"In the Clique": Popular Culture, Constructions of Place, and the Everyday Lives of Urban Youth

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This study focuses on two teens, Tony and Rufus, and how they used key popular texts to construct a sense of place in the small city where this research was conducted. These two teens mobilized these popular texts in very specific ways, both finding specific thematic links between and across them and also using them to index their relationships with biological and extended family in this city and "down South." This study highlights the complex, emergent, and messy relationships many young people have with popular culture.

Young people today are using ever ubiquitous media forms and technologies to define themselves and to map their daily lives, in ways that often confound adults, including teachers (Giroux 1996; Steinberg and Kincheloe 1996). These popular texts—and I include here films, songs, and television shows—are circulating and being picked up in many different and often entirely unpredictable ways. These texts are no longer—if they ever were—embedded in stable social systems that draw participants into coherent and predictable modes of reception (Lash and Urry 1994; Thompson 1990). However, while many researchers acknowledge that reception practices cannot be assumed a priori and their effects cannot be prefigured, we have only just begun to get a sense of how young people actually use these texts to construct their identities, their unique subjectivities, and the social networks in which they are embedded. Indeed, though many are realizing that popular culture is pervading the lives of young people and that schools must respond in some fashion, work in the field has been notably and markedly sparse.

Three approaches tend to dominate the study of popular culture and education. First, critical pedagogues like Henry Giroux argue that media and popular culture play important roles in young people’s lives and must be explored as a kind of alternative "lived" curriculum. Yet, as with much curriculum history and theory, textual analysis has reigned supreme here, much of which simply demonstrates how these texts reproduce dominant cultural imperatives, assuming high levels of predictability from text to subject. For Giroux (1996) and others, we can "read" popular texts like Menace II Society and Boyz ’N the Hood to understand more clearly how young people are being demonized in popular culture. On the logic of such readings, these texts create visions of young people as without complexity, as one-dimensional and evil, and can

play into conservative and ultimately debilitating agendas. We see similar approaches from a range of critics working in cultural studies, media studies, and education today, all of whom foreground textual analysis and background young people and their messy and unpredictable relationships to and with popular texts (e.g., Kellner 1995; Steinberg and Kincheloe 1996).

Second, theorists of "media literacy" such as Len Masterman (1985) have stressed the ways young people can be taught to resist these seemingly deleterious effects of contemporary media cultures. This has tended to be, as David Buckingham writes, a "defensive" position, one that attempts "to inoculate students against or protect them from what are assumed to be the negative effects of the media" (1996:644). In their recent review of media literacy in the U.S. curriculum, for example, Kubey and Baker quote documentation from North Carolina’s viewing strand: "It is an important goal of education for learners to be able to critique and use the dominant media of today. Visual literacy is essential for survival as consumers and citizens in our technologically intensive world" (1999:58). Quite plainly, phrases like "essential for survival" evidence the defensive nature of even the best media literacy programs in the United States today. Both of these approaches thus theorize popular culture as a site of oppression for young people, making a priori assumptions about popular texts and their effects—direct or otherwise—on students.

Third, and finally, there has been a small but growing body of ethnographic work on young people and their uses of popular culture that offers a powerful counterargument to the above. Much of this work has been celebratory, validating the kind of creativity and effort that young people invest in the nonelite arts. Paul Willis, a key figure here, has documented the multiple uses to which young people put popular culture, or, as he writes, the "common culture" that young people create and sustain. Willis, for example, celebrates the ways that young people subvert dominant music and fashion industries by taping music from the radio for free and buying secondhand clothes and using them in exciting and interesting ways. Traditional schools, Willis argues—those "predicated . . . on the assumed superiority of high art"—are becoming less and less important for young people as this "common culture" is becoming more so. He writes, "Common culture will, increasingly, undertake, in its own ways, the roles that education has vacated"—connecting with the lives, energies, and interests of young people as they construct identities and selves (1990:147).

Willis does much to highlight the work that young people invest in popular culture. Yet the young people in Willis’s world remain largely faceless. We have little sense of particular life courses, or of valued local social networks, or of the institutions young people traverse. As I will argue here and throughout, understanding these multiple, complex, and (often) contradictory forces is crucial if we are to understand the role
of popular culture in the lives of young people. Researchers including Finders (1996) and Fisherkeller (1997) have begun to address these concerns, adding a crucial empirical dimension to these discussions about media culture, youth culture, and education, extending a body of important work (e.g., Buckingham 1993; McCarthy et al. 1999; Mahiri 1998; Richards 1999).

Finders (1996), for example, looked recently at one group of seventh grade girls—"queens," she calls them—and how the girls used popular teenage magazines like Sassy, Seventeen, and YM. She argues that these magazines (she calls them, perhaps too loosely, "zines") allowed these girls to begin to challenge developmental boundaries, giving them access to seemingly taboo or more mature (albeit circumscribed) kinds of knowledge. These girls used these magazines to solidify the exclusive boundaries of their own social friendship network and also to ascribe special status within their group. These were the local, and often problematic, social functions and uses to which these texts were put. Finders calls for schools to counter these uses in their formal curricula, though, in so doing, she evokes the "defensive" media literacy position discussed earlier.

While the collective nature of the "queens" seems most important to Finders, others have focused more closely on the ways that young people's individual biographies inform their relationship to and with popular culture. Fisherkeller (1997), for example, recently looked at the lives of three young people and how they related to key popular figures like Madonna and TV shows like Murphy Brown. She looked at their lives in context—in their homes, in their neighborhoods, at school, and within their peer cultures—to help explain how and why they were attracted to what texts and what pedagogical function or role the texts played in their everyday lives. For example, she focused on one teen and his relationship with The Cosby Show. This working-class African American teen (who chose the pseudonym "Wolverine") had aspirations of being a businessman, which were reinforced in multiple contexts, including in the home. As Fisherkeller demonstrates, Wolverine was able to "imaginatively learn from Cosby's phenomenal achievements" in constructing a validated self (1997:478–479). Personal biography thus adds another degree of complexity to our understanding of young people and popular culture.

