

## **Cultural meaning and hip-hop fashion in the African-American male youth subculture of New Orleans**

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This paper reports results from an ethnographic study of African-American youth subculture in a New Orleans high school. The paper contends that youth subculture remains an important construct to situate stylistic resistance among subaltern groups like urban black youth that confront demands for conformity from representatives of institutional authority with alternative cultural solutions. The core argument is that resistance to demands for conformity among members of this subculture stands as a challenge to institutional power enforced by agents of media, school, police, and the prison that label as deviant stylistic expressions such as wearing sagging black pants and braided hairstyles. However, care must be taken not to reify youth subculture affiliation as overly inclusive and resistant, and instead focus on the variable commitment of participants to dominant culture or subculture. Subcultural styles like wearing sagging black pants manifest an ambiguous cocktail of resistance and acceptance of hegemonic ideals and reveal the contradictory fashion and behavioral codes of contending status orders that validate identities.

**Keywords:** subculture; fashion; African-American youth

### **Introduction**

Youth subculture remains an important construct to situate stylistic resistance among subaltern groups like urban black youth that confront pressure to conform to dominant institutional norms with alternative cultural solutions (Hodkinson 2004, Blackman 2005). Youth stylistic expressions take on a resistant dimension when they challenge demands for conformity from representatives of institutional authority in media, schools, police, and prison that spearhead efforts to label as deviant and sometimes criminal certain forms of expression. Care must be taken not to reify youth subculture affiliation as uniformly resistant or inclusive. A re-thinking of subculture as a contested context for stylistic expression and identity formation helps reveal the variable commitment of participants to dominant culture or resistant subculture (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004).

This paper addresses the cultural meaning of fashion in a marginalized segment of society where demands for conformity are complicated by individual and subculture resistance that frames identities yet also inspires mainstream fashion trends and moral panics. The focus is on young African-American males in a New

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Orleans high school, many of whom adorn themselves in a defiant way that is associated with a gangster or thug lifestyle, although only a few truly live that lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> The setting demands a theoretical approach that goes beyond passive consumers sold ready-made identities by the culture industry or autonomous consumers who juxtapose countervailing discourses to create a personalized fashion sense (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972, Thompson and Haytko 1997, Crane 1999). Instead, we propose a return to debates about the importance of resistant subcultures where an internal status order rewards stylistic expression that presumes to challenge established authority while those same styles are marketed by the culture industry. Styles such as sagging black pants, baggy t-shirts, flashy gold teeth, facial tattoos, and braided hairstyles manifest an ambiguous cocktail of resistance and acceptance of hegemonic authority and reveal the contradictory fashion and behavioral codes of contending status orders within which identities are enacted.

The paper proceeds to debates about youth subculture and stylistic resistance before identification of the socio-spatial context and major influences on African-American youth subculture in New Orleans. The argument is that this hip-hop and prison-inspired subculture has a resistant dimension because it inspires defiant stylistic expressions that challenge institutional power holders that label as deviant and even criminal the wearing of sagging black pants and braided hairstyles. The concept of resistant youth subculture remains a useful dialogic counterpoint to the idea of a dominant culture to establish a dynamic context within which identities are enacted and resistance to authority is made visible. But neither of these constructs should be taken as totalizing or internally homogeneous. The second half of the paper locates local youth in an internal status order to suggest that identities are negotiated and enacted based on various levels of commitment to thug or gangster subculture, or to more conformist lifestyles consistent with demands of institutional authority.

### **Debates on youth subculture and stylistic resistance**

The concept of subculture typically presumes a challenge by members of some social group to the meanings created in a dominant culture where members share a system of meanings and understandings by which significance is conferred on experience. A functionalist theorist like Talcott Parsons (1951) defines culture in universal terms and labels as deviant any alternative sources of identity and meaning available in subcultures that support behavior at odds with the normative order. Howard S. Becker (1963, pp. 80–81) is among those who point out that certain ethnic, religious, regional, and occupational groups share common understandings that belie the existence of any totalizing culture, and he questions the application of negative labels to members of these groups. He further argues that members of groups labeled as deviant by those with power to make and enforce rules may also share symbolic understandings that constitute a subculture built from the difference between their definition of who they are and the definition held by other, more powerful, members of society.

Scholars from the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS) contextualized Becker's analysis of the labeling of outsider subcultures within a neo-Marxist framework that power is located in social class relations supported by a hegemonic ideology that builds consent among the governed

(Clarke *et al.* [1975] 1996). CCCS scholars propose that the difficult conditions of working-class youth birth resistant youth subcultures that take shape around distinctive activities and group concerns enacted in relation to a dominant culture and the culture of working-class parents. Working-class youth subcultures like the Mods, Teds, and Skinheads emerged from similar social conditions to express collective identity and meanings symbolically through dress, music, and language. These resistant youth subcultures were read politically by CCCS scholars as providing symbolic challenges to a dominant culture rather than as signs of social pathology (Jenks 2005, p. 112). The idea of the bricoleur is important to specify how members of a subculture appropriate normative signs from the dominant culture and re-order and re-contextualize them into new meanings that are dislocated from the larger society to resist and potentially disrupt the social order (Hebdige 1979, pp. 206–210; [1975] 1996, p. 136). This paper is inspired by that tradition to consider how black pants are symbolically transformed by a subculture into an emblem of resistance when they are worn ‘sagging’ way below the waist like a prisoner.

