonstrate how accountability shapes the interactions of aspiring artists. Aspiring artists’ orientations toward the norm and their assessments and enforcements of themselves and others regarding this norm constitute expectations related to “doing hip-hop.” In what follows, I analyze examples of these orientations, assessments, and enforcements to show the social dynamics of power at work in this process. I also show how accountability constrains on the possible practices and subjectivities found in hip-hop.

4.4.1 Orientations

Artists described their personal orientations toward hip-hop as well as what they perceive to be the orientations of fans and the record industry. Part of becoming an artist involves developing an understanding of what hip-hop is and how they should act. Virus said that he remembered a time when “it all clicked” for him and his “personal mantra started to form.” His mantra, that “hip-hop can be a springboard for anything,” or that those in hip-hop can create diverse songs and performances, shapes how he evaluates himself and others (Interview, 6/5/14). This orientation leads him to always challenge himself creatively by making music that is “different” from his previous music and the music of others. He also feels entitled to admonish those he believes are not attempting to do the same. As individuals “do hip-hop” they develop their orientations towards what they and others feel are hip-hop norms.

4.4.1.1 “Who Are You and What Do You Stand For?”

Prof-a-see believes that establishing and understanding your orientation toward hip-hop is an essential part of beginning a career in hip-hop. When asked what advice he would give to new artists, he explained:

The first question I ask artists is “Who are you and what do you stand for?” To me, if you can’t answer that, then you are not ready. That’s going to be the definitive point to where your art comes from. If you can be definitive in that, and bring your art in that...then you’re not going to be another dude surrounded by a hundred dudes in a basement somewhere making the same fucking video. (Interview, 1/27/15).

Prof-a-see acts on his belief that in order to “keep it real” in hip-hop, an artist has to be themselves. In order to do that, the artist must understand who they are and orient their attitudes and actions toward expressing that honestly. He points out that embracing your individuality will

help you stand apart from other artists and keep you from mimicking other artists. Taj, however, admits that rap music gave him “a direction on how I should dress, look, and act” (Interview, 5/16/15). Even though artists value individuality and creativity, they admit that they need an understanding of cultural norms of hip-hop as well.

As artists develop orientations toward hip-hop, they are doing so under constant surveillance by others. While artists strive to “keep it real” by having their rapper persona match salient aspects of their identity, aspiring artists still try to separate the two. Actshawn described this struggle:

I forgot how to live at one point! I really forgot how to live at one point because I was so consumed with all of the moves being made. It got to a point where it was like having two personalities. You got your artist, [Actshawn] and [Shawn]...All my people know me as [Shawn], but then other people will be like, “Yo, that’s [Actshawn]!” (Interview, 2/18/15).

Just as other artists describe a double consciousness they have, Actshawn asserts that his orientations toward doing hip-hop led him to focus on the career “moves” being made by others to the extent that his personal identity was completely subsumed by his rapper identity. In other words, he was so strongly oriented toward doing hip-hop that he “forgot” about other aspects of his identity.

4.4.1.2 “I’m Thinking About Who is Going to Hear This”

The idea that artists feel it necessary to understand how they are viewed by others plays a large role in the orientations of rappers. For example, Alchemist sought a name change after he realized that his previous name (a pun involving his given name and an illicit drug) would be undesirable for portions of his desired audience. He admitted that some might be oriented toward hip-hop in a way where the drug reference in his name would limit him to being a “novelty act”;

other artists might say, “he must suck” because of that name (Interview, 9/12/14). Likewise, he felt that parents might not condone the purchasing of his music by their children because of their understanding the drug reference in his name as being potentially harmful for their children. To complicate this process further, the artist wished to have a portion of his actual name in his stage name because his orientation toward “keeping it real” involved him representing his “real” life, of which his name was a symbol. This artist felt accountable to other artists, potential consumers of his music, and his notions of “keeping it real” as he struggled with finding a new stage name.

Alchemist provided another example of how the perceived expectations of others shape how rappers act and what they produce. He recently changed his orientation toward his music:

I just got national exposure for the first time, not even a week ago and it’s already affecting me. Now that I know that I have that backing, I’m approaching the songs differently...When I’m making a song, I’m thinking about who is going to hear this when I first release it. My friends are going to hear it. My immediate fanbase is going to hear it. My parents are going to hear it...And now it’s different. It’s like fuck my immediate fanbase, I love them...I don’t mean it like that. I just mean to say, okay, now it’s time to take it a step further and make my voice heard on a broader scale. (Interview, 9/12/14).

Alchemist has changed his orientations from thinking about his friends, family, and immediate fanbase when making a song to thinking about a wider audience. Alchemist said he is dismissive of his “immediate fanbase” (i.e., his fans in Pittsburgh) because he feels he has earned their respect and he “knows they are going to like [whatever music he makes] because they like [him].” His goal to break into the mainstream had him trying to find what was “right for the people that will be consuming it” while also adhering to his personal credo of keeping it real (Interview, 9/12/14).

Rydah described how he uses fans' orientations toward hip-hop to his advantage when making music. When I asked what he does not like about rap music, he told me that he does not like the stereotypes surrounding it. He repurposes those stereotypes in his songs:

I have a song called "Kill." Now, if you see a rapper has a song called, "Kill," what are you going to think? They are talking about shooting everybody. But, the song wasn't about that. The song was about just being driven to be the best...What I like to do is because I'm from an area like this,²⁸ people expect me to make trap music, thug music, hood music. So, what I do is I find production [i.e., beats] that those people like, or find some of their lingo, but switch it into my way. (Interview, 10/7/14).

Rydah is able to keep it real and stay true to himself while citing norms of hip-hop culture. This is most certainly what Virus meant when he described "peppering" songs with references. Rydah uses the common tropes in hip-hop to draw the audience in and expose them to his music. He feels that this repurposing allows him to escape the trap of being inauthentic by merely reproducing rap stereotypes. Rydah is still exploiting tropes to "hook" listeners and engaging in wordplay that adds to his originality and legibility.

Artists also describe how their perception of the expectations of the music industry shapes their orientations toward how they do hip-hop. Some artists, Cookie for instance, attempt to market themselves in a way that is compatible with certain brands. He said that he purposely makes music that would go well on a cable network he admires with goal of having his music

²⁸ The "area" to which Rydah is referring is McKeesport, PA, a deindustrialized, racially segregated township to Pittsburgh's southeast. He continued that quote with an anecdote that adds a further wrinkle to the expectations placed on artists. He said: "When I went to college and I told somebody I was from McKeesport, I literally saw a girl clutch her purse and walk away from me because they were like, 'Oh you're from McKeesport.' Where this one girl was like, 'Oh, you're from McKeesport, I lock my windows when I ride through there.' I was like, it's really not that bad. We have crime out here. But it's because you're involved in certain things. It's not random crime out here. You're not going to get shot at because we see you standing on a street corner out of nowhere. That doesn't happen. So, I try to change the misconception because I get tired of being judged when I go to places and they see my ID and they see I'm from, 'McKeesport, oh, you must sell drugs.' I was working in Greensburg and this lady said, 'There's a lot of people up here from McKeesport up here selling drugs.' I was like, that's not what I'm here for. I'm working, I'm going to school."

played on that network and using that as a pathway to stardom. Others are fortunate enough to receive sponsorships and must take those brands into consideration as they make their music.

Maverick described his experiences:

I need to brand myself as a human being and market myself and find out what everybody wants. And that goes for every sponsor. Subway is a sandwich company and I got a deal with Reebok. Two totally different things, but they both want [Maverick]. So, how do I give them [Maverick] from a different angle, but still stay myself?...So, it's really about finding out what the consumer wants. And the consumer could be the sponsorship or the label. (Interview, 4/14/15).

Maverick wants to keep it real by being himself, but points out that what he presents as himself is mediated by what he thinks his sponsorships want him to be. His orientations toward how he must do hip-hop are shaped by the expectations placed on him by his sponsorships. Alchemist has a similar experience to Maverick, but his experience involves an individual that has invested \$50,000 in his career. He said he often thinks, "How would my investor feel?" when he records music. Even though rappers want to make music that is "real" and honestly represents themselves, their orientations toward their music is shaped by multiple individuals and groups.

Artists describe how strategically taking other's expectations into account creates orientations toward hip-hop that set them up to achieve their goals of breaking into the mainstream music industry. Prof-a-see described a rapper he is currently mentoring:

What makes him good, especially performance-wise, [is that] in his mind, he's the best. When he came to me, he had a lot of work to do, but he still thought he was the best. So, when he performs, he performs with a particular attitude like, "I'm the best," which makes him connect with the audience in a particular way...that's what makes him good. To me, he's one of the dudes that's going to have a national impact from Pittsburgh because he just has that belief in himself and he moves off of that belief. (Interview, 1/27/15).

Prof-a-see believes that a key to being successful in the rap music industry is establishing a proper orientation toward your music and performance. The artist he describes has an orientation

that allows him to fully commit to doing hip-hop. This commitment allows him to “connect with the audience” and sets him up for “national impact.” Prof-a-see cites the attitude that creates the performance as the reasons for this artist’s eventual success rather than the performance itself.

Artists doing hip-hop use their understanding of normative expectations to make themselves intelligible. It is common for aspiring artists to reflect deeply on their orientations toward hip-hop. The orientations of aspiring rappers described in this section shed light on why these artists “do hip-hop” in the manner that they do. While they have orientations that value honest self-expression, they understand the situated expectations of fans, the record industry, and others financing their careers. In order for them to break into the mainstream music industry, artists must take these expectations into account and modify their attitudes and behaviors to satisfy those groups. Aspiring rappers continue to struggle over being themselves and being who others want them to be out of the fear of being asked to account for how they do hip-hop. Both originality and familiarity with the rules and tropes are resources for success. In the next section, I analyze how these assessments take place in the music industry.

4.4.2 Assessments

Artists also described the processes through which others assess their ability to properly “do hip-hop,” and they named the criteria they use for assessing their own behaviors and the behaviors of others. Some artists have received direct feedback from fans via email, Twitter, or in-person at their live performances. The assessments they describe often stem from two sources. The first source involves assessing the extent to which artists “keep it real” in their music. Fans and colleagues assess artists on the congruency between the lives they present in their music and

available knowledge about their lived experiences. The second source stems from what artists see as the problematic orientations individuals have about stereotypical representations in hip-hop. They describe how individuals make assessments of them based on assumptions of what they believe hip-hop to be, which often relies on racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes. This second source leads artists to describe how the expectations of what hip-hop is, and how it should be done, are shaped by middle-class whiteness and masculinity. Artists also described their abilities to assess themselves as they do hip-hop.

Artists also describe how these assessment, or the potential for being assessed (what West and Zimmerman call accountability), shapes their behaviors. Prof-a-see described how he approaches his live performances:

You get on stages where [the audience] is tough. They will announce, “Here is rapper, [Prof-a-see]!” And [the audience] will be like, “I don’t know no fucking [Prof-a-see]. I don’t know you. You ain’t famous to me!” [*As himself*] Then I have to come out spitting. Pop. Pop. Pop. [*As audience*] “Oh shit! [Prof-a-see] can rap a little bit now. [*As himself*] Oh yeah, now, let’s rock. (Interview, 1/27/15)

Prof-a-see uses the assessments of those that he feels he must “win over” (i.e., those who do not know him) with his performance and therefore starts those sets with high energy songs. He does this to get the crowd on his side and show that he is capable of doing hip-hop. When the hypothetical audience in his example validates this through their assessment, he remarks, “Oh yeah, now, let’s rock” to show that has met the audience’s expectations of him and the show is no longer about proving that he can perform but is now about saying what he wants to say through his raps.

Aside from audiences, artists must also take the expectations of music industry executives into consideration as they build their careers. As artists attempt to make it into the mainstream music industry, they receive feedback from record labels executives. Chef said:

The whole thing I've been hearing [from labels] since I started was, "Yo, you ain't marketable. You're a plain-looking white dude from Pittsburgh. There's nothing that jumps out about you." That's been used against me. (Interview, 5/13/15)

Chef believes that part of the process of becoming a commercial artist is being assessed on your market viability. He said that he did not want to pretend to be someone else based on this assessment, so he has instead tried to use his work ethic to his advantage. Chef adopted a strategy of "working harder than everyone else," which he believes will make his art "jump out" while maintaining his authenticity. Artists face assessments of how they do hip-hop from multiple positions in the rap music industry, and must meet multiple expectations. As Prof-a-see points out, audiences may assess an artist based on their ability to put on an engaging performance. As Chef points out here, industry executives may assess artists on their ability to be marketed to a wide audience. While keeping these various assessments in mind, artists also assess themselves on their ability to make music that is a true reflection of themselves, or, their ability to "keep it real."

4.4.2.1 "He's Really Real About These Things"

Many artists believe that their success in rap music is a product of their ability to be assessed as "keeping it real." When I asked why each artist believed their fans liked their music, they often gave responses that were similar to the one given by Grey Test:

[The audience] can tell that [my music] is not gimmicks or games or lies. It's me in artistic form. That's usually what I get the most. I wish that in my days I would

find out what it is that other people like. I'm only going off of what other people tell me. I'm trying to acquire more confidence about what I do because that helps. That helps to bring yourself out. That's what people tell me. (Interview, 4/12/15)

Grey Test's ability to keep it real by not lying or relying on rap "gimmicks" (the clichés that rappers above describe in music they find unoriginal) is appreciated by his fans. Grey Test is also attempting to change his behavior as a result of previous assessments of his work by gaining more confidence. He explained to me that being shy keeps him guarded a bit in his music to a point where he is uncomfortable covering topics he sees as "personal" in his music. However, because he has had that aspect of his music positively assessed by his fans, he indicated that he is building the confidence to continue sharing those topics. He also wishes he could find out what others like so that he can attempt to capture a wider audience.

Prof-a-see feels that his life outside of music helps him gain legitimacy as a "conscious" rapper. Conscious rap is known for containing content that provides social commentary and critique. Prof-a-see makes music he describes as "Pro-Black" about poverty in Pittsburgh, police brutality, and other perceived injustices of the black community. He feels that assessments of his authenticity are based on this subject matter:

I'm actually involved in the processes [I rap about] and I think that's what really causes people to be like, okay. It gives me legitimacy in terms of [people thinking I'm] really real about these things and not just somebody who is like: Oh, another young black dude is killed? Maybe I'll put out a video and hopefully I'll get a lot of hits and people will know my name. If I was just a rapper, people would just look at that and be like, "This ni**a fake as hell." (Interview, 1/27/15)

Prof-a-see's position as both a rapper and an activist allows him to be assessed by others as properly doing hip-hop. They see his position as a conscious rapper who also participates in protests as legitimate because he is acting on the messages in his music. If he were "just a

rapper” his intentions behind making a song about the death of a black man may be assessed negatively because individuals may think he is trying to capitalize on current events.

Artists can also use the assessments of others to their advantage without being truthful.

Maverick said that he can use fans’ expectations to his advantage to help solidify his brand:

And I hate to say this...some of the fans are stupid...They are only going to see what they think they need to see. So, if I post a picture on Instagram at a mansion, I could say nothing in the caption, but, automatically they think I live there. “That’s obviously [Maverick’s] house because he’s a rapper and it’s a mansion.” Later, I’ll do an interview and I’ll be like, that was my stylist’s house and they are like, “Oh, you liar!” What do you mean? I never even said that. (Interview, 4/14/15).

Maverick has created a brand around himself that involves conspicuous consumption. Even though he has sponsorships and tours the country, Maverick has not reached a point of financial success where he can afford to live in a mansion. However, he has created an orientation in his fans that makes them assess a picture of him at a mansion in a way that assumes that mansion could be his. Maverick believes that he still keeps it real by doing so because he never claims ownership of the mansion. When asked to account for his “admission” that the mansion is his stylist’s, he points out that it is the fans’ assumptions that suggested anything to the contrary. Despite being asked to account for the house being owned by his stylist, Maverick believes that the false assessment of him as capable of living in a mansion is ultimately beneficial to his career. He says that posting images like the one he describes creates an image of himself that is “cool” and desirable by fans because they think he is more successful than he really is. As I discuss in Chapter 3, the perceived success of an artist helps that artist advance their career.

4.4.2.2 “Oh, You Must be Doing Something Shady”

While Maverick points out that false assessments can benefit a career, other artists experience negative effects of assessments based on false assumptions. Scrollz believes that his effective citations of hip-hop norms in dress have led to negative assessments of his character:

You know like, the way I dress is hip-hop, but it's not accepted everywhere I go. Some people think I'm a drug dealer because I got a bucket hat and I might have some gold on and I might be doing that. Instead of just being like, "You have a job as a recording artist," it's more like "Oh, you must be doing something shady." No, it's a legit thing, it's very legal. It's like, you know it's perceived as a bad thing and people think you have to be involved [in the drug trade]. (Interview, 4/24/14)

Scrollz believes that normative expectations of individuals who dress in a manner commonly associated with hip-hop culture are often assumed to be associated with the urban drug culture. Scrollz adds that the fact that he is a black man compounds these expectations because of the disproportionate amount of black males that are incarcerated for drug-related offenses (see Alexander 2010). While cultural cues that circulate in the urban drug culture borrow from hip-hop and vice versa, Scrollz feels that individuals improperly assess him as being involved in both, when he is only involved in the “legit thing” of hip-hop. However, for Scrollz, hip-hop stereotypes and racial stereotypes collide in individuals assessing him in relation to his attire as being involved in “shady shit” and therefore not accepted everywhere he goes.

Hip-hop artists are assessed by others in terms of race and authenticity. While my respondents believe that authenticity within hip-hop is no longer tightly bound to blackness, they believe that white artists must do hip-hop in a way that avoids black cultural appropriation. In agreement with Armstrong (2004) and Hodgman (2013), Prof-a-see cited rapper Eminem as an example of a white artist who keeps it real:

Eminem kept it real. Eminem didn't try to be anything other than a young, white dude who came from [Detroit's] 8 Mile [Road]...he didn't say he was from the slums, he didn't say he was busting guns and selling drugs, because that's not what he was doing. He kept it real. (Interview, 1/27/15)

Eminem is assessed as keeping it real because he is seen as accurately representing his upbringing and life experiences. Prof-a-see lauds Eminem for focusing on his experiences as a “young white dude” rather than talking about other topics like “busting guns and selling drugs” commonly associated with black rappers (as Scrollz points out above). When I would ask respondents to provide an example of an artist who does not keep it real, they would bring up rapper Iggy Azalea. In fact, Prof-a-see used the above quote to draw a comparison between Eminem and Iggy Azalea²⁹ to underscore how she fails to do hip-hop properly. He continued:

With Iggy, you're from Australia. If you spoke from the perspective of a young white girl trying to be a hip-hop artist coming out of Australia, and the obstacles and things that you faced, I'm with you. But, when you try to sound like a black girl in the South, wait, wait, hold up, hold up, wait a second...That's not how you sound. Now you're stealing. You're not being you. You're not being true to yourself. You're trying to be someone else. (Interview, 1/27/15)

Prof-a-see's objection with Azalea is not that she is white, nor is it that she is a woman (both identities are said to have difficulties in claiming authenticity in hip-hop). Rather, his objection is that she is trying to do hip-hop in the style of a black woman from the American South, and therefore is not being true to her roots as an Australian. His assessment is on par with other artists' assessments who criticized the way she raps (One Stop, Miz Taken, Scrollz, Ben, Leena, Grey Test) because she does so in an accent reminiscent of the South while her speaking voice has a prominent Australian accent. The way that Iggy Azalea performs hip-hop has been assessed by others as inauthentic because they can audibly hear the difference between who they

²⁹ Prof-a-see also compared these artists to rapper Macklemore, saying that what he said about Eminem is the “same with Macklemore. He talked about his experiences coming out of Seattle.”

think she claims to be in her music and who they believe she is in her real life.³⁰ These assessments indicate that there is a way that Azalea can authentically do hip-hop as a white, Australian woman, but it involves avoiding cultural appropriation by expressing those identities that they have attributed to her.

Part of Alchemist's struggle with his name change was his desire to use his real name in his rapper name. He said that he floated around the idea of simply using his entire name, but "it has certain Jewish connotations with it," so he decided against it (Interview, 9/12/14). Alchemist was afraid that the additional assessments made about his family's Jewish heritage (his father is a non-practicing Jew and Alchemist does not claim a faith) could create expectations that he is a religious artist. His desire to make secular music while also keeping it real by using part of his given name in his rapper name made him create a story behind his rapper name that he explained in a song.³¹ These conflicting desires made him attempt to control any possible assessments of his name and music that he did not want his audience to make.

4.4.2.3 "White People are the Tastemakers"

Artists argue that the racialized assessments of artists stem from an industry that promotes and rewards a certain type of black masculinity. In other words, they focus not only on the context or standards of assessments but who holds them accountable through assessments. T-1000 said, "I think that part of the problem with having corporations involved in the decision making in rap

³⁰ I say this in this way to underscore a point made by many of my respondents and summed up by One Stop: "I don't know these people, Jeff" (Interview, 1/27/15). Ultimately, assessments of realness like those of Iggy Azalea are done with assumptions made about the congruency between an artist's music and lived experiences.

³¹ To keep his responses confidential, I avoid detailing this story. For an analogous example: if his name were really "Alchemist," the song would explain what alchemy is, and how he is transforming lead into gold through the magic of his music.

music [is that] you have suits telling artists what to put out there” (Interview, 3/29/15). T-1000 speaks for other artists (Grey Test, Prof-a-see, Actshawn, Rubble, Scrollz, Miz Taken) who described the rap music industry as being run by mostly white men who are looking to capitalize on a narrow view of the “black experience” associated with the urban ghetto. They argue that the industry instead should be able to assess what is “good” (i.e., “marketable”) music versus bad (i.e., not “marketable”) based on the understanding shared by these artists that hip-hop is comprised of multiple experiences that should all be celebrated for their accurate representation of the lives of hip-hop artists.

Alchemist expands on this point by describing the “tastemakers” in the rap music industry. He indicates that the “tastemakers” are “the people who are dictating what gets heard” because their assessments of who is/is not doing hip-hop properly matters to consumers and record labels:

Tastemakers are different for types of music, in all honesty: for the Top 40, white people are the tastemakers...It’s funny because in hip-hop now, too, man, back in the day the tastemakers were thugs and shit. This is hip-hop...So these thugs are making music for other thugs to relate to but now they are making it for some nerdy fuck behind his computer, these bloggers, these writers who grew up with hip-hop...a lot of shade has been thrown on the industry because of who the tastemakers are right now. It’s not people who know the culture. It’s not people that grew up in the ghetto...It’s bloggers. (Interview, 9/12/14)

Alchemist asserts that artists now make music for “white” and “nerdy” people who run blogs about hip-hop rather than for the “thugs” for whom artists made music for previously. This quote is interesting for a number of reasons because it is a bit unclear as to where Alchemist positions authenticity in his analysis of the music industry. First, Alchemist is using the racially coded term “thug” (i.e., “thugs” are black men) to signify a position he is comfortable with assessing rap music. To Alchemist, “white” and “nerdy” individuals who may be fans of hip-hop have less

of a claim on recognizing good rap music than (black) “thugs.” Moreover, as a white man, Alchemist asserts his claim on hip-hop by positioning himself as someone who does hip-hop by performing as an artist as being distinctly different than someone who merely comments on hip-hop, which again highlights the importance of being “in and of the culture” described before. In other words, what makes his position as a white male in hip-hop more authentic than a white male blogger is that he is participating in the culture and not merely spectating. Another option is that he values when “the tastemakers were thugs” because they “knew the culture” unlike the white bloggers who just “grew up with hip-hop” (i.e., are fans of hip-hop). In other words, he highlights the importance of being a part of the culture on which you are commenting, which he feels these tastemakers are not. Racially coded language aside, Alchemist is, at the very least, favoring a period when hip-hop was assessed by those considered “inside” the culture, rather than those “outside” the culture (where he positions bloggers). A final option is that he values “thugs” making music “for other thugs to relate to” because describing your shared lived experience is a way to keep it real. The music and the message is important, rather than monetarily capitalizing off the music. Alchemist, then, could see “thugs” making music for white tastemakers as an inauthentic attempt to financially capitalize off of that experience. Alchemist positions authenticity as residing with those who “do it for the culture” rather than those who do it to achieve stardom. Most likely, he is saying all of these things, which illuminates the multiple forces at work in the assessment of what doing hip-hop properly is.

4.4.2.4 “Now I Need to Make Something Better Than That”

While they point out the pressures and implications of being assessed by others, artists also describe the process of self-assessment in structuring how they do hip-hop. Artists believe that it

is important for them to assess their own music and performances in relation to their ideas of what it means to do hip-hop. For some, like Maverick, this just means making sure he is pushing himself creatively and forcing himself to be original:

I'll get a beat and I'll be like, okay, I know where I want to go with this. I'll create a little demo, freestyle in my mind, okay, now I'm going to write this. Write it out. Going over and over and over and over it. You know what? I can do that better. Ball it up. Let's start from scratch. So, by the time I get in the booth, it's perfect for me. For instance, my song [song title] did great on the radio, went crazy. Now I need to make something better than that. (Interview, 4/14/15).

Maverick describes a process typical among rappers where they desire to improve on their previous material, rather than replicating it. To grow as an artist, they feel the need to assess their music in relation to the music they produced before that. I observed Scrollz and Swiss assessing the album they were making together in this fashion. Even though Scrollz told me several times that all of the songs he created for the album were “his best work,” he chose only 13 out of the more than 20 that he recorded with Swiss for the final album. He said that he needed to pick the best and the songs that most represented his vision and goal for the project.

Artists also take on the role of others when assessing their own music. Alchemist made the point earlier that he thinks about his fans, friends, and family when creating music. T-1000 made a similar point:

I have two little sisters. I have two teenage sisters. I'm always cognizant of that. So, I don't want to put those vibes out there. It puts you in handcuffs artistically. Because your mind goes, "I should go this way" immediately because you're building a rhyme. But, then you're like, no, I should go this way, I should go around that. (Interview, 3/29/15)

While Alchemist assumes his fans, friends, and family will like his music by default, T-1000 says that he is “handcuffed” when he imagines his sisters assessing his music. He said that he

avoids (or, “goes around”) talking about sex because of the perceived evaluations of his sisters and his own expectations for himself to be a good role model for them.

Artists also describe their assessments in terms of keeping it real. They have to critically evaluate their music to make sure that they are accurately representing themselves in their music.

Cookie said that he initially did not do this when he rapped:

When I first started rapping, I was rapping about some stuff that I never even did or never even saw. You feel it. You feel it within yourself. You know this ain't true. Now, when I sing my music, and when I listen to it, I feel it one hundred percent because I know it's real. (Interview, 6/11/15).

For Cookie, the result of assessing his own music is that he is able to remain connected with it and continue to invest in performing it. The songs he assesses as being authentic representations of himself show him that he understands how to do hip-hop properly and will eventually succeed in the rap music industry. The songs that he created when he first started rapping, the songs in which he was not keeping it real, have been removed from the internet and are no longer a part of his live performances. He “felt within himself,” he says, a sense of shame that he was not living up to the expectations of realness he has for himself and others.

4.4.2.5 “Different Strokes for Different Folks”

When artists assess their work and deem it to be an authentic representation of themselves, they are able to ignore the negative assessments of others. A strategy they use to deflect criticism is by saying things like, “I am who I am and I’m not ashamed of it. So, at the same time, if you don’t like me, oh well” (Burner, Interview, 4/28/15). Because they are hitting their standards for keeping it real, they are comfortable saying that they are aware that their music may not be for everyone. As Virus said, “Different strokes for different folks. You know, not everyone likes

apples” (Interview, 6/5/14). While they may try to appeal to as many people as possible, they are comfortable knowing that no matter what they do, they may still not fit with everyone’s taste in music.

Artists assess others and are assessed themselves on how well they can adhere to the expectations set for them in regards to doing hip-hop. At some points this involves artists shaping their behaviors to avoid negative assessments (or encourage positive assessments) of their songs and performances. These assessments show that artists take the values of their family, their friends, their fans, the music industry, other artists, and “tastemakers” into consideration when deciding how to perform and present their music. These groups make their assessments based on widely varying criteria like marketability, race, class, and gender. The main through line, however, is that individuals in the rap music industry hold themselves and others accountable to doing hip-hop in a way that values accurately expressing yourself in your music and performance.