Ethnographic work, in short, has helped us understand more clearly young people's relationships to and with popular culture. This exciting and interesting work offers a key counter to the textual approaches that have come to dominate the study of popular culture. Yet this work does not focus as sharply as it might on the discontinuities in young people's use of popular culture—how biographies and social networks, for example, often work at cross-purposes. These discontinuities highlight the complex, emergent nature of young people's daily lives, throwing into sharp relief key issues vis-à-vis young people and their relationships to
and with texts, both popular and academic. Young people, in short, have very messy relationships with popular culture—ones best understood, I argue, through long-term ethnography.

This kind of research is especially necessary among black teens and with black popular culture. Indeed, rap music, as a recent *Time* magazine cover article made so clear, has redefined the popular American landscape in fundamental ways—we now live in a "Hip Hop Nation" (Farley 1999). Yet virtually all the work on black popular culture and rap music to date has been historical and textual (e.g., Rose 1994). There has not been a single long-term ethnographic study of rap music in the daily lives of black youth. Textual analysis of rap lyrics has dominated popular and academic discussion on both the right and the left (Sexton 1995). Much of this work, importantly, has been deployed to diagnose an entire generation of black youth as nihilistic and pathological, setting the stage for increasingly draconian public policy (see, for example, Males 1996).

This essay aims at a corrective. Popular media forms made a whole host of constructs available to the young people at the community center where I conducted this research. These constructs were part of day-to-day life and conversation in ways fairly easy to predict. Yet I did find some surprises as I explored local friendship networks as well as individual biographies in situated institutional contexts. I argue here that the closer we get to young people's lives—their individual biographies, their valued friendship networks, and the institutions they traverse—the less predictable is the role of popular media. Specifically, this article focuses on two African American teens, Rufus and Tony, and how they used key popular texts to construct a sense of place in the small city where this research was conducted. These two teens mobilized these texts in very specific ways, both finding specific thematic links between and across them and also using them to index their relationships with biological and extended family, in this city and "down South." These two young people reconfigured a Southern tradition of specific values and mores, one that provided a highly valued sense of stability in the face of an intensely precarious social, cultural, and material reality, one that they lived through in very different ways. As such, I will highlight throughout the discontinuities and disjunctures so evident in their lives, offering a richer sense of media use as emergent, unpredictable, and ultimately messy.

**Setting and Participants**

The site for this study was a local community center (or "club") in a small Midwestern city where I developed and ran a weekly program devoted to discussing African American vernacular culture (generally) and hip hop or rap music (specifically). I maintained the program and its curriculum for two and a half years. This program was offered as one of a handful of programs at a center that serves over 300 economically marginalized African American children in the community. In this program,
we discussed popular texts and figures—most often related to hip-hop or rap music—in open-ended and nondirected ways. I typically brought in a number of prompts for discussion (e.g., copies of song lyrics) and gauged what my participants were most enthusiastic about discussing. I then chose a new prompt when discussion seemed to wane. I usually began by asking them to interpret or explain the meanings of these texts, though these discussions almost always led us toward key events in their daily lives. The participants ranged in age from 10 to 17 and eventually met in two separate groups (10–12 and 13–17). These focus groups on average consisted of three to ten participants who attended many but not all sessions. The younger group typically attracted larger numbers while the older groups typically attracted fewer.

After a year and a half of conducting these focus groups, I began conducting one-on-one interviews with select participants. The goal of these interviews was to get a more particular sense of young people and their relationship with popular culture, the kind of information that might be missed in larger, group discussions. Rufus, a very warm and friendly teen who attended these focus groups, seemed a logical first person to approach. He agreed to participate, and we conducted several of these sessions before he asked if his "cousin" Tony could come along as well. Tony, Rufus said, had been through a lot and had a lot to say about many of the issues that we discussed. I of course agreed, and we conducted numerous discussions, individually and together, formally and informally, over the next two and a half years.

I first came to this site as a researcher in 1995. However, my role changed considerably over time, in ways that helped me understand this site and its role in the community more clearly. Most specifically, as I was conducting research, I also began performing volunteer work in the fall of 1996, doing a range of tasks like answering the phones and monitoring the main game room. Over the course of the year, I impressed some of the older staff members, including the unit director, and was asked to become a regular staff member in the summer of 1997. As a staff member, I developed and maintained educational and recreational programs for children in three age groups—7–8, 9–10, and 11–12. I returned the following fall for two more years of volunteer work. Toward the end of the second year, I helped organize the activities of the teens and the newly opened teen center. My shifting position—as researcher, volunteer, and staff member—gave me greater purchase on the site itself, the community where the center was located, and the children and adolescents who peopled the club and participated in my program. All of these insights—as I worked these various hyphens—were central for my work (Fine 1994).

Indeed, as a white researcher working in a nearly all-black setting, I was clearly marked as an outsider, someone who had entered into a formal, contractual relationship with the site and its members. I agreed to bring pizza to each meeting, and these young people agreed to provide
me with valuable data. I did not share any responsibility for the club or maintaining its rules. My relationship to and with these young people was clearly contained. As a volunteer and staff person, however, I was more aligned with the authority structure of the club, an institution that had a long history and privileged role in the local community. I was able, as the only white person who occupied such a position, to negotiate new kinds of relationships and trust with young people over this period. (The constraining dimensions and ethical problematics of occupying these new roles as someone also conducting research is beyond the scope of this article, though it is treated elsewhere [Dimitriadis in press].)

Most especially, as I became a fixture in the community and at the center, I had opportunities for more informal kinds of interactions with these young people, including Rufus and Tony. As a rare individual with a car, I was called on for trips to the supermarket, to the bank to cash checks, to the laundromat, and the like. In addition, young people would drop by my home from time to time. While conducting this research, I lived only two miles or so from the club, and my apartment was also located right between the club and the local high school that many of my older participants attended. These informal interactions complemented the interviews and focus group sessions I conducted at the club and reflected my growing role as a trusted older figure in their lives.