Some cultural theorists have come to reject subculture as a useful construct because it implies a fixed and unified image of symbolic resistance that fails to recognize the fluidity and fragmentation of postmodern cultural practices and identities (see Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). For example, rave and club cultures are viewed by these researchers as hybrid cultural constellations where participants combine elements from global and local cultures to create internally diverse and fluid identities drawn from a supermarket of style rather than from any unified subculture (Polhemus 1997, Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003, pp. 3–7). Concepts like neo-tribe and image tribe have also been offered to describe group formation and shift the analytical focus from the totalizing notion of resistant subculture toward the idea of loosely knit and transitory forms of sociability engaged by multi-affiliated individuals. Many theorists dismiss the subversive potential of subcultures and subcultural style, which is now viewed as inauthentic, commercially contaminated and superficial.

Sarah Thornton (1995) analyzes the complex internal status hierarchy of club cultures where taste and authenticity are defined in relation to judgments offered in the media and by other institutional authorities. Using ethnographic rather than semiotic methods, Thornton concludes that musical taste, fashion, and language are best understood as subcultural capital that members acquire to distinguish themselves on an internally devised scale of authenticity that builds social status and demarcates youth from the mainstream (Thornton 1995, p. 9). The analytic focus is on the politics of internal status hierarchies rather than the subversive potential of subcultures to challenge authority located in dominant institutions. Internal status hierarchies emerge in relation to a plurality of influences in a fluid process where members demonstrate various levels and intensity of commitment to the status order without necessarily offering resistance to established authority.

In today’s world of fast-moving capital, fragmented and fluid identities, and communications technologies that disconnect culture and place, there is still room for the concept of resistant subculture. One approach is to follow Bakhtin’s (1981, [1939] 1984) conception of culture as heteroglossia, containing clashing ideals and conventions that coexist in a dialogic struggle to simultaneously keep things together and blow them apart. Cultural meanings and identities are relational and meaning-making is embedded in social interactions where different voices and viewpoints

compete. Instead of theorizing the effects of culture and subculture on individual actors in some totalizing way, think of them in a contested and dynamic relationship that involves people, places, and institutions. Think further that the individual negotiates among meanings produced through the patterned social practices of culture and subculture. This is culture as Clifford Geertz (1973) conceives it, a context within which to investigate the symbolic ways people conduct the search for meaning. This is subculture defined in a more micro-interactionist fashion as a set of understandings, behaviors, and artifacts used by particular groups and diffused through interlocking group networks (Fine and Kleinman 1979).

Young people participate in overlapping group networks and subcultures. Affiliation with any subculture is more or less important, or salient to individual youth, which suggests variable levels of commitment to its norms and styles. This approach departs from Thornton's (1995) critique of subculture by inserting what she terms club or taste cultures back into a culture/subculture dialectic, which reveals that standards of internal youth culture stratification can be constructed in a contested dialogue of resistant subculture with demands of institutional authorities. An important influence on the salience and commitment of youth to a subculture is how the labeling process makes youth think of themselves in terms of stereotypes offered by older representatives of institutionalized authority (e.g. teachers, police officers), or makes them decide collectively to resist stereotypes and defiantly celebrate identification with the subculture. One argument developed below is that many black youth labeled as deviant by rule-makers and rule-enforcers in New Orleans wear styles that defiantly embrace their status as deviant outsiders. This is subcultural non-conformity that offers resistance to institutional authority.

George Lipsitz (1994, p. 6) argues that changes in capital mobility and communications technologies provide the context for shifts in the political focus of cultural resistance beyond the nation-state and pure class politics to place greater emphasis on popular cultural communication. New social movements and new forms of resistance stake claims about identity and advance demands for multi-cultural recognition against institutional demands for conformity. Lipsitz directs attention to identity politics and resistance disguised in the commodity form (e.g. clothes, recorded music) at a time when the centrality of consumption makes the conduits of commerce important vehicles for cultural expression within the system that can create critical accounts of contemporary social relations. If Hebdige (1979) is right that hegemony is a moving equilibrium that involves a provisional alliance of social groups, it makes sense to consider variable levels of commitment of young people to subcultural resistance and to demands for conformity from institutional authorities. It will be shown below that the way black pants are appropriated by local subcultural bricoleurs expresses variable commitment to the subculture and variable levels of resistance to institutional authority depending on whether they are worn sagging or just baggy.