4.4.3 Enforcements

According to Hollander (2014), the enforcement aspect of accountability involves the consequences when individuals are able or not able to conform to the expectations of the norm. I have uncovered two main strategies individuals in the rap music industry use to enforce the behaviors of doing hip-hop properly. On the one hand, individuals are able to use what I call “soft” enforcement to guide others in the direction of doing hip-hop in a way they find acceptable. Artists use “soft” enforcement when individuals collaborate on songs together and try to mesh their orientations and assessments of the norm with one another. That is, artists

appeal to one another to get a song or performance “right” by changing elements or redoing the entire song. Swiss said that being an engineer “taught [him] the art of interaction.” He learned that he could persuade the artist to change their behavior by saying, “Yo, one more take. We need to get this part right here” (Interview, 10/22/14). Artists also use constructive criticism to “softly” enforce adherence to the norm. While engaging in this constructive criticism, they encourage the other artist by creating an understanding that their enforcing these norms comes from a place of “love” and not “hate.” Artists softly enforce one another to avoid conflict while still managing the behaviors of others.

On the other hand, there is also “hard” enforcement that involves direct conflict. Artists use hard enforcement to sanction the behavior of their peers and direct their behavior toward their desired outcome. While most artists seek to avoid conflict, there are certain instances where they cannot agree on the direction of the song. This often occurs when one of the collaborators perceives the other as “not knowing what they are doing” and the artists have a conflict over one another’s knowledge and experience. Individuals also conflict by calling each other out for not acting in a manner that they find acceptable. For example, as the owner of the Beat Box, Mike Tors was able to police the behaviors of individuals using hard enforcement by restricting certain acts from performing. He said that when choosing who could play at the Beat Box he “wanted to stay away from what [he] call[ed] ‘Kill Black People Music’...So, we turned a lot of artists down” (Interview, 1/29/15). By not allowing certain types of rap music to perform at arguably the most important performance venue in the city, Mike was trying to foster a norm of hip-hop that did not include overtly violent music. Hard enforcement manages the behavior of individuals through direct repudiation.

Most of the enforcement I encountered were of one of these two varieties. However, artists also described how they avoided enforcing the behaviors of others out of a fear of being labeled “a hater.” In these cases, individuals would not enforce others because they felt that openly criticizing others would open themselves up enforcement from others. That is, individuals often faced enforcement by being asked to account for why they enforced others. This enforcement is related to the processes of horizontal hostility described in Chapter 3.

Finally, individuals also described how their participation in the music scene led to positive enforcement. As they do hip-hop, artists experience moments where they feel, or others tell them, that they have done things right. In these situations, these behaviors are reinforced and artists believe that they are closer mainstream success.

4.4.3.1 “Is that Flow Sounding Right to You?”

When creating a song, several individuals often come together to produce a final product. In my observations, I have seen producers work with artists to create a song from scratch, I have seen an entire album get critiqued and “touched up” by an engineer, and I have talked to all of my respondents about their creative processes. Likewise, I have discussed the perceived difficulties in collaborating with other artists and observed the importance of places in organizing networks of people in Pittsburgh’s music scene.

Swiss praised his collaboration with Scrollz, who was currently in the studio, explaining that Scrollz allows him to work independently, and then they come together to discuss the final product. These two artists work with a power differential that establishes each as an “expert” in their field. To do this, they ask for assessments and give enforcements in the form of a question rather than a command. “What if we pitched that section down?” Scrollz asked. “Is that flow

sounding right to you?” Swiss later asked (Field Notes, 10/7/14). Here, these individuals are holding one another accountable for their contributions through asking them to assess their own contribution. Swiss explained that even though he is paid for his technical skills as an engineer, he will still enforce his expectations when working with an artist: “The business [i.e., pay] means something to me too, but, I’ll be the first one to tell you something like, ‘You can’t put that out because it’s compromising who you are” (Interview, 10/22/14). Swiss indicated that people may not like his criticism enough that they will leave his studio and never return. Despite the possibility for losing clients, he tries subtly to guide them toward making more authentic music (i.e., music that doesn’t “compromise who the artist is”) without reaching that point of conflict.

When I asked Alchemist about the typical methods he uses for criticism, he described “The Thumb Test.” He explained that when he is working with another artist, he uses his thumb as an indicator of how he feels about the song. “If I’m vibing with what is going on, the thumb stays up,” he explained, “If it’s not hot, the thumb goes down. I’m trying to get them to hear what I’m hearing” (Alchemist, Interview, 9/17/14). This interaction is an attempt by this artist to structure his collaborator’s orientations toward and assessments of the song. Through this real-time assessment and enforcement (he explained that if the thumb is down for too long, he cuts the track) allows him to influence the other artist involved. He said that his collaborations with Actshawn were great examples of “The Thumb Test” working to avoid conflict and steer another artist toward performing in a way he wants. He said that after a recent collaboration Actshawn told him, “You brought the best out of me in that song, bruh” (Interview, 9/12/14). However, this strategy does not always work, Alchemist admitted:

Oh, it has mixed results for sure. I’ve got people that probably aren’t going to want to work with me again. But, I want my music to sound like my music...I’m never going to come at someone and say, ‘You Suck’ though. (Interview, 9/12/14)

Alchemist's adherence to realness and authenticity as being original and a true representation of him creates this set of practices in which he attempts to structure the behaviors of those with whom he works. He also tries to come up with a non-threatening way to enforce other artists to avoid conflict.

4.4.3.2 “It's Sort of Like a ‘Tough Love’ Sort of Thing”

Artists believe that to make the best possible music their must be behaviors assessed and enforced by others. They also know that others may ask them to provide assessments and enforce their behaviors. My respondents believe that reciprocal assessment and enforcement constitutes constructive criticism that can help them advance their careers. As artists try to keep it real, they rely on others to “keep them in line.” Again, they do this not to reject others outright or as a source of conflict, but to help guide them in an almost paternalistic manner.

It is common for newer artists to seek out the advice of older artists as they try to establish themselves in the scene. Both Miz Taken and Prof-a-See have been in the Pittsburgh scene for over 10 years and say that they have found ways to be critical new artists' music, while not discouraging them from making music all together. Miz Taken said:

I'll tell you when you are wrong and I don't have a problem saying it in front of everybody. It doesn't mean I hate you. It just means you need to be corrected. People will send me their music and ask me for my feedback, for example. I'll tell them what I think honestly and, if I don't like it, I'll say why. I don't just say, “Oh that video sucked.” I'll say, this really isn't really my thing and I'll say why. I'll give constructive criticism. So, it's sort of like a “tough love” sort of thing. (Interview, 5/11/15)

Miz Taken is willing to enforce the qualities that she thinks makes “good” rap music to other artists by providing explanations of why she does not like their music. She tries to create a dialogue with the artist to encourage forward momentum through suggested changes. Her desire

to foster “tough love” indicates that she wants the artist to continue and is providing the negative feedback for the artist’s benefit.

While Miz Taken provides little indication as to how exactly she tries to enforce when providing her constructive criticism, Prof-a-see is much more direct. He recounted an experience he had with a young up-and-coming artist who asked for his thoughts on a CD he recorded:

I listened to it and it was all about selling drugs. He was going overseas, he's riding Mercedes Benz, he's dripping diamonds, he's going to Miami. I said, you know what, you can really rap, but you're not doing any of this...I was saying that you're a young dude from the Hill District. You live in the projects. You don't have to make up an experience. Your experience that you came from is already hard enough. You don't have to make some shit up. Rap about that. Rap about your own true experience. (Interview, 1/27/15).

Prof-a-see enforced the expectations of hip-hop realness on this artist by advising him against making music that was not about his lived experiences. Prof-a-see also said that this artist listened to him and “is still rapping to this day.” I got the impression from Prof-a-see that if the young artist had not been asked to account for his inauthentic music, he would have continued to make music that was not true to his lived experiences. In turn, he would have most likely been considered “fake” by his audience and his peers, and been rejected from the scene. Prof-a-see enforced this artist’s orientation to the norm of hip-hop realness after assessing his portrayal of his performance as being inauthentic.

Artists assert the importance of establishing a peer group that will honestly assess and constructively enforce their work to help them avoid potentially career-derailing judgements and actions by others. If their peer group is forthright, artists may suffer the embarrassment of not living up to the standards of individuals they respect. However, as Burner said, if his friend is listening to his songs and “I spit something that is terrible...and he’s like, ‘Yo, that was hard [i.e., good]!’ and we release that, who looks like the asshole?” (Interview, 4/28/15). Burner

points out the importance of having friends who will “keep it real” with him by being honest about his work and enforcing his conforming to their expectations helps him fine tune his orientations toward and assessments of his music. He also wants to avoid “looking like an asshole” to a wider public, a consequence that could have a negative impact on his career. Prof-a-see, Ben, Chef, Scrollz, and Grey Test all also emphasized the importance of having friends that are willing to say things like, “Don’t put that song out” (Ben) or “That song is trash” (Chef). Ben also said, “It’s a lot easier to take that from a friend” (Interview, 6/6/14), to underscore that this whole process of critique is about helping the artist, not bringing them down.

At a Rhyme Calisthenics (“Rhyme Cal”) event I attended, Kerve was a participant while Chef was one of three judges (Miz Taken was also a judge). In the event, Kerve was required to spin the wheel and perform a freestyle rap in the style indicated on the wheel. Kerve’s verse was deemed to fall outside of the “Old School” category indicated on the wheel. The judges praised his ability to freestyle, but ultimately gave him scores (with Chef giving him two out of ten points) that inhibited him from moving on further in the competition. The judges paired their praise of Kerve with very harsh criticisms of him pertaining to his ability to stay in line with the category and questioned his ability to understand what the category meant. Kerve described his reaction to this, his first Rhyme Cal event:

I was a little upset that I didn't make it to the next round, I feel like I could have, [Chef] gave me a 2. [Chef] gave me a 2 in a competition! A lot of people could have been mad, and I was one of those people that didn't make it to the next round, but, I just think that next time I just need to step my game up. This is something that is telling me, step it up. Strengthen your skills. (Interview, 6/13/15)

Kerve sees the judge’s public criticism of his performance as their attempt to encourage him to do his best and play by the rules. He told me that he was unprepared for the category he received

and that next time he would focus on preparing for all of the possible categories. He said that it was important for him to hear the praise from Chef, a previous winner of the event, while also hearing his criticism because he felt Chef was acting in his best interests. Kerve took his comments with overwhelming positivity rather than discouragement, a reaction Kerve feels is atypical because “a lot of people could have been mad.” When I talked to Chef at the event, he told me that he was being intentionally harsher than the other judges because he wanted what was best for the performers. As an internationally-recognized freestyle battle rapper himself, he said he was trying to emulate the type of harsh feedback these artists would receive in the next levels of their careers. His hope was to get reactions from the artists similar to Kerve’s reaction: “step up their game” to be competitive. In his criticism, Chef gave artists instructions on how they can improve (e.g., study certain topics, practice more, listen to certain artists, etc.) as an attempt to show that he was acting in the artists’ best interests while trying to get them to conform to the high standards of larger competitions.

Artists admit that there are times when interactions based on constructive criticism and collaboration lead to conflict. Actshawn said that he “loves constructive criticism” because “he needs to get better.” However, he believes, like Kerve, that some artists who receive constructive criticism are not willing to accept it, which is detrimental to their careers:

I’ve been in the studio with people that are like, “I ain’t trying to do it like that.” And I’m like, it’s going to make the song better! And they are like, “I ain’t trying to do it like that!” I’m like, alright, cool, but when the engineer tells you, “Yeah, he was right,” It’s like, come on man! It’s going to make the song better. If you are not open to criticism, how do you think you are going to get in front of LA Reid? They’ll shred you to pieces! (Interview, 2/18/15)

Actshawn advocates for having a thick skin and the ability to adapt. Artists who reorient in response to criticism are more likely to be successful, or in Actshawn’s words, “if you are open

to constructive criticism, you will go far” (Interview, 2/18/15). Actshawn is drawing on a similar interaction that Alchemist described having with him. Many other artists agree with them that the ability to take into account and incorporate collaborators expectations of songs and performances, as expressed through critical assessments intended to enforce orientation to communal norms, is a harmonious way to maximize the quality of what you are producing.

4.4.3.3 “Bro, I Got You”

While most artists approach collaborations with mutual respect, that is not always the case. During collaborations, a common theme that emerged was one of perceived competency in the music-making process, or quite literally their ability to “do” hip-hop. Some rappers’ only contribution to a song is the lyrics he or she writes for the verses. Others help with the melody and overall aural construction of the song, working in tandem with a producer, engineer, and sometimes other artists. In this section, I analyze the conflicts between artists that emerge over the enforcing of expectations regarding doing hip-hop.

In one studio session, an owner of a music studio, Swiss (who also raps) described his frustration with working with some artists. During this discussion, he explained how conflicts arise when people improperly assess his expertise and do not value his opinion. He discusses the “right” way to ask him to change something in the music and the “wrong” way. Artists who challenge Swiss’ expertise often do so through a process similar to “backseat driving.” That is, individuals often insert themselves into his process of mixing a song during that process, which to him shows a lack of trust in his ability to know what to do. Most of the time, he explained, individuals point out something that is basic based on their limited knowledge of sound engineering and mixing. Because he knows that he would not possibly miss something so basic,

he views these comments as power plays to challenge his credibility and question his ability to do his job and properly produce and engineer the song. Swiss is annoyed by artists who enforce the “proper” way to do his job because he sees them as being unjustly fearful that the song will come out poorly. These artists’ assessments lead him to ultimately enforce them for believing that he does not know what he is doing. All of his examples portrayed a power structure in which the artist was in a position of power to command him to do one thing or another to a song, without his collaboration or input being valued.

Alchemist described his approach to collaboration as being characterized by the same trepidation. A university-trained sound engineer himself, he wants to have a hand in every aspect of his songs. However, he finds that other producers and sound engineers assess him as “just a rapper” and therefore do not listen to his advice. “Man, I have tons of tracks on the shelf because of that,” he explained, “Some producers will hear my advice and just say, ‘Bro, I got this’ and not change what I’m asking them to. So, I’ll never release that stuff. [That] shit’s not me. It’s not my creation” (Alchemist, Interview, 9/12/14). The enforcement of the engineer in saying “Bro, I got this,” is seen by Alchemist as infantilizing. The engineer does not believe Alchemist has the ability to make suggestions regarding the beat, the engineer’s area of expertise. For Alchemist, in order to do hip-hop correctly, he must “keep it real” by making music that follows his creative direction. When he is unable to do that, he refuses to release that song to a wider audience. In turn, he is also enforcing his expectations, that engineers should believe artists have valuable contributions to the production process, on the engineer by not releasing the music they made together because the engineer did not take his input into consideration.

When artists are assessed and enforced for their perceived inability to add a meaningful contribution to collaboration, conflict occurs. This often leads to artists no longer working with

other artists and not releasing the music that they made during that collaboration. Aside from creating hostile feelings toward one another and possibly leading to the “fragmentation” of artists’ community and scene discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Alchemist also said that these interactions are “just a waste of money” (Interview, 9/12/14). Alchemist is referring to the fact that in these collaborations, one artist is typically paying the other to perform with them. Additionally, they are paying for the studio space and/or the beat. When these artists’ expectations clash to the extent that the song does not get released, aspiring artists see no returns on their investments. Artists also say that the time they spent recording that music that will never be released could have been used in other ways to advance their careers.

Aside from collaboration, artists also engage in conflicts over their expectations of how to properly do hip-hop. Virus said that he often goes to events in order to enforce the behaviors of those he sees as uncool or improperly doing hip-hop. He told me he likes to “go to events, talk a lot of shit, and then leave,” which he explained as:

I go in and say, “You’re whack, you suck,” and “Heard your new shit, sounds like your old shit. You’re garbage!” And they are like, “You’re garbage. You haven’t put anything out!” I tell them, “That’s because it isn’t 2080 yet. When it’s 2080, you’ll know what’s up.” (Interview, 6/5/14)

Virus purposely antagonizes those that he feels are doing hip-hop in an improper manner. He enforces his belief that an artist’s style should change and evolve on two fronts. First, he tells individuals that their new music sounds like their old music, saying that they lack the creativity to make cutting edge music. Second, when asked to account for why he has not put out new music, he responds that his music is so evolved that it is more suitable for the year 2080. Virus has moved to L.A. since our interview because of his frustration with members of the Pittsburgh scene not sharing his expectations on the necessity to push creative boundaries.

Kerve explained a conflict he had with a former college roommate over Kerve's expectations of keeping it real. He recounted a time where he enforced his roommate's authenticity:

I remember I just bought this new Yo Gotti album. And my roommate was like, "Yeah man, I listen to Yo Gotti!" I feel like he was doing it because he felt he needed to fit in with me. And I said, "Well, name a Yo Gotti song for me. Say a Yo Gotti line for me." And he couldn't do it. I'm like, you don't have to act all hard. Just because I listen to this don't mean you have to listen to it. You can have your own musical preferences and I can have my own musical preferences. You don't have to do what I'm doing. You can be yourself. (Interview, 6/13/15)

Kerve knew that his roommate had different music preferences than him and was trying to seem "cool" to him.³² Kerve asked his roommate to account for his claim that he is a fan of rapper Yo Gotti to enforce his expectations that his roommate keep it real with him.

However, some are afraid to enforce the behaviors of others because they feel that doing so will have negative consequences on how they will be seen by others. Ben described an experience in which he criticized a local artist's new song in the comments of a blog post about the song. When the artist found Ben's comments saying that he did not like the new song, the artist confronted Ben. Ben's attempt to enforce his expectations of what a "good" song is led to him being told to keep his opinions to himself because he "didn't know what [he] was talking about" (Interview, 6/6/14). To Ben, a manager and frequent blogger about hip-hop, this interaction seemed normal. He said that artists typically responded to criticism with some version of the idiom, "you wouldn't know good music if it hit you on the head." This dismissive attitude, he contends, results in an unproductive cycle where those who criticize an artist are met by

³² It is easy to imagine interactions just like this one occurring in many college dorm rooms. For this reason, I am hesitant to say that the roommate was trying to pass as a hip-hop aficionado or merely trying to establish a common interest with his roommate Kerve. Regardless, Kerve assessed his behavior as inauthentic and enforced his expectations that the roommate "be himself" in their interactions.

“dozens of people that will come to [the artist’s] defense” and “for those dozens of people, there are dozens of people attacking [the artist] again” (Interview, 6/6/14). While Ben concedes that public enforcement about tastes in music are a “battle you can’t win,” he also alludes to another point about the behavioral expectations in this local music scene. Sanctioning artists is acceptable when done privately or when it is solicited, as in the above examples. However, Ben’s experience shows that publicly sanctioning other artists can lead to sanctions for “being a hater,” which Ben was accused of being by many in that internet exchange.

4.4.3.4 Being a “Hater”

The normative expectations of “keeping it real” create a contradictory position of the “hater” when it comes to enforcing the expectations of how to do hip-hop. A primary interaction involved in keeping it real involves telling an artist or friend when their music or behaviors are not meeting expectations. However, some people are afraid to do this because they run the risk of having their behaviors enforced by others by being labeled as a “hater.” The person being described as a “hater” is discredited because their opinions are seen as not being helpful, coming from a place of jealousy, or being negative for the sake of being negative. Those who are “haters” engage in the practices of horizontal hostility found in Chapters 2 and 3. By admonishing those who engage in this process, or avoiding engaging in this process themselves, individuals are attempting to enforce a new regulatory norm that focuses on support rather than horizontal hostility.

Extending on my analysis in Chapter 3, I find that artists in Pittsburgh seek to enforce a set of behaviors that promote a supportive hip-hop music scene. But as Ben indicated above, blind support violates expectations of keeping it real and negative public assessments are

criticized. Chef said that he struggles with knowing that supporting local artists will help the music scene grow while also believing that local artists need to improve to earn his support:

Pittsburgh has a lot of trouble with that...there's a lot of people that go to social media and be like, "Pittsburgh don't support." Half of it is why should I support you? Give me a reason to support you and I'll be there. (Interview, 5/13/15)

Chef responds here to enforcements on social media meant to hold others accountable to a desired norm of support for local artists. He argues that in order for him to be supportive of other artists, they must demonstrate to him that are deserving of his support. He wants these artists to demonstrate that they can do hip-hop before he provides this support. Chef highlights part of the problem for an aspiring artist in the career advancement. Artists feel like they are struggling because they do not receive the support necessary for them to advance their careers; however, Chef believes that this lack of support is a way to hold artists accountable to how they do hip-hop. His lack of support, then, is an enforcement that the artist should “do better.” In other words, it is tough to say whether artists are struggling due to the lack of support they receive from others in the scene or if they are receiving a lack of support because they are struggling. This relationship is further complicated when artists view critics as haters.

Virus, and others above, believe that collaboration and honest assessments are necessary for individuals to hold one another accountable to how they do hip-hop. However, Virus says that individuals are not open to criticism and see behavior as being unsupportive. When artists ask Virus for his opinions on their music, any criticisms that he makes are met with “Oh, you’re just a hater,” or “You’re mad because you’re not on” (Interview, 6/5/14). Despite Virus’ admission that he like to instigate conflict with other artists, his experiences correspond with others’ experiences. Actshawn provided a similar account. He said:

If I had to go in a room and spit in front of people and 4 people liked it and 1 person didn't, I want to know why that one person didn't like it. And I want to be like, what would make it better? Are you just not liking it because you are a hater and that's what people say, "You're a hater." No. You have your opinion. You don't have to like everything. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Interactions based on criticism are tough for artists to decipher because they are unclear whether the criticism is coming from the horizontal hostility of a "hater" or from an ally who is keeping it real with them and enforcing their expectations of how to properly do hip-hop.

At the Pittsburgh Hip-Hop Summit, an event that served as a forum to discuss the current state of hip-hop in Pittsburgh, several artists described Pittsburgh as a "hatin'-ass city," in other words, a city that is full of haters (Field Notes, 4/4/14). Members of the hip-hop scene perceive their peers as enemies due to their experiences with horizontal hostility described in Chapters 2 and 3. Artists view criticism, then, as an attempt to discredit them and not as a peer attempting to keep it real and enforce what they believe are the normative expectations of hip-hop in terms of quality and/or performance. Members of the scene at the Hip-Hop Summit told others to "stop hatin' and start supporting" in an attempt to promote a behavioral norm around positive reinforcement. Not surprisingly, although artists want their crew and peers to keep it real by providing their honest opinions about their work, they are quick to dismiss any negative criticisms as simply coming from a hater. As Ben said, "It's tough [to keep it real with someone] because people that do keep it real are often labeled as 'haters'" (Interview, 6/6/14). Members of the Pittsburgh rap music scene enforce a set of expectations that both encourage honesty, while creating a skepticism of that honesty because it may come from a hater whose perceived "natural" reaction is always negative.

As individuals enforce the expectations of how to do hip-hop, they engage in several types of interactions. Artists are sometimes able to work collaboratively and shape the behaviors

of their collaborators through things like constructive criticism that seek to avoid conflict. In these interactions, artists believe that being asked to account for their behaviors that do not meet expectations is being done in their best interest. Artists enforce their expectations that their peers keep it real and provide honest feedback to their work thereby enforcing the expectations of how to properly do hip-hop. However, there are other interactions that have more negative motivations and outcomes, with individuals seeking to admonish the behaviors of others for their inability to do hip-hop properly without attempting to benefit the artist to whom the criticism is directed. With the added perception of horizontal hostility as a common characteristic of the scene, artists are unable to decipher the motivations of the person providing criticism and are likely to attribute negative feedback as the result of a person being a hater. In turn, they enforce their expectations of support by reprimanding those who criticize their work for being haters in an attempt to create a more supportive scene.

4.4.3.5 “This is Definitely Something that I Want to Do”

Artists also described instances in which their behavior was positively sanctioned that motivated them to continue being an artist. In these interactions, artists are reaffirmed by fans for their hip-hop performances. From these positive sanctions, artists learn a set of practices that are desirable when doing hip-hop. They then use these interactions to further shape their orientations and assessments of their work. While negative enforcements give artists an idea of what not to do, these positive enforcements show them what they should be or should continue doing.

The most common way that artists described reinforcing behaviors was in relation to their live performance. Actshawn said that some of his favorite things about being a rapper are “performing and the reactions.” He continued:

When you're on stage and you're performing and connecting with the person, it's great. You can't connect with them for very long, you gotta keep it going, but when you see a person in the audience like, "Mmmm, yeah!" it's a great feeling. Then you have to move on because you're like, "I've got too many other people to connect with! I gotta connect with everybody!" (Interview, 2/18/15)

Although I never witnessed it during the performances I observed, individuals described an opposite experience of "being booed off stage" (Ben, Interview, 6/6/14). In the first instance, there is a "connection" with audience members who have their expectations of what makes a good hip-hop performance is met. The artist realizes this and, according to Actshawn, wants to continue making that connection with as many people as possible during the performance, which gives them a "great feeling" of having accomplished doing hip-hop properly. However, if an artist were to be booed off stage, they would realize that the audience's expectations are not being met through the negative sanction of booing.

While Actshawn focuses on the abstract "connection" he is sometimes able to make with the audience, Scrollz described a set of tangible reinforcements. When I asked him about what made him continue to pursue rap music as a career, Scrollz said:

Just seeing how [my music] affected people made me realize that I really wanted to do this for real. Wow, the way music makes people jump and feel and smile, you know? I've done songs around that time [that I was first starting], like emotional records, and people cried. So, it's like wow, this is definitely something I want to do. (Interview, 4/24/14)

Scrollz' motivation to continue performing rap music stems from his interactions with fans during live performances. The artist and audience not only "connect" in the interactions described by Scrollz, but they also respond to one another in a way that shows their expectations are being met. Presumably, Scrollz read the audiences reactions of "jumping" and "smiling" as corresponding with his expectations for the song he performed that elicited that response. Likewise, seeing people cry shows him that he can properly make an "emotional record."

There are some instances where artists are told directly by fans that they are properly doing hip-hop. A common occurrence I observed on Twitter was to see artists “retweet” a message from a fan saying things like, “[Artist’s name] is the realest one out there,” “[Artist’s name] is bringing that fire! [i.e., making good music],” or “Keep going, [artist] I see you!” These reinforcements are ways that fans signal to artists that they are doing hip-hop properly. Likewise, through retweeting these messages, artists are showing others they have had their hip-hop performances positively assessed.

Burner said that he has had interactions with fans he has met that have motivated him to continue making music. He described an experience with a fan:

This one guy came to me and it almost brought me to tears. He said that listening to my mixtape talked him out of doing some stupid shit. He was going through it with his wife and his kid and they was getting kicked out of their place and he told me that he listened to my shit on repeat because...it was about a lot of the struggle that I was going through at the time. He told me he related to it. This was back maybe 2012-ish. He told me that it helped him get through those times. To understand that someone can relate to your music that is indescribable. Knowing that I can curb someone's mood in 3 and half minutes it's cool. (Interview, 4/28/15)

Burner’s fan approached his music with the expectations of finding solace in their shared struggle. The fan’s ability to relate to Burner’s music indicates that Burner was able to keep it real and accurately represent struggle and strife. Burner’s expectations of realness involve accurately representing himself in a way that others find relatable. Seeing himself as the reason that the fan’s mood was “curbed” and that he did not engage in any “stupid shit³³” showed him that the fan assessed his music as genuine. The fan sharing that with him reinforced Burner’s behaviors.

³³ Burner said that he felt the fan was insinuating that he may have hurt himself or his family in a follow-up to that response.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter brings the concept of interactional accountability into the analysis of the interactions of members of the underground rap music scene in Pittsburgh. In doing so, I outline the process of “doing hip-hop” as artists attempt to make themselves legible as hip-hop subjects. Artists seek recognition as hip-hop subjects to legitimize themselves as artists (i.e., to be taken seriously) to establish a pathway towards breaking into the rap music industry. To gain fans and larger industry recognition, artists must learn and demonstrate the ability to do hip-hop in a proper way.

An essential part of doing hip-hop is “keeping it real,” which artists describe as the ability to honestly and genuinely express their “real” lives and emotions. While their creed of keeping it real relies on honesty, artists admit that they will often stretch that truth to make themselves more marketable. They often struggle with trying to “be themselves” versus trying to “be who others want them to be,” which one artist referred to as a “hellbox.” This hellbox has artists struggling with providing accurate representations of their daily lives while knowing that they can gain commercial appeal by citing norms that they find stereotypical, racist, or denigrating. As they seek to establish themselves as hip-hop subjects, they hold themselves and others accountable, and are held accountable by others, to the normative expectations of doing hip-hop.