Space and Community in a Small "Hub" City

The small Midwestern city where this study took place has a population of over 60,000 and is equally distant from a handful of major cities, including Chicago and Indianapolis, readily accessible via a number of interstate highways from Southern states, including Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee. In addition, the Amtrak railroad runs through this "hub" city, a line that connects Chicago and a number of key Southern states, including the ones mentioned above. However, because of Amtrak's prohibitive pricing, the Greyhound bus and car pooling remain the primary options for transportation. African Americans are the largest single minority group here (nearly 20 percent of the total city population), and whites overwhelmingly dominate (at nearly 80 percent). The African American population has traditionally been highly mobile and often transitory, typically coming from and going to this city for a variety of reasons. Individuals, as I will note, can often trace their complex family histories across the South and Midwest. These family ties are both biological and "claimed."

Economic promise (real or not) attracted many to the city. Up through the 1970s, this was a manufacturing town with a number of major factories. These jobs have largely disappeared, the victims of corporate downsizing. However, young people still speak of these jobs as lucrative, and of the individuals lucky enough to have them as all but wealthy. I recall, in particular, one staff member in his early twenties who left a job at a large food company in 1997 to follow his self-professed dream of working
with young people. Other staff members and children alike often noted that taking this job at the center (which paid about $6 an hour) meant taking a very serious pay cut, indicating his degree of commitment. Work on the railroad was also another traditional economic incentive for people to move here. In fact, Tony's grandfather Phil, about whom I will say more, came to the city to do this kind of work. He eventually purchased a small house, which indicated, for many, the relatively rewarding nature of this work. These jobs, of course, have disappeared completely. In fact, many of Phil's grandchildren, unable to secure such work, lived in this house at various points in time when in need. For many, service-sector jobs in fast food (e.g., McDonald's) and megadepartment stores (e.g., K-Mart), and manual labor at the university or local hotels provide the most common options. As a result, young people typically work jobs similar to those of their parents. Salaries here are typically minimum wage (or slightly above), $5.15 as of July 1997, with little or no security or benefits.

Fear is also another reason that African Americans have migrated to this city. Traditionally, throughout the century, many left the South due to racism and fear of racial terrorism. This fear is still a living memory for many, including the unit director, who often related stories of racism—both explicit and implicit—in the South. Many young people commented that the Klan is still active in the South and also spoke of relatives who have experienced the Klan's violence. As one young person commented, "They came from Mississippi or Alabama. . . . They be going around burning houses and stuff, putting people, black people, on crosses and burning the crosses."

More recently, many have expressed a general fear of crime, one enabled and encouraged by popular media forms, which often construct cities as irredeemably and monolithically violent (McCarthy 1998). Many children from larger cities have been sent here to avoid violence, most especially gang violence, which became pronounced beginning in the 1980s. I recall one staff member in his early thirties who left Chicago several years earlier, in the mid-1980s. When I asked why, he said, "Mom's thought it was about that time!" He was being recruited by a major gang. One young person who left Chicago to come to the town when he was 12 commented that he left because "my mamma thought this was a nice and quiet place." This young person, who briefly flirted with gangs in the city, commented that "while they gambled like on the street, I supposed to be sitting up, watching them . . . if you see police, they say, if you see police, tell us, there's like a little signal to make on the corner. They'll run, and then I'll be like another kid playing." When speaking about life in Chicago, he commented, "At 12 o'clock, mostly every night . . . on the Westside . . . those gangs gonna be shooting . . . just in the air. It woke me up in my sleep." For many, over the course of two decades, this town provided a good and safe alternative.
The city thus has an African American population that migrated there for a variety of reasons, often to leave behind racism, to find better jobs, or, more recently, to avoid the violence of larger cities. Though historically specific in many ways, this migration can be linked to a broad, diasporic migration of African Americans from the South to the North throughout the century, one enabled by a once burgeoning railroad system that quite literally divides this starkly segregated city in half.

Indeed, the South looms large in the collective imagination of these young people, who typically trace complex family histories to and across Southern states such as Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, and especially Mississippi. Often these young people have come from Chicago, but it is usually "by way of" one of these Southern sites. Many young people share histories of migration. During a discussion of family history, one young person noted, "I got people from ... Atlanta, Chicago, Texas, Mississippi," to which another young person said, "Everybody from Mississippi." Still another said, "I know! That's where most people in town from." Indeed, such comments (e.g., "Everybody got family in Alabama!") were common.

Importantly, family means more than blood relations to many young people. Typically, young people will choose to "claim" people who are not related to them by blood or will disclaim those who are. This dynamic is complicated by the fact that maternal lines of relation are inextricably stronger to these young people than paternal lines. One can more easily choose not to claim a stepsibling by one's father than by one's mother. During a particularly telling conversation between two girls, for example, one girl, Keisha, commented, "I don't even like my own brother [kin on her father's side]. I barely claim him ... he ain't gotta claim me either!" She continued, "My sister Keia [also kin on her father's side], we claim each other. She cool." Hence, while blood relations were mobilized here to give warrant to Keisha's claim about her father, they served to index, ultimately, the fluidity of these familial ties.

These kinds of discussions were ubiquitous and indexed the contingencies around claiming family as well as the durability and strength of claimed ties. I often heard young people refer, in the possessive, to their "brothers," "sisters," and "aunts," only to realize later that these were "claimed" relatives. Because family members are so spread out across the country, family reunions were often a way to convene and reinforce family ties. Such family reunions were a ubiquitous subject of conversation among club members. Homemade T-shirts announcing family reunions, complete with pictures and maps, were common. These reunions, it is important to note, were often held in succeeding years in different locations across the South and Midwest. Unlike reunions that take place every year in one site, these are highly mobile, evidencing how clearly populations are spread out, how familial identifications transcend geographic sites while indexing them. T-shirts often indicate the year of the reunion and the particular site where these events were
held. Typically, these shirts also feature maps marked with all the different areas from which family members would be traveling. These sit side by side with remembrances, prayers, and photos of beloved and often departed family members.