The contested nature of culture extends to institutional authorities. Consider the tension between agents of social control like the police and school authorities that promulgate and enforce uniform dress codes to dampen status competition among students, and marketers of non-conformity in the culture industry that profit from the sale of hip-hop-inspired clothing worn by members of a resistant subculture. The wearing of styles like sagging black pants and over-sized white t-shirts can be read as resistance of pressure from authorities to conform that also produces profits for

merchandisers. This is reminiscent of Lipsitz's (1994) examination of the wide commercial popularity and influence of Rastafarian 'resistance through not fitting in,' which centers on stylistic and lifestyle claims to multi-cultural expression as a viable alternative to conformity. Early hip-hop activists like Africa Bambaataa provide another example of the 'imagination and ingenuity of slum dwellers' who work through the commodity form and global media to get the message out about subaltern sensitivities and viable alternative cultural identities (Lipsitz 1994, p. 27).

### **Note on methods and external validity**

Semiotic analysis of subcultures is often criticized as an overly deductive and structural approach to phenomena that should be studied in context with ethnographic methods to discern how culture and identity are enacted and negotiated in every day interaction (LeBlanc 1999, Hodkinson 2004). Institutional and semiotic analysis of socio-spatial context and influences on urban black youth subculture in New Orleans are supplemented with ethnographic data collected over the course of three years when the first author was a teacher at 'President' High School in New Orleans. Fifteen formal and many informal interviews were conducted with young male students at the school. Interviews covered a wide range of subjects; ranging from stories about upbringing, relationships with parents, peers and school authorities, stylistic preferences and influences, and attitudes about crime and career. Interviews were taped, transcribed and given to each respondent for correction. The interviews were supplemented with extensive field notes based on personal observations. While physical entrée to the setting was easy, it took time for a teacher to gain the trust of key informants. Most of the formal interviews were conducted after the first author had known the students for more than a year. During that time the authors learned that the young men interviewed want to be heard in a society that often silences them, and that they decided to share some of their views. The reader must decide how faithfully these views are represented.

The research site and the sample of youth interviewed are not representative of African-American youth culture in general. The youth interviewed live in low-income working-class neighborhoods, many residing in or near housing projects where negative interaction with police is expected and the temptation is strong to back up stylistic resistance with violence or criminal action. The immediate experience of being profiled and labeled as deviant by police and school authorities, and having direct contact with criminal elements, makes the resistant subculture at 'President' high school more revelatory than typical of African-American male youth culture. However, it will be shown that the street-inspired gangster lifestyle and fashion sense found at places like 'President' high school are disseminated through hip-hop culture and media portrayals so any young person can internalize the imagery and embrace it with various levels of commitment.

### **Context of a youth subculture**

The historic confinement of African Americans by slavery, Jim Crow segregation laws, ghetto isolation and racial residential segregation provides the socio-spatial context for subculture formation (Wacquant 2001). A well-documented process of deindustrialization and suburbanization of employment in many US cities since the

1970s concentrated poverty among minority people living in isolated central cities while many whites and middle-class blacks fled to the suburbs (Wilson 1996). Many young black people are warehoused in these poverty-stricken neighborhoods, surplus population stuck between available low-wage employment and a life of imprisonment should they pursue innovative strategies to escape poverty. Resistance of some black youth against the social stigma of prison involves identification with a resistant subculture where participants accept the prospect of spending time in jail.

New Orleans is a prime setting where concentrated urban poverty and racial residential segregation support a resistant youth subculture. Black median income in the city is one-half that of whites while the black poverty rate (35%) is higher than the national average and more than three times the poverty rate of local white residents (Brookings Institution 2005). The proportional white population of the city declined by one-half from 1970 to 2000 as the black population increased to nearly two-thirds of pre-Katrina New Orleans residents. During the same period, real wages in the city declined as shrinkage of the regional oil industry reduced manufacturing employment by 23% while the growth of tourism swelled lower-paying service-sector employment by 136% and retail employment by 76% (Brookings Institution 2005, p. 10).

Federal and state construction of sprawling low-income housing projects exacerbated the spatial concentration of poverty in New Orleans as it did in many other American cities. Starting in the 1940s the Magnolia, Calliope, Lafitte, St Bernard, Desire, and Fisher housing projects were built exclusively to house blacks. Over time, housing projects constructed to house whites also became home to poor black residents who built and defended communities and culture in these difficult locations. Areas of extreme poverty concentrated around housing projects feature substandard schools where drop-out rates typically exceed 40%. A vibrant and violent street culture exists in these neighborhoods, where the informal drug economy flourishes and violent crime is a daily concern of many hard-working citizens.

Prison is another experience young black men in New Orleans know well. The US imprisonment rate of 738 per 100,000 persons in 2005 was the highest in the world, while the Louisiana rate (1138 per 100,000 persons) was the highest of any state in the US (US Department of Justice 2006). The imprisonment rate for black males in Louisiana in 2005 was 2452 per 100,000 persons, over five times the rate of white males in the state (US Department of Justice 2006). In the words of one respondent:

Basically cause it's what a lotta us see. You [directing toward interviewer] grew up seein', you know, people in suits, see what I'm sayin'? We grew up seein' your [respondent's] uncle, you know, bein' in jail a lot. (Fish)

This is a context where basic sentiments are often incompatible with both mainstream African-American leadership and the ideals of the dominant culture, making it a textbook context for a resistant youth subculture (Neal 2004a).