My focus on doing hip-hop and interactional accountability adds to the understanding of how interactions shape behaviors and products in cultural industries. While rappers may seek to avoid or resist stereotypes, they are held accountable to the expectations of others. For aspiring artists, the expectations of fans and record executives carry significant weight because they feel they must do hip-hop in a way that meets those expectations in order to make money off of their

art. The tension between keeping it real and the hellbox involved in doing hip-hop creates an environment in which the content of rap music is mediated not by the free will of the artist, but by their perceptions of what would work best in establishing their career. By examining these ethnomethodological processes, I analyze the conditions that produce rap music and performances, which are often used as the units of observation for analyses of hip-hop. I have shown that the messages and content of rap music are best seen as a response by artists to the expectations as they seek to gain lucrative exposure within the commercial rap music industry. This is not to say that the critiques of rap music as violent, misogynistic, homophobic, etc., are misrepresenting the feelings of the artistry. Rather, it is to show how an industry that rewards those themes creates a system of interaction and structures the behaviors of artists and fans.

5.0 MAKING IT IN PITTSBURGH'S UNDERGROUND RAP SCENE

In previous chapters, I have examined the sets of interactions that shape rappers as they attempt to make a career out of rap music. These interactions uncover a system of accountability and highlight the horizontal hostility that circulates among artists in their daily pursuit of their goals. This chapter shows how concepts important in previous chapters (horizontal hostility, accountability, and music scenes) influences the strategies individuals use in attempts to make a career out of rap music. Previous chapters highlight how artists understand who they are as artists and how they project that self-understanding to their audiences, peers, and potential employers. Additionally, previous chapters provide contextualize the rap music scene in Pittsburgh, how artists relate to one another, and how they encourage and discourage certain behaviors. In this chapter, I focus on the strategies utilized by artists to transition from “amateurs” to “professionals” (Stebbins 1992). By documenting this process of professionalization, I examine the “discourse of professionalism” (Evetts 2011) that circulates in the Pittsburgh scene.

While many hold other jobs to “keep the lights on,” most of the individuals in the community I study consider rap music as their primary profession. Individuals oriented towards pursuing a career in the rap music industry engage in a variety of practices aside from making music. For many, these practices are parts of a professionalization process whereby these

amateur musicians work on acclimating themselves to the demands of the music industry. For an artist who is “on the come up,” or attempting to crossover to the mainstream music industry, there are endless tasks related to this pursuit. While a focus on improving his or her musical and performance skills is necessary, artists must also attempt to gain exposure to his or her work.

In what follows, I analyze artists’ accounts and personal observations on the obstacles artists face and the strategies they deploy as they attempt to break into the commercial rap music industry. I analyze the common pathways that bring artists to the realization that they wish to pursue rap music as a career. In doing so, I uncover social, economic, and cultural forces that guide artists into their aspirations in music. I also analyze how artists understand what it means to “make it” in rap music and how that shapes their outlook on their music. As was the case in previous chapters, these definitions highlight a struggle between how artists see themselves and how they feel they are seen by others. I catalog the set of strategies artists deploy as they try to “make it,” and show that and why aspiring artists view some strategies more favorably than others. Artists also face a set of obstacles that impede their attempts to make it into the industry. I then analyze the discourse of professionalism that circulates in the Pittsburgh scene to highlight the traits that artists deem desirable in attempting to break into the rap music industry. My goal in this chapter is to highlight the similarities between rapping as a profession and any other profession. Artists discover their talent or otherwise find inspiration to pursue rap music as a career, engage in an extensive training process, and undergo a process in which they learn how to make themselves employable.

5.1 BECOMING A RAPPER

While almost all the artists I spoke with were fans of rap music, few aspired to becoming a rapper at an early age. In their accounts of their careers, artists described how they realized the connections between rap music and other aspects of their lives. For some, desire to pursue rap music as a career grew out of involvement in church. Others' passion for poetry brought them to rap music. Still others saw rap music as a desirable alternative to pursuing higher education or more traditional careers. These different pathways always led artists to dabble in rap music, mostly as a hobby or a form of personal expression not meant to be shared with others. However, artists typically described an inspirational moment where they realized that they had a talent for rap music, or as some called it, "a gift." These inspirational moments were either brought on by a decision to share their music with friends who offered encouragement, or were catalysts for artists' decisions to share their music with friends who then offered encouragement.

In this section, I draw on the similarities and differences in artists' accounts of their pathways into rap music to describe the various social forces that help steer artists into their careers as musicians. Few artists' pathways into the rap music industry are linear; most leave music periodically, or at least let other pursuits take priority over their music career. What these accounts show is how rappers see the rap music industry as an alternative to education and "traditional" vocations and wage labor. Rappers speak of their pursuit of rap music as a "calling" (Weber 1905) rather than as a rejection of capitalist notions of work.³⁴ While rappers hold most modern forms of work in contempt, they pursue rap music because they feel that is where their

³⁴ Kris and Kurz (1987) explore artists' notions of their art as their "calling." Additionally, Jeffries and Thorsby (1994) discuss an "inner drive" that motivates visual artists to become professionals.

skill set is best utilized. In fact, their attempts at making a career in rap music are rooted in an entrepreneurial spirit that is very much in line with modern notions of Neoliberalism and Capitalism.

5.1.1 From the Church to the Stage

Three of the artists interviewed (Actshawn, Greazy, and Scrollz) specifically described the connections in their life between their church and rap music. They provided valuable insight into how the church can shape or prime individuals' pursuits of rap music as a career. While none of these artists consider themselves "gospel rappers" (Barnes 2008), they talked about how their experiences with the church and their religion helped inspire their careers. Artists described how they learned how to perform from their time in church and how the teachings of religious scripture influence their lyrical content. Greazy and Scrollz also document how hip-hop's image as "secular music" made it difficult for them to make the decision to attempt to make a career in rap music.

As I will show in this section, an ethnomethodological focus provides a vital role in understanding the relationship between religion and rap music. As is the same with other aspects of hip-hop culture and rap music, researchers have analyzed the similarities between rap and religion in terms of the "sensibilities" they produce (Pinn 2003). Additionally, researchers have shown how hip-hop artists utilize religious imagery in their lyrical content and imagery (Utley 2012). Others examine how hip-hop figures present themselves as religious figures and the role religion plays in their music (Miller, Pinn, and Freeman 2015). Scholars have also examined how black churches have incorporated rap music into their services or provide guidance on how to

incorporate rap music into services (Barnes 2008, Smith and Jackson 2012). What is missing is a comprehensive discussion of how religion and the church shapes the aspirations and decisions of rappers as they attempt to make a career in the industry. This section asserts that a great deal can be learned from how the church influences artists in ways that go beyond how they express their religion (or lack thereof) in their music and videos. The church provides training for artists and a venue that can expose them to performance for the first time.

Greazy “grew up in the church” where his parents helped organize and performed with the choir. At an early age, Greazy was introduced to music, in the form of gospel. As he got older, he began to sing in and play instruments to accompany the church choir. He honed his drumming skills and learned to play the guitar in this religious context, spending most of his time performing religious music. At the same time, Greazy’s peers were listening to rap music, which his parents would not allow. He recalled, “If it wasn’t Will Smith, it was not getting played [in my parent’s house]. I wanted to get a 50 [Cent] album, I wanted to get a Jay-Z album, [but] they wouldn’t let me” (Interview, 10/27/14). While Will Smith’s music is still secular, he is an artist who made his reputation on keeping his music free from violence, drug use, and swearing, and was therefore deemed as acceptable to Greazy’s religious parents. Will Smith’s music was extremely popular at the time, but it was not considered as “cool” rap music to many fans. Greazy brings up 50 Cent and Jay-Z, two artists that would be considered “cool” by most rap fans at the time, in comparison to Will Smith to show his desire to be “in” with other fans of rap music, but to show how he was unable to do so.

Despite his limited ability to consume rap music under the watch of his parents, Greazy was still able to listen to rap music when hanging out with friends. Through this exposure,

Greazy became a fan of mainstream rap music beyond the Will Smith records that his parents sanctioned. He said that eventually:

We [he and his parents] found a compromise in me doing Christian rap. I was in a group called [Group's name]. We had this single, "[Go Read the Bible]," when I was 16 at the time. I used to write ferociously. I had a notebook in hand all the time. I had bars.³⁵ I was on stage performing and doing that for like two or three years. (Interview, 10/27/14).

Greazy melded his Christian upbringing and his fandom of rap music and entered the scene as a Christian rapper. During that time, he was able to put the key skills he learned through his involvement in the church to use in rap music. As a member of the church choir, he learned musical arrangements and music theory. Those skills then transferred to making beats for his rap group. His rap group produced an elaborate music video during a workshop through their church youth group. This group also performed their songs in front of their youth group and church, which helped them learn about performance and how to interact with the crowd. While these skills were fostered in the church to keep Greazy and his peers involved in the church and learn to praise the Lord, the skills themselves are secular. These practices of performing and producing music were fostered in the church and then utilized for secular purposes by Greazy. Greazy's involvement in the church may not have inspired him to explore his faith through music, but it taught him valuable practices he then used to develop a name for himself in Pittsburgh's rap scene.

Greazy eventually left his Christian rap group, and rapping in general, to attend college. While attending college, Greazy became a producer, where he used the skills he learned playing music to create beats for secular rappers. He is currently one of the most-respected producers in

³⁵ The term "bars," in hip-hop vernacular, is a way of saying that one has talent at rapping. "Bars" refer to a couplet of rap lyrics. Saying that one "has bars" means that they have quality lyrics.

Pittsburgh because of his ability to incorporate a wide palette of different sounds into rap music. Greazy credits his parents' insistence that he avoid rap music for helping him develop this palette because it got him to listen to other types of music that he can now incorporate into his own.

Greazy's outlook on hip-hop is very much inspired by his experiences in the church. In fact, he told me that part of what drew him to hip-hop was that:

Hip-hop is like a religion. It really is a way of life. I call it a religion because when you see how other religions are, like I have, [you see how] you build your life around certain religions. How you sleep, how you eat, how you dress, how you talk to people, how you go about your day. Hip-hop is the same way. (Interview, 10/27/14)

Greazy's experience with Christianity has helped him to devote himself to hip-hop. Because he sees the similarities between the two in terms of devotion, he can understand how hip-hop structures his daily life. He understands the rules and regulations surrounding how he ought to do hip-hop in the same way he understands things that help him become a "good Christian."

Greazy's experience with the intersections of religion and rap music was the most involved of the three who discussed religion, with his experiences with his faith helping shape his orientations toward hip-hop and teaching him the technical skills of performance. Greazy learned who to treat something as "a way of life" from the church that he transferred to his devotion to hip-hop.

Actshawn, in contrast, focused on the technical skills he learned from his church experience and how that has helped him in his career. His developed practices related to memory techniques for scriptures, language, voice projection, and rhythm that he says made him comfortable as he attempted to make it as a rapper. He describes his experience:

I get [my performance skills] from when I was in church and I would have to remember scriptures. You'd always have to remember and say a whole four- to six-verse scripture and do it every Sunday. And you would get up there in front of

the whole church and you're like, yo, I gotta say this scripture, I hope I don't mess up! (Interview, 2/18/15)

Actshawn recalled how reciting church scriptures got him to feel comfortable in front of a crowd. He remarked that the scripture recitations were looked at very seriously by the congregation, so "messaging up" was not taken lightly. As a rapper, he understands that if he forgets his lyrics on stage, he will be criticized for not taking his performance seriously just as he would be accused of not taking his faith seriously if he forgot his scripture reading.

Aside from teaching Actshawn to avoid embarrassment in his performance, these scripture recitations provided him with skills that are helpful when he makes a new song. He continued:

There were times that I learned the scripture just that morning. I had to get up at 8am and I knew we was going to church at 11am. I had to learn 4 little scripture verses. That taught me a creative process and remembering and trying to figure out the pieces to a song and everything. It's not easy. It's not just about, oh, put on a beat and I'm going to rap. (Interview, 2/18/15)

The act of preparing himself for church has informed his creative process. He feels he is better equipped to put together a song because he has had experience dissecting how Bible verses are arranged. He understands from experience the mnemonics of performance, whether liturgical or musical. While his music may not have the same structure as Bible verses or feature of religious imagery, he still learned valuable lessons about narrative structure as he attempted to memorize and recite scriptures. He said that he would think about what would logically come next when he would stumble with his scripture memorization. With music, he says he engages in a similar process, only the next verse of his song "hasn't been written yet."

While he had a similar experience to Greazy, the intersection between religion and rap music in Scrollz' life provided both hindrance and help. Growing up with his mother, whom he

describes as a “strong Christian woman,” Scrollz was exposed mainly to gospel music. After being introduced to rap music when his uncle gave him a Jay-Z CD, Scrollz fell in love with the music and decided he wanted to pursue it as a career. Greazy gained the support of his parents by starting his career as a Christian rapper (later producing secular music), but Scrollz’s mother’s support was hard-won:

My mom took a long time to accept that I was going to [become a rapper] and I was [becoming a rapper] because she’s a Christian woman. She was like, “It’s secular music,” and she has her own image of what rap is like because she knows like two rappers...all she knew was like weed-smoking hood dudes and she didn’t want me to be influenced by that so she was like, “You can’t listen to that.”
(Interview 4/24/14)

Scrollz’ religious upbringing acted as a barrier to his entrance into the rap music industry. While he wanted to pursue it as a career, he had limited exposure to the music because of his mom’s restrictions on the music. Additionally, he was hesitant to try to become a professional rapper because of his relationship with his mother. He wanted her to support his life decisions, but knew that was going to be a tough sell if his decisions included pursuing “secular music.” He went on to pursue rap music, and says that his mother is becoming more and more accepting of his music as she recognizes his talent. Greazy’s start in the Christian rap genre helped him earn the blessings of his parents. He then used this acceptance to transition into secular rap music. This transition is similar to artists like pop-superstar Katy Perry (and countless others), who began her career in Gospel music to keep the respect of her religious parents before transitioning to (secular) pop music (Zimmerman 2015). Scrollz, however, went headfirst into secular rap music, against the wishes of his mother.

Scrollz’ struggle with the apparent contradictions among his Christian upbringing, his respect for his mother’s wishes, and his desires to participate in secular pursuits formed the basis

of the album I observed him creating. As we sat and listened to the music, Scrollz told me that almost every song on the album is about what he sees as this “duality”. He said that he wants his audience to know that his life experiences are drawn from both his life in the church with his mother and his life from a “rough neighborhood” in Pittsburgh where he witnessed the illegal drug trade and gun violence. For example, in one song, he pointed out, he talks about how he has both a Bible and a gun in his car. He said that this imagery is intended to show how his life has seen him both accept God (thus, the Bible), and turn away from Him (thus, the gun). While Scrollz does not feel he created a “religious album,” he said that his experiences with Christianity inspired him to write songs about the duality of good and evil (Field Notes, 5/10/14).

These three artists described how their pathway into rap music was influenced by their involvement in the Christian church and their parents. For some artists, the practices and rituals in church services provided early exposure to some of the skills necessary to develop a career in rap music. The other artists, like Greazy in his early years as a rapper, draw inspiration from their faith and use rap music as a vehicle of worship. Perhaps the act of “testifying” in church has oriented artists toward their beliefs that they should keep it real in their music. In both cases, they seek to represent their individual standpoint honestly and share that with their audience. The interactions between these artists and their religious upbringings highlight how religion can influence the careers of artists beyond providing inspiration for imagery and lyrical content. While Actshawn, Scrollz, and Greazy draw creative inspiration from religion, they also appropriate the behaviors and the skills they learned in the church into the context of their musical career.

5.1.2 Putting Poetry in Motion

Individuals also described how poetry acted as a pathway into the Pittsburgh rap music scene. Several artists indicated that they exhibited a passion for poetry at a young age. As they gained exposure to rap music, they recognized the similarities between it and poetry, which piqued their interest. They also suspected that being a poet might be a difficult career aspiration. Artists began expressing themselves creatively through poetry and then transitioned to rap music. Poetry not only taught them rhyme schemes, imagery, alliterations, and meter, but it also taught narrative structure and performance techniques.

Nine artists described how poetry influenced their careers as rappers. Alchemist said that poetry gave legitimacy to rap music for him. Growing up, Alchemist admitted that he was never a big fan of rap music: “You can’t spell ‘crap’ without ‘rap,’ I used to say” (Interview, 9/12/14). He sought to emulate his mother, who is a writer, by taking up poetry. As he ventured into the city from his suburban origins, he had a realization: “I hung out with dudes [from the city] and I saw that rap was just like poetry in motion and I was like, wow, people my age think this is cool. That’s how I started doing what I do” (Interview, 9/12/14). After seeing how rap music was influenced by poetry, Alchemist gained more respect for the musical genre. Shortly thereafter, he realized that rap music was a way to use his poetry skills to increase his popularity. However, he knew that his pursuit of rap music would not come without challenges:

I wrote poetry and I realized that rap was a cool version of poetry for people my age. People liked rap music more [than poetry]. Once I got into it, though, I realized that not a lot of people were going to support me off the bat because I was just a white kid from the suburbs that was trying to rap. People probably would have liked me better if I would have stayed making poetry for a while there [*laughs*]. (Interview, 9/12/14)

Alchemist wanted to pursue rap music because he saw it as a “cooler” version of poetry. By rapping, he imagined, he would be able to gain the acceptance of his peers and ascend the social ladder. However, he felt that his position as a “white kid from the suburbs” would inhibit him from establishing legitimacy in the genre. Despite the similarities he sees between rap music and poetry, Alchemist establishes rap music as an inner-city black pursuit while establishing poetry as a suburban, white pursuit. Even though he assumed these divisions, he still made the transition from poetry to rap music, where he found acceptance from both white and black audiences.

Just like Alchemist, Rydah described how he began writing poetry before he began writing raps. Rydah said that he “got into writing poetry when [he] was younger” and eventually transitioned to writing raps (Interview, 10/7/14). For Rydah, poetry was an emotional outlet. He says that as he matured, he began to see how he could express his emotions better through rap music. The emotions he was looking to express dealt with his personal depression as well as his response to the struggles he witnessed in the neighborhood in which he grew up. Rydah believes that because of rap music’s history as a voice of inner-city struggles it is a better emotional outlet for him than poetry. While Alchemist positioned poetry as the pursuit of “a white kid from the suburbs,” Rydah often avoided using this sort of racial language, often promoting a “colorblind” ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2010). However, Rydah made a similar demarcation as Alchemist did: poetry is an outlet for (white) suburban people and rap music is an outlet for (black) inner-city people. Rydah (who identifies as a black man) went as far as to say that if it was for “people like him,” but stopped short of associating poetry with whiteness and rap music with blackness like Alchemist did explicitly. As a white kid from the suburbs, Alchemist points out how he should feel comfortable (or accepted) in the medium of poetry in the same way that Rydah feels he should feel comfortable (or accepted) in the medium of rap music. Both believe they are “out of

place” in the other medium because of the white/black suburban/urban divide they associate, or believe others associate, with each of the art forms.

Rubble, like Rydah, saw rap music as a better way than poetry to express his personal experiences. He explained that he approached rap music through the lens of poetry:

Rap music has always been corporal in my life since early on. I wouldn't say that it was in the forefront. I did a lot of poetry to start...So, when I started to really listen to rap music, and to get the gist [of the music], I saw the stories and just some of the ways rappers put stories together. I liked how they could do that. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Like Rydah, Rubble's interest in pursuing rap music came from his realization that the genre offered a way to express his story in a desirable manner. During their interview, Rubble and Actshawn mocked the cadence of slam poets and insinuated that the style of slam poetry was less authentic to them than rap music. He said that because rappers tend to keep it real, their stories come across in a less “preachy” and condescending tone than he feels is typical of slam poetry. Poetry helped spark Rubble's passion for self-expression while rapping provided what he sees as the best vehicle for that self-expression.

One Stop also found rap music to be a way for her to merge interests in poetry with her other interests in music and performance. Also, in addition to Alchemist's pursuits of social acceptance and Rydah's and Rubble's pursuits of emotional expression, One Stop recognized that she could get paid while pursuing these interests with rap music. She said:

[Rap music] is just another form of expression. As an artist, I've always been a storyteller and a writer and a poet. So, [rap] was just a natural development in a sense. I've always been interested in music; music definitely came before writing for me. So, I always knew from a very young age that I could create, that I enjoyed it, and I think that I eventually got to a point where I was like, wow, I can make money from doing this! That's cool! So, I pursued rapping. (Interview, 1/27/15)

One Stop made a “natural development” of combining her passions as a musician and a poet to become a rapper. While other artists only implied that rap music was a way to monetize their poetry, One Stop stated it directly as a motivation. While it is certainly possible to have a successful career in poetry, the artists in my sample believed that rap music was a more viable route to financial rewards. These artists are perhaps motivated by the pervasive glorification of economic success in rap music imagery that is not typically associated with poetry (or storytelling and writing).

Rubble’s transition from poetry to rapping was brought on by a similar realization. While he appreciated the similarities between rap music and poetry, and even thought rap music better served him as a form of self-expression, he did not believe he had what it takes to make it in rap music. As he became more involved with poetry, he realized this transition was possible:

[My poetry] always sounded like raps. They always rhymed in the way that I wrote. I would read joints and then cats would be like, “Okay, you ever think about putting that on a beat?” I’d be like, no, I’m not that comfortable [doing that]. I wasn’t even comfortable reading poetry out loud. I got comfortable over the years of just reading my poetry at small little events here and there. Then, after a while, I was like, yeah, I guess I can make the transition. (Interview, 2/18/15)

Rubble provides an account that demonstrates how the act of reciting poetry (similar to Actshawn’s experiences with reciting scripture), in addition to poetry’s structure and its function as a form of self-expression, helped him develop the practices required to become a rapper. This realization, coupled with the encouragement of his peers, were his motivations in deciding to become a rapper. Like Actshawn’s experiences in the church, Rubble’s experiences with poetry helped him develop the skills and comfort with performing that he deemed necessary to begin his career as a rapper.

For someone like Ben, who is a manager and acts as an amateur rap music critic via his blog, his appreciation of poetry and other forms of writing helped foster his appreciation of rap music. As a fan of rap music at an early age, he said:

As I went through [rap music] more and more, I started to think about what I like about it. I've always been into words, whether it's writing or essays or poetry, so, rap music came naturally as far as me being fascinated by it. I was really intrigued by how [rappers] put their words together and still kept with the rhythm. I started counting syllables and noticing which ones are accented and which ones aren't. I thought that was really cool. (Interview, 6/6/14)

Ben described how his experiences with poetry and other forms of writing inform his appreciation of rap music. Even though he was a fan early on, his fascination and critical involvement with the genre were aided by the skills he learned other forms of writing.

Individuals in Pittsburgh's rap music scene express an appreciation for the intersections between poetry and rap music in a way that goes beyond their structural similarities. In some cases, they see rapping as a "cooler," or more socially acceptable, version of poetry. They also describe how they have used the practices they learned from poetry to aid in their pursuit of rap music as a career. In some ways, artists use poetry to give rap music a legitimacy that they feel the genre is not afforded. While they initially see poetry as a more "serious" creative pursuit, they learn that rap music involves a comparable amount of creativity, skill, practice, knowledge, and dedication. Poetry also provides some of the necessary skills for them to pursue their careers in rap music like stagecraft, delivery, connection, etc.

Seeing how poetry acts as a gateway to a career in rap music uncovers how these individuals define and utilize notions of the distinctions (Bourdieu 1987) surrounding cultural production. Alchemist distinguishes between urban/suburban and white/black distinctions of cultural consumption and production as he suggests poetry is seen as a pursuit more suitable for a

“suburban white kid.” Rydah and Rubble distinguish between authentic and inauthentic forms of cultural expression as they highlight the merits of rapping over poetry. One Stop, Rubble, and Ben discuss how the skills learned in poetry can be transferred to rap music, suggesting that the music genre is worthy of equal merit.

5.1.3 Rap Music as an Alternative to Education

For artists in Pittsburgh, the decision to pursue rap music as a career was appealing because it provided an alternative to a hegemonic work paradigm that focuses on educational attainment as a pathway to success. Of the 25 artists interviewed, the majority (22) attended college or community college for at least one semester. Of those 22, seven left school before obtaining a degree, thirteen received a bachelor’s or associate degree, one received a master’s degree, and one received a doctorate. Even though this sample is highly educated, artists expressed a desire to pursue rap music because they were unsatisfied with the lifestyle that they would be afforded through their academic pursuits. They feel overwhelmingly that their education has set them up for an unfulfilling life of waged or salaried labor. Many of the artists who attended college framed their time spent there as a placeholder in their lives while they figured out what they wanted to do professionally. In most cases, artists came to the realization that they wanted to either leave school to pursue music, or obtain their degrees to secure a “regular job” to help fund their musical pursuits.

Several artists focused on their displeasure with the common pathway of modern capitalism in which individuals must attend college and secure a “good job” in their explanations for either leaving school or deciding not to attend school altogether. They feel that their desired

career, in the rap music industry, is not accepted by society as a whole. As Virus explained in his account of why he left school, artists desired a more fulfilling life than the life they feel they would have pursuing “traditional” forms of wage labor:

But we don't value expression. Right now, it's all about go to college, do something that is boring, something secure, [where] you're not really going to be happy, [but] that doesn't matter, make a bunch of money, have some babies, and then die. I'm like, that sounds crazy!...If there's a chance that I don't have to lead a really boring 9-5 life, then, fuck, I'm on it. (Interview, 6/5/14)

Like Virus, many artists believe that rap music would provide them with the ability to remove themselves from a dead-end life of lock-step education, work, and family. Rap music provides these artists an alternative to this conventional trajectory.

Snyder (2012) examines how individuals in the skateboarding subculture conceptualize their career pursuits in a similar manner. While subcultural theorists informed by the Birmingham school have avoided analyzing this notion and focused on participation in subcultures as a way to resist working-class ideals, Snyder's subjects, along with my respondents, show how individuals can use subcultures or music scenes to provide themselves with less-conventional career opportunities. Snyder (2012) writes:

The fact that people make careers out of their subcultural participation means that the radical promise that many had invested in stylistically resistant working-class subcultures has been dashed. And while some have decried subculturalists for selling out, this research shows that many people become involved in subcultures with the hope that they may be able to have a career doing what they love to do. (315)

I believe that artists in the Pittsburgh rap music scene do not use rap music as a way to avoid work entirely. I disagree with Hall and Jefferson's (1976) contention that “there is not ‘subcultural career’ for the working class lad” (47). My respondents often embrace the amount of “work” involved in becoming an artist. Rather, their involvement in rap music, as Snyder (2012)

points out, supports McRobbie's (2002) assertion that this involvement is evidence of "young people's ambitions and desires for success 'on their own terms'" (318, emphasis removed). I see artists' involvement in the rap music industry as their attempt to reformulate what is considered "work" rather than resisting it altogether.

Rappers expressed a desire to remove themselves from this paradigm of work not because they desired a life of leisure. None of the artists I spoke with described their decisions to pursue rap music as a way to avoid work or make "easy money." Rather, they wanted to pursue rap music because they believe their "calling" (Weber 1905) to be an entertainer or an artist. Scrollz described his decision-making process in precisely these terms:

Personally, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life when I was 17...[I thought], I could go to college, and I did, and do something that I would be good at, but I knew that I just had a greater calling with words...I could go to school, be a writer, but would I be fulfilled? There's certain things that are inside of you that you just have to do or you're wasting what God gave you. It's not like I tried to be good at rap. I was just kind of naturally talented at it...It wasn't like I needed to try to want to do it, like, "Oh man, I really need to be a rapper because this or that." It was just like, "Okay, well, I'm good at it and let's not waste whatever talent God gave me." (Interview, 4/24/14)

In this account, Scrollz demonstrates how artists conceive of their pursuit of careers in manner similar to other professions. His pursuit of rapping sprang from a self-identified aptitude (a "natural talent at it"), a spiritual compulsion (a "greater calling with words"), and a desire to be "fulfilled" through labor. Scrollz decided to pursue rap music because of an internal obligation he felt to utilize his "God-given" talent and share that with the world. He saw a career in rap music a better route to self-realization than a college degree. Rather than conceptualizing rap music as a way to avoid working, Scrollz views it as a way to best utilize his skills and share them with society.

Scrollz admits that he mimicked the structure of college in his pursuit of rap music. He described his orientation toward his pursuit of “getting on,” or being signed by a record label, as resembling what he sees as a typical apprenticeship. To be successful in his attempts to get a record deal, and to find out if this was really what he wanted to do with his life, he decided to give himself four years—the equivalent of the time he would invest in college. He figured he could afford to invest four years to learn how to make music, perfect his lyricism and music, and observe the steps artists must take to move from the hip-hop underground to the hip-hop mainstream. This led him to start a collective with his friends and spend his days writing, recording, and attempting to make a name for himself in Pittsburgh. His most recent album came at his four-year anniversary of this promise he made to himself. In his opinion, this album was his real professional debut and a sort of exit exam of this time in “college.” This is another example of artists not looking to avoid traditional pathways to “success,” but looking to restructure these pathways on their own terms.

