



# THE RAVEN FOUNDATION

## 2011 Raven Foundation Essay Contest Submission

### THE DISORDER OF HIP HOP: MIMETIC DESIRE IN THE HOOD

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Word, what go around come around I figure  
Now we got white kids calling themselves nigga.  
The tables turned as the crosses burned.

*KRS One MC's Act like They Don't Know*

In 2003, then current hip hop pin up boys Ja Rule (Jeffery Atkins) and 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson) bring their beef to a head. The two superstars of all things gangsta are locked in a rivalry with each other as a result of mimetic desire. The basic premise of René Girard's mimetic theory is that humans desire because we see others desiring. This is shown with a triangular model which includes an object, model and subject. An object is desired by the model which the subject is non-consciously imitating. Therefore, the subject also desires the object and rivalry is created between them. This rivalry is evident in all aspects of human life including popular culture. To relieve the disorder and conflict as a result of this rivalry, one or more parties find themselves the victim or the 'scapegoat' of others. This essay will briefly explore hip hop culture as a specific genre which reflects this disorder (and sought order) through its culture of violence.

The borders between race, nation and style are crossed as hip hop travels through these aspects of humanity. With its genesis in the North-eastern states of America in the 1970's, the hip hop culture (of which expression through music is only one part) saw African American youths beginning to communicate a struggle of identity and marginality. Four decades later, the culture of hip hop extends from its original hood of the Bronx across many geographical and social boundaries and fosters rivalry like no other section of popular culture. This paper is not a beat up on hip hop culture but one example of mimetic desire which may be found in every part of any culture, to more or lesser degrees.

Atkins and Jackson's public rivalry aided the growth of their respective record sales and high profiles. Verbal and physical violence drove up the mean-street status of hip hop and their activities confirmed the fears of 'respectable folk' that the culture was one of shooting up and shooting anyone. The murders of 2Pac (Tupac Shakur) and Notorious B.I.G (Chris Wallace) in the late nineties had rocketed the stature of violent hip hop culture into the popular culture stratosphere. In October of 2003, Atkins took part in an interview (care of his record label

*Murder Inc*) with advocate for African American civil rights and Minister; Louis Farrakhan. The interview was surreptitiously timed as Jackson launched a public attack on Atkins' widespread image. Jackson made claims of pseudo hip hop-ness and lack of street cred for the gangsta/hip hop exterior Atkins was portraying.

Jackson's survival of a drive by shooting in 2000 and his family history of drug taking and dealing gave him the perceived legitimacy and authority required for one to lay claim to the hip hop lifestyle. His monikerian imitation of Kelvin Martin, a Brooklyn based African American criminal, known as '50 Cent' in the underground quarter, set his villainous image into the minds of those in the hip hop scene. The rivalry behind Atkins and Jackson was fuelled by a necessity to be seen as 'ghetto authentic' and marketed successfully as such. Hip hop and all it encompasses had become a 'selling of the soul' deal. In order to climb the ranks of popularity and status in the eyes of the following public, a hip hop celebrity or gangsta wannabe must prove their gritty ghetto roots, an ability to dodge and rebut the law, and a cavalier attitude towards the taking of lives. Samuel Craig Watkins, author of *Hip Hop Matters*, says regarding this trade off: "...One of the cruelest ironies in the rise and transformation of hip hop [is] the fact that its livelihood- indeed its very survival as a pop culture juggernaut- rested almost entirely on its ability to sell the black death" (2005:2).

Who buys this death? And why is it a desirable commodity? This survival by, and selling of death, might also be described in a Girardian sense as a mimetic cycle. There is an object, such as an attitude, lifestyle, image or identity. This is held up by those in the upper echelons of hip hop (models) as desirable and elite. There are a range of subjects (from the youth in high school to the prison inmate) who see the models creating and following the culture of hip hop and then imitate this desire. Though the subjects may never meet their models face to face, an ancient rivalry is present in their desire to obtain the object. Violence manifests itself through attitude, language and action. Individuals are lifted up in the public eye and targeted by the 'mob' in a non-conscious attempt to deal with the build up of overinflated machismo and conflict caused by mimetic desire circulating in the global hood. In the competitive arena of hip hop, Atkins' celebrity status and record sales declined rapidly following the feud between he and Jackson. However, the popularity and earnings of the hard 50 Cent image continued to increase, as did his conflicts with other artists besides Ja Rule.

Known in the beat scene as The Amen Ra (Godfather), DJ Afrika Bambaataa Aasim, originally from New York's South Bronx, is arguably the earliest developer and phrase coiner of hip hop. He turned his lifestyle as local ghetto warlord to peacemaker in the midst of civil rights conflict between black and white in Africa and America in the 1980's. Bambaataa and his legacy remains a positive and authentic model in the disordered and politically charged arena of hip hop culture. Disorder continues in a cycle as we continue to imitate and non consciously compete for the desires we see in others. In the world of hip hop, this comes with a particularly high price as rap artistry struts the line between creativity and violence. With its roots in African American

beat and minority struggle, hip hop at its best retains its true authenticity and creative passivity against injustice.

Author **Debra Anstis** is a part time lecturer of New Testament Greek at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She begins her PhD this year following the recent completion of a Masters degree in which she proposed Jesus and Judas as a pair of typological and Levitical scapegoats. A longtime reader of the work of Girard, she is a member of the Australian Girard Seminar as well as COV&R. Her interest in mimetic theory primarily relates to biblical studies and theology, however, she believes its engagement with other fields makes it especially thought-provoking.