The marginal status of many black people in New Orleans was revealed to the world immediately after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in August 2005. Tens of thousands of people were trapped for days in the flood waters and were then picked up and housed without toilet facilities for several more days in the Superdome

and Convention Center. As the US military entered New Orleans as an occupying army, many young black males from this environment were labeled by media pundits and authorities (e.g. police, teachers) as ignorant and dangerous criminals who will loot stores and commit violent crimes.

### **Hip-hop and prison influence local black youth subculture**

Fashions and hairstyles worn by most students at the high school reflect a combination of rampant consumerism and what Lipsitz (1994) terms rebellion through commodity consumption that can be traced to hip-hop culture. Hip-hop emerged from the bankrupt urban landscape of post-industrial New York City in the mid-1970s. In this context, class polarization and the concentration of poverty were framed by ever more commodified images of wealth and consumption. The embrace of capitalism and consumption is one dimension of hip-hop, while Tricia Rose (1994, pp. 25, 33) argues that hip-hop also provides young black people with an alternative path to identity and social status that creatively combines fashion, music and language to confront a dominant cultural frame that limits these youth to a life of concentrated poverty, crime and loss. Clarence Lusane (2004) agrees that, in important ways, hip-hop is a culture of resistance and insurrection of subjugated knowledge acquired by members who grow up in conditions of violence and destitution. Hip-hop provides a clear conduit of commerce and consumption that can carry resistant musical and stylistic messages.

On the fashion front, members of hip-hop crews gain status from competition to craft and display new styles. New styles bubble up from the street and are marketed as popular brand names like RocaWear, FUBU, Sean John, G-Nikes, Jordan's, Air Force Ones and Girbaud that are favored by those interviewed for this study. Styles are generated in ongoing communication between prison, street, and mass market. Sagging pants, wearing shoes without laces, and long shorts are associated with a tendency of hip-hop culture that is heavily influenced by the prison (Boyd 2003, Wharton 2003). The pants of many prison inmates sag below the waist because inmates are not allowed belts. Sagging pants are worn by some young people in New Orleans and other places as emblems of a gangster or thug lifestyle identified with the incarcerated. This is an emblem of resistance and affiliation with a resistant subculture that demands defiant masculinity and hardness.

Sagging pants and the larger baggy pants trend first appeared on the streets of New York City in the early 1990s. Gangs in Los Angeles copied the style as it spread across the country. Hip-hop-inspired fashion labels like Cross Colors and Karl Kani, and later Sean John and RocaWear, further marketed and popularized this sign of resistance to established authority (Weiss 1998, Walters 2004). Wearing sagging pants challenges the authority of police and school officials charged with enforcement of laws and uniform dress codes. Revealing under garments is a short step away from showing one's ass, revealing private parts as a defiant sign of resistance to basic requirements of body adornment (Joseph 1986, p. 57). The sagging pants style is reminiscent of the shaved head worn by British Skinheads studied by scholars from the CCCS (Clarke *et al.* [1975] 1996, p. 56). This parallel suggests the continued relevance of stylistic resistance that is defined by the wearer's social context, the reactions of institutional authorities (e.g. police, school, media), and an internal status order that draws individuals toward the resistant subculture.

The rappers, or rhyming storytellers of hip hop, are privileged spokespeople for the marginal and socially under-privileged. These artists market messages of social resistance and affirmation through a variety of local and national venues (Rose 1994, pp. 38–39). The vibrant New Orleans hip-hop scene features a variety of independent performers along with artists who record for locally owned but globally distributed ‘No Limit’ and ‘Cash Money’ record companies. Two important tendencies in the local rap scene include ‘bounce rap’ that features very fast, high-pitched, and powerful beats that is New Orleans’ unique contribution to the party music that has always been a staple of hip-hop culture. The local street or gangsta rap scene borrows heavily from traditional themes of gun play, sexual prowess, and celebration of neighborhood and housing project life but adds a language and inflection that is unique to New Orleans. ‘Where Dey At’ and ‘You heard me’ are standard New Orleans slang found in many locally produced rhymes. Call outs to fellow Ward (neighborhood) dwellers take the form of ‘Hey Wodie,’ while ‘boot up or shut up’ is a local challenge to fight, and ‘let me hit you from the back for [some Popeye’s] or [a double stack]’ refers to exchanging sex for Popeye’s famous fried chicken or a hit of the drug ecstasy.