Some artists believe that their pursuit of a music career is more time-sensitive than their pursuit of higher education. That is, they feel they need to try to make it in the music industry while they are still young, while college can wait. Virus said that college is a viable fallback plan for him because he knows that “college isn’t going anywhere; [he] can always come back to it” (Interview, 6/5/14). Wheels agreed with this sentiment when he said that the biggest piece of advice he would give to individuals looking to make a career out of rap music is to “start early” (Interview, 10/28/14). Wheels, the only respondent with a master’s degree, feels that he entered the rap music late (at age 28) because he was pursuing another career in social work. While he maintains a job in the field for which he is formally trained, he wishes he would have seen a career in rap music as a possibility earlier in his life. He prioritized his education ahead of his

interests in music, and while he is extremely proud of his academic accomplishments, he feels that his window for making it in rap music is quickly closing because younger artists are more desirable to record companies. Artists believe that they can always go back and obtain a college degree, but starting their music career must happen at an early age. Menger (1999) shows that orchestral musicians, dancers, and other artists have decreased chances of upward mobility in their occupations as they age. There is nothing about hip-hop that would suggest this arena would be any different in this regard.

Rydah's account of how he came to the decision to pursue rap music encompasses many of the themes common in artists' responses. He began his rap career as he was starting college, but ran into financial troubles while trying to pay for his education. He provided this outlook on his experience:

When I got into a financial issue with school, I really sat down and decided that a lot of people don't go for what they really love and what they want to do and what they know. A lot of people do what they tell you to do. Like, after high school you are supposed to get a job or go to college. That's the only way to be successful. But, if people really tried and put as much effort into what they love as they do trying to get a degree, there's no way you can't be successful. I made the decision that this is what I want to do and school's kind of on the back burner. As far as I'm concerned, you're never too old for school. So, if by 30-32, rap music doesn't work out for me, I can go back to school. I have a year left [to do in my degree program]. (Interview, 10/7/14).

Rydah echoes the common sense of the lock step life course: the only way to achieve "success" is to "get a job" or "go to college." He rejects this template and says that people should try to pursue their passions, even if that falls outside of this socially acceptable success narrative. Like Scrollz, he advocates for using the same type of dedication one would use pursuing a college degree to pursue what they really love. Even though he is showing this type of dedication to his career, he acknowledges that rap music may not work out for whatever reason, and in that case,

he can always head back and obtain his degree. For Rydah and others, the payoff of realizing their dreams of becoming a rap artist is worth the risk of not making it. They realize that, should they not make it, they always have the opportunity to engage in a “normal” career. Even though he maintains a level of dedication where “there’s no way [he] can’t be successful,” he recognizes the reality that success stories in his field are few and far between. Other artists make similar rhetorical moves. Rydah both imagines that his success is inevitable because of his work ethic and perhaps concede to realism by placing a time limit on how long to tolerate lack of success before he will revisit his education.

While some artists voluntarily leave or avoid higher education to pursue rap music, others, like Rydah, are forced out of higher education. Rydah was unable to afford his college after his scholarships were revoked.³⁶ Kerve had a similar experience in college:

When I started college, [music] was kind of put on the back burner. So, when 2012 came around, I’m not afraid to admit it, I messed up in school. So, I came home and was like, “I’m not really feeling school right now, but I don’t want to be a regular dude and just work every day. So, the summer of 2012, I was fighting an appeal and writing letters to get back into [my university], while I was also working on my first full-length project. Working on music helped me pass the time because I realized I was probably getting kicked out of school. I didn’t know what I was going to do...I put out my first project on the same day I got a letter from [my university] telling me I wasn’t coming back. I don’t know if that was a blessing or what. (Interview, 6/13/15)

Kerve admits that he “messed up” in school (his grades dropped below the minimum GPA requirements), which helped motivate him in his pursuit of music. The uncertainty of not knowing whether or not he would be welcome back for the next semester and his desire not be a “regular dude [who] work[s] every day” motivated him to complete his debut album. Kerve saw the pursuit of music as providing a more desirable alternative to entering the workforce after

³⁶ Rydah failed to provide details as to why his scholarships were revoked. He simply stated that his grades did not comply with the standards required for his scholarships.

being suspended from his university. He currently works as a nurse technician but, his belief in his music career gives him hope that this is only a temporary position for him.

Miz Taken earned her PhD in Computer Information Systems in 2013. Despite her advanced degree, she maintains “at least five jobs” to support herself and her family (Interview, 5/11/15). As a rapper, event promoter, and owner of a hip-hop clothing store and performance space, at least three of those jobs are outside of her formal training. Miz Taken says that she works in hip-hop not only because she loves it, but because it allows her to supplement her income from working as an adjunct professor at a local college. Miz Taken’s advanced degree is highly lauded by her peers in the rap music industry, showing that they respect her dedication, effort, and accomplishments a great deal. In fact, Miz Taken is afforded even more respect for her academic achievements because she was able to attain them while still pursuing her passions in hip-hop music. This is all to say that even though some artists reject the idea of success being tied to obtaining a college degree and using it to find a “square” job in that field, they do not reject education outright, at least not for others who have academic success. Rather, they would like to see the normative understanding of how one should pursue “success” incorporate their chosen paths. These artists are not looking to reject “success” or “work ethic,” but are critical of lock-step trajectory and lack of a “path” to arts careers.

For artists in Pittsburgh’s rap music industry, music provides an alternative pathway to success aside from one that values college education and wage labor. For some artists, the pursuit of a career in rap music is a way for them to pursue their interests, even if they fall outside of those legitimized in the university. They describe how their pathway to success involves a similar dedication, talent, and discipline to that required by those seeking higher education. The realization for some artists that school “just isn’t for me” (Greazy, Interview,

10/27/14) give them the motivation to pursue a career in rap music. What the above shows, and what I will emphasize in later sections, is that rappers create and define alternative pathways to success. That involves artists' creating and finding strategies for success, overcoming obstacles impeding their success, and developing a conception of what success means. Success to them is defined most commonly by "making it." I analyze how artists define making it in the next section.

5.2 MAKING IT IN RAP MUSIC

As they advance their careers, artists build sense of purpose related to what it means to "make it" in the rap music industry. Artists invest "making it" with various meanings, but all definitions involve establishing rap music as their primary source of income. In short, rappers feel that to "make it" is to achieve "success," however that is defined. Artists typically benchmarked "making it" by three criteria: getting a record deal, obtaining some amount of wealth beyond their current income, and transitioning from a fan of famous rappers to a peer.

As I have explained elsewhere, artists often struggle with their personal understanding of their career and their music in relation to how they feel these things will be understood by others. "Making it" is no different. All of the artists said that they were trying to "make it" in the rap music industry, but what that means is highly individualized. Swiss' description is typical:

What does making it mean? I don't know. You know, this is a great question because making it for everyone is different. I get kids who come in here [to his studio] and they'll say, "Who are you?" Because I didn't 'make it' in the sense of [being] on *XXL*, and on all the blogs...This is what I do every morning. I woke up every morning the past four years professionally and helped people materialize what they had in their brains...to me, I made it. (Interview, 10/22/14)

Swiss realizes that his own definitions of success may not correspond with those of the people coming into his studio. For him, he has achieved a level of success that affords him the ability to have his music studio as his sole source of income. He feels that those who come to his studio may look down on him because he has not been featured on popular hip-hop magazines or blogs. Swiss' ideas of success differ from the ideas of those who criticize him in both scale and scope. His ability to work locally with other artists and "help them materialize" their music differs from the conceptualization of success provided by those who come to his studio who believe that success is defined by gaining national attention. Swiss continued:

Unfortunately, that's how the world works. A good buddy of mine said, "The world works on a social ladder and you need to be looked at socially as a success. And socially as a success is not the same as success in our brains." And you know, to you, success might be drinking a coffee, watching Netflix, and all your bills are paid. That's a fucking success. That's a success to me. If I don't have nothing to worry about, all my bills are paid, and I can just watch TV? That's success! Because I don't have nothing to worry about, no one is telling me what to do, how to do it, I'm not in jail, I'm not on welfare, I'm a self-sustaining member of society. That's should be success in people's minds, but it's not. [For them,] success is who you are rubbing shoulders with [or] how big your last hit was. (Interview, 10/22/14)

Swiss feels that his orientations toward success do not correspond with the orientations of those who may assess him. For him, success is tied to being able to afford a comparatively laid-back arts-oriented lifestyle (i.e., run a music studio, drink coffee, watch Netflix, etc.). He realizes that he may not look like a success "socially" because he feels that others measure success on the basis of his fame and productivity. Despite his understanding that his ideas of success "in his brain" may not place him high on that "social ladder," Swiss is extremely positive when it comes to his "success." Swiss has seen incredible growth and now has over 400 "paying" clients in the 4 years his studio has been in operation. I say "paying" because while most clients at Swiss' studio are charged an hourly fee, he does some work with artists, like Scrollz, free of charge.

Swiss takes on these clients because of his belief in their music. Even though he says he is not concerned about getting a “hit” to come out of his studio, taking on clients free of charge because of their perceived talent suggests otherwise. If Scrollz, or another non-paying client, were to gain mainstream commercial success off of something produced in his studio, he would be able to afford the laid-back arts-oriented lifestyle he desires. He also talked about how lucky he feels to be able to run a studio as his sole source of income and how much he enjoys his work and life.

Artists set modest criteria for “making it” in part because hip-hop is loaded with imagery of conspicuous consumption. I infer that artists avoid including making exorbitant amounts of money among their criteria for “success” in hop-hop because they understand that few artists become superstars; although no one said so explicitly, many artists pointed to Mac Miller and Wiz Khalifa as rare examples of superstardom. Another explanation may be that artists downplay their desires for extremely lucrative record deals because of worries of becoming a “sell out” when they “make it” (Sköld and Rehn 2007). Artists did describe making it as being in control of their own careers while being able to make a living from their music, vaguely defined. In other words, obtaining a record deal in which the artist maintains creative control and receives national attention without what they deem to be significant financial compensation would not be a success to them. Conversely, obtaining a record deal without creative control while obtaining national attention and an extremely large paycheck is similarly undesirable. However, they believe that the public and the rap music industry perpetuates an understanding of “making it” that values money over everything. In what follows, I analyze how artists talk about each of these aspects and how they manage their personal accounts of what “making it” is to them in relation to what they think “making it” is to others assessing their careers.

5.2.1 Getting On

One shared feature of artists' explicit criteria for success in hip-hop is that making it involves obtaining a record deal, or, "getting on" a record label. For them, winning a record deal is a formal validation that their music is considered "good" and that they have transitioned from amateur to professional status (Stebbins 1992). Even artists who believe one can make it without "getting on" a record label believe that others often equate making it with signing a record deal. In relation to the material I cover in Chapter 3, obtaining a record deal is a tangible way for artists to create credibility in the local underground scene. Artists with deals have a clearer pathway to broad recognition, and fans are more willing to support them. Take, for example, rapper Boaz, who signed to *Rostrum Records* in 2012, then the label of Wiz Khalifa and Mac Miller. Despite having his debut album, *Intuition*, featured in *XXL*, *Complex*, and other popular hip-hop magazines and blogs, Boaz is far from a household name like Wiz and Mac. Prof-a-see, when describing the Pittsburgh scene, mentioned Wiz and Mac and then said, "Boaz made it, he got a deal" (Interview, 1/27/15), which underscores getting a record deal as being shorthand for making it. As others point out, however, signing a record deal is not always equivalent to making it.

Although different artists add different items further down the list of evidence of "making it," they agree that the first step is to sign a record deal. One Stop described a few aspects of making it, but said that it boils down to "being signed to a large deal." From that "large deal," artists would be able to gain "national recognition." She also concedes that making it "means something as real as record sales" and a large deal is where an artist "is able to then profit from the touring and the additional fanfare that goes with it" (Interview, 1/27/15). In this account, One

Stop touches on several aspects of making it, “record sales,” “national recognition,” and “profit from touring,” all of which artists expect to follow a record deal. Artists do not automatically “make it” upon signing a record deal, but it is seen as a prerequisite of “making it.”

Artists agree that the common perception is that an artist typically “makes it” when they receive a record deal. However, as Wheels described, not all record deals are equal:

I think that's usually defined as having a deal. That's everyone's ultimate goal. “Oh, I got a record deal.” That's how it is defined. Is that how it should be defined? I don't know. For me, making it again would be getting to a point where my shit is appreciated enough to where I can just focus on that. Make a living and be able to hold myself down off music. That's making it to me. Some people think that they've made it just because they got a deal, and they broke as shit. They didn't really make it. But that's their interpretation of making it. “Hey, someone invested in me, I signed a deal.” I think that it all depends. It all depends on the person's goal. (Interview, 10/28/14)

Among rappers, there is a priority placed on obtaining a record deal, even though it may mean little to finances or career trajectory. Wheels says that artists may get a deal, but they may never receive a high level of appreciation and may still be “broke as shit.” Several other artists said that while getting a record deal is a starting point to making it, there are other factors necessary in identifying an artist who has “made it”.

5.2.2 Wealth

Another aspect of “making it” for artists, as Swiss emphasized above, is achieving economic stability. For many artists, making it is signaled by the ability to do nothing but make and perform music to financially support their desired lifestyle. While several artists in my sample relied solely on their music to support their lifestyles, many of them indicated that their current revenue streams were inconsistent and precarious. Unlike the discrepancies in describing the

importance of “getting on,” artists were consistent in establishing that part of making it is being able to provide for yourself, your family, and your friends.

Artists often refer to the work of being an aspiring artist as “the grind.” This apt description refers to the consistent, daily work that artists must put in to gain any headway in the industry. They make and record countless songs, work tirelessly on self-promotion, practice their live performances, and are constantly searching for opportunities to profit off of their music, be it through performance, sponsorships, or record sales. All of these activities together can equate to the time expenditure of at least a full-time job. Often times, these artists are doing all of this work while also working another full- or part-time job. Part of making it would be to be able to ease up on the responsibilities of their other full- and part-time work. Cookie said that making it is “whenever you can live financially free on your own and do what you want. If I could wake up in the morning and do whatever the hell I want to do, that’s how I know [I’ve made it]” (Interview, 6/11/15). Taj agreed that rap artists have made it “validation from the masses and [they are] making money off of [rapping] so that they don’t have to do anything else but rap” (Interview, 5/16/15). Aspiring artists desire financial independence not because they want to engage in frivolous spending, but because they want to escape the economic precarity and “grind” of attempting to make it. Artists propose a tautological position that they will know when they make it because they will no longer have to work at making it.

Artists tie the financial aspects of making it in their lives not to conspicuous consumption, but to anxieties that exist surrounding precarious and low-wage work. Artists were relatively modest in their financial aspirations in the rap music industry, often expressing a sentiment close to that expressed by Flow-er Child:

Making it to me is being able to provide a comfortable lifestyle for myself, my friends, and my family by doing what I love for a living. That, to me, is making it...I don't need \$10 billion and the hottest chick on the planet. I just want to provide for myself and the people I care about and continue to do what I love for the rest of the time I have here. (Interview, 2/11/15).

Artists typically said that they wish to use rap music to provide for themselves and those around them while doing what they love. Because artists treat their musical careers as jobs, they express the same anxieties and hopes as all other precariously employed youth and adults in the service economy. Aspiring hip-hop artists in Pittsburgh are far less concerned with the idea of fame and immense wealth than my preconceptions led me to expect when I headed into the field. In an industry saturated with images of extreme wealth (Rehn and Sköld 2005, Sköld and Rehn 2007), aspiring artists eschew crass materialism and conspicuous consumption. They prefer to describe their desires in terms of “having enough money to secure my family” (Greazy, Interview, 10/27/14) in response to the economic uncertainty that comes with their position as aspiring artists. These are the same anxieties experienced by artists in other genres and other precariously positioned youth.

5.2.3 From Fan to Peer

Artists also say that they will know that they have made it in the rap music industry when they reach the level of success they see achieved by their idols. Aspiring artists still see themselves as fans as well as musicians. Artists describe making it as a shift from being a fan of artists they admire to being a peer with those artists. Additionally, artists gain inspiration from their idols by examining their performances and interactions with their audiences. The shared experiences of the aspiring artist and the mainstream artist in terms of music production and performance helps

inform aspiring artists' ideas of making it. That is, aspiring artists learn how artists they deem as successful are perceived by others, how many records they sell, how large their concerts are, and how devoted their fans are. They use those details to create benchmarks for themselves in their definitions of success. While fans may idolize an artist for their wealth, social life, and/or fame, artists focus on fame when expressing their aspirations.

It is important to note that these aspiring artists are not simply chasing fame in and of itself and equating fame with making it. Rather, they describe making it in a specific way that focuses on their fame as being positively influential and impactful for audiences and rap music in general. Maverick described his views on making it in a way that exemplifies the exact achievements artists may deem necessary for them to feel like they have made it. As a lifelong Jay-Z fan and someone who believes Jay-Z is one of the greatest rappers ever, Maverick said:

When Jay-Z asks me for advice, that's when I know [I've made it]...When Jay-Z asks me for advice on something, then I know that's right around the corner. Right now, I look up to somebody and that's what I want to do. I always told myself when I first started, I'm going to keep going this hard until my inspirations are my enemies. Okay, like Jay, 50 [Cent], I'm looking up to y'all. Now, when I get that point, I want them to be worrying about me. I want to be like, okay, my stuff is going to come out the same day as Jay, let's see who sells more. When I can have that conversation, that's good. Because right now, they are considered the best. As soon as I get them asking me for help, I'm good. (Interview, 4/14/15)

While artists remained modest in their financial aspirations, they lack modesty when it comes to their fame and critical reception. Many artists use the idea that they are “the best” to ever rap as motivation for the music they create and their performances. Maverick expresses a different aspect of this mindset when it comes to making it. An aspect of making it is having his expertise and skill validated by artists he idolizes. For Jay-Z to ask Maverick for advice, Maverick's position in the rap music industry relative to Jay-Z would have to change dramatically. While Maverick knows Jay-Z, it is highly unlikely that Jay-Z is even aware Maverick exists. Currently,

Jay-Z provides motivation for Maverick because Maverick considers him as “the best” and he tries to use Jay-Z’s career as a model for his own. If Jay-Z were to ask Maverick for advice, it would mean not only that Maverick and Jay-Z have more reciprocal relations than fan and idol, but Jay-Z has become a peer, or, even more, Maverick has now become a mentor to Jay-Z.

Maverick provided an even more tangible benchmark that would signal to him that he has made it when describing how his “inspirations” would become his “enemies.” Again, Maverick pictures a hierarchical shift, perhaps even an inversion, of his relation to the artists who inspire him. His fantasy of success is to go from being an admiring fan of artists like Jay-Z and 50 Cent to a peer or even a potential threat. Maverick’s conception of making it clearly involves his being at “the top” of a zero-sum rap music industry. Additionally, in terms of record sales, Maverick proposes a scenario in which he and these other rappers all have records that come out on the same day and there is legitimate speculation as to who will sell more records. Maverick’s adversarial braggadocio departs from the modest aspirations other artists state. His conception of making it is not merely having a record deal or being able to support his family; rather, it is moving to the very top of the rap music industry.

Maverick’s aspirations may come from the fact that he has secured sponsorships and has been featured on MTV, thereby establishing himself as an artist. While some artists are seeking to make rap music their only job, Maverick has already done so. While his standpoint may allow him to “dream bigger,” artists that have not reached those career milestones still express similar sentiments. Kerve, a relative newcomer on the scene by his own admission, has similarly lofty goals that he gets from an artist who inspires him:

My opinion is, when I've finally made it in music is when I can I step on stage in front of 50-60,000 people, maybe even 100,000 people and they can, and I can just give the show to them and hear them reciting my lyrics. That's when I'll feel

like I've made it. It's not financial, it's not in jewelry. You know that you've made it when you can step in front of a crowd of 100,000 people and you can just hand them the mic. I remember I heard Nipsey Hussle say that in one of his interviews. When you can step in front of a huge crowd like that, and they can feel what you are coming from and you can put the music on and you can have the crowd just, that's when I feel like you've made it. When you can touch the people in that way where they are inspired by you. Not inspired by your money or your jewelry, but inspired by you. (Interview, 6/13/15)

Inspired by an artist he admires, Nipsey Hussle, Kerve dreams of performing in front of an enormous crowd. However, the size of the crowd is not as important for Kerve as it is to have a connection with the audience. Just as Maverick would understand that he made it through the interactions with his idols, Kerve would believe he made it through connecting with such a large crowd. He asserts that making it is not based on material possessions like jewelry and money; rather, making it means drawing an audience that is so “inspired by you” that they know all of the lyrics to your songs. Again, as someone who draws inspiration from artists who he considers to have made it, Kerve conceptualizes making it as moving from his position as the inspired to the position of the inspirer.

As Swiss pointed out, artists are oriented toward “making it” in a different way than those who may assess them. Pittsburgh artists believe that they will have “made it” when they achieve able to interact with the rap music industry in certain ways that go beyond using their art to attain immense wealth, fame, or other aspects glamorized in mainstream rap music. While aspects of aspiring artists’ conceptions of “making it” involve making financial gains and achieving notoriety, their accounts assert that aspirations are anything but frivolous. They describe their pursuit of a record deal as a way for them to be able to focus more on making music and less on trying to get onto a major record label. A record deal, to them, would not only provide a more stable paycheck, but it would allow their music to reach and be appreciated by a larger audience.

They describe their pursuit of greater financial rewards as providing them a chance to escape the precarity of work they experience as aspiring artists. For artists that need to maintain other work on top of being a full-time recording artist, making it provides a way to leave their other job and focus on their self-expression and work in their desired career as a rapper. For the artist currently supporting themselves through their artistry, making it provides them with greater financial stability and the ability to support others. In these conceptions, making it is much more than a selfish desire to be a rich and famous superstar. Even those like Maverick and Kerve, who equate making it with superstardom, believe that making it has an aspect of mentorship or the ability to provide inspiration behind it.

5.3 HOW TO BECOME A PROFESSIONAL RAPPER

Artists interested in “making it” in the rap music industry reflect on the time and effort required to develop their skills and art. Artists spend their days writing, recording music, shooting videos, maintaining a presence on social networks, and reaching out to others in the industry. Managers often are fielding emails from media, looking at contracts, and attempting to get their artists on local and national concerts. As part of my observations, I participated in a group text message with the “Big Bosses” (Ben, Justin, and Scrollz) of one collective (often referred to as a “team”). The collective’s main artist (Scrollz) and his two managers exchanged text messages at an impressive rate. While sometimes these messages were about life and leisure—they are good friends after all—the majority had to do with holding one another accountable for the functioning of their team.

Ben explained to me the work that he does on a daily basis and highlighted the importance of exposure for underground artists and collectives. In conjunction with his full-time job, a part-time job as a youth soccer coach, he devotes nearly all of his remaining free time to “building [his team’s] brand.” For him, brand-building means a routine of outreach that involves sending at least five emails to people that can “help the brand” every day. He said that even if only 5% of those he emails respond (a rate he thinks is low and easily obtainable), he will still be making connections with nearly 100 people in a year. For him, success will come from finding individuals who can help his brand gain exposure; he has oriented his daily activities accordingly, working to maximize those possibilities.

Aside from “dedication” and “networking” broadly defined, artists discussed specific strategies they use to maximize their chances of making it. They outlined the technical aspects of the music industry with which artists must familiarize themselves. Artists need to not only learn how to best present themselves as artists, they also must learn how to navigate the bureaucratic aspects of the music industry to get paid for their music and to ensure that their music is protected by copyright laws. In this section, I describe how normative rules governing behaving and belonging intersect with the technical aspects of transitioning from an amateur artist to a professional artist. This intersection uncovers not only how artists present themselves as professionals to their peers and audiences, but also how they present themselves as a professional in the music industry. I begin by discussing the strategies artists recommend for establishing themselves as professionals in both of these areas. I then describe the obstacles they face in establishing themselves as professionals. In the final section of this chapter, I analyze a discourse of professionalism that circulates among artists in Pittsburgh’s underground rap scene.

5.3.1 Strategies of Making It

During my interviews with artists, I had them give advice to hypothetical artists trying to transition to a position as a professional rapper. This advice allowed me to map a set of strategies artists feel are useful in establishing oneself in the rap music industry. These strategies ranged from means of creative and professional development to business plans necessary to copyright and monetize their music and maximize distribution of their music. In this section, I analyze the strategies artists describe relating to professional development. In Chapter 4, I analyzed how artists signify being “in and of” the cultural of hip-hop. In this section, I uncover how artists show and enact that they are taking their music career “seriously.” The processes are similar in that both require signaling to themselves and others that they are devoted to the culture or their career and are not just “pretending.”

The most common theme discussed that signals that an aspiring artist is taking their career seriously is that they devote time to improving their career. While this may seem obvious on its face, artists emphasize this point to push back against the belief that an innate talent is enough to catapult an artist to stardom. For example, Greazy offered this advice:

Practice. Work until you can't anymore. Build your sound. Test things out. Don't be afraid to be experimental. Be consistent. What they say is true³⁷: if you put enough hours in it, you really do become a genius at it. When you put time in, you can't help but get good results. (Interview, 10/27/14)

Here, Greazy uses the advice of “practice” to underscore the themes of keeping it real and doing hip-hop described by other artists. To achieve “good results,” presumably a record contract or other aspects of “making it” described above, Greazy believes that artists need to work on

³⁷ This is most likely a reference to Malcom Gladwell's (2008) “Ten Thousand Hours Rule.” Gladwell (2008) asserts that it takes roughly ten thousand hours of practice to gain mastery in any field.

developing and experimenting with their sound. For artists to express who they truly are in their music, they must put in the time and effort in shaping a consistent style. The hard work and dedication that Greazy describes helps an artist exhibit that they are “all the way in,” which Scrollz highlighted as an important aspect of doing hip-hop properly (see Chapter 4). The immense amount of practice and work-ethic it takes to be successful, as evidenced by Greazy here, is among the reasons that artists believe their path to success is similar to the lock-step life course. It also highlights the importance of learning these practices and gaining practices early-on in an artist’s life, which some artists are able to do in the context of poetry and the church.

Other artists also touched on the idea that “practice” was the most important tactic for making a career out of rap music. For some, like Miz Taken, this comes in the form of “writing as much as you can” (Interview, 5/11/15) so that an artist can have a consistent stream of material from which they can draw. For others, like Flow-er Child, it is just a way to show that “you are dedicated to your craft” (Interview, 2/11/15). The idea of being dedicated also was also emphasized by T-1000. He described a strategy for artists to establish the proper dedication:

Don’t have a Plan B. If you have a Plan B, then Plan A will never happen...It becomes a point where you just have to jump out of the plane with no parachute and know you are going to land. The parachute isn’t going to keep you in the air and that’s not where you want to be. Don’t have a Plan B. Just go at it balls to the wall until you know you can’t have it. It has to be that or nothing. (Interview, 3/29/15)

T-1000’s metaphor relies on working to develop an all-or-nothing attitude toward their career. While the prospects of making it in rap music are akin to jumping out of a plane without a parachute, he feels that the safety of a parachute (or a fallback plan) diminishes an artist’s chances of making it. In order to make it, according to T-1000, an artist must prove to

themselves that this is truly what they want to do and then devote (or perhaps sacrifice, to complete the metaphor) their life to it.

Part of creating and maintaining a sense of dedication to pursuing rap music as a career is accomplished through practicing and developing your skills as an artist (i.e., practice). Another part, according to artists, is making the necessary sacrifices in their personal and professional lives to make this dream a reality (i.e., developing an all-or-nothing attitude). Rydah reflected on why he feels he has set himself up to make it:

This is what I want to do, so that's why I'm doing it...You have to really decide that you are going to dedicate your time and money and make sacrifices to make this what you want it to be. People say they want to rap and [that] they take it seriously, but if they have a big opportunity in Atlanta tomorrow, they aren't going to call off from their job today. And that's an opportunity that could change your life. Me on the other hand, I don't care if I was working a Fortune 500 job. If I got a call from Dr. Dre tomorrow and had to be on a flight, guess what, I quit. (Interview, 10/7/14).

For Rydah, the level of dedication required to be successful as an artist is knowing that a “big break” could happen at any moment. Like T-1000, he feels it is necessary to maintain an attitude that gives primacy to his rap career over any repercussions that may have on any other career he may have. He continued to say that he has a 2-year-old niece that he has only seen a handful of times even though he lives within 30 minutes of her. He said that his rap career keeps him from her because he is traveling or does not have the time to visit her and then head to the recording studio to work on his music after also working his full-time job. “Does it bother me?” he asked, “Of course because I'm not getting the proper time with my family, but I also know that what I'm trying to do is bigger than me and I can help put them into a better situation” (Interview, 10/7/14). Attempting to succeed in the rap music industry requires artists like Rydah make personal and professional sacrifices. They believe that the financial investment and emotional

detachment will eventually lead them to a career in which they will be able to make up for those sacrifices.