Notions of family, in sum, were linked to shifting and dynamic notions of place as well as histories of migration. Hence, family and community were mapped in different ways by young people, ways that often implicated particular, highly complex, and mobile notions of place and identity.

“In the Clique”: Two Teens Construct a Sense of the South

Rufus and Tony

As the above discussion indicates, I assume here that places do not have essential characteristics but are “ideas” or constructions created, maintained, and lived through by active agents in particular ways, by and with particular kinds of cultural resources (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Traditions linked to place are, in turn, similarly performative and the work of invested agents, a point underscored by much recent work in anthropology and folklore (Feld and Basso 1996; Tedlock 1997). Indeed, Richard Bauman has argued most persuasively that tradition should not be considered a noun but a verb, a process by which people create a sense of historical stability for themselves, linking contemporary concerns to the certainties of the past. He writes,

Tradition, long considered a criterial attribute of folklore, is coming to be seen less as an inherent quality of old and persistent items or genres passed on from generation to generation, and more as a symbolic construction by which people in the present establish connections with a meaningful past and endow particular cultural forms with value and authority. [1992:128]

As I will make clear, Rufus and Tony co-constructed a vital sense of the South with available discursive resources, reconstituting a tradition linked to place in important ways, investing Southern rap with unique “value and authority,” to echo Bauman. However, their need for daily survival often cut across and reconfigured this sense of community in important ways. These two young people deployed these resources—which they marked as “Southern”—in often paradoxical, highly individualized ways, which ultimately put these constructions at distinct cross-purposes. Here I will demonstrate how these teens highlighted key themes of community, respect, and “playing” in their discussions of rap. I will demonstrate, as well, the particular ways they drew these themes together, connecting both to family, friends, as well as their valued Southern hometown.

The two teens in this study were 18- and 17-year-old African American teens, Tony and Rufus, respectively, who attended the Midwestern
community center where I conducted this research. While similar in many ways, these teens had, until recently, followed very different life courses. Rufus had, by and large, stayed out of trouble, sticking close to the club and its staff members throughout his life. Although he had not done particularly well in school, he had participated in many extracurricular activities such as football and had done very well in them. Rufus was well liked by everyone he came in contact with and had received a number of awards at the club. Tony, however, had led a less sanguine life. As he stressed a number of times, he had had numerous discipline problems at school and with the law throughout his life. He was, in addition, a member of a local chapter of a national gang.

The teens, however, were close friends—they called each other “cousins” even though they were not related by blood—and came from the same hometown in Mississippi. Tony had a large family in this Midwestern city, including numerous aunts and, most especially, cousins. Rufus, importantly, referred to all of Tony’s cousins as his own. They were all roughly the same age and had been Rufus’s primary group of friends for his entire life. The group—they numbered roughly six—shared a long history, even living together in the same house for a time growing up. They were commonly referred to (especially by Tony) as “the clique.” The house, which had recently been torn down in a city-wide renovation project, was at the center of their early lives, serving as a kind of “home base” for the group. When Rufus’s mother moved up to this town from the South, she stayed in this house with Rufus until she got settled in her own home with the help of one of Tony’s aunts—Rufus’s godmother—who got her a job. This house was a first stop on the trip from Mississippi for many in Tony’s family.

These “claimed” familial ties were crucial for both teens, as was their friendship generally. Tony looked up to Rufus as a person who could “kick it” or hang out with different groups of people without getting into the kind of trouble that plagued him. In this, Rufus was singular, as other members of the clique had trouble with the law and had also been involved, in varying degrees, with gangs. He was also a comforting ear for Tony, who commented that Rufus was “like a counselor” to him, helping him through some particularly hard times. Finally—and perhaps most importantly—Rufus was a living connection to a Southern neighborhood and ethic that Tony prized above all else.

In turn, Tony and his family provided Rufus—whose only blood relative in town was his mother—with a family of his own away from his home in the South. He noted, “Like up here, I really don’t have no family. I just call Tony and them my cousins ‘cause they the closest thing.” This large familial network was very important to Rufus, providing him with a sense of solidarity as well as informal protection in the neighborhood. Family networks are often mobilized by youth, beginning at a very young age, to deal with interpersonal conflicts. As I observed at the club numerous times, young people will almost immediately call on
family members to help them deal with interpersonal and potentially violent conflicts. Someone with a large family is privileged in many respects, while someone with a small family is often at a disadvantage. Clearly, Tony and his cousins played an important role in Rufus’s life in this regard.

This kind of protection also played a crucial role in Tony’s life as well. For Tony, the clique provided a network that allowed him to decrease his involvement in his gang at the point in his life when he wanted to “turn things around” for himself. Gangs purportedly offer young people a ready-made family that will stick up for its members no matter what. In reality, many young people talk about how difficult it is to trust anyone in their gang. Typically very self-centered and self-directed people, gang members are often the first people to turn on each other when in trouble (Jankowski 1991). As Tony got older and decided to extricate himself from his gang, the clique provided him protection and also provided him with a tightly knit peer group, most of whom also happened to be in gangs. Family ties, however, were most important here, overriding these less personal and more self-destructive allegiances.

Indeed, both teens stressed that these allegiances came before all others, including potential gang allegiances. As Tony noted, “No matter what this gang and this gang is, you gonna draw together [i.e., look out for one another].” Rufus offered another example, referencing Midwestern gang rivalries (Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords) as well as West Coast ones (Bloods and Crips): “Two common ones, GD and Vice Lord or Blood or Crip. That’s a clique right there, those four would be a clique. They would clique together. It’s a set thing, if they was from the neighborhood, your neighborhood comes before your gang.”