One important message delivered by local street rappers like Juvenile and Lil’ Wayne is that they are successful, and wearing what they wear is a sign of success. When asked about stylistic influences, respondents frequently identify rappers and television personalities as models whose stylistic choices are copied. In the words of Dipper, ‘they copying because like they see rappers wear that.’ Byron plainly states that, ‘if they didn’t have no rappers, we wouldn’t know what to wear’; while Roe explains it as follows:

I think most of it gotta do wit entertainment. If they see a rapper or whatever wearing this chain, they want that chain. They see ‘em wearing this jacket, they going try they best to get that jacket, you know. I’m saying, it’s a trend. Most of it’s from entertainment . . . Instead of like, liking how they is, they’s like to be a entertainer. Cause, if they didn’t have no rappers, no actors, or none of that, everybody would be theysself. You know I’m saying? But since they follow some things and then rapper says, ‘I got this! Oh, I got this!’ Like, I got this car, and I got, you know, this house and this what I wear. For awhile you start to feel like you ain’t nothing cause you ain’t got, you know, you can’t show, you know they living good and you just, you know average. So you try your best to live good.

Respondents spoke of well-known rappers who grew up in housing projects, many without a father present. They struggled to survive in grim conditions using any means available to climb out of poverty and achieve success. Many of those interviewed grow up in similar conditions and hope to achieve success and make money, and one popular indicator of success is to dress like a famous rapper, not like a Wall Street banker.

Cause they have it, like, like, when you see a man on Wall Street, got the two-piece, three-piece suit on, you know you like, ‘man, he looking good, he must be doing something good’. That’s same as when we look at a rapper got the little RocaWear on or whatever, you think, ‘Damn, he must be doin something good, he, he got it on, like damn, I want get that (Billy).

The culture industry goes to great lengths to market hip-hop music and fashion styles because they are profitable and that profit is agreeable to stockholders. Nelson George (1998) submits that rap has always been 'a capitalist tool,' which suggests that money and consumption are celebrated. Nearly all of the young black males interviewed embrace the value of material success represented by successful rappers but they want to spend money on clothing and hairstyles labeled as deviant by authorities who believe that most of these young men are budding gangsters who lie and steal to get the money to buy what rappers loudly display. The widespread cultural appeal of the thug or gangster lifestyle spills over into a celebration of prison as the institutional embodiment of non-conformity and resistance of established authority. The imprisonment of many young black men and the embrace of prison styles by rappers and young people from all backgrounds fuels mainstream fashion trends through the medium of hip hop as it reflects the experience of these youth. The specific style of wearing sagging pants, braided hairstyles, and all black outfits sets a new standard of defiant masculinity, a symbolic affiliation with prison culture that has spread from poor segregated minority neighborhoods into white suburbs (Walters 2004).

### **Elements of black youth subculture are demonized**

Political and cultural elites typically reduce hip-hop followers to cardboard stereotypes that mask a complex array of cultural forms and practices (Kelley 2004). For example, the emergence of gangsta rap in the late 1980s provided ammunition for authorities and moral entrepreneurs to demonize rappers and their young black followers as violent lumpen criminals or 'urban terrorists' (Lusane 2004, p. 357). The labeling spectacle unfolded as the appeal of gangsta rap spread among white suburban youth, generating the conditions for moral panic.

Profane lyrics, misogyny, and violence associated with the gangsta rap genre inspired Congressional Hearings and a moral crusade in the early 1990s to censor rap lyrics. Artists such as Ice-T and NWA challenged police authority in the revolutionary nationalist tradition of The Black Panther Party, even describing conditions under which they would kill a police officer before that officer could kill them. The crusade against gangsta rap was led by moral entrepreneurs like Tipper Gore, former Secretary of Education William Bennett, C. Delores Tucker, and by representatives of national associations of police officers that demonized fans of the gangsta rap genre (Dyson 1996, p. 182). At least partly in reaction to the media firestorm, insurance companies raised the price of bonds required to stage rap concerts and big record labels like Warner and Sony tried to distill the defiant message of rap music into a search for equal status through consumption (Neal 2004a).

### **Sagging black pants and dreadlocks are demonized emblems of resistance**

Black pants worn low so they sag below the waist to reveal under-garments are a stylistic expression of the African-American youth subculture of New Orleans. Wearing sagging pants is an act of symbolic resistance because of the reaction it gets from those in authority. The institutional status of sagging as an act of sartorial rebellion engaged in by thugs and wannabe thugs was codified in Louisiana House

Bill 1626, the so-called low-rider pants bill, introduced in April 2004 to make it 'unlawful for any person to appear in public wearing his pants below his waist and thereby exposing skin or intimate clothing' (Krupa 2004). The bill did not become law and it did not curtail the popularity of low-rider pants, but local ordinances with similar intent have been passed to combat 'young thugs' who wear long baggy t-shirts and baggy pants that 'sag' below the waist, prison style.