Aside from sacrificing time or prioritizing their rap career over their other work, artists believe that it is essential to invest money into their career to make it. Several artists have committed all of their disposable income to their music career. For an artist like Kerve, committing to becoming an artist requires making these sacrifices:

[Being an aspiring rapper] takes a lot of sacrifices. I've lost a lot of friends over the last 3 years. Had some personal relationships with girls that I really wanted to be with tarnished because I was working [on music]. Just make sure this is really what you want to do with your life, because, it's fun, but, at the same time, you've got to make a lot of sacrifices. Not going to that party that I want to go to. Not buying those tennis shoes I might have wanted. Not buying that [PlayStation 4] when I wanted it. It takes a lot. (Interview, 6/13/15)

Kerve echoes the sentiments of Rydah that making it in the rap music industry requires sacrifices that can strain personal relationships and he adds a warning to others thinking about trying to make it in rap music. In one sense, making it requires the dedication to make sacrifices like the ones he describes. However, making those sacrifices is not sufficient in proving that you are dedicated to your craft. Rather, his warning brings forth the possibility of quitting and being stuck with the consequences of these sacrifices with nothing to show for it. Like Rydah's relationship with his niece, Kerve believes that if one is dedicated enough to pursuing rap music, their ability to make it will offset an psychological or emotional hardships they face as a result of their sacrifices.

Kerve also describes how he must invest money into his career instead of shoes or a video game system, even though he would really like to purchase those items. Flow-er Child said that the biggest advice he would give to new artists is about their relationship to their money:

You cannot be afraid to invest in yourself. If you do not want to spend the money to do the music thing, just don't do it. Because, if you really want to make it, you're going to spend thousands. You're going to spend thousands before you even make one cent back...If you really want it, investing in yourself, spending money on this and that, it won't be a problem. That's the biggest reason a lot of people don't make it...People are like, "Why do I have to spend money [for studio time, graphics, etc.]? Why do I have to spend money for this person [to help me]?" No, you are spending money for you...so that you can progress and move forward and better yourself as an artist. (Interview, 2/11/15)

Flow-er Child believes that individuals in the rap scene must orient themselves toward their career in a way that they understand the importance of investing money into it. He relies on the common saying, "You have to spend money to make money," as a strategy for increasing an artist's chances at making it in the industry. The money invested, he believes, will lead to a better product. The more expensive the graphic designer or videographer, the better quality and more reputable their work. To produce excellence, one needs to recruit excellence and invest accordingly.

Swiss put the idea of "spending money to make money" to practice when he opened his studio. When he was in his planning stages, he asked those he trusted in the recording industry for advice. He says that the most important advice he received was to invest in expensive (and high quality) speakers, a top-of-the-line microphone, and expensive software to mix and master his music. He spent over three-thousand dollars before establishing a regular clientele because he believed that producing the highest quality sound he could would help him secure clients and referrals. After coming off of a short period of unemployment following an injury, he invested the little savings he had accumulated in order to make his goal of opening a recording studio a reality. He believes that his business grew because that investment gave him a reputation of having the equipment capable of producing a high-quality recording (Field Notes, 10/29/14). The development of this "spend money to make money" mantra is similar in many other genres and

highlights another aspect of the orientations toward their work and success that artists must develop in order to successfully “do hip-hop.”

Artists describe several strategies necessary for professional development as an aspiring artist. Much of their advice is an attempt to push back on what they see as a popular belief that becoming a superstar rapper involves nothing but a little talent and dumb luck. They believe that those outside of the industry believe their pursuit of a career in rap music is filled with leisure. Their advice to others trying to do what they do is akin to what Prof-a-see said in his interview:

[To become an artist] you have to be really, really, serious. You have to work hard. To me, that’s the biggest lesson from Wiz. He works hard. I think that people look at Wiz and they see him smoking and laughing, and they don’t give enough credit to how hard he works...If you want to get to that elite level, it’s going to take hard work. And it takes patience. You can’t just put a mixtape out and all of a sudden you blow [i.e., get famous]. (Interview, 1/27/15)

Artists believe that making it in the music industry involves taking your career “seriously.” Taking your career seriously involves developing an ambitious work ethic and making required sacrifices in an artist’s personal, professional, and economic lives. In the next section, I look at the strategies artists use to establish and grow a fan base.

5.3.2 Respect

Cultivating an audience is another part of “making it,” whether the goal is fame, sales, or putting food on the table. Artists have developed several strategies to capture an audience. Artists realize that attracting listeners is not a passive pursuit. Rather, they describe how an artist must actively work to win fans and build a reputation. As discussed previously, artists understand that the market for aspiring artists in Pittsburgh is heavily saturated and they must actively differentiate themselves from their peers. For many, this involves a delicate balance between presenting their

music to their audience in a forceful way without coming across as overbearing or pushy. Additionally, establishing a “buzz” around yourself as an artist takes dedication and consistency.

Aubrey Loud believes that for an artist to be successful in today’s rap music industry, they must embrace the technological advances that come with the internet. Along with other artists who see Pittsburgh’s scene as “oversaturated,” Loud accepts that it is difficult for an artist to stand out in the market. If an artist is completely different from all other artists out there, she says, they “maybe” have a chance of being discovered on their talent alone. She continued:

I think that you really need to embrace the technological changes because record labels aren’t going to take you unless you have some buzz online. At this point, that’s how they choose [their artists]. That’s how Mac and Wiz got their deals, because of online buzz. They didn’t really go anywhere until they had that. (Interview, 10/16/14)

Aubrey Loud cites Mac Miller and Wiz Khalifa as examples of artists who benefitted from generating “buzz” online. She believes that this is not only a helpful strategy in an artist’s career, but a necessary one. In what follows, I describe how artists use the internet and social media to gain and expand their following both by themselves and with the help of others.

Part of creating and maintaining visibility as an artist involves presenting yourself and your music as a desirable product to consumers. Maverick described a strategy he would recommend to new artists that relies on establishing a consistent identity for yourself:

Be consistent. Consistency is key. Whether it’s in any category [of your career]: publicity, new music, writing, promotion, communication, even Instagram. Consistency is key...If you really want this to be your career, you want people to take you seriously [and] everybody is looking for the new thing. So, if you can always give them something new, they’ll never get bored. (Interview, 4/14/15)

Maverick provides a strategy that focuses on a consistent presentation of self as an artist. He has created a persona, or “brand,” for himself and his music and social media posts reflect that persona. He says that he tries not to deviate from that established identity because he wants his

current and potential audience to “know what to expect when they put on a song by [Maverick].” For Maverick, he must innovate his sound so his audience does not get “bored” with his music, but he must also create music that establishes a recognizable identity for himself.

I observed this in the social media accounts of Maverick and other artists. Maverick’s social media posts often include “hashtags,” or internet markers that digitally link posts by theme,³⁸ that refer to his identity as a self-starter and entrepreneur. In addition, artists like Chef encourage their fans to use hashtags referring to new songs or albums as a way to generate a following around, and respect for, their music. The hope is that others see these hashtags and it helps start a movement around their music. This is similar to the strategies used by social movements and other causes, like #BlackLivesMatter. The rapper Cookie was so successful in circulating the hashtag associated with his new album that it became a “Trending Topic” in Pittsburgh for a few days surrounding the album’s release. Becoming a “Trending Topic” placed this hashtag on the homescreen of all of the accounts being accessed in the Pittsburgh area. Artists hope that the visibility create by strategies like this not only solidify their identities as artists, but also create the possibility of their music “going viral,” spreading rapidly to extensively networked individuals.

Another part of Maverick’s advice involves establishing yourself as “the next big thing” (Kruse 2003). He believes that audiences are looking to be on the cutting edge of what is hip in music. Virus described how he saw this strategy work for Mac Miller as he began his career:

I thought that [Mac Miller] was smart. He was smart. He understood that suburban kids bought predominately what urban kids thought was cool. So, he sold himself to [those urban kids]. As in, “I’m already in, dog. I’m already in. All

³⁸ For example, on sites like Twitter and Instagram, artists may use hashtags like “#PittsburghHipHop” in their tweets or posts. If a user were to click on this hashtag or search this hashtag, they would find a list of posts using that hashtag. I have omitted the actual hashtags used by my respondents to help protect their confidentiality.

these black people love me. I'm rapping." And white people are like, "Yeah! I want to be in! How do I be in?" (Interview, 6/5/14)

Here, Virus draws on a racialized understanding of an insider/outsider dichotomy, or what it means to be "cool," to describe how Mac Miller's strategy was successful. He believes that Miller's success as a white hip-hop artist was partly due to his ability to establish himself as an insider in a cultural medium where he believes most insiders are black. Virus is saying that an effective strategy for artists is to capture the insiders who will establish them as "cool," which will permeate into wider audiences seeking insider status. Virus associates being "cool" in rap music with blackness because they are associated with urban communities. White, suburban kids then fall on the outside of being "cool." In order for these hypothetical white kids to be cool, they need to gain the acceptance of, or prove themselves to, the hypothetical black kids. Virus provides Mac Miller as an example of someone that was able to do this.

Without the support of a record label, one of the hardest and most important tasks for an underground artist is to get their music into the ears of consumers. Along with the effort of artistic creation, distributing and promoting of music are daunting tasks for an artist. Artists use websites such as SoundCloud and YouTube to post music and videos. These websites are great for artists because they require limited financial investment and can be accessed directly by consumers. However, this also floods the market with free music, making it easier for an artist to get lost in the shuffle.

Even though artists agree that aspiring artists should seek to maximize their visibility on social media, they also agree that artists should avoid "spamming" their followers. An artist is "spamming" when they excessively post links to their music or artist webpage. Miz Taken went so far as to say that her one piece of advice for aspiring artists would be to "get off the internet."

It is her perception that this strategy has become so prevalent that the consumer no longer treats these posts as potentially offering access to the next big thing, but as annoyances:

Artists think, “Okay, I’m going to make songs all the time and post them on the internet and people are going to like it.” And then nobody listens to it. I see it all day on Facebook. I don’t listen to it. Why? Because there is more coming later. There is no urgency for me to listen to it. But, if I see you in person, if I like it, I’ll be like, okay, now I see that you actually exist outside of Facebook, you are an actual entity and then I’m more likely to be involved with you. (Interview, 5/11/15)

The overexposure of an artist’s music can lead to consumers losing respect for them because the consumers feel the artists is not taking their music seriously. Miz Taken presents a logic that artists who post their songs with an overwhelming frequency are perceived as focusing on quantity rather than quality. She believes that the most effective strategy to gain a following is through live performance and in-person interaction with potential audiences.

Scrollz and his team discussed these strategies in their group text message. They purchased a service for their social media accounts called Hootsuite. This platform allows users to manage several social media accounts and schedule the automatic posting of messages, articles, and links to music, videos, and other promotional materials. Their main concern when beginning to use this program was that their followers would be turned off by their constant posting or that they would be considered to be spamming. They decided to schedule their tweets about videos, songs, and performances at a rate that would maximize their exposure, but avoid spamming, by targeting their messages to occur once during the morning, afternoon, evening and late night. This way their messages would show up at times when they expected their users to be online and at a rate fans would most likely deem as “natural” and not automated.

Scrollz and his crew also discussed strategies for rolling out new music so that they could pique their audience’s interests. Scrollz would often tweet about his upcoming album in an

attempt to get his fans excited about it. He finished the album in early April of 2014, but did not release the album until late June. In the weeks between, they slowly “leaked” items from the album like the track list, names of artists featured on the album, a music video “trailer” for the album, and audio of two songs from the album. They did this to create a buzz around the album and keep the audience engaged through generating an anticipation for the album. This strategy also involved the “Big Bosses” discussing the rollout of the music of another artist in their camp, Rydah. They wanted to make sure that when they rolled out his music, it would not conflict with Scrollz’ album release and vice versa. The two alternated dropping new material so that their audience would remain engaged with both artists and neither would steal the other’s limelight. It is important to note that although this strategy involved Rydah’s music, he was not included in the discussions on the “Big Bosses” text chain, though they presumably discussed this with him elsewhere.

I have also seen artists engage in strategies to increase their exposure that offer fans “rewards” for listening to and sharing their music. Recently, Rubble posted a link to a new song on Twitter asking his fans to share the song with others. He wanted his fans to “force him to release new music” by publicly placing a stipulation on himself that for every 50 people that shared the song with an accompanying hashtag, he would release a new song. He reminded fans of this promise every few days, but he failed to reach this self-imposed benchmark after over a week. After that week, his posts about the song became less frequent, until he stopped posting about it altogether. While his attempt was unsuccessful, it is an example of how artists try to manufacture a buzz around their music themselves rather than through channels of the industry. These strategies also show how artists attempt to engage and build their audience through social media and manage the perceptions of others.

While some artists try to create a buzz around themselves as artists through their personal social media accounts, others try to get their work placed on popular blogs to generate a following. Alchemist described a recent increase in exposure that he credited to a blog. He called the endorsement of “tastemakers” like popular blogs in the hip-hop community a necessity to “get [one’s] foot in the door.” His songs, popular by some underground standards, saw a rapid increase in listeners when he was featured on a popular hip-hop blog. The author of the blog was a friend of his growing up, but lost touch as they got older and went off to college. Both began working heavily in the music industry after they lost touch. While Alchemist was aware that this former friend had the ability to help his career, he balked at the opportunity to call in a favor: “I just wanted to do it the ‘right’ way. I wanted to get people’s attention on my own.” The blogger eventually saw a video that Alchemist released and posted it to his blog:

[The blogger] called me and said, “Dude, I just saw that video, that shit is dope. I put it up on the blog and it already has 200 views in 5 minutes...I really like what you are doing so just let me know before you release songs and I got you.” So, now I have that connection...and this is a dude who has connections to every outlet in the industry. Like, *XXL*, *The Source*, *Complex*, A&Rs, everything. (Interview 9/12/14)

Some of Alchemist’s songs received over 3,000 listens in the span of a month, coming mainly from listeners locally in Pittsburgh. However, within two days of his song being featured on this blog, it had racked up nearly 20,000 streams from listeners all over the world. Similarly, Flower Child said that his songs went from regularly getting 500 streams on his music to getting over 30,000 streams when he was featured on a popular blog after he connected with the blog’s owner. Artists say that they can then use these numbers when they contact record companies to show that there is a growing demand for their music.

Gaining placements on blogs is a very helpful way for artists to gain exposure for their music. Other artists might attribute success like Alchemist and Flow-er Child to nepotism. Most artists believe that building those connections is a necessary strategy to make it, so they rarely speak critically of those who have done so. However, placements on these blogs can create resentment among artists in certain situations. While they refused to divulge who engaged in this process, Prof-a-See, Scrollz, Alchemist, Ben, and Kerve all said that they were aware of artists in Pittsburgh paying to have their work featured on popular blogs. Just as Alchemist said he wanted to make sure he was gaining traction “the right way,” artists point to this pay-for-play system as way that artists do not keep it real and fabricate their popularity as a means to try to get ahead. In terms of “realness” and authenticity, the internet has brought some interesting dynamics in the attempts for artists to make themselves visible. While payola may not be legal (but perhaps still practiced) in radio, it is very much alive in the new medium to discover artists, the internet. In some cases, popular blogs that seem to just “find” the next new buzzworthy rappers do not discover the artist without a check or money order. I discuss more of these practices as they relate to the obstacles faced by artists when trying to make it in a later section.

Another strategy that artists use to widen their exposure and gain the respect of their peers is through collaborations with other artists. Because of the horizontal hostility common among artists in the Pittsburgh scene, it is seldom easy for artists to collaborate. However, artists who can collaborate insist that collaboration is an effective way to tap into a wider audience. Social media strategies based on networks expand with other artists involved. Collaborating artists can promote themselves, each other, and their joint music.

Artists see these collaborations as a way to introduce themselves to a wider variety of consumers. Wheels sees collaborations as one of the best ways a new artist can announce their arrival to potential new fans:

I'll tell you one thing, doing collaborations, that really does broaden your fan base. Because, when you do those, whoever you are collabbing with, those fans merge. I just did a track with like 5 people on it. That's all of our fan bases. Seeing that [song], [fans] are like who's that? He's nice. And your fan base just expands and expands. (Interview, 10/28/14)

Securing collaborations with other artists is a way for artists to gain the support of other artists and their fans. Because of the horizontal hostility endemic in Pittsburgh, artists struggle to get other artists to share their music. By collaborating with other artists, Wheels says it is a way to “build with people” in that they now have a vested interest in, at the very least, the song they created together.

Ben supported Wheels' claim and provided a rationale for why this strategy is successful. He believes that rappers should collaborate not only with other rappers, but with producers as well. He said:

For artists, the route I would take...[would be to] collaborate with as many different people from as many cities as possible. Because, if you don't have a real resume yet, you can get you name in as many cities as possible. You can get into their fan base so that those people at least plant a seed there. Establish relationships with producers...[and] understand that for them, it's a mutual need. Producers need rappers to rap on their records so that when they release music, it gets heard by more ears. (Interview, 6/6/14)

Ben points out how establishing a “mutual need” between artists is a way to ensure that your music will be heard by more people. It also is a way for an artist to build a resume because it provides a “co-sign” from another artist that they are a good rapper. Collaborations are ways to overcome the barriers of horizontal hostility that make artists unwilling to support one another without this “mutual need.” Additionally, artists use this as a strategy to help gain local support.

As discussed previously, artists believe that fans in Pittsburgh are more likely to consume their music if they see them reaching audiences in other cities. Collaborating with artists from other cities is another way for artists to do so without having to rely on the difficulties of booking a show in that city or setting off on a tour.

Chef says that his visibility as a battle rapper has tapped him into a network of artists all over the country. On his most recent album, he collaborated with artists from all over the country to help his exposure in their scenes as well as providing exposure for those artists in Pittsburgh. One of the first singles he released from that album featured an artist from Atlanta and an artist from Boston. As he promoted the song, he also shared admiring posts from those other artists and their fans. This was one way for him to show that people outside of Pittsburgh were consuming his music and a way to signal his broader appeal. He told me that this expanded network afforded to him by his career in battle rap allowed him to make the best song possible by enlisting the services of artists he thinks are great from throughout the country (Field notes, 6/12/15). The song itself introduces each of the artists and mentions their hometowns, working as an introduction to consumers that may not be aware of the other artists' works.

Hracs (2012) and McLeod (2005) describe how the shift to digital distribution of music via the internet has redistributed the power in the recording industry from major record labels to independent artists and labels across genres. With many digital retailers offering a “pay-per-play” model where artists receive small dividends for every time their song is played, artists do not need to wait to be “discovered” before they begin to profit from their music. This structure is not genre-specific, but it is especially important for the artists in Pittsburgh in terms of realizing their career goals. Artists do not necessarily need to wait for the weak infrastructure in Pittsburgh to improve and increase the likelihood of major labels coming into Pittsburgh to discover them.

Rather, they can begin profiting off their music immediately, even if it is the small fractions of a dollar they receive per play of their song, and begin to recoup some of the sunken costs of their music or afford to improve their equipment and products. The intense focus that these artists have on cultivating their social media and internet following is an attempt not only to gain notoriety, but also an effort to profit off of their work.

The internet provides a relatively new medium for artists to share their music with their fans. While it still occurs, it is less frequent that fans of rap music are exposed to new artists through their performances or the once-common practice of selling self-produced mixtapes on a street corner or out of the trunk of a car. While the internet has made the world smaller in that an artist's music (like Chef's) can be instantly shared with fans of other artists in Atlanta and Boston, it also brings with it a whole slew of obstacles artists must face. The hustling of physical products like mixtapes and CDs has been replaced by digital downloads, page views, online streams, and "shares" on social media. In the next section, I analyze these and other obstacles and how they reflect artists' views of authenticity and realness in an evolving commercial musical landscape.

5.3.3 Navigating the Music Industry

Another important aspect of trying to make it by making the leap from underground to mainstream is learning to navigate the bureaucracy of the commercial music industry. Reflecting on important advice for aspiring artists, my respondents often said that it is important to make sure that an artist's "business is right." When they talk about "business," they mean the technical aspects of the rap music industry that establish artists as a professional in the music industry (i.e.,

an artist being paid for their music). I have discussed the obstacles presented by interactional accountability and horizontal hostility in the development of artist's careers elsewhere; in this section, I focus on the structure of the music industry and the many barriers to artists' advancement. The obstacles faced by artists as they try to make a career out of rap music show the vast amount of technical knowledge required to launch a career and the political economic structures that can determine why one artist makes it and another does not.

Burner says that the most necessary step in the career of an aspiring artist is to learn the "business" side of things. He says that learning these things helps not only protect the investment an artist has made in their music as described above, but also ensure a return on their investment:

You have to look into copyrighting, BMI, ASCAP, look into getting your shit registered and understanding the business aspect of [your music] because if you don't understand the business aspect of it, you're going to get robbed blind. You have to understand the business side of things before you take yourself serious. You have to understand that you have to copyright your music to sell it. You have to register your stuff to make money when you sell it. You have to register it correctly with the Library of Congress before you sell it. (Interview, 4/28/15)

Burner asserts that an artist who takes themselves seriously is an artist who goes through the proper bureaucratic channels to register and copyright their music. BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.) and ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Artists, and Publishers) are professional organizations that advocate on behalf of artists to ensure they are compensated for the use of their music. While there are many tutorials online for how to register with these organizations and the process itself only takes a matter of days, some artists fail to do so. The process may seem "too official," "too technical," and even "too expensive" for some. Even though artists understand that you have to spend money to make money in the music industry, paying around \$55-\$100+ to register your music is not appealing to some artists because it comes on top of what it costs for the studio time, the hiring of an engineer to mix and master the songs, the hiring

of a graphic designer to create album artwork, and the physical copies of a CD. The annoyance of registering music seems to be more of an obstacle for artists than the money it costs to do so.

An example of the obstacles artists face when attempting to make it in the rap music industry than the payments required for registering and copyrighting songs, is the practice of “pay-to-play.” Rydah informed me that artists can pay to gain placements on popular blogs, automate their social networking sites, and secure live performances. He said, “When you are underground, millions or thousands of people are grinding to get to the same plateau. But, not everyone has money” (Interview, 10/7/14). Artists with economic resources can afford to maximize their exposure. Financially marginalized artists see artists who pay for placements on concerts or can afford automated social media programs that “spam” users with their music as taking a shortcut and harbor hostility toward them and others perpetuating this system. Prof-a-See expanded on this point:

If there is one thing locally that I think is fucking whack, it’s places that make artists pay to perform. I don’t care who you are, if you make an artist pay, you are exploiting that artist. [*pounds on table*] Do your fucking job, promoter! And then when what is the show is whack because it’s not the best artist, it’s the ni**a with the money! [*laughs*] You should be picking the best artist that’s going to make your show hot and you should pay the artist...Artists don’t say, “I’m going to give you \$20,000 if you hang my painting in the Andy Warhol Museum.” That dude would be like, “Ni**a, you ain’t, fuck you. No, I’m choosing what goes here and I’m choosing the best.” (Interview, 1/27/15)

Prof-a-see highlights how constraints in infrastructure can lead a situation where artists are hostile toward both venues that promote “pay-to-play”, as well as the artists who have the money to take advantage of this system. Often, artists are more hostile toward the latter than the former. Both Rydah and Prof-a-See indicated that artists who take advantage of this structure do so because they are not as talented as other artists and bribery is the only way they could secure

shows. Artists even went as far as saying that they suspect artists who pay-to-play are financing their careers through illicit drug sales.

In an environment like the Pittsburgh rap scene, where artists struggle and compete to gain visibility, artists believe that paying to perform creates an unfair advantage. They also say the buzz such artists generate is artificial rather than authentic. Rydah offered this criticism:

You're telling me that even though I'm talented, but I don't have the money, that I'm not supposed to grow? That's just the way things have been [in Pittsburgh]. Even with opening for big acts out here, they'll be like, "You can open for this big act if you give us \$500," but it's just like, how about you listen to my music and hear that I'm a talented person and I'm actually going to liven your crowd? What it does whenever anybody can pay to perform is that it takes away from the quality. Plenty of terrible rappers can find \$700 to open for Wiz tomorrow...Now, no matter how terrible this person is, they are in everyone's face. (Interview, 10/7/14)

Rydah believes that performance opportunities should be divvied out on a system of merit and not based on those able to afford an excessive fee to perform. He believes that artists who pay to perform artificially inflate their notoriety. When artists list their biographies online or when they send press kits about their work, they often include the notable artists for whom they have opened. The more notable the act with whom an artist can secure a billing, the more notable they may be perceived to be. However, this works on the premise that the artist was chosen for this billing because of their stylistic similarity or their talent, and not because they were the first to offer the requested performance fee (or, worse, outbid other artists). Artists may use these inflated resumes to secure more performances or catch the attention of a record label, leaving behind artists who cannot afford the fee (or whose integrity prevents them from paying the fee).

Artists like One Stop and Prof-a-see say that an artist should go to great lengths to ensure that they are being paid for their performances rather than the other way around. One Stop said that she can avoid paying to perform while also being paid to perform by organizing the events

herself. If she were to go through a promoter, she says, she would not be able to negotiate her position and would therefore be more likely to be asked to pay to perform. She said that most of the gigs she books are “things that [she has] actually produced or created or had a hand in” (Interview, 1/27/15). Through self-producing and self-promoting her performances, One Stop can ensure that she receives a larger portion of the revenue from the show. The only cost she would incur is the space rental fee, which is sometimes waived if the artist draws a reasonable crowd to the performance.

While securing performances in general and with well-known acts is an important step in the career advancement of an artist, so too is building a following on social media sites. As I indicated above, record companies use internet analytics to help spot artists on the rise. However, Alchemist informed me that the numbers associated with an artist’s online materials may be fabricated. Part of understanding the industry, according to Alchemist, is understanding the underground economy created by this focus on page views, streams, and shares of artists’ materials online. As it turns out, in 2012 YouTube stripped many popular artists from Sony/BMG, Universal Music Group, and RCA Records of nearly 2 billion views on their videos (<http://hiphopdx.com/news/id.22366/title.youtube-deletes-2-billion-fake-views-from-universal-sony-rca-videos>). The hardest hit was Universal Music Group, from whom YouTube stripped 1 billion of their 7 billion hits because they were accessed by “click farms.” Click farms are service providers, mostly overseas, that organize and pay people to click links, stream videos, or “like” and share posts on social media. These click farms use countless fraudulent accounts to generate internet traffic around the items paid for by their customers. Individuals can also use “bots” or computer programs that generate fake accounts and look as though they are engaging with an individual’s account or materials. Not only can individuals buy views on YouTube, they

can also purchase followers on Twitter, friends on Facebook, and create just about any sort of internet traffic that may factor into record companies' analytics. Record companies may use these fake views to bolster their own position, but aspiring artists can use these fake views to catch the eye of those record companies. Websites offering to bolster view counts often only cost a fraction of a penny per view. One journalist used the site <http://www.ytview.com/> to purchase over a half a million views for \$500, which stayed on his account for over six months before being removed by YouTube's quality control, which monitors for these fake views (<http://www.dailydot.com/business/youtube-buy-fake-views-deleted/>).

For an artist like Alchemist, the ability for large record companies to generate fake views creates an interesting problem. He explained the impact of these practices:

It's such a big thing right now that every artist in Pittsburgh has done, whether they admit it or not, is either buying Twitter followers or buying YouTube views. People are like, "Oh that's corny," but what they need to understand is that the labels are doing it too, for people already famous. So what they are doing is actually shifting the amount of numbers that are exciting to have on a record. (Interview, 9/12/14).

Alchemist stated that even though other artists may not admit it, it is a common practice for local artists to artificially inflate their online metrics to gain recognition by the recording industry. In fact, Alchemist was directly referencing a conversation he had with Scrollz and I the previous night at Scrollz' album release party. After Scrollz said that he was surprised to learn that individuals purchase views and followers on their social media accounts, he and Alchemist argued over whether this practice was "necessary" (Alchemist) or "corny" (Scrollz). Scrollz believed that artists engaging in this practice were being inauthentic in their presentation of their fame and notoriety. "Eventually," he said, "the labels are going to find out that you've been buying views and that the following you say you have ain't true. They [are] just going to drop

you” (Field Notes, 9/11/14). He felt that although buying views on his social media accounts may help him get noticed by a record label, the inevitable exposure of the fake views would be more detrimental to his career than the publicity or advantage in the analytics were worth. After his argument with Alchemist, Scrollz said to me, “Talk about ‘keeping it real.’ How you gonna keep it *real* if you are literally buying *fake* [YouTube] views?” (Field Notes, 9/11/14).