In sum, this social network—the clique, but more importantly, their particular friendship—was important for both Rufus and Tony in ways outlined above. Though their reasons for valuing their friendship were quite distinct, in each case these investments were linked to day-to-day survival in precarious social and material contexts. This point echoes recent work in social psychology that has moved away from purely psychological models of friendship to more sociological ones. These models acknowledge that a broader social context makes certain options for human relationships more readily available than others (e.g., Adams and Allan 1998). “Friendships,” in other words, “are framed by the social and economic formations in which they occur. . . . [T]hey are not free-standing, but are patterned by the contexts within which people’s lives are constructed” (Allan 1998:700). The context here, as for many generations of African Americans, was precarious.

Constructions of the South

Both teens, it is important to note, linked the clique to a whole constellation of privileged ideas about their neighborhood. While they both stressed that the clique was not a gang and that they did not “claim”
territory as a gang does, they explicitly shared fond memories of growing up together there. Both Rufus and Tony marked a kind of pride in the local as distinctly Southern and connected it to older figures in their lives. Johnny, the unit director of the community center, and Tony's maternal grandfather, Phil, played important roles here.

Johnny, it is interesting to note, grew up right outside of the same Mississippi town that these two teens were from, and both teens prized and often reiterated that fact. Johnny was, in almost every respect, a neighborhood hero, and it would be hard to overstate his importance in their lives. As both stressed, Johnny made an extraordinary amount of money by community standards. However, he maintained his home in the neighborhood (he lived a block away from each teen) as well as all of his old allegiances and friendship networks. Tony noted,

He got all this money, but he wish to fix him up a fancy house in the middle of the ghetto, you know what I'm saying? That's what I really like about Johnny, 'cause he ain't trying, 'cause like most black people ... when they get the money to they head, they try to get away and get the biggest, fanciest house, the fanciest cars.

"Moving up" thus was not equated with "moving out" for Johnny. However, this ethic—which both Rufus and Tony explicitly validated—was not shared by everyone from the South. During this same discussion they mentioned another family, the Johnsons, in counterdistinction. Tony stressed,

The Johnsons and them, they went through a rough time in the South also. That's the way I see it, and then, so now they got all this money so they let it go to they heads, saying they don't want to live the way they used to live. But Johnny, on the other hand, he was born and raised in the South and he stuck with the South. He still visit the South 'til this day.

Hence, the Johnsons equated success with rupturing old ties (i.e., "saying they don't want to live the way they used to live"), while Johnny, in explicit contrast, "stuck with the South," implying a whole constellation of privileged values that these teens explicitly linked to a shared memory of their hometown.

Johnny embodied an egalitarian ethic, self-consciously rooted in a "sense of the South" and mediated by a number of important personal relationships. As both teens stressed, the South is a site where such communal values are privileged, a place that forces people, due to rampant racism, to stick together and look out for one another. People in the South have "been through a lot" together (as Rufus noted), which has prompted them to maintain a familial ethic. Both teens shared this memory of racism in the South as well as the ways that communities had to come together to buttress it. This egalitarian Southern ethic was very much tied to the kinds of traditional survival practices that this community and other African American communities have had to deploy in the
face of intense poverty and racism. Carol Stack makes this point in her classic ethnography *All Our Kin*, in which she notes that material and social exchanges and obligations between families and extended kin are very much "a resilient response" to a whole host of social and economic problems (1974:124). This sense of extended community is very much tied to the imperatives of material and social survival.

Johnny was one of a number of key figures who embodied the ideals these teens posited as distinctly Southern. Another key figure was Tony's maternal grandfather, Phil. Phil was a particularly strong presence in Tony and Rufus's lives and in the neighborhood in general. As Tony put it, "Basically, he's the grandfather of everybody in this neighborhood." When I first met Rufus, he referred routinely to this man as his grandfather, though it later emerged that they were not related by blood. Like many African American grandparents, Phil opened his house up to many relatives in need, including several of his grandchildren, and even to Rufus, who considered him his de facto grandparent. In addition, Phil owned a car and routinely drove Rufus and his mother, as well as Tony's mother and siblings, to their myriad day-to-day tasks, including the always important job of getting groceries as cheaply as possible. Like Johnny, Phil was someone who lived in the community for many years and was always there to help out others when they were in need. Recall that it was Phil who housed Rufus and his mom when they first made the trip up from the South.

Both Johnny and Phil thus gave themselves over to the community in important ways, a value that was marked by these teens as distinctly Southern. In addition—and just as essential—both Johnny and Phil embodied ideals of physical and emotional toughness and invulnerability that were important to both teens as well. Both maintained a sense of individual respect at all costs. Johnny, as unit director of the club, had to settle many conflicts and fights between teens. A physically imposing man who lifted weights at the club with many of the teens, Johnny was not averse to physically intervening between combatants and marked this as a source of pride. Johnny worked hard to earn the respect of younger club members, and a large part of that was his physical presence. He was highly respected by many young people in town, including many gang members and leaders, who tended to keep their conflicts away from the club at his behest. However, more important than his physical prowess was his ability to settle conflicts without fighting. When Johnny, after nearly two decades, left his job, he was replaced by a younger man, a former football player, who weighed over 300 pounds. Johnny commented that his size would not necessarily help him with trouble-making teens. Maintaining control was largely a mental endeavor, effected by way of roots in the community as well as the ability to generate a more intangible kind of respect.

Though Phil was nearly 30 years older than Johnny and suffered from diabetes, both Rufus and Tony spoke often of his strength and toughness.
Phil was unafraid of anyone and reportedly used to keep an ever-ready rifle in the trunk of his car. No matter how quick you think you are on the draw, Tony noted, "he’s much quicker!" He was also rumored to have loaned out various resources in the not-so-distant past and was able to effectively demand repayment. Tony’s grandfather, they noted, demanded respect and got it from everyone, including those younger than he. Tony elaborated, “He got a belt for every child in the neighborhood that don’t call him granddaddy.” Both teens stressed how important this kind of respect was in the South. Rufus noted, “You gotta give grown folks they respect” in the South, to which Tony added, “It’s all about respect . . . ‘cause down South this how it is . . . you gotta show that respect.” Individual respect and autonomy thus were marked as distinctly Southern ideals.