The city of Opelousas, Louisiana was among the first to legislate against sagging pants, handing out tickets for indecent exposure to extreme 'saggers.' Police Chief Larry Caillier defends the practice with a 'broken windows' philosophy of policing, which proposes that cracking down on things like sagging pants, loud music, and loitering outside nightclubs addresses 'residents' smaller complaints, helps build trust with the police and makes the community safer' (Weiss 1998). The LaFourche, Louisiana Parish Council banned the wearing of sagging pants because a majority of the Council agreed that they are obscene; that partial nudity is 'not becoming to his or her sex' (St Martin 2007). Lafourche Parish Councilman Lindel Toups contends that the ban on sagging pants is not unconstitutional; 'we're not telling people how to dress, just how to wear their clothes' (St Martin 2007). This comment was made in support of legislation to sanction the bricoleur who sabotages convention through the appropriation of ordinary black pants for use in a resistant subculture.

Braided hair is another example of stylistic expression in the black youth subculture that is sometimes sanctioned by local authorities. Dreadlocks have long been identified in Britain with political resistance and pot-smoking Jamaican Rastafarians whose music and fashion styles inspired white working-class youth rebellion in the 1970s (Hebdige 1979). The wearer of dreadlocks is often stereotyped as a folk devil, a deviant pothead outsider who is blamed for crimes and other social problems, and who must be closely watched and regulated (Cohen 1973, Bose 2003). The labeling of stylistic rebels as folk devils is often used to amplify deviance and blame social problems on a marginalized group located outside the social consensus. This boundary maintenance process is consistent with a heteroglossic conception of a dominant culture/subculture relationship that stereotypes black youth, regardless of intent. Sheriff Jack Strain of suburban St Tammany Parish, Louisiana recently had the following to say in a television interview about black youth who wear dreadlocks:

Now I don't get into calling people names and all that fact, but if you're gonna walk the streets of St. Tammany Parish with dreadlocks and chee wee hairstyles, then you can expect to be getting a visit from a sheriff's deputy. St. Tammany Parish won't tolerate any New Orleans thugs and trash in St. Tammany such as the unemployed and those displaced from New Orleans federal housing projects. (Strain 2006)

Aware of the widely held perception that dreadlocks are worn by unemployed housing project residents who are thought likely to engage in violent crime, the principal of a local private black high school decided one day to send home nearly one-third of all males enrolled in the school for wearing various braided hairstyles in violation of school rules. He told parents that fashion and hairstyle reflect on character and that when these young men interview for jobs they cannot show up with braids in their hair or they will be perceived as men of low character. The principal did not mean to imply that one-third of his students are thugs of low character, but the extreme behaviors of some youth who wear braided hairstyles and sagging pants reflect on all young black males who look like that and the principal

believes all black males must adapt to that perception by taking braids out of their hair while at school.

A wave of robberies, beatings, and shootings over possession of Air Jordan tennis shoes, Starter Jackets, and coveted team jerseys in the 1990s prompted many school districts to institute uniform dress codes. Enforcement of a uniform policy is an attempt by the school to create 'model citizens' through the imposition of a normative fashion code and status system to supplant an alternative status order. The US Department of Education manual on school uniforms states that uniforms will help students concentrate on school work, develop discipline, and resist peer pressure (Bryce 2007). The imposition of uniform dress codes also recruits, embeds, and subordinates students into the institutional reality of the school, which Joseph (1986, p. 120) argues is a metaphor for recruitment of young people into society. This is a case where struggles over style are also struggles over the extent young people must conform to the demands of an institutional order.

'President' high school was the first school in New Orleans to institute dress codes. All public schools in New Orleans later imposed uniform dress and behavioral codes in an attempt to address defiant forms of expression. According to the Principal of 'President' high school, the dress code was initiated because of a 'class and status thing that we did not want to continue. Students try to top each other and they keep on over doing it.' A teacher at the school adds that kids were fighting over Starter Jackets and it was well known that kids were killed in New Orleans over jackets and shoes. The required school uniform is navy blue pants or knee-length shorts with belts worn *above* the waist. Colored t-shirts or other shirts worn under or over the uniform shirt are strictly prohibited. Authorities link hip-hop styles to gang membership and criminal behavior, and perceptions are cemented as reality as the cultural meaning of style is constructed in the minds of teachers and police officers, and is codified in official school rules.

Dress codes and censorship crusades did not curtail the message or popularity of street rap or sagging pants. Instead, young black males continue, with variable levels of commitment, to appropriate the thug or gangster style and continue to be demonized, incarcerated, and generally blamed for urban decline (Beauregard 1993). In the face of a uniform dress code designed to counteract violence associated with prison-inspired hip-hop styles, students subvert the uniform policy and resist the authority of teachers and administrators. The effort of school officials to suppress individuality and alternative group affiliations is met with resistance by students who refuse to suppress other statuses and conform to dress codes. The failure to build self-esteem among students through enforced conformity to dress codes illustrates the competition of a resistant subculture for the hearts and minds of adolescents. Further exploration of fashion choices and resistance of uniform requirements reveals much about the nature of resistance in the subculture and its variable influence over identity formation and behavior of the young black males interviewed.