The act of buying fake YouTube views, as Scrollz points out, underscores an interesting aspect of artists’ struggles with balancing their views on how to keep it real with the strategies they feel are necessary to be successful in the rap music industry. Artists strive to “be themselves” in their work, while admitting that they also modify their behaviors in some slight way to be more appealing to more people. While this practice relies on gaining a following or support on a false premise (i.e., presenting yourself as someone who you are not), it still involves gaining the attention of real consumers. That is, fans judge and hold artists accountable for how they are doing hip-hop and whether or not they are keeping it real. When an artist buys fake views, they are avoiding that accountability structure completely and manufacturing support for a message that may not gotten that support otherwise. Additionally, while judging if someone is keeping it real relies on assessing the extent to which their asserted identity matches their life experiences, when it comes to fake views online, keeping it real relies on determining whether a fan, follower, or viewer of online material is in fact a real person and not a bot or a worker in a click farm.

Alchemist told me that the reason he was excited about taking my interview was so that he could explain why he thinks that he keeps it real despite buying fake views on his songs. His main rationale for his belief relies on the obstacles faced by aspiring artists trying to break into the music industry in relation to their access to resources.

As an up-and-comer, you have to give something for people to get excited about. As much as I hate to admit it, the [quality of the] music isn't everything; you have to be able to create excitement. So, when I was first coming up and I was making songs strictly on YouTube, to be able to break 1,000 or 2,000 views was an accomplishment, man...But now the industry has changed and there are so many ways to boost your plays. So what these labels are doing on a national and international scale is actually shifting the number of views that are exciting to the public...it's almost like you're falling behind if you don't [buy views]. It's not like you are starting at zero. You're starting at -10. (Interview, 9/12/14)

For one artist, Scrollz, buying fake views is misrepresenting your popularity as an artist. For another, Alchemist, buying fake views is a way for aspiring artists to get a foot in the door and compete from a disadvantaged position. Aspiring artists are at a disadvantage because they do not have the promotional machinery around them that major record labels do. Alchemist believes that buying fake views is an acceptable practice because it is a strategy used by these major record labels. His buying of fake views is a way to overcome the obstacles of trying to create excitement around his work and is a response to the continual escalation of expectations by the major labels. Alchemist says that this practice is just a logical response to "how the industry functions."

Buying fake views of his music is not only a way for Alchemist to achieve his goal of making a living off his music. He also rationalized the practice as a way to achieve his goal as an artist of sharing his work and message with as many people as possible:

You have to understand that Sony and BMI, they lost *billions*, YouTube took *billions* of fake views off of their accounts. Including views from Michael Jackson's songs from the 70s! This is how the industry functions. And it trickles down and it doesn't give people like us much of an option. So, it's like, why am I even doing this if I'm not trying to get people to hear it? (Interview, 9/12/14)

Even artificially inflating the number of views could increase the likelihood that individuals will eventually find and listen to his music. When ranking search results, YouTube and other search engines use algorithms that consider the number of plays on a song. Aspiring artists tag their

videos with popular hashtags and inflate the number of views on their accounts to push their music closer to the top of the search results obtained by these consumers. This avoids their being “buried” by other songs with fake views promoted by record labels with more resources to acquire more views. An artist’s work is “buried” in the search results when their songs show up so far down in the search results that they may never be accessed by the consumer.

It is unclear how often aspiring artists buy fake views (Alchemist was the only artist who admitted to engaging in this practice). No matter what, though, inflated counts and manipulable algorithms present an interesting obstacle for aspiring artists to overcome. Both Alchemist and Flow-er Child described how they could achieve a sort of viral success on some of their music from the exposure they received from popular blogs. This sort of success, in the moment, is virtually indistinguishable from the sort of success that could be manufactured by purchasing fake views. This creates a sort of cynicism among artists as they compete with one another. Because they are aware of these practices, they are inclined to attribute any buzz surrounding an artist to these practices. Scrollz and Ben greeted a song release of another Pittsburgh artist that got over 20,000 views in a little over a day with cynicism; in the group text message, Ben asked, “How many of those views you think he bought?” and Scrollz replied, “SMH [Shaking my head], probably most of them” (Field Notes 6/24/14). While they may otherwise have been inclined to respect the achievements of this artist, the perceived popularity of this “corny” strategy led them to be critical of the achievement. They even discussed not seeking out this artist for collaborations because of the potential repercussions that this artist’s buying of fake views may have on future associations.

Artists who do not believe that the buying of fake views is a legitimate strategy use it to rationalize the horizontal hostility they have for artists in the Pittsburgh scene. For example, Rydah said that he believes that many Pittsburgh artists are “shady in business”:

People pay for listens and views on YouTube, which is the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. You’re not growing at all, and you’re just faking it. For who? You’re faking it so bigger companies can see you and be like, “Wow, you have 900,000 views on this song.” But, you paid for 800,000 of them! It’s not real. Nothing is realistic anymore. Everything is money driven. Nothing is about quality, so there is no quality control. (Interview, 10/7/14)

Rydah is critical of artists who purchase fake views online and points out how this is an indicator that the quality of music in Pittsburgh is diminishing. Like other artists, he feels that an artist’s exposure should be based on the quality of their music, not on their ability to pay for it. While he speculates on the prevalence of this practice, he focuses on how it is a strategy that encourages the “crabs-in-a-barrel” mentality in Pittsburgh. Rather than trying to increase the quality of music in Pittsburgh and organically gain exposure on the scene, buying fake views increases the individual artist’s visibility but floods the market with bad (in Rydah’s opinion) music. Artists like Rydah believe that artists who buy fake views will eventually be exposed, which will blemish his work by association. This practice also primes artists to be critical of the success of others rather than supportive because they remain skeptical that the success artists experience on their online material is earned rather than purchased.

The practice of buying fake views on YouTube and other social networking sites by artists in Pittsburgh highlights the need for more research on these practices as they relate to the careers of aspiring artists. Artists speculated wildly that this practice was being used by many artists, but only one artist of my interviewees admitted to this practice (Alchemist). Even though he admitted to this practice, when I pressed him on how many views he purchased and for how

many songs he purchased views, he simply responded, “What we thought was enough to get us in the door.” Further investigation into these practices will help better understand how artists use the internet to establish and advance their careers. It would also illuminate more aspects of the political economy of music production.

The purchasing of fake views goes against some of artists’ views on integrity. However, it also emphasizes the point that artists are competing with one another based on not only the quality of their material, but their ability to engage in the economy built around promoting their career. Artists above talked about how individuals can pay to perform with big acts and how they can pay for promotions with major blogs. This economy surrounding the access to opportunity shines some light on the types of people who make it in the rap music industry. Rydah made a larger point when describing how artists get exposure for their work:

Everyone just sees dollar signs. So, a magazine like *XXL* isn’t looking for whoever is most talented, they are looking for the person that’s going to give them \$2,000 for a cover or whoever is going to give them \$700 for a 2-inch ad in their magazine. That hurts someone like me because I’m an honest person. I go to work for mine. I don’t sell drugs, I’m not that type³⁹...so, I have to do things the legal way. And it gets hard [for people like me] because job situations aren’t always so great...and people make it to the point where now if you don’t have money, you can’t rap (Interview, 10/7/14)

Rydah’s comments have great bearing on understanding rap music as a way for aspiring artists to escape economic disadvantage. Artists do not expect to become overnight celebrities. In fact, I find that they are willing to invest a great deal of hard work and persistence to realize their dreams. They are also willing to make the required monetary investment in the production and promotion of their music. However, they resent the underhanded pay-to-play economy that has

³⁹ In the section I omit here, Rydah explains that he does not have the time, energy, or desire required to sell drugs. He emphasized that he wants to do things “the right way” and also said that doing so is indicative of his work ethic, which he sees as contrasting with those who use the drug trade as a “shortcut.”

developed in among aspiring artists. For artists working to support their families and careers with limited financial means, this informal economy can act as a prohibitive factor in advancing their musical careers.

Additionally, analyses of rap music frequently discuss the music's relationship with the illegal drug trade (see, for example, Bogazianos 2012, Herd 2008, Diamond, Bermuda, and Schensul 2006). Rydah's comments suggest that this relationship should further be studied to assess the extent to which the drug trade is helping to finance the careers of aspiring rappers. Several artists said that it is their belief that individuals have been able to secure the money to secure performance slots, magazine promotions, and well-known artists to perform on their songs through money they earned in the drug trade. Recently, rapper Bobby Shmurda was arrested and sentenced to prison for actions he committed while involved with the GS9 gang. Jay-Z also used money he earned while selling crack-cocaine to help finance his aspiring rap career. It could be that messages concerning the illegal drug trade are prevalent in rap music because the industry rewards artists whose lyrics contain those messages with recording contracts. It also could be that artists feel that taking on a persona in which they portray themselves as being associated with the drug trade will increase their chances of becoming famous or help them gain respect with consumers. Rydah presents a third possibility, that is, that individuals involved with the drug trade can obtain the financial means to access more opportunities to advance their careers.

The obstacles faced by rappers attempting to make it in the rap music industry illuminate the vast array of technical knowledge required to monetize the production of music. Artists seeking to make a career out of their music must take the necessary steps to officially establish themselves in the industry. These obstacles also illuminates how the chances of making a career

out of rap music are impacted by the strategies of others in the music industry. I have analyzed an economy that puts some artists at a disadvantage because of their unwillingness to engage in business practices they see as being “shady.” Artists believe that they should be able to gain a following and break into the music industry based on their talent hard work, and entrepreneurial investments, but understand that the pay-to-play system that persists in the music industry in the digital era can inhibit them from doing so. When analyzing the types of acts that gain prominence in the rap music industry, it is essential to look at the strategies used to gain that prominence. On the one hand, success in the commercial rap music industry is the result of a top-down structure; record labels seek out certain types of artists to sign to record deals. On the other hand, artists can gain prominence by paying their way into opportunities. While this system may not have a bearing on the content found in rap music (which I believe relies on the system of accountability described in Chapter 4), it certainly gives an insight into how content is promoted and how artists gain recognition.

5.4 PROFESSIONALIZING THE RAP CAREER

In this section, I describe how artists’ experiences with trying to make it in the rap music industry culminate in the production of a discourse of professionalization (Evetts 2011) in the Pittsburgh rap music scene. As artists trying to make a career out of rap music interact with one another, they develop a way of establishing themselves as professionals while also criticizing the unprofessional acts of their peers. Artists believe that developing a professional identity

(Costello 2005) is essential in showcasing that they take their art seriously and have what it takes to make it in the rap music industry.

The various ways aspiring artists discuss “being a professional” in the rap music scene result from the processes and interactions I have analyzed throughout this dissertation. Individuals spend their time “on the come up” learning the necessary skills and norms of interaction required to properly do hip-hop as a professional. Additionally, they hold themselves and others accountable to the normative expectations of what they think it means to be a “professional rapper” in the music scene. The horizontal hostility that is endemic in Pittsburgh’s music scene often consists partly of artists criticizing one another about their abilities to conduct themselves professionally. Artists assess and enforce normative expectations of what it means to be a professional rapper constantly and these interactions help shape how they conduct their daily lives as well as how they produce and perform their music.

In this section, I discuss how artists differentiate between their involvement in rap music as a hobby versus their involvement with it as a job. This differentiation shows how some artists struggle with their approach to their music careers because they see it both as a form of work and an alternative to traditional conceptions of work. I then analyze how artists catalog the traits of what they consider to be “professional” artists. They use this discourse to establish themselves as professionals and indicate how they can identify artists who “take music seriously.” I also investigate the types of conflicts that occur when artists engage in acts that are deemed “unprofessional” and how they encourage others to act in what they consider is a professional standard in their industry. The analysis of these elements illuminates another way that the pursuit of rap music organizes the lives, practices, and discourses of aspiring artists.

5.4.1 Is Rap Music a Job or is it a Hobby?

Aspiring rappers struggle with characterizing their pursuit of rap music as a job or a hobby. The data in this section come from asking artists, “Do you consider rapping as a job or a hobby or is it something in between?” My initial goal for this question was to determine whether each of these aspiring artists was using rap music as a sole source of income. However, with this question, I was able understand how artists approach their musical production and further affirm the extent to which they were trying to make it as a professional rapper. Artists can approach their art as a form of leisure (a hobby), as something they do to support themselves monetarily (a job), or some combination of those two approaches. For those who consider it as a hobby, music is a form of self-expression and escape. The act of engaging in rap music itself, then, is sufficient for artists to rationalize their involvement in it. Their involvement in rap music is done simply because it is something they enjoy and making music is rewarding in and of itself. They consider their involvement in the music industry as a “labor of love” and “[insist] that occupational commitment and achievement in the arts cannot be matched to the monetary considerations of a market economy of exchange” (Menger 1999: 554). For those who consider rap music as a job, music is a way of utilizing their talents for larger rewards of money and fame. Their involvement with rap music is instrumental, directed toward the specific goal of creating upward mobility for themselves by growing their careers as rappers or producers. Those who see their involvement as a combination of the two create rap music because they enjoy the act of creating music and welcome any sort of other rewards that may come along with it. That is, while they are not actively trying to gain prominence as a rapper or producer, they are certainly not avoiding it either.

Of the 23 artists in my sample, 12 said that they see rapping or producing as their chosen career, while 5 said it was more of a hobby, and 6 said that it fell somewhere in between those two categories. Alchemist said rap music is “100% [his] job, 1000% [his] job” (Interview, 9/12/14), and Swiss said, “It’s 100% a job,” (Interview, 10/22/14); their sole source of income comes from rap music and they commit every day to producing and performing rap music. They rely on a traditional understanding of a job as organized labor in exchange for wages. However, apart from a few artists, many were reluctant to classify rap music as a “job” because of the negative connotation they have with the idea of “work.” While they were quick to point out the immense effort they put into their music, they believe that the nature of the work involved with rap music inhibits them from categorizing it as a “job.”

The artists that said their involvement in rap music is a job for them because they believe that treating it as a job is the only way to be successful in the music industry. Rydah said that the sacrifices he has made for rap music exhibit his dedication to his music and that he could never treat it as a hobby. He differentiated hobby from job.

It’s a hobby if it’s not really what you want to do. If you are rapping because your friends are rapping, it’s a hobby. If you’re just dropping music to drop music, it’s a hobby. If you put your time, your effort, you’re making sacrifices and this is what you believe in, it’s your job. I don’t even consider it my job, it’s my career, it’s my life. I don’t take kindly to people that play around with music...It’ll never be a hobby for me. It was a hobby when I was younger, but now, this is my life. (Interview, 10/7/14)

Rydah’s outlook on his music shows that some rappers feel they must treat their music as if it were a job for them to be successful. As discussed earlier, he, Ben, and Scrollz carefully planned the release of their music so that their efforts will be synergistic rather than zero-sum. When he collegially promotes his own and others’ work, he is not just “dropping music to drop music.” Instead, Rydah is strategically advancing his career while building the community of like-

minded artists. He does not “take kindly” to individuals who release music with no purpose because he feels it devalues the time and effort he puts into his own work. By establishing music as his “career” and his “life,” he feels he is a professional positioning himself for success.

The more common response among rappers was to discuss their involvement with rap music in a way that focused more on the subjective experience of work. Artists typically said that they had troubles classifying what they do with rap music as a job because of the enjoyment it brings them. Take, for example, Maverick’s response:

I would say, God, that’s a good question! I think it falls under a couple of hats. It’s a job for me, it’s a love, it’s a passion. So, when you love what you do, it’s not work. It does put food on the table, it pays the bills. It’s a love. It’s like what Big Sean says, “Forget a vacation, I do better at work.” I feel better at work rapping than I do on vacation. (Interview, 4/14/15)

While he gave that response, his publicist, who accompanied him to the interview, interrupted and said, “Well, it’s not a hobby,” to which Maverick responded, “Right, it’s not a hobby. It’s a career. It’s definitely my career” (Interview, 4/14/15). Maverick focused on his subjective experience rapping to assert the negative connotation he has with the idea of work. While he recognizes that his involvement with rap music “pays the bills,” he is not making rap music strictly for that purpose.

Cookie also said that it was tough for him to differentiate between rapping as a job and as a hobby. While he is “making a lot of money off of shows” and does not have another source of income, he still feels it is not a job for him:

A job is something that you don’t look forward to going to and a hobby is something that you enjoy doing. I feel as though this is a job because it pays the bills. I have fun with it as well, so it is something in between. You could say it’s a hobby, but it’s not just something that I do every now and then. It’s something I do all the time. I guess you could say that I enjoy my job *[laughs]*. (Interview, 6/11/15)

Again, it is difficult for these artists to classify their work in the rap music industry as a “job” because of the subjective enjoyment their music brings them. Artists described their interests in exploring a career in music as a way for them to avoid “traditional” work. They evoke the “labor of love” argument discussed by Freidson (in Erikson and Vallas 1990) and in so doing, they believe that they have found a way out of the world of work.

The traditional saying of “do what you want and you’ll never work a day in your life” rings true among these artists as evidenced by their hesitation to classify their careers in music as a job. Those who do say that their involvement in music is their job do so with the stipulations put forth by Cookie. They seek to legitimize their daily activities in the music industry as taking the time, effort, and dedication involved in work. This is why the artists who classify rap music as a job say things like, “I get paid for it. I make a schedule for it. I have clients and customers” (Greazy, Interview, 10/27/14), or “It’s a full-time thing for me” (Flow-er Child, Interview, 2/11/15). They are drawing on the common discourse of work (e.g., schedules, clients, customers, full-time, etc.) to identify what they do with what others do in more “traditional” forms of work. The rhetoric that artists like Greazy and Flow-er Child use supports Menger’s (1999) claims that “freelance artists may be better thought of as operators of small businesses” (550). This also acts as a way for artists to distance themselves from having what they do being a form of leisure.

Wheels said that his involvement in rap music is based on his belief that individuals should contribute their best skills to society. Wheels and others who expressed similar views take a functionalist stance: Society operates best when individuals find what they are good at and contribute that skill. He said that rapping for him is a “duty” and explained:

I feel like if you have this skill, if you have that voice, it is your duty to utilize it...I generally believe that people don't pursue the things that they are the most talented at...If everyone fulfilled what their purpose was, I think that they would increase how the world is. Instead, you have people doing things that they don't like, on a career path that they don't really like, so then they don't do that job well. And then *that* is your contribution to the world? (Interview, 10/28/14)

Wheels expresses the sentiment that his pursuit of rap music is to fulfill his "duty" to society to share his skills. He believes that others do not do so because they feel an external pressure to enter careers that are associated with more traditional forms of success. People who experience this pressure forgo their passions in favor of doing what they may feel is more socially acceptable, even though they will not "do the job well."

Artists who classify their involvement in rap music as a hobby emphasize their subjective experiences with rap music, while downplaying the financial rewards that may come with it. For an artist like T-1000, rap music provides an emotional outlet.

Rap music is therapy for me. It's pure therapy. I'm probably the most calm and relaxed person people know because I have an outlet to express myself. I don't hold on to any aggressive feelings or sad [feelings]. I'm not too emotional because I can put it in a song. (Interview, 4/12/15)

T-1000 said there was a point at which rap music was his job when he was trying to get his group signed to a major label. He said that now that he has gotten older and has settled into another profession, he no longer has the time or dedication to take on rap music as a job. However, the subjective experiences of making music keeps him in the industry and he still releases songs with the hopes of being discovered. Taj made a similar statement:

I'm humble about it. I call it a hobby, but in the back of my mind, I really think that it is my dream. I would love to just make albums for the rest of my life...[but] I'm older. (Interview, 5/16/15)

The statements made by T-1000 and Taj show a trajectory for the career of an artist in terms of their relationship to their music. First, they discover a passion for rap music and begin creating it

in their leisure time when they are “younger.” Next, there comes a point where they “take it seriously,” and pursue rap music in the same way that others pursue their education and employment. Later, there comes a point where artists realize that they may have aged out of their dreams of becoming a professional rapper and transition back to pursuing rap music as a hobby. While they maintain their hopes of being discovered, they no longer devote as much time to making that a reality as they had previously.

The data in this section show that artists in the rap music industry conceptualize their pursuits in terms of traditional notions of work. They desire to make it in the industry to avoid working for work’s sake. They think their passions and skills make them well-suited for a career in rap music, and they subscribe to the ideology of “do what you love and the money will follow,” so they commit the time and dedication to that pursuit. They emphasize this time and dedication to legitimize their endeavors and show that they take their music careers as seriously as others take their respective jobs. Artists also indicated that there is a progression in this worldview. As artists age, they realize that it is harder to devote the time and dedication needed to make a career in the rap music industry. There is also a belief that younger artists are more desirable in the music industry and therefore there comes a time in an artist’s career where they believe they are too old to be discovered. Those who do feel that rap music is a “job” circulate a discourse of professionalism that concerns what they feel individuals must do to exhibit that they take their careers as musicians seriously, which I cover in the next section.

5.4.2 What Does a Professional in the Rap Music Industry Look Like?

I conclude this chapter by analyzing the discourse of professionalism that circulates among artists in Pittsburgh's rap scene. Artists believe that to be successful in the rap music industry an individual must conduct themselves as a "professional." What does it take to be considered a "professional" in the rap music industry? When I posed this question to my respondents, they said they believe that a professional in the rap music industry is identifiable through the ways they conduct themselves and their business practices. I have observed how artists construct a notion of professionalism in their careers and how they use this understanding of professionalism to hold themselves and others accountable for how they do hip-hop in the Pittsburgh scene. Something that is common among rappers "on the come up" is their desire to shed any appearance of amateurism, and construct their identities as "professionals" in the rap music industry. In the following section, I discuss how one can accomplish a display of professionalism in this industry.

In this section, I am engaging with literature on the sociological study of professions and professionalization by responding to a research imperative proposed by Adams (2010). She argues:

Considering professions as organized status groups, and exploring the ways in which their status is acquired, and the ways in which their relationships with the state, the public, and other workers are structured, is an approach that promises to move research forward. (Adams 2010: 67)

I grapple with this research imperative by focusing on the technical and interactional aspects of artists' attempts to establish themselves as professionals. Depending on their presumed audience—the record industry, their fans, or their peers—artists engage in a different set of

interactions. As discussed previously, being a professional in terms of the rap music industry requires accessing the bureaucratic channels to formally register themselves as artists. In terms of their fans, artists must produce and distribute a “quality product” while also conducting themselves in a “professional manner” while in the public eye. In terms of their peers, artists attempt to enforce the behavior of their peers to ensure that their conduct is “professional.”

When I asked Greazy, “What does a professional in the rap music industry act like?” he gave me a response that encompassed all the above aspects and also summarized the points made by many of the other artists in my sample. First, Greazy touched on an artist’s presentation of self:

[A professional artist has] a website. Cards, if need be, physical [business] cards...You have to be seen to have people know who you are. We need a picture of you, a video of you, something. You say you are a producer? I need to see your work...Even if you don’t have your own domain yet, having a SoundCloud or a Reverb Nation site. A MySpace. Not just Facebook and Twitter. And with professionals, we need to see good, quality work. Not necessarily super HD, high definition 1080p videos, or songs mixed and mastered at the highest possible quality, but good quality. (Interview, 10/27/14)

Greazy focuses on the presentation of self (Goffman 1959) that is required of an artist attempting to be viewed as a professional. He says that professional artists need to have a way for others to access them and their work. Business cards allow for a professional presentation of self and a formal way to exchange information with others. Artists must also give access to their work so that audiences, potential collaborators, and potential employers can vet their work, which, in turn, should be of good quality.

In Chapter 3, I focused on Chef’s feeling that he needed a reason to support local artists in the Pittsburgh rap music scene. One way to earn support is to establish oneself as professional. He elaborated on his points about support, saying:

Just be on your game. I don't even got to like your music, man! If you are serious about everything and everything you put out is professional and you're breaking your back to sell records and you're not writing with a Sharpie on your CD, hey, maybe I'll come out and support and be like, "Kudos to you, man. You're out here doing it."...If you walk up to me with a CD that looks professional, that I can unwrap the shrink wrap or however it is packaged and you have good artwork, I'm already taking you seriously. (Interview, 5/13/15)

Much of being a professional relies on others believing that an artist is taking themselves seriously, and Chef outlines ways to signify that through the products artists produce. Chef recognizes that his taste in music might not align with the music the artist produces, but he is willing to support professionals in the scene in their endeavors. He chastised people who peddle their mixtapes in the style he mentions in the quote (with "Sharpie on the CD"). He said that those who do so will never get people to listen to their music because it is a "running joke" in the industry that when you see a CD like that, "it's going to be trash."

Second, for an artist to be considered a professional, they need to set up the proper channels to sell their music. Greazy says that an artist must also have "physical product, something to sell. Somebody has to have a way to contact you for business...and some things artists overlook are things like PayPal" (Interview, 10/27/14). He differentiates a professional artist from an amateur as someone who has music to sell and a way to conduct those sales. He suggests that artists open a PayPal account, a service that allows peer-to-peer transferring of money, so that they can receive compensation for any services rendered. This shows that an artist is "serious" about their services and has established the necessary channels to receive financial compensation. He added that professionals need to produce their music in a professional manner by having or using professional equipment:

You have to be in a studio. You have to have a studio of some sort that goes beyond just your laptop. You need a setup, you need an interface, your need hardware and software. Not just, eh, I make beats on Fruity Loops on my

MacBook and then that's it. If that is the case, a professional has somewhere to take it...you can take [your beats] into a studio and keep going from there. (Interview, 10/27/14)

Greazy differentiates professionals from amateurs using criteria shared by the other artists I interviewed. It is common for artists to use software like Fruity Loops, a cheap audio recording software platform, when they are pursuing music as a hobby or experimenting with music production. Artists described a transition process in their careers: They went from what they considered amateur production and recording with laptop programs like Fruity Loops to a professional setup in a studio. When an artist goes to a studio or uses a studio to mix and master their recordings, they see it as a way to differentiate themselves from those who may record themselves in their basements or dorm rooms for fun. "Using professional equipment and having a real engineer recording you," is the most notable way to become recognized as a professional rapper because "it all starts with the music" (Wheels, Interview, 10/28/14). Using professional equipment and a professional engineer also signals that you are embedded in a professional network with the necessary resources to make professional-sounding music.

In one of my observations at the recording studio in which Wiz Khalifa began his career, I talked with two artists who were in the studio after making a two-hour drive from West Virginia. They said that they came to that studio because of the reputation it had for quality recording. They said that they had reached a point in their recording where they wanted to "take their careers to the next level" and that the best way for them to do that is to work with other professionals at this studio (Field Notes 5/15/15). It is important for artists to have quality recordings for their music and, in this case, from a reputable studio.

A third aspect that artists cite in their discourse of professionalism in the rap music scene relies on artists conducting themselves “professionally” in interactions with others. Greazy pointed out some ways he gages the professionalism of an artist in interaction:

It’s how you conduct yourself. You have to be approachable. You have to know what you are talking about. There’s a lot of terminology in music that you have to know. You have to be able to speak the language. (Interview, 10/27/14)

Artists need to exhibit the requisite cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987) in order to be taken seriously as professionals in the music business. Artists must be able to interact in a way that shows they are knowledgeable about the creation and production of music. Additionally, artists must make themselves “approachable” so that their dispositions are in line with other professionals in the industry.

Swiss agreed with Greazy’s assessment and gave an example of how individuals can be professional in their interactions. His experiences running a recording studio have lead him to provide the following advice for artists looking to be seen as a professional in the industry:

I would say that the most important thing to do is show up when you say you are going to show up and deliver the things you say you are going to deliver. And you will pass up 80% of people in this industry. You show up on time, and even if you are not that great...you’ve strengthened your relationship with the people that gave you that opportunity. (Interview, 10/22/14)

By having their actions follow their words, artists in the rap music industry can demonstrate a level of professionalism that will set them apart from others in the industry. Swiss says that this can really help an artist’s career by solidifying relationships because it helps others determine that you are taking your music—and their time—seriously.