A similar kind of autonomy and invulnerability was at work—and was explicitly valorized by both teens—in romantic relationships as well. "Playing" was a construct that many teens—boys as well as girls—used to talk about romantic relationships, wherein manipulation for sex, money, and affection was the seeming ultimate ideal and hurt and loss were at risk. Though not necessarily linked to physical invulnerability (girls, for example, were often better players than boys), playing was more about the ability to sustain and maintain mental and emotional distance. Playing meant different things for different young people. To Rufus and Tony, playing meant flirting with different girls at the same time, rarely committing to any one, and always having another relationship possibility present if a current one fails. Though the term pimping was often used interchangeably here, these practices seemed far more egalitarian than the term might imply. They never implied coercive mental or physical manipulation for sex, which was treated as a very serious social, physical, and psychological commitment for the teens I worked with—girls as well as boys. In fact, talk about playing and pimping, I found, was a way to mitigate against the very real personal risk that intimate relationships always seemed to imply for these young people.

Key here for Rufus and Tony were older figures in both their lives, especially family members. Indeed, both Rufus and Tony drew on specifically Southern familial and interpersonal ties to inform their discussions of playing. As Tony noted, “I think being a player runs in your blood. . . . I think it’s hereditary.” Rufus concurred, saying that he had an uncle "down South" who was a player and also a cousin who should be a player but was not. He noted, “Sam, he was the son of a player. Therefore he a player. He should be a player now. But Sam, he ain’t like that. He a happily married man.” The uncle’s son thus was an exception that proved the rule—playing runs in one’s family. Even Phil, according to both, was a “player.” Tony noted, “I don’t care what nobody says . . . he the truest player . . . I don’t care what nobody say. I know it for a fact.” Playing thus was an ideal marked by both as distinctly familial and distinctly Southern.
In sum, we see here complex and contradictory notions of the South—ones that Rufus and Tony lived through in their daily lives. On the one hand, being Southern implied giving oneself over to the community, being there for others, and often ignoring one's own self-interest—in short, placing one's self in the background. On the other, being Southern meant demanding respect as an individual and being physically and emotionally invulnerable—in short, placing one's self in the foreground. Both Johnny and Phil, as well as other family members, embodied these seemingly contradictory ideals, these different elaborations of the self, that were so important to Rufus and Tony.

**Southern Rap**

I want to suggest here that the themes Rufus and Tony deployed in their construction of the South—themes they marked as unique in key figures in their lives—were marked by both as unique in Southern rap. It is important to note that taste in rap music is, today, inextricably bound up in notions of place. Whenever I asked young people what their favorite kind of rap was, they almost always answered "East Coast" or "West Coast" or "the South" or some combination of the above. The personalities of key iconic figures, such as Master P, Biggie Smalls (or Notorious B.I.G.), or Tupac Shakur, were very much linked to particular places. Hence, favoring Tupac Shakur was tantamount to favoring West Coast rap, and favoring Biggie Smalls was tantamount to favoring East Coast rap. Much of the dichotomy between the East and West can be located in the conflict between the rappers Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. This conflict, in contrast to rap's earliest "battles," foregrounded the lives and biographies of iconic personalities including (most especially) Tupac Shakur, who represented the West Coast–based Death Row Records, and Biggie Smalls, who represented the East Coast–based Bad Boy Records. Much of the conflict revolved around off-record interpersonal conflicts. Hence, Tupac claimed in the single "Hit 'Em Up" and in other places that he and Biggie had been friends, but Biggie stole his style of music. He did not criticize Biggie's music as much as the seeming fact that Biggie did not live the life he rapped about, and instead imitated Tupac's. This conflict jelled regional differences in music that had been a part of the idiom since the mid-1980s and that ended, sadly, only after both men met violent deaths.

Importantly, both Rufus and Tony posited Southern rap as an alternative to investing in the highly violent dichotomy. Both Tony and Rufus marked Southern rap as unique here. For example, Tony commented, "The South is cool with everybody," noting that artists from the South rarely "diss" other artists on record as those from the East and West do. While discussing the East/West conflict, he commented that Tupac "should have took his ass" to the South instead of involving himself in the rivalries. He repeatedly noted that "the South on [is interested in] pimping, playing, and making money"—not petty conflicts.
During one of my first discussions with Rufus about rap, he noted that his favorite rap artists were 666 Mafia, Kingpin Skinny Pimp, and others associated with the Prophet Posse record label. He also said he liked Eightball and MJG, Tela, and others on the Suave House Record label. Both are Memphis-based companies. During a later discussion, Tony said that he liked all of these groups but also added Master P and related artists on No Limit records, which is based in Louisiana. Both teens thus spoke more of record labels and localized (here, explicitly Southern) sounds than of individual artists, deeming Suave House, No Limit, and Prophet Posse their favorites.

Both Rufus and Tony self-consciously resonated with the perceived egalitarian ethic these Southern rap artists have with each other and their neighborhoods. During an early discussion, Rufus commented on the importance of local Southern crews:

Really down there that’s what it’s based on. If you from my 'hood, if you in a different gang, it don’t matter, 'cause you from my hood. Like if you was a—I’m gonna use the Bloods and Crips—if you was a Blood and I’m a Crip, but you was born in my neighborhood, we still boys... so it’s just like a clique thing.