### **Symbolic and behavioral resistance in New Orleans' black youth subculture**

Representatives of institutional authority enforce dress codes and construct a regime of stylistic conformity codified in school rules, police profiling, and legislation that bans particular styles of dress. Dress and styles embraced by the young black men interviewed symbolize conflict between prison-inspired and gang-inspired codes of

conduct and behavioral expectations enforced by representatives of institutional authority that often label as deviant anyone who appears to identify with a resistant youth subculture.

They judge you about everything you do. Cause I wear my pants like this, they judge me, they call me a thug. Cause we get golds in our mouth, they judge us, they call us thugs. We curse, we gotta be ignorant. Cause how they don't figure that's the way we express ourself? (Spook)

A closer look at the black male youth subculture reveals that some youth do live the thug life and act like stereotypical gangsters, while many more adopt variations of the thug style and variably identify and commit to a resistant subculture that defies conventional authority; while the mainstream world gravitates ambiguously between demonization, repression and reluctant fascination and financial exploitation of these styles.

Many youth construct meanings and express identities consistent with local versions of a thug subculture popularized through hip hop. John defines thug style like this: 'Thugs have they pants saggin' and you know, gold teeth and earrings and big chains, and you know, stuff like that. Big shirts, you know, big clothes and stuff like that.' Other respondents see thugs this way:

If you see somebody dressed the exact way as that dude with that pink and white on, but he got golds, he got tattoos on his neck, and uh, you know he kinda got some size on him, the way he talk, his whole attitude, then you know that he's tryin' to be a thug wit' it or whatever ... most thugs stick to theyself and they always dressed in black. (Reginald)

Twenty million niggas fucked everything. They get golds in they mouth, show, that's us, that's our style. We get golds, braids, get tattoos all on our neck and all on our face because we thuggin. (Spook)

Subversive fashion choices are backed up by dozens of students who spend much of the school day walking in and out of class and loitering in hallways, parking lots, and under trees on and around school grounds. These youth accumulate subcultural capital and experience personal strength from cutting class and wearing all-black clothing and pants that sag like a prisoner.

When you wear all black ... it's like saying, 'I'm harder than you ... I am a savage, I'm deep in these feet, don't mess with me, I'm better than you ... I can fight better than you ... I'm stronger than you'. It's a strength I guess, a strength with all black ... don't even tell me nothing. (Reginald)

Reinforcement of stylistic resistance with illegal and violent action defines the real thug. One 17-year-old African-American youth from 'President' High School was arrested in 2004, charged with second-degree murder in the shooting-death of a 20-year-old pregnant woman during a Mardi Gras parade. The woman was killed by stray bullets fired during an explosive confrontation between two groups of African-American high school students who were previously unknown to each other. The trigger for this deadly confrontation was who had the right to wear all-black clothing that night on that street. An interview with the police detective who investigated the

shooting confirmed newspaper accounts that the incident was precipitated by a comment about fashion:

The first thing [said] was like, 'who are these guys wearing black' among the first group. And then, and then they [second group] say, 'yeah, why, what's wrong with that?' 'What, y'all wearing black? Y'all think y'all bad enough to wear all black?' And then someone from the first group says back, 'Well yeah, we bad enough.' And then they chested up to each other, and one guy got pushed and the push came from the [second] group that the shooter was part of. And [the shooter] and the other guy pulled a gun and um, that's when [the shooter] started shooting.

The incident described above is tragic but it is not totally isolated as two other students at the high school were indicted for murder in separate shooting incidents that occurred during the same year. The incident provides a poignant example of the potential for violence sparked by symbolic communication in a resistant subculture. Obviously, clothes do not pull triggers, but clothes can serve as triggers in an alternative status order where subcultural capital is accumulated from posturing that is sometimes backed up with violent action.

The incident described above is reminiscent of Tony Jefferson's ([1975] 1996, p. 82) analysis of the touchiness of British Teddy Boys who were quick to fight after insults to person or appearance. He linked this touchiness to lack of traditional status so that when status claimed in the resistant subculture is challenged, the self is challenged and fights break out to defend the self and the turf that reinforces it. This is an instance where fashion symbolizes the self as the cultural extension of oneself but the egoistic element of adornment is supplemented by a social process of distinction whereby the individual is recognized for how they look (Simmel [1908] 1950, p. 339). This sphere of significance is linked to honor and status projected by the personality, and is reflected back to the personality by relevant group members. Tension in this process is revealed when primary group affiliation with a resistant subculture defines identities and standards of conduct at odds with dominant standards of respectability.

Inside the subculture, identification as a real thug goes beyond style to include disposition and behavior. Spook insists that judging someone solely by how they dress is stereotyping and that is wrong:

Yeah, it's stereotyping. I said I'm a thug because the things I do, not because how I dress. That don't make you no thug. It depends on the things you do. You know what I'm saying? See, thugging is niggas that be, they don't give a fuck about nothing, shoot at the police, shoot at everybody, they don't give a fuck about it. Cause, police, they crooked. Police targeting most black people.