I witnessed Swiss enforce his beliefs about professionalism in a recording session for Scrollz’ album. Scrollz was working with a videographer to document his recording process as part of his promotional roll out of his album. When the videographer arrived, we all introduced

ourselves and “dapped up,” or shook hands with one another. When the videographer shook Swiss’ hand, Swiss yelled, “Man, dap me up again!” and made the videographer shake his hand again. Swiss explained to him, “Man, I hate it when people come in here with weak daps. It’s just not professional. If you want to be here, show me that you want to be here!” (Field Notes, 6/24/14). When I asked him about that interaction, he said that he was trying to show this videographer that a way to show others that you take your job seriously is to seriously engage them when you first meet them, in this case, with a proper, heartfelt dap. He recalled our first encounter and said that my notebook, audio recorder, and proper handshake signified that I was serious about my work and it made him want to help me as much as he could. “Sure, he [the videographer] had a camera,” Swiss said, “but you know how many people come in here with their boys and have a camera and then just party in the studio?” (Interview, 10/27/14). For Swiss, a proper handshake is a way for an individual to show that they have come to his studio with a purpose, and not simply to “hang out with rappers.”

The expectations of professionalism as outlined by Swiss were not always common in other recording studios. In many of the studio sessions I observed outside of Swiss’ studio, it was common for rappers to bring an entourage of people with them to just “hang out” while the artist recorded. Individuals would drink, converse, play video games, or watch movies during these recording sessions. While Swiss believes that artists who engage in these practices are “unprofessional,” some of the artists I observed believed that this is a perk of being a professional. I noticed a difference between those who came with an entourage and those who did not: Those who came alone typically got more recording done than those with an entourage simply based on the distractions presented by the entourage’s presence. The engineers and studio owners working in the presence of an artist’s entourage hardly ever reprimanded artists for being

distracted by the friends they brought with them. Swiss said that he does not always tell artists in the moment that they should be more focused. “They are paying to be [in my studio], so, whatever they want to do is up to them,” he said (Interview, 10/22/14), which seems to be the rationale for other engineers I observed in not trying to keep artists on task. One engineer said, “I get paid either way” after he rolled his eyes because recording had stopped while the artist entertained some friends that showed up at the studio (Field Notes, 5/15/15). Even though he does not always enforce his expectations of professionalism in the moment, Swiss says that he tries to avoid booking artists that are more inclined to participate in this unprofessional behavior.

Being in the studio is a crucial part of a rapper’s career. For female artists, this can be an extremely intimidating space as most of the people at the studio, working or not, are typically males. Aubrey Loud said that as she began her career, she was “very timid” because she was uncomfortable being in a crew of men:

I was very timid, when I would actually sing I was so timid that my voice wasn’t that quality because I was like scared. So, I was always trying to sing and get out there. They weren’t really giving me the opportunities, I was one of the few women in the group...I was so nervous and so tense that I was just like real frustrated with myself, so I really started to pull back in and write in my room. (Interview, 10/16/14).

Aubrey Loud experienced anxiety in the beginning of her career because she was afforded fewer opportunities by her group (comprised mostly of black men). She partially attributes this to her being the newest member of the group at the time, and the newest person trying to be performing, but she also hints at the idea that this was because she was a woman. Later, she confirmed that she had to continue to pester other members of the group she was in to let her collaborate on songs with them. She said it was a process to get them to “take her seriously” as a professional rapper because they thought she only sung. A blonde, white girl like Aubrey would

typically only be in the studio to sing a hook in their estimation. She said that she emerged from one of those writing sessions in her room, performed a rap she had written, and was never seen as “the girl who sings hooks” again. Aubrey Loud’s transition from singer to rapper required her to “do hip-hop” to legitimize herself as a professional rapper to her crew. While this is a process necessary for all artists trying to present themselves as rappers, the difficulties her crew had from recognizing her as an equal, rather than a supporting artist is no doubt a function of the typical roles ascribed to men and women in hip-hop.

When I asked One Stop to describe the rap scene in Pittsburgh, she gave an interesting response regarding the gendered structure of the scene. One Stop pointed out that female rappers may not just be the solitary woman in a crew of men like Aubrey Loud described, but they may not encounter another woman in their whole process of production and performance:

If I can be completely frank, [the Pittsburgh scene is made up of] a lot of dicks. A lot of dicks all up and around trying to get in your pocket, your panties, your ear, your mouth, [and] your head. It’s just a lot of that type of male dominance going on and when you are an independent artist as a female, 90% of the time, when you go see a producer, he’s a man. He invites some musicians in? They’re guys. The engineer is a guy. The promoter is a guy. The booking person is probably a guy. The club owner or manager is probably a guy. The sound guy is a guy, it’s in the name. It’s just like, it’s a guy’s world, man. It’s a guy’s world. (Interview, 1/27/15)

From my experiences, One Stop’s assessment of the gender makeup of the Pittsburgh rap scene is accurate. Aside from working as rappers, the only other place I came across women in the scene were as event promoters. While the patriarchal composition of the rap music scene in Pittsburgh may not be surprising, the way One Stop chose to express that certainly is when it comes to understanding how navigating this scene to make a career in rap music is different for men and women. When One Stop characterized the scene as having “a lot of dicks” I initially thought she was using the term “dick” as a stand-in for “jerk.” However, it was clear to me she

was using synecdoche when she started pantomiming a penis being thrust into her “ear, mouth, and head.” She used the term “dick” in two senses to highlight the two main ways she feels men interact with women in this space. The first way is that men are often trying to get into the “pockets” of women, or to take advantage of them financially. The second way is to try to get into the “panties” of women, or to have sex with them. The first role presents women as “easy marks” with men believing that they can exploit women’s presumed ignorance about money. In the other role, men are only attempting to work with women because it may allow them the ability to have sex with them in the future. It also shows that doing masculinity in these spaces relies on the sexual objectification of women and sexual boasting.

One Stop expanded on this by describing how these two roles could create barriers for women as they attempt to advance their careers. She explained:

I’ve had negative reactions [in the studio] because, as a woman, they think I am secondary. If I was a guy in there, they would be tending to my business immediately and be on top of their shit. Maybe, because I’m a woman, they will say, “I need 10 more minutes before your session starts.” That’s an example of something negative I experienced as a result of not being a man. Or someone trying to overcharge me or underpay me...Your awareness of being a woman [in the studio] is like, oh, you don’t respect me or I’m going to have to make you respect me. (Interview, 1/27/15)

Men enter the recording studio with “respect” because the androcentric organization of the industry dictates that they are expected to be there. One Stop describes importance of punctuality, especially in the recording studio, because shows that you are “serious” about the task at hand. She is not afforded the automatic respect that men get in the recording studio so must rely on ways to “prove” her worthiness of the person running the studio. Because those running studios do not “respect” female rappers, according to One Stop, they do not greet them with the professionalism of punctuality that is afforded to male rappers. In an industry where

time is money, women are placed at a disadvantage every time they are asked to wait for the producer or engineer to finish their own “more important” work before attending to the female client. And in terms of the actual financials, One Stop claims that female artists are more likely to experience price gouging and pay discrimination. One Stop says that she has stopped working with certain studios in the city where she has experienced this discrimination, even though the quality of the engineering and production there are better.

Female rappers experience men ultimately looking to take advantage of them professionally or sexually, while also considering them less important than their male counterparts. Aubrey Loud, citing her experiences from being “in almost every studio in Pittsburgh” said:

It’s very hard as a woman because there are no other women there. [The studio is] already an intimidating space in the first place. I think that just for any artist to go into the booth, and then to be surrounded by this totally different vibe that is so opposite of yourself in some ways [is harder]” (Interview, 10/16/14).

The construction of the recording studio as a space privileging men and masculinity gives women like Aubrey Loud a vibe “opposite” of herself, adding a layer of difficulty to the creative process. Leena also commented on the gender makeup of the recording studio:

Every time I go to the studio, I have to bring people with me otherwise I’ll be the only female...There might be one or two other [female] artists that come through, but that’s generally the case. You go into the studio and you are the only female. And then there is a certain feel because, when you talk about hip-hop, it is a culture dominated by men. (Interview, 4/12/15)

The process of “doing hip-hop” as I have described is always about making yourself seem “worthy” of being categorized as a hip-hop artist. These women describe an extra layer of that by highlighting the “feel” or “vibe” of the recording studio that signals to them that they are outsiders. Not only do these female artists express the anxiety that comes with making music that

is “good enough” to be recognized by the scene and eventually the mainstream industry, they also describe an anxiety of even being in a hip-hop space like the recording studio.

Most of the men that I observed and spoke with treated the recording studio as a place of both business and pleasure. When I would “hang out” with my male respondents, we would often meet at their recording studio; they seemed “at home” there. I observed many Twitter exchanges between male artists asking each other to “drop by the studio,” extending the invite with seemingly social intentions rather than business intentions. This is in stark contrast to the women in my sample who expressed how they must conduct themselves as “all business” in the recording studio so that the men there would take them seriously. Their orientations toward making music, and the pleasure derived from the act of recording, seemed inhibited by the construction of the studio as a male space.

Aubrey Loud is interested in changing this culture in Pittsburgh. She told me of her detailed plans to create an all-female recording studio. She is putting together a team of female artists to produce, record, and engineer music for other female artists. Her primary goal is to provide a space where women who are not performing artists (rapper, singers, etc.) can gain experience working in music production. She said that one of the biggest changes that needs to come to hip-hop is that more women need to be “on the other side of the microphone” (Interview, 10/16/14). She said that women are not being hired as sound engineers and on the Pittsburgh scene, women do not pursue sound engineering because the recording studio is a space that is run by males. Her goal is also to create a safe space for women to record music without the sexism or objectification they sometimes face in the recording studio. She summed up what motivates her to create an all-female recording studio by saying, “Quite simply, being in a studio is not the same experience for men [as it is for women]” (Interview, 10/16/15).

I witnessed an instance where the gender politics within the recording studio were challenged and individuals were held accountable for orientations toward gender in the studio. I was invited to a music studio on July 15, 2015, to celebrate the birthday of an R&B singer, producer, and rapper, Landry. A group of 6 men greeted me when I arrived at around 7:30 and explained that they were going to record some songs and have some drinks before heading out to the club. Two artists who drove up from West Virginia were in the middle of a recording session. While I talked with my contact Seth in the studio, the others gathered there called various women from the lobby area and told them to stop by the studio for Landry's birthday. To my knowledge, aside from the 6 men already in attendance, I was the only male invited after my arrival. As I state elsewhere, the studio doubles as a space for men to entertain women with the hopes of their interactions turning into some sort of sexual relationship.

After a short time, women began to show up to a point where the gender ratio was about even. After the two West Virginian artists finished their session, everyone came in from the lobby area into the studio. Landry began constructing a beat on the audio equipment while other artists took turns freestyle rapping. They would periodically point to another person or indicate in their rhyme that they were "passing the mic" to another person there, an indication that it was their turn to rap next. This went from man to man typically, but occasionally they would, in what appeared to be a joking manner, pass the mic to one of the women there. While I knew that many of the men there were rappers, I was unaware if any of the women rapped. When they passed the mic to the women, they reacted in the same way I did, simply waving their hands to indicate that they do not rap. While they only did this to me once, passing the mic to a woman seemed to be a joke that had a punchline that would never get old, with some women being singled out multiple times. The women often covered their faces in embarrassment. When I reacted in the same way,

the rappers in the circle went straight to the next person. When a woman would react in the same manner as me, it was met with raucous laughter.

While this could easily be seen as flirting, I also saw this as establishing masculine dominance in a mixed-gender group. The women, and myself, were designated spectators to these men's performances of masculinity; the lyrics the men spit were often about their sexual prowess, their toughness, and other aspects of the masculine cool pose associated with hip-hop music. The jokes seemed to highlight that the women were not able to engage in this practice, and worked as a method of humiliation and exclusion. The men here applauded one another's abilities, laughing at punchlines, and dapping each other up with lines with clever wordplay or difficult rhyming patterns. So, the only method of exclusion or difference-making was the continued pointing out that the women in the room could not rap. The act of "passing the mic" as these men were doing is an important demonstration of power, belonging, and "doing" heteromascularity while also rapping. The microphone, imaginary in this case, represents the duty and privilege to speak (Lane 2011). By continuing to pass the mic to these women who were unable to speak in the requisite language of freestyle hip-hop, the men were asserting their dominance. This act affirmed the men's control of the interaction, at the center of attention; the women were guests and spectators who should be in awe of their abilities.

In this instance, the men were engaging in homosocial bonding (Sedgwick 1985, Bird 1996, Quinn 1996, Oware 2011) where the goal was not only to impress the women in the space, but the other men as well. They would continually "pass the mic" to the women to reiteratively cite (Butler 1993) the androcentric norms of the recording studio and signal to the women that they were outsiders in this space. The men engaging in this practice were doing so to show that they were "one of the guys."

However, this all changed when two women got up and started examining the artist's recording booth, which is a soundproof room in which an artist can deliver his raps or sing while capturing their best sound without outside noise interfering. Landry told them they were welcome to hop on the mic and record a track over yet another beat he was putting together. The one woman said she was not musically inclined, just curious how things worked, but the other woman said she enjoys singing and wondered what her voice would sound like on a recording. The singer (Jill) was still embarrassed, no doubt from being put on the spot several times during the cypher (the reason she got up from her seat to inspect the room in the first place), so she asked her friend to join her in the booth.

Landry, another artist, and Jill began freestyling a track. After a few condescending critiques, Landry told Jill that she needed to sing with more confidence. "Well, y'all just spent the past hour making fun of us for not rapping, how am I supposed to be confident?" Jill shot back (Field Notes, 7/15/15). Landry and the rest of the rappers apologized profusely, with Seth pointing out that their behavior was a bit like teasing a girl in the schoolyard as boys. Jill's calling out the men for their rude male bonding ritual changed the interactions from then on. While Landry had begun this informal session by calling Jill, "Honey," he switched to referring to her by her first name. Also, he began coaching her in a much more respectful way than he did with his initial critiques. After she would sing a part, Landry would sing the same part back to her, trying to get her to get a feel of the notes she needed to hit and how to match those notes with the beat.

While these interactions could clearly be seen as relating to a professional/amateur dichotomy, the gendered environment created in the studio further shaped their interactions. The men were attempting to show off for each other as much as for the women, which is why we

were in the studio which sat about 8 (there were 12 of us) rather than the much more spacious lobby. If the interactions were clearly based on ability to rap, why was I not singled out after admitting I could not rap when the other women were repeatedly singled out? The men were showing the women how the studio works, laying claim to their space, and solidifying the women's status as outsiders, making sure the women knew (and stayed in) their place. In Pittsburgh's hip-hop scene, the studio is a place for men to hang out, with women entering the space as guests.

Of the four female artists I interviewed, Leena was the newest on the scene. Her experience was largely in singing R&B music, but she was making the transition to rap music as an accompanying artist who would sing choruses and aspired to being a solo rapper/singer. She explained that she was often made aware of her gender when individuals would try to label her as groupie. It is important for artists to conduct themselves in a manner that is deemed professional by others in the industry. Leena points that, for women, being a professional ultimately involves distancing oneself from the image of the groupie. She explained:

There's a certain persona that [rappers in Pittsburgh] have about women. So, it's pertinent to remain professional. Because you don't want your image to be tarnished. People assume things about you just because you are a female artist and you are a local artist and you're in the studio. (Interview, 4/12/15)

When I asked what she felt people assumed about female artists in the studio, she clarified:

Well, you're expected to be loose. You're expected to be more like a groupie than a musician. These artists expect that you are clinging to them to try to make a come up for yourself. They expect you to date them or do less than. (Interview 4/12/15)

The expectations surrounding sex or romantic relationships highlights one of the many ways that men and women are seen differently in the recording studio. Even though both men and women can enter the recording studio with no other goal but to record music, it is the woman's presence

that is more often questioned for their “ulterior motives” for being there because of the sexist skepticism generated by the groupie image.

Scholars discussing gender in rap music analyze how normative discourse surrounding black women (re)produces oppression (Moody 2011). Through an extensive content analysis, Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) find support for claims made by cultural critics that misogyny is prevalent in commercial rap music. They link their findings to the sociocultural sources, claiming that hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) shapes the gender relationships found in rap music. Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) found that nearly one quarter of their sample contained misogynistic themes ranging from the use of derogatory names to sexual objectification to the general distrust of women. Weitzer and Kubrin point out research that shows popular music to be increasingly accepting of diverse female experiences to highlight the fact that rap music remains a hostile space for representations of women. They also highlight the normalization of misogyny and oppression that exists in rap music at the expense of black women. Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) believe that to change the oppression found in rap music “requires in part changing the conditions under which it is created” (26), which they suggest are economic disadvantage, the material interests of the record industry, and cultural norms associated with hegemonic masculinity.

I observed sessions for the dual purpose of recording music and impressing women. Except for Swiss, sound engineers and producers were perfectly fine with, and even encouraged, rappers to invite friends to their recording sessions, especially if those friends were women. Men invited women with whom they had past, present, or potential future sexual connections. The social aspect of the recording studio vis-à-vis women creates a space where women are present at the whim of the men there. The men are there for both the “serious” work of recording music and

the intentions of impressing the women, and the women are there to divert them during this work and respond to their heterosexual display. This behavior for the men is only seen as “unprofessional” if it inhibits the recording session. What it means to “inhibit” the recording session is a moving target. Individuals often enter recording sessions with the hopes of “getting as much done as possible.” This goal is often tautological; “getting as much done as possible” is often defined as “whatever they get done during the recording session,” so it potentially allows for men to also entertain others while recording. At the end of the day, the only “cost” to the career of the male artist using the recording studio to pursue relationships with women is the cost of repeated studio sessions.

This scale of professionalism is completely different for women in recording studios, according to Leena. Female recording artists must position themselves as being there for a “serious” reason and that they “are not like those other girls⁴⁰.” As in many work settings, women in the booth/studio are in a double bind. Because women are often only in the recording studio at the invitation of men, perhaps even occupying a sort of “groupie” role, they are read sexual opportunists of potential targets by default. Moreover, gender conformity requires that they are decorative, silent, sexually available, and compliant listeners. To be a professional, then, requires more impression management on the part of the woman to show that they are serious about recording music and are not there to try to romantically pursue male artists. Leena suggests that these are the assumptions made about women in the studio and that she understands that her actions may be read as her attempts to use a male artist for her advancement. Women, then, are not judged by their potentials as artists in the hip-hop recording studio, but are judged on their

⁴⁰ For a thorough discussion of how those in rap music, both men and women, differentiate between “good” and “bad” representations of femininity in this way, see Rose 2008. For a discussion on how women engage in this process in their rap music lyrics, see Oware 2009.

potentials for sex and their potentials for unfairly capitalizing on the careers of male artists. Women face a double bind of being suitably feminine *or* meeting the androcentric standards of professionalism.

Miz Taken agreed that there is an underlying expectation of sex when it comes to interactions between men and women in the rap music scene in Pittsburgh and these expectations can inhibit the careers of female artists. She asserted that she has trouble finding men to work with on some occasions because they think, “Oh, I know I can’t have sex with her, so I don’t want to be around her” (Interview, 5/11/15). She said that because some men conclude that she will not sleep with them, they often will try to charge her more for services. She said this happened when she approached someone about shooting a music video for her. Because she knew how much this individual charged male friends of hers, she knew the price the videographer quoted her was outrageous. Her ultimate conclusion was, “Oh well, I’ll just get one of my drag queen friends to shoot my video for me because they don’t care [that they cannot have sex with me]” (Interview, 5/11/15). Miz Taken said that she is reluctant to seek out new networks of collaborators because of her previous experiences. Because she cannot be certain that she will receive unfair treatment from others because she is a woman, she chooses to work with those she feels she can trust. Her friends, she admits, might not be at the best in their respective fields, but the sacrifice in quality is worth the fair treatment she will be given.

Equally disheartening is rappers who are men’s assertions that this discrimination should work in her favor. Miz Taken clarified saying, “I’ve had more than one guy say to me, ‘Well, if I were you, or if I was a woman, then I would have been on [a record label] by now. You’re not using your resource!’” (Interview, 5/11/15). These men believe that the path to the top of the rap music industry could be easily navigated by women if they chose to use their sexuality, or their

“resource” of sleeping with men in higher positions, to get ahead. Miz Taken believes that men feel she either “owes” them sex in their business exchanges or that sex could help her sleep her way to the top. When speaking about groupies in the recording studio, it is exactly these perception practices that work against women.

Men in hip-hop ultimately position themselves as the gatekeepers of how, when, and in what context women should be able to have sex. Lane (2011) argues that women’s bodies in hip-hop are always already sexualized due to the roles they typically play in rap music and rap music videos. What the interactions described by these artists indicate is that women’s bodies are also always already sexualized when entering the recording studio. Men use the space to impress women in hopes of sex and expect women to use sex as a bargaining chip in acquiring the services and assistance that would benefit the careers of woman as artists. Women cannot be both gender conforming and professional whereas in the androcentric world of rap and the studio, men can be masculine and professional.

Aubrey Loud said that her sexuality has been something that others have focused on in their advice to her. She summarized her experience:

[I would] constantly hear both from a media perspective and from even like local people that were like, “You’re really good, but you should turn the sex up a little bit. Embrace your sexuality more. Do XYZ. You would blow up” (Interview, 10/16/14).

Aubrey Loud said that, in a way, she agrees with those people and she made the conscious decision not to exploit her sexuality. On the one hand, she thought, she could “turn up the sex a little bit” in her music and performances just so she could garner more attention. Then, she estimated, she would be exposed to people that could help her improve her music and become a well-known artist. From that point, she would be able to ditch her reliance on her sex appeal and

have a platform for her initial focus on exposing corporate greed and advocating for environmental protection in her music and performances. On the other hand, she thought that she would not be “keeping it real” by using her sexuality to get ahead. “It wouldn’t be real because I’m not that way...I’ve never slept with someone to get ahead. It’s never been a part of my being, so it would have been weird to do that [or even appear to do that]” (Interview, 10/16/14). She agrees that using her sexuality may have paved an easier path for her to advance her career, but maintains she would have violated her integrity by doing so. At the basis of this significant part of the double bind is still the reduction of the female rapper to her sexuality, and not her talent or cause.

Individuals in the rap music scene also talked about professionalism as it pertained to the presentation of self on social media. When Ben, Justin, and Scrollz discussed adding a new group to their collective over the group text message, they discussed whether or not these artists were “ready to take the next step” with their careers. Ben asked Justin and Scrollz to check out the social media accounts of the pair of artists. He said that the way they conducted themselves on social media was an indicator to him that the two were not ready because they did not handle themselves professionally on social media. The three decided to ask the pair to “clean up” their social media accounts to make them more “professional” before they would consider bring them into the fold. When the artists did not do so, discussions of their collaborations died (Field Notes, 8/14/14).

The trio also tried to manage their expectations of professionalism with another artist in their collective, Rydah. Ben explained to me that Rydah’s interactions on social media were unprofessional because he posted too many messages about his emotional state. Ben said that this was unprofessional because it lacked a maturity (and one cannot help but imagine the

displays of masculine stoicism) that he associates with professional artists. Rydah says that he uses social media as a way to authentically present himself to his fans. As someone who struggles with depression, he feels that discussing his emotions is a way for him to connect with his fans. He feels that because he discusses his emotions in his music, talking about them on social media is a way for him to show that what he talks about in his music matches his real-life experiences. Rydah explained their disagreement.

Everybody's idea of professional is different. For instance, you said you talked to [Ben] about this. With him, me being a professional would entail me not being on Twitter about my everyday life. [It would be] me just kind of keeping things short and sweet, me interacting with people but not telling people, "Oh, I had a sucky day." They always want me to put a face on for people. And that's not the person I am. (Interview, 10/7/14)

Rydah's understanding of professionalism is akin to his understanding of keeping it real. For him, a professional is honest with his fans and seeks to interact with them in an authentic and humble manner. Ben, however, believes that an individual should keep a professional distance with their social media content by not mixing their private life with their professional life. This is just another way that artists struggle with the boundaries between their personal and professional lives, which is only made more complicated by operating in a cultural medium that values blurring these boundaries with its credo of keeping it real. It is also an example of the different ways of assessing gendered emotional labor.

One last area where I observed the discourse of professionalism emerge refers to how artists feel they should act in public. Artists believe that one can identify a professional artist by their public conduct. Their ideas of professionalism hinge on the constant surveillance they believe they are under as artists. Wheels described one aspect of professionalism: "As a professional, you always have to handle yourself maturely. You can't just be walking around like

an asshole all day, doing silly shit” (Interview, 10/28/14). Kerve agreed with this assessment and said that professional artists avoid bringing negative attention to themselves. He pointed to Jay-Z as an example of someone who is professional in the public eye:

You have to carry yourself the right way. Ultimately, we’re all role models. If you know that you are out here and you are trying to conduct yourself as a professional, you can’t be that guy on TMZ getting drunk and acting crazy. That might happen, but you don’t hear about him [Jay-Z] in the news. He’s always been about business. So, that’s a professional to me. It’s more than just being a rapper. (Interview, 6/13/15)

Kerve points out that a mark of a professional in the rap music industry is “all about business” rather than the other perks that may come along with stardom. He joins the other artists who push back against any beliefs that becoming and being a rapper is all about having fun and living a life of leisure.

Actshawn described an instance in his career where he felt he changed from an amateur to a professional that involved how he interacted with the public. This change for him occurred when he was at a bar with a friend and a fan approached him while in the bathroom. At first, Actshawn was upset that this fan chose to approach him in the bathroom, and wanted to ask for privacy. However, he realized that part of being a professional is interacting with the public, even at these times he would consider private. He said that even though he would prefer to be able to have a private life, his prominence in the local scene does not afford him this privacy. He joked, while pointing out the hilarity of this interaction, that a professional always makes themselves available, even in the bathroom.

In this section, I have covered the ways that artists talk about being a “professional” in the local music scene. For them, to be a professional requires a certain amount of technical, industry-related knowledge about the production, sale, and distribution of music. This allows the

artists to become “official” professionals in the eyes of the music industry. Artists also insist that it is important to interact with others in the industry and the public as a professional. Aspiring artists describe a set of public interactions that are common among artists who are professionals. They disagree at points, but they insist that individuals must modify their behaviors to show that they are taking music seriously and should therefore be taken seriously as professionals.

5.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have described the processes and interactions common to my respondents as they attempt to make it in the rap music industry. For many artists, there comes a point in their life where they are exposed to rap music, recognize their talent for making rap music, and decide to pursue it as a career. Along the way, they must learn the various processes involved in transitioning from enjoying rap music as a fan, to pursuing rap music as a hobby, to pursuing rap music with the intentions of “making it” in the rap music industry.

Artists described several desirable aspects of pursuing a career in rap music. They also described a few common pathways that brought them into the rap music industry. In my interviews and observations, I found distinct connections among education, the church, and poetry that motivated artists to pursue rap music. These places on where artists learned the practices (e.g., rhythm, memorization, song construction, work ethic, etc.) they use to attempt a career in rap music. While the connections among these areas and rap music have been explored in terms of their effects on rap music’s content, the data in this chapter show how these social structures influence the career aspirations of rap artists. That is, the data point not to what artists

decide to make in the rap music industry, but how they decide to make their music and why they decide to make rap music in the first place. My research shows the development of practices necessary to “make it” in the rap music industry and the context in which these practices develop. It also shows how artists use financial resources and race and gender as resources to navigate the industry.

Through an analysis of artists’ beliefs on what it means to “make it” in the rap music industry, I have uncovered a nuanced set of motivations that drive artists in their pursuit of music. Artists tend to repudiate being motivated by the possibilities of wealth, extravagant lifestyle, and superstardom. Rather, they see rap music as presenting an alternative to traditional forms of wage labor and often have modest material goals for what they would consider to be “making it.” Hip-hop carries a negative connotation, one that is not afforded to other non-traditional pathways of financial success like sports, which makes artists feel they need to defend their decision to pursue rap music as a career.

Artists describe a set of strategies used and obstacles faced while they attempt to make a career in the rap music industry. The promotion of an artist’s music requires a savvy use of the internet to maximize your exposure and popularity. Artists have developed various strategies to build a following and create a buzz surrounding their music. Artists struggle with a pay-for-play economy that has emerged that artists use to help manufacture a following. Artists are not only deciding how to craft a persona and craft musical content in which they “keep it real” by honestly representing themselves in their performance and musical content. They are also struggling with choosing business practices that adhere to those values. While some artists view these strategies as necessary measures to stay on pace with the evolution of competition in their

market, others see these business strategies as promoting individuals that have the most money to advance their careers rather than individuals that have the most talent.