Hence, one’s neighborhood or local allegiances were more important than gang allegiances, which can span (at least in theory) beyond the local. (For example, Bloods and Crips rival gangs are represented—often symbolically—throughout California as well as the Midwest, while Chicago gangs like the Vice Lords and the Gangster Disciples have proliferated in the Midwest.) Rufus went on to note that the artists who are loyal to their clique will help one another out when they need help. Notably, artists have an obligation to put other rappers on their records once they get famous, to promote fledgling careers. However, as Rufus noted, some artists do not sustain this egalitarian ethic and are the focus of negative criticism. During an early discussion, Rufus brought up a conflict between rapper Player Fly (who had received little public attention) and his former group-mates in 666 Mafia (who had received more). 666 Mafia, he noted, did not help him out once they got famous: “Player Fly was once with them, right? So, uh, I guess they got up, and they made so much money, since they on a worldwide tip. Player Fly still underground. But yet, I guess he said they forgot all about him. They don’t even know, remember they neighborhood.”

Rufus thus saw certain kinds of allegiances in the “crew system” of Southern rap and prized them. These values included staying close to one’s neighborhood and helping out others from the neighborhood when one can—exactly the same ideas that registered in his constructions of the South. When discussing a favorite cut, “Serious,” from a compilation entitled Young Southern Players, he noted, “I relate to that one because he’s saying how things were in his neighborhood and how he gonna stick with his neighborhood. The neighborhood makes the
person, stuff like that. I felt that, 'cause I love my neighborhood. All my friends and stuff." It is critical to note that this stress on friendship and loyalty to one's neighborhood was very much a part of nearly all recorded rap, fueling, for example, the noted conflict between the East and West coasts. However, Tony and Rufus marked Southern rap as unique in this regard. In addition, their talk about loyalty in Southern rap mirrored, in large measure, their talk about their own clique as well as older figures on their lives, all of which were constitutive of their self-professed ethic of the South.

The importance of extended friendship networks and familial ties came up numerous times in our discussions, both formal and informal, and was explicitly linked to the vicissitudes and uncertainty of a cruel world. As Rufus noted, "You can't stand alone in this society. You gonna need somebody. If I made it big and Tony went the low route, or even it's the other way around and Tony went big, I say, 'Tony, man, look, I need some help. OK, man, you my boy, you help me out.' . . . I do the same for him." Hence, the world is rough, and having friends who can watch your back is crucial. Tony mirrored Rufus's sentiments about friendship and community. However, he also added the crucial dimension of "respect" that played so pivotal a role in his life. (While Rufus claimed that respect was important to him as well, it had not defined his life course in quite the same way.) When I asked Tony if he agreed with Rufus about "standing alone" (previously noted), he responded, "Most definitely, you got to have somebody look out for you at all times. Like I said, society rough out there now." He continued, drawing on Southern rap to inform the discussion, "Like Eightball [a Southern rap artist] said, 'I trust no man, 'cause man will put you down every time.' " When I asked if he trusted people in the clique, he responded, "Can't trust nobody. But like I said, I got respect for my boys. Like I said, when it comes down to it, I'ma ride out with them before I ride out with anybody." The point is crucial: Both the egalitarian clique ethic and the kind of radical autonomy indexed by "respect" were implicated in personal survival as ways to mitigate against a world that is "rough out there now." This was, again, a central tension in their lives and in their self-professed relationship to the South. While one cannot stand alone, one must also (paradoxically) stand alone at times, as an individual, to earn respect. One has to be both physically and emotionally invulnerable at key, critical moments.

This kind of respect, and the feelings of self-preservation and invulnerability that often underlie it, was also very much a part of romantic relationships, which were similar sites of intense anxiety. Romantic relationships were a constant source of worried discussion, as they implied a loss of self that was very frightening for both. In the face of this uncertainty and contingency, loss of autonomy and hurt, these young people drew on an ethic of invulnerability and mutual manipulation. As Tony noted, "To be a player, you can never like your females . . . well, you can like them but you should never fall for them." The problem, of course, is
that the one female that you fall for might be playing you. As Tony noted later, "You should never let a female be your main attraction . . . over the rest of your females. 'Cause then, that one female'll use your game [i.e., of playing] to go against you . . . Play you at your own game. Then she'll be the player and you'll be one of her ho's."

Here as well, both Rufus and Tony linked the player ethic to Southern rap, noting that they learned a lot about playing from this music. As Tony noted, "Rap music, they tell you how to pimp and play." (Recall the earlier discussion about playing and pimping, largely interchangeable terms that had particular kinds of local value and meaning for these teens—value and meaning that belied the kind of exploitation these terms might imply.) When asked for examples, Rufus said "Sho Nuff" and "Space Age Pimping." These teach you, in his words, to "get you a ride [i.e., car], take her wherever she want to be," both metaphorically and literally. Tony in turn noted that the song " 'Lay It Down' . . . tell you how to play females . . . basically telling you how to keep your game [of playing] down." "Space Age Pimping" and "Lay It Down" are both by the rap group Eightball and MJG, while "Sho Nuff" is by Tela, who is on the same rap label, Suave House (it also features Eightball). The artists on the label are marked by their stress on playing and its attendant attitudes toward women and conspicuous consumption. Eightball and MJG's most popular album is entitled On Top of the World and features tracks like "Pimp in My Own Rhyme" and "Space Age Pimping." It is important to note that East Coast rap—especially the work of Biggie Smalls—stresses many of these same ideals. However, these teens continually drew on the explicitly marked genre of Southern rap to inform these discussions, a genre that indexed a highly valued social and familial network. Recall the discussion earlier about Rufus's uncle, Sam, Phil, and playing.