As illustrated above in the case of a shooting precipitated by style of dress, real thugs back up stylistic resistance and talk with action. A central requirement of the thug lifestyle is to back up other members of one's crew:

Thugs sell drugs. You know what I'm sayin', smoke weed. Using, you know, carryin' guns . . . Hangin' wit' a clique full a niggas that's 'bout anything so like, when you been wit' a group, it's like, a oath, ya heard me. Like say, I'm a stay real with this nigga. Never put nobody over yo' nigga, . . . if you get in an done a my lil partnas get into it right now, come knockin' on the door and you open that door and you let him in and he be like,

'I just got into it', I'm not goin' ask him what we goin' do, and how we goin' do it, I'm a get my ass up out this chair, go out there and do whatever he want us to do cause that's my nigga. (Spook)

Another requirement of being 'down' with the thug lifestyle is doing whatever it takes to acquire emblems of status like expensive all-black clothing. The desire for money is rooted in the dominant cultural value of success and status, and some young people will do violent crimes to achieve the status that follows money.

When you see somebody in the hood pushing a big ole car with some big ole rims, you like that. You like, that's nice, I want that. Then you goin' be sittin' next to a nigga that's evil, got an evil plan, you see that nigga tell my boy I want that. He going be like 'Man, I know a way we could get that.' Now let's go up there and go get some drugs and we can start a little, and get big selling drugs. You could get a lot of money quick. You got it and I want it, I'm a take it from you. If I have to kill you-tell you, I'm a fuckin kill you. Fuck you nigga, I don't need you. I ain't going to lose no sleep for killin you. It feel good buyin the big ole cars wit big rims. Feel good doin' that because you could take the ugliest person in the world and give them money and they goin' be the beautifullest thing in the world. Because once you have money, you got everything. (Spook)

There is a real sense of urgency within the subculture to show that you are 'not nothing,' and dressing in style and showing off possessions are major ways to prove that you are something. More than where the money comes from the cost of the outfit matters, the type of cellphone attached to the hip matters, the style of hat matters because it lets everyone know 'my money long and you can't tell me nuttin' (Reginald). The amount of money spent on the newest brand-name clothes show strength, power and upward mobility within the subculture.

The vast majority of respondents do not engage in violent confrontations over the right to wear all-black clothing or engage in criminal activity to get money; they simply wear particular styles of clothing 'the wrong way' to resist demands for conformity and identify with the thug subculture. Several respondents told us they do not care what others tell them to wear, and that includes teachers, parents, and police. They wear their clothes the way they want to even though it is not the 'right way.' Most students refuse to hike up their pants and tuck in their shirts, and if they do tuck in their shirt, they quickly un-tuck it. Teachers are the outsiders who try to enforce conformity in a subculture where they do not belong and where their orders lack legitimacy. Rule-makers who believe it disrespectful to authority to show underclothing in public are countered by local youth who oppose bans against wearing sagging pants with comments like 'If I paid for them, I can wear my pants the way I want,' 'They can't tell me how to dress,' or 'All it's [ordinance against sagging pants] going to do is make us do it more' (St Martin 2007).

The offending youth accept that conventional styles are the proper way to dress and their way is somehow opposed to that, a statement, a challenge to authority. For example, John describes his style of dress using words such as right and wrong:

you could have big pants and they still gonna fall and you know, you could wear baggy pants and pull em up and wear em right, the proper way . . . I was taught to wear my pants on my waist . . . I still do what I want do, wear my pants real low, saggy past my butt and stuff like that, you know cause it's what I want do.

Even though John is aware of the school dress code, he says 'it's just a new style that everybody do, I wanna wear my pants below my butt and that's that. Nobody ain't gonna tell me nothing; if they do, I don't care.' Another respondent describes his resistance this way:

First of all, you not supposed to wear your pants sagging at school, you're here to learn, for one thing. You're not here to show your ass or nothing like that. You're not here to, you know, be walking around all day. You're here to learn and, you know, you supposed to wear your pants above your waist with a belt, shirt in. And it's just something everybody ain't doing, everybody pants sagging and they not going to class. (John)

Stylistic resistance is central to the gangster or thug subculture but it is not the same as acting like a violent thug, and that distinction reveals an important cleavage in the subculture that is often overlooked by authorities and by scholars who stereotype or totalize resistant subcultures.

### **Real and studio thugs**

Participants in the subculture distinguish looking like a thug from acting like one and this distinction helps identify an important dimension of the subcultural status hierarchy. An internal distinction is made between those who struggle and lead a real thug life and those who embrace the style without living the life – known as 'studio niggas.'

They studio gangsta ass niggas . . . They real imitatin' ass niggas. Real niggas don't need to wear no button-up-ass shirt, might as well put on some slacks and suit too. Niggas gotta be real, and I feel I wear my pants saggin because that's my style. (Spook)

Being a real thug requires not only that one dresses like a thug, but that one's actions demonstrate loyalty to one's clique and a willingness to do whatever is necessary to get the money required to display signs of success. Male toughness is displayed through dress and style but the real thug backs up style