Lastly, after artists decide they want to pursue rap music as a career, set goals for themselves, and decide on strategies to achieve those goals, they develop an understanding of what a professional in their industry acts like. All of the above points are vital to the understanding and study of how individuals put culture to work. These strategies and understandings that are circulated among aspiring artists have a bearing on the possibilities for individuals to use music as a form of social mobility. The construction of professionalism in hip-hop is done so in an androcentric space, requiring women in the industry to face a double bind of gender conformity and professionalism. It also shows how the large, commercial industry sets the standards and manipulates the possibilities for individuals to realize their dreams in the rap music industry. The discourse of professionalism that circulates in the local rap music scene is another avenue through which individuals hold themselves and others accountable to how they do hip-hop in their daily lives as artists.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS: SURPRISES IN STUDYING HIP-HOP

Throughout the 18 months I was engaged with the Pittsburgh underground hip-hop scene, I constantly found myself being surprised by many aspects of the scene. These “surprises,” I believe, uncover some points of analysis that are vital in understanding how aspiring artists produce community, careers, and culture as they try to break into the commercial music industry. These surprises are not necessarily based on unconventional responses from those that I interviewed nor do they come from what I believe to be unique experiences of me simply being “at the right places at the right times.” Rather, I believe that these surprises have to do with the site of this research and my focus on ethnomethodology. By focusing on how artists seek to establish Pittsburgh as a city rich with hip-hop scene and how artists try to define themselves within that scene, I have been able to analyze and explain several processes important in cultural, community, and career production for aspiring artists.

In what follows, I reflect back on some of the biggest surprises of my research. In doing so, I point out the importance of the creation and utilization of racial, gendered, and hip-hop identities in the cultural, community, and career production among aspiring artists. I also point to directions for future research on these and related topics. I begin by describing my surprise at finding such a vibrant hip-hop scene in a city with no national reputation. This surprise highlights the struggle for artists to not only make a name for themselves in the rap music

industry, but also their struggle to put Pittsburgh “on the map.” I then describe the surprise that Pittsburgh is rife with a category of artist that is often overlooked in discussions of rap music, especially when it comes to ideas of “realness” and authenticity. This category of artist, which I call the aspiring mainstream artist, is often confused with the “underground” artist, who eschews the commercial music industry. Many of the artists in Pittsburgh are not “underground” because of a moralistic stance against the commodification of rap music; they aspire but are not (yet) recognized by the commercial industry. I then analyze the surprising economy that exists around live performances, which uncovers the power differential between those who own infrastructure in Pittsburgh’s rap scene and the artists who seek to use it. Lastly, I reflect on the surprising assertion by many of my respondents that talent is not among the most necessary elements for an artist’s success. All of these surprises are directly linked to my ethnomethodological concern with how artists learn and act on their conceptions of what it takes to make it in rap music. I was ultimately not surprised at how race and gender organized the scene. I found these racial and gendered interactions to be quite predictable, but my data provide more context on how race and gender can be used as resources for some rap artists and how race and gender act as barriers for others.

6.1 “DOES PITTSBURGH EVEN HAVE A HIP-HOP SCENE?”

When I was among friends or colleagues, and during conference presentations, one of the most common questions about my research I received was some variation of, “Does Pittsburgh even have a rap scene?” Admittedly, when I began my research, I had the same question. Despite the

success of Mac Miller and Wiz Khalifa, Pittsburgh has yet to gain a national reputation for hip-hop music. Even though hip-hop is a national phenomenon, cities like New York, Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles are known for nurturing and promoting hip-hop talent in the United States. While hip-hop continues to grow in other cities, it is more common to hear of the thriving hip-hop scene in cities like Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Washington, DC, than it is to hear about the Pittsburgh scene. Magazines like *XXL*, *The Source*, and *Complex* and popular hip-hop blogs give little attention to Pittsburgh and its rap scene. Artists in Pittsburgh thus have a dual mission. They simultaneously work to establish themselves as notable artists, while also working to bring the spotlight to city as a whole.

I began my research expecting to find a handful of artists who were really engaged with the scene. My bias on this account was primarily due to Pittsburgh's reputation as a white, working-class steel town. Hip-hop, I figured, would be more prevalent in cities with large urban centers concentrating black and minority youth. This bias comes from my awareness of hip-hop's history being tied to these conditions (see Chang 2004 and Kitwana 2002). My friends and colleagues stated that they were surprised to hear of a hip-hop scene because of the "grit" associated with Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh's reputation as a steel town, they and I believed, would make it more likely to have a thriving rock or punk scene, given those genres associations with working-class whiteness. However, I was surprised to find a large network of artists who were all trying to establish themselves as artists and continue to grow what they saw as a thriving scene. The largely, but not exclusively, white singer-songwriter scene in Pittsburgh has many similar dynamics, but I cannot yet speak to the shared or particular features of the rap scene.

Throughout my research, I saw how the two-part battle of trying to legitimate themselves as artists while trying to legitimate Pittsburgh as a hip-hop destination shaped the interactions of

artists within the scene. Artists consistently tweeted their frustrations with the lack of exposure given to their city, saying that they felt Pittsburgh is being “slept on.” This phrase is a way of saying that the scene is being overlooked, or not given the respect it deserves. As I was completing my research, I caught up with Actshawn and asked him for his opinions on the scene in the time since we last spoke. He told me that Pittsburgh is still being slept on and added, “How many big-name rappers come through here? Not a lot.” He pointed out that major artists do not schedule tour stops for Pittsburgh because, in his estimation, Pittsburgh is “not on their map” and major artists do not believe they can draw a big crowd in Pittsburgh (Field Notes, 6/25/2016).

This two-pronged strive for legitimacy helps set the stakes for artists as they try to make a name for themselves in the industry. The fact that Pittsburgh is not currently a hip-hop destination to those outside of the city has discouraged several artists from participating in the scene. I found evidence for this in the three artists that have left Pittsburgh to try to “make it” in other cities with more gravitas in the hip-hop industry. Maverick and Virus moved to L.A., a hip-hop hotbed, and Alchemist moved to Philadelphia, a city with its own storied hip-hop past. Several other artists suggested that it may be time to “get out” of Pittsburgh because of the limited opportunities the city provides for their careers. This is certainly a strategy that holds true with other genres of music. It is where we get the cliché story of the artist or band that packs up their gear and heads to Austin, L.A., Nashville, Seattle, or New York to try to make it big.

If the opportunity structures of other cities would make it easier for artists to realize their goals of making it in the rap music industry, what keeps them in Pittsburgh? Certainly, an obvious factor is that not all artists have the means to pack up their lives and move many miles to a new city to try to chase their dreams in rap music. Artists never said that their decision to stay

in Pittsburgh was because they did not think they could afford to move and live elsewhere. Rather, they referred to Pittsburgh as being their “home” and said that they wanted to work to put “their city” on the map. For many of them, success is both being taken in by the rap music industry while also bringing the rap music industry to their city.

Kubrin and Nielson (2014) refer to the emphasis on locality in rap music. As rap music has expanded, rappers have continuously clung to their streets, neighborhoods, cities, and even countries as they introduce themselves to audiences. Rappers often identify with and are identified by their location of origin. Location provides context to a rapper’s experiences and when it aligns with cities seen as hip-hop mainstays, helps provide legitimacy to artists. For example, Kendrick Lamar comes from Compton, CA, which is Los Angeles County and has a long history of producing rappers since N.W.A released their album, *Straight Outta Compton*. For many, his ascent to the top of the rap music industry makes sense because of the association of Compton with mainstream success in rap music. However, a rapper like Drake’s position also at the top of the rap music industry is as perplexing as Kendrick Lamar’s is expected. Drake comes from Toronto, ON, Canada and while he takes pride in this fact and often references his hometown, his Canadian roots are the subject of many jokes at his expense among those in the hip-hop community. Compton’s association with hip-hop culture, gang culture, and urban poverty bring with it a certain expression of black masculinity that aligns well with the ideas of black masculinity many have when judging rappers. Like Toronto, Pittsburgh does not have these connotations.

Artists in Pittsburgh feel the need to increase the reputation of their city in the eyes of hip-hop fans and the music industry. Additionally, they feel the need to increase the visibility of hip-hop culture in Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Hip-Hop Summit event that I attended in March of

2014 was a meeting of the minds from many in the Pittsburgh scene who hoped to not only bring unity to the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh, but also raise its profile in the city. This meant having more events which drew bigger crowds. These bigger crowds would catch the eye of promoters who would be able to show the popularity of hip-hop in Pittsburgh to bigger and bigger acts and draw them to perform in Pittsburgh. When bigger acts come to Pittsburgh, they increase the visibility of the city to their record labels and other acts touring who may also book Pittsburgh dates for their tours. The artists in Pittsburgh are then able to interact with these larger acts and either get tips on their own careers or begin to create a network of people in the industry that may be able to help them secure a record deal. Eventually, this line of thinking goes, more and more people will be drawn into the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh until it eventually gains the national attention and legitimacy of other cities seen as hip-hop hotbeds. They are looking to make the sentence “There’s hip-hop in Pittsburgh” a declarative statement rather than a question.

With the relatively unknown reputation of Pittsburgh hip-hop on the national scene, I expected to have an immensely difficult time finding individuals to recruit for this study. However, I quickly found that there are hundreds of artists working in the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh. Patrolling hip-hop blogs from the city, attending hip-hop events, and scrolling through Twitter allowed me to interact with well over 100 artists in Pittsburgh. Recruiting them for interviews proved a bit more difficult. Many artists did not have time to focus on booking their own shows, recording music, promoting themselves, carrying out their day jobs, while also finding time to sit down with me for a few hours. Some of these artists declined my requests for interviews or, it seemed, our communications back and forth trying to establish a meeting time simply got lost in the shuffle. This led me to miss two important case-types. The first is the artist that is still in the process of learning how to get involved in the scene. All of the artists I

interviewed were regularly performing and had at least a small following. Their perspective came from a place of having already learned the “rules of the game.” Something important processes of trial and error were most likely lost because I never witnessed artists at the very beginning of their career. The second case-type comes at the other end of the spectrum: the artist who decided to quit rapping completely. These cases could help me make claims on the influences that can cause a person to realize this goal is no longer achievable. If I had pursued these cases, I would have a complete analysis of the suitability of Pittsburgh as a place that fosters, or diminishes, the career opportunities of aspiring rappers.

However, my inability to contact some artists highlighted the lack of infrastructure available to the rap music scene as well as the inexperience of artists within Pittsburgh. As I described in Chapter 2, the closing of the Beat Box represented a significant change in the infrastructure of Pittsburgh’s rap music scene. Members of the rap music scene could previously congregate at the Beat Box to share ideas, grow their social networks, and meet other artists. When the Beat Box closed, the scene began to scatter throughout the city, forcing people to seek out places that would be hosting hip-hop music and events that night. In other words, there is no longer any particular place where members of the hip-hop scene in Pittsburgh simply “hang out.” Underground artists became further buried by the lack of infrastructure in Pittsburgh. Before the Beat Box closed, artists could just perform there and know that there would be a crowd of hip-hop aficionados in attendance who frequented the Beat Box because of its status as a destination for those in the scene. Artists now have to do more work in getting people to go to unfamiliar venues not explicitly associated with hip-hop music. This makes it harder for artists to draw a crowd of potential new fans because it is less likely that individuals would just attend these shows on a whim.

The closing of the Beat Box helped fuel the skepticism that many people to still express about the rap scene in Pittsburgh. Even for those who are not hip-hop fans, the Beat Box still had a positive reputation among those “in the know” about Pittsburgh’s nightlife. There is yet to be a space that has taken up the mantle of the Beat Box as the epicenter of Pittsburgh hip-hop. Similar to places like *CBGB* in New York (though, with much less national acclaim), the Beat Box was the symbolic home of Pittsburgh’s hip-hop scene. When it died, many believed that the scene died with it. For members of the scene, gaining national attention for their scene seems compromised by the fact that it is hard to convince even those that reside in Pittsburgh that there is still a thriving scene here.

Another barrier that kept me and others from being able to connect with some of the many artists in Pittsburgh relates to the ideas of professionalism described in Chapter 5. When I would track down performances in Pittsburgh, I would also try to touch base with the performers. In some cases, this would prove difficult because performers would sometimes leave the venue immediately after their performance or they would retreat to the backstage area to party with other artists. When talking about live performances, artists often said that the sign of a professional is one who gives primacy to the performance itself and making connections with the audience over celebrating and partying. During his album release party, Scrollz said that he wanted to talk to everyone there while “not getting too drunk” because he wanted to project a professionalism that would help show his maturity and development as an artist. He felt that he had done that through the effort he put into making his album and the content of the album itself, so he wanted his comportment to match that.

Perhaps the skepticism surrounding the scene has something to do with people attending events where artists do not interact with the audience, but rather retreat to party with friends,

making it seem like they are less serious about making it as an artist and more interested in the partying that can accompany live performances. Nevertheless, it would be hasty to conclude that I was unable to talk to some artists after they performed they were not being serious about their careers. Rather, some artists were not available after their performances because they were working so hard that they were leaving the performance for another performance at another venue, heading to the recording studio, or heading to another job.

I would often seek out those artists with whom I could not connect at their live performances by trying to find their email, websites, or social media accounts. For some artists, this would prove to be quite difficult. Even though several artists pointed out the importance of having a website and contact information in their discussion of professionalism, I often found it hard to find information about the people I had just observed performing. Some would have no website (or, at least one I could find), some would have websites that listed were so out of date that their performance schedule listed dates that were over two years old, and others had websites that needed to have their domain license renewed and just gave a broken link. For these aspiring artists, the inability to make the connections between themselves and fans keeps them from emerging onto the scene and gaining recognition. For those surveying the scene, these qualities signal that members of the Pittsburgh rap music scene, or at least these artists, are not serious about making a national impact. While there may be many artists trying to make it within the rap music industry, some do not make the effort to maintain the channels of interaction between them and those looking to interact with them and their music. It is hard for a fan who just saw an artist perform to then try to access their music online to only find one or two songs that were produced several years ago, or a defunct website, to believe a scene is thriving.

The above aspects made me contemplate how a city “puts itself on the map” in relation to cultural production. Historically, we have seen how the consolidation of movie studios in Hollywood created the epicenter of the US and global film industry. Additionally, we have seen how the cultural origins of rap music in the Bronx made New York City the foremost city associated with rap music. The consolidation of record companies in Nashville established it as the home of country music. While other cities may not try to “snatch the crown,” to borrow from hip-hop vernacular, from the cities that are foremost associated with different idioms of cultural production, it is important that further research attempt to document and explain how cities are able to achieve monopoly in their respective disciplines.

Further research should be done into how producers of culture work with infrastructure, governments, and media outlets to give exposure to their city. In Pittsburgh, there is an effort being made to gain the attention of the American film industry. Pittsburgh is now home to one of the largest movie studios outside of Hollywood, offers tax incentives for films that wish to bring their production here, and has been used to shoot scenes in Hollywood blockbusters like *The Dark Knight Rises*. Even with these efforts, it is unlikely that Pittsburgh will ever be seen as a major player in the film industry. Rappers in Pittsburgh believe that if the city focused on hip-hop the way that they have the film industry, there is no doubt many of the artists from here would be household names. However, they seem to be buried underground both within the city of Pittsburgh and in terms of Pittsburgh’s notoriety in the music industry as a whole.

6.2 BURIED UNDERGROUND

Documenting the career trajectories of aspiring artists as I have done in this research uncovers one type of artist that is often ignored when analyzing rap music: the aspiring mainstream artist. While many have looked at the rap career (e.g., Lee 2016, Hess in Forman and Neal 2012, Morgan 2009) most take on the admirable task of identifying the role the rap career takes in the lives of mainly young, poor, black, men and how their pursuit of rap music is a response to the struggles of their social location. It seems that the discussion and analysis is focused more on the idea of “before and after”: before deciding to become a rapper and after deciding to become a rapper, before making it big and after making it big. Very rarely do analyses focus on the trials and tribulations of artists as they try to break into the music industry. Those who have not “made it” are given the moniker of being “underground” because of their unknown and undiscovered status. As I discuss in this section, the artists in my research have little in common with artists typically thought of as being “underground.” Often the term “underground” is given to artists who choose to subvert the mainstream. These artists, however, are simply being overlooked, or buried underground.

When it comes to rap music, the distinction between the mainstream and the underground is often housed in the discussion of authenticity in hip-hop. On the one hand, there are artists that enter the inauthentic mainstream by “selling out” and giving over control of their music to record labels. On the other hand, there is the authentic underground, which consists of rap music that is not connected with record labels and may be more political, critical, musically adventurous, etc., than commercially viable music. Mainstream artists are criticized for relying and capitalizing on music trends to make a name for themselves rather than skill and integrity. Underground artists,

then, are seen as pursuing music for the love of the craft and their skill level in terms of lyrical content is said to be higher (Harkness 2013, Oware 2014). The “underground” is presented as a choice artists make to pursue rap music while keeping creative control by avoiding corporate influence thereby allowing them to engage in more skillful and artistic rhyming while relying on do-it-yourself (DIY) marketing and production (Morgan 2009). The artists in this sample often refer to themselves as underground artists, but do so not as a way to signal their authenticity. Rather, they wish to signal the fact that they have yet to be discovered by the mainstream industry. They are not looking to avoid the mainstream industry; the mainstream industry is avoiding them.

In these ways, the production and promotion of the career of these artists take on a completely different meaning that is not captured by most discussions of artists who are “underground.” They engage in DIY marketing and production because they are compelled to given their status as relative unknowns in the industry. They do not wish for the “pure” experience of doing things on their own and without the assistance of any major record company. They do everything themselves so that eventually they will have to do nothing themselves besides create music. Some of the artists said that keeping creative control was important to them and would possibly inhibit them from signing on with a major label. However, many others took the position of Alchemist would said he would “pay his dues” with a major record label and allow them to call the shots until he got big enough that he could call the shots.

The distinction between the mainstream and the underground generates a false antagonism. The underground is said to exist in the space outside of the commercial rap music industry, yet discussions of the underground take on a very narrow view on what that could mean. For most, it means artists engaged in socially conscious lyricism, complex word play, and

independent production and distribution. However, the artists typically talked about as examples of the hip-hop underground are those that have received a great deal of success. Yes, their net worth may have fewer zeroes than their mainstream counterparts, but they still represent a portion of artists that have “made it” by many accounts. This makes it hard to locate artists like those in this sample. The term “underground” indicates that these artists have not emerged into the mainstream either by way of hiding from the mainstream or being buried by it. For those that choose to remain hiding, the going characterization of underground artists seems to fit just fine. But, for those buried by the mainstream industry that they very much want to be a part of, this narrow view of the underground ignores many of their interactions with the industry that I present here.

6.3 PAY-TO-PLAY

One of the most surprising aspects of the Pittsburgh rap music scene was how much it operates on the adage, “You have to spend money to make money.” This idea plays out in a couple of ways in the Pittsburgh underground hip-hop scene, from spending money on production and promotion of music to the paying for opportunities to perform. It is this latter point that I would like to emphasize. The Pittsburgh scene presents an interesting scenario that make it possible for aspiring performers to be exploited while they attempt to advance their careers. As I have detailed, the Pittsburgh infrastructure, in terms of performance spaces, provides precious few opportunities. Additionally, the prejudices against hip-hop culture, with the racial prejudices that accompany it, make some venue owners avoid booking hip-hop shows in general. In the section

below, I describe how the “pay-to-play” system that has developed in Pittsburgh hinders the career advancement of aspiring hip-hop artists. This system highlights the importance of understanding how the cultural production of live music operates in cities. By understanding how this system operates, we are able to understand more of the social forces that shape the career paths of artists.

I find that the lack of performance venues for aspiring artists in Pittsburgh creates a system where the venue owners have a great deal of influence on the career trajectories of aspiring artists. Because there are few venues in which artists can perform and so many artists that wish to do so, venue owners can charge artists for access to venues and audiences. This creates competition among the artists to acquire these performance slots. As I explained previously, the venue owners or show promoters often do not worry about what will be a “good” show, rather, they seek out artists who are willing to pay their fees. Artists said that this often leads to shows where the opening acts are not the best fit with the touring headliner. Artists are then exposed to a crowd that is not receptive to their music. Another artist may be a better fit for the concert lineup, but they are priced out of the market for stage time.

Artists claim that there is a certain amount of nepotism in the securing of shows and that certain venues and certain promoters will refuse to book certain acts. Owners are looking to book acts that they feel will bring a good crowd and generate profit for their business. Many artists, however, see owners’ monopoly on venues as much more nefarious. For artists without the social connections with the venues and promoters, getting their act off the ground proves difficult. When venues allow artists to perform, they often charge them a fee that they can make back by selling a certain number of tickets to their show. Artists bear the risk and the financial burden. The owners and promoters put themselves in a relatively no-lose situation by selling the tickets

to the performer because, even if the show fails to draw a large crowd, they have still sold a sizable number of tickets to the performers off-loading the risk to performers.

I have found that live performance is essential to the growth and development of artists and it provides an essential aspect of the process of “doing hip-hop.” Many artists recounted their experiences with live performances as a way of showing themselves and others that they were legitimate rap artists. Live performance is unique in this aspect because it allows fans and artists to be exposed to one another when they might not be if left to their own devices. This is particularly true for artists who do not fit the stereotypical mold of a hip-hop artist, that is, for those artists who are not black males. Both Aubrey Loud and Alchemist, who are white, said that individuals often assume that they would not be able to do hip-hop based on appearances alone. However, people often change their minds upon seeing the two artists perform. An essential part of gaining legitimacy in hip-hop is by being able to show that you can perform. Artists even detailed how this is different from recorded music because of the ability to doctor and over-produce music with modern production techniques. That is, it is nearly impossible to “fake” a live performance, and the bond created between the artist and the audience is impactful. Without the ability to legitimize themselves via these live performances, artists in Pittsburgh are at a disadvantage.

The relationships among owners, promoters, and artists shows a lack of synergy between the infrastructure and the music scene. One thing that may be needed for the Pittsburgh hip-hop scene to succeed is for venues and promoters to buy into the scene by making it easier for artists to perform. One reason that the Beat Box was so successful in helping to encourage the growth of the hip-hop scene was that it provided a space for artists to perform and grow their fanbase without creating a financial burden. Mike Tors said that the hip-hop scene needs to move toward

a more collaborative ownership model between venues and the scene. If the scene could acquire, open, or work with performance spaces more easily, they may be able to help the scene reach its full potential. Further research needs to be done looking at the economic relationships between artists and performance spaces. This research could help develop models that encourage the development of music scenes and aid in the career advancement of artists.

The difficulties of securing places to perform their music has led artists to phase themselves out of the scene in Pittsburgh or seek out opportunities elsewhere. While artists described the benefits of performing in other cities in terms of how it affects their acclaim in Pittsburgh, it is certainly not the ideal business model for aspiring artists. The problem here is twofold. First, in order to perform in other cities, artists must be able to secure transportation, lodging, and food, all of which adds up. Just because artists travel to different cities to perform does not mean that they are avoiding the pay-to-play system. Often artists run into the same economic structure in the cities they visit. Only this time, they have the added costs of food, transportation, and lodging.

Second, playing in different cities can make it difficult for artists to draw, and connect with, a crowd. Pittsburgh's rap scene may not have the clout to get a fan in that other city to come out to the show. This exposes an interesting catch-22. To get people to come out in other cities, the reputation of Pittsburgh hip-hop needs to increase. However, increasing the reputation of Pittsburgh hip-hop requires people in other cities to come out to shows and become fans of these artists. Artists then must put in extra effort to draw a crowd in the cities that they visit in the hopes that these brief interactions inspire fans to seek them out for much more sustained engagement with their music through online music downloads or by purchasing their album. It may be easier for artists to build a following if they could secure regular performances in their

city, where they could have sustained interactions through performance with the same people, creating a larger and more dedicated following.

The pay-to-play system that exists in Pittsburgh often leaves artists without places to perform and leave fans without performers. Off-loading risk to artists inhibits the formation and the solidification of a community within the hip-hop scene. Additionally, it impedes the career development of artists. It makes artists who must pay to secure live performances scramble for other ways to make money off their music. Future research should be directed in understanding how these economic systems develop and what they mean for the career development among aspiring artists in other cities. It is also important to see how these systems are subverted and resisted by artists looking to give live performances.

6.4 TALENT ISN'T ALL THAT IS NECESSARY

Perhaps most surprising to me was that most of the artists I spoke with presented a narrative about developing a rap career in which talent is of secondary importance. While the artists believe themselves to be talented and often point out the talent of others in the scene, they emphasize the importance of many other processes that are more crucial to an artist's success. As I entered the field, I went in with the expectation that the music business worked on the basic premise that talented artists create music and gathered a following based on their talent, which eventually caught the eye of a record executive. That record executive would then offer the artists a recording contract because their talent was too good to pass up. Or, perhaps alternatively, I imagined that artists dabbled around with music until they eventually made one

song that caught the attention of many people (perhaps by going “viral” on the internet), and this catapulted them into the spotlight. My respondents offer a narrative that devalues the importance of talent and suggests that understanding the “rules of the game” with regards to hip-hop cultural codes and business practices is much more important than being “talented.” Even the most talented artists will be overlooked if they “don’t have their business right” and even artists lacking talent can make it big by understanding how to play the game.

The question I asked that artists had the most trouble answering, was actually an ice-breaker: “Who are some of your least favorite artists and why?” This question almost always created a snag in our conversations for one of two reasons. One reason was that despite the anonymity I promised my respondents, they did not want to be recorded defaming other artists. As aspiring artists, they did not want to create a potential rift between themselves and other artists that they may interact with upon breaking into the commercial industry. In other words, they did not want to make enemies before they established themselves. A second reason, which has nothing to do with self-preservation like the first, is that artists avoided giving me “least favorite” artists out of recognition of the difficulty of making a career in the rap music industry.

Artists would typically say that there were artists that they did not like, but, they would still commend them for making it in the industry. They would highlight how these artists, despite not being talented in their estimation, are able to market themselves and grab the attention of fans. They would say things like “[this artist] brands themselves well” or “[this artist] knew how to get the attention of the record companies,” highlighting that the mechanism that got these individuals recognition was their business practices and not their talent at rapping.

In some cases, artists claimed that some famous artists had no talent whatsoever in their estimation and the only reasons they are famous is because of their business savvy. These claims

highlight the importance of the processes I have outlined in this research. For aspiring hip-hop artists, success hinges upon being able to establish themselves and their music as viable products in the commercial industry. While all artists strive to “make good music,” their experiences as they try to make it in the rap music industry show that simply making good music is insufficient for four main reasons (each of which I have detailed in a chapter above).

First, artists must deal with the local infrastructure of performance venues, radio stations, record companies, and other resources available to them and their music scene. Each artist recognized that they were only one of many talented artists in their music scene. However, they felt that all of this talent may be going to waste without being given a platform for people to experience it. Second, being only one of many talented artists fosters horizontal hostility and competition over scarce resources. No matter how talented an artist may be, their success can be limited by others in the scene. Third, artists hold themselves and are held accountable based on norms within hip-hop that have very little to do with talent. The requisite norms that they must cite in order to be seen as authentic and legitimate in the rap music industry have much more to do with learning the rules of behavior and belonging in the industry than they do with having talent. At the very least, talent is on the same level as these norms, and similarly, can be developed over time. Fourth, artists must learn the effective business strategies to get their talents seen by the music industry. Having talent will be of no use to an artist if they do not understand how to portray themselves as a professional in the industry. These four reasons show the importance of understanding the processes that go into creating careers, communities, and culture.

6.5 FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should continue to examine the processes that go into the creation of careers, communities, and culture related to music and art. Genre and geographic variation in the contexts and practices of artistic production characterize these processes. Accessing the processes behind the content requires shifting analysis away from products and content to the interactions that shape the production process. This involves investigating how race, gender, and other identities shape and structure the expectations and interactions of those attempting to establish themselves as artists. As I have shown here, scenes have their own sets of resources available to artists and operate with unique sets of expectations. It is vital to investigate how other music scenes help and hinder the production of culture. Taking into consideration the expectations of artists and those within culture industries by looking at how accountability shapes these interactions will illuminate the constraints placed on cultural produce as well as highlighting the potentials for artists to reshape and redefine those expectations.

Understanding how individuals use space and place to help develop their careers can illuminate the differences in possibilities some scenes offer those who operate within them. I have shown that much more research needs to be done in which music/art scenes are not narrowly conceptualized as places of unity. Engaging with a scene can be harmful to the career aspirations of some artists because of the limited assistance they can provide and the hostile interactions they may have with fellow scene members. Investigations into music scenes in these ways can help understand why and how certain locations can have success in producing careers and culture that shape the expectations for aspiring artists.

Lastly, research needs to investigate the influence that the internet has on all of these processes. The use and impact of digital technologies is rapidly changing the way artists interact with one another and the commercial industry. The process of buying “fake” views on YouTube videos and “fake” listens on artists’ online music that I uncovered here shows the potentials of this underground economy. As strategies like these develop, it is important to investigate how they shape the careers of artists and the circulation of the music they make.

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