In sum, while themes of playing, respect, friendship, and community circulated widely in popular culture and found resonance in the lives of many young people, Tony and Rufus linked them to a Southern influenced worldview mediated by memory, key individuals, and popular cultural texts. Southern rap, in particular, was a key resource through which their connections to the South and to each other and family members were enabled and sustained, though in entirely unique ways. Both teens, I argue, used this popular form as a way to access and make new and relevant this Southern tradition—a tradition that has helped African American communities survive in the past and in the present, a point made by historians (Griffin 1995), social scientists (Stack 1996), and novelists (Ellison 1947) alike. Both found this stability in rap as well as in the intergenerational ties it indexed. These constructs allowed these teens to live ecologically validated lives while linking them both to a Southern heritage mediated by a whole series of privileged familial and interpersonal networks.
**Tensions in Tradition**

I have shown above how these two young people have produced and maintained a certain kind of local ethic in this Midwestern city using the themes available in Southern rap. These themes were valued for many young people, but these youth used them in particular ways to index an idealized notion of the South. This empirical insight resonates with contemporary currents in anthropology that stress that "culture" is not coherent or static but, rather, a rough assemblage of discourses that individuals mobilize in particular ways and not others and with real effects (Clifford 1988).

Accordingly, it is crucial to note that while these teens deployed a Southern tradition to mediate against ever-present feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, the tradition was, in practice, also shot through with tension. The themes that these young people picked up from popular culture and connected to the South—for example, friendship, respect, and playing—were intimately connected to day-to-day survival and, as such, coexisted with each other in often intensely precarious ways. As noted at the outset, Rufus and Tony—though united very deeply—saw themselves and were perceived by others as having followed very different life courses up until very recently. Drawing on communal resources and constructions of the South, Rufus was entirely willing to place himself in the background, to avoid conflict and maintain a kind of "conciliatory" role. In fact, Tony suggested that Rufus was like a counselor to him. He was an extremely good listener and supportive person, someone willing to give himself over to others, including the community. Rufus, out of necessity, had to expand his circle of extended kin, and, perhaps as such, maintained a nonconfrontational and conciliatory personality. This was a survival tactic for Rufus, one he found indexed in Southern rap and its constructions of community.

Tony, however, was more willing to fight for certain kinds of social and cultural capital, risking his own "self" both literally and metaphorically. Tony had a clear sense of right and wrong and always felt the need to speak up for himself if he thought a wrong had been perpetrated, often to the point of physical confrontation. Indeed, when people, as he perceived it, did not show him respect, he "snapped." When I asked him for an example, he noted,

> Like when we in class and the teacher make a mistake and then I try to correct her, even though I'm raising my hand or something and then she gets a little attitude or whatever. I don't appreciate that... got kicked out of class for correcting a teacher ... basically, the dean gave me an hour detention and I snapped, 'cause I felt I shouldn't get no detention for trying to correct a teacher.

In fact, nearly every major incident in which Tony got into trouble with the school or the police—for example, when he was accused of attacking his boss at McDonald's over nonpayment of wages—was over his
"snapping" at another person when he felt he was not accorded respect. As he noted, "I hate when people call me wrong when I knows I'm right. So then I snaps from there." In counterdistinction to Rufus, I argue, Tony's stress on "respect" was enabled by his large familial network of kin in this city—ties that were, in the end, stronger than claimed ones, a fact that came up in numerous, painful discussions with Rufus. Someone was always there, it seemed, to help out Tony if he got into trouble. For example, as mentioned earlier, when he chose to leave his gang, his clique—which also included numerous gang members—was there for him.

Tradition thus was very much about survival in the here and now. As such, it was quite unstable, and both teens lived throughout this tradition differently and—it is crucial to note—with real consequences. In the years to come, Rufus—always giving himself over to others, always there for others—would become the full-time caretaker for his mom, who was suffering from an acute diabetes-related illness, putting work, school, and friends on hold. This willingness to give oneself over to another unconditionally, no matter the personal cost, is "Southern" in the sense developed throughout. In turn, Tony, at around the same time, tried resolving a dispute between his friend and another youth and was assaulted with a baseball bat. He was seriously hurt and had to leave town under threat of further retaliation. This willingness to stand up for oneself, to defend what one perceives as right, to demand respect, is also "Southern" in the sense developed throughout. In both cases, the complex and contradictory survival strategies that these youth deployed to mitigate a cruel world—survival strategies rooted in "traditionalized" notions of place—were the self-same strategies they fell into as their lives derailed.

Conclusions

Rufus and Tony managed to create a certain kind of "place" for themselves, albeit contingent and fragile, out of the dominant "spaces" offered in this small city (de Certeau 1984). These processes were exceedingly important for both teens and give us insight into the ways that young people can mobilize texts—here, rap music—in unpredictable ways over complex life courses in particular social networks. Following Bauman (1992), these young people used Southern rap to create and sustain a traditional discourse about the South, one that reached across generations and provided them key social support in the face of ever present flux.

The finding is worth stressing, coming up as it does against popular discourses about the loss of history and tradition in African American communities, most especially because of the perceived effects of rap music. Indeed, critics such as Farah Jasmine Griffin (1995) have demonstrated how a seemingly communal sense of the South has been symbolically recreated in the North by the first migrations of African Americans, often as a survival tactic. Many have argued, in turn, that this kind of community has been lost to an out-of-control generation of black
youth—most often symbolized by and through rap music. Yet we see here that these teens attempted to create a kind of cultural continuity through these self-same popular resources—an insight that simply could not be predicted by textual analysis of rap lyrics alone; though, again, the majority of work on popular culture and education tends to stress this kind of analysis first and foremost.

Understanding these processes—how young people navigate their way between the various and often highly disjunctive influences operating in their lives—is crucial if educators are to forge more locally relevant policies, institutions, and curricula for often intensely marginalized young people. Indeed, such work might help us to consider more clearly questions of multicultural curriculum development in school settings, helping us understand in less predetermined ways the affective investments marginalized young people have (or perhaps might have) in particular texts, popular and otherwise, as well as potential links between and across them. Such work—less sutured in its assumptions about the connections between texts and lived experience—would do justice to the complex lives of young people like Tony and Rufus, young people who must, as I have shown throughout, search for and sustain community, as Tupac Shakur rapped, “against all odds.”

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1. Names and some identifying characteristics have been changed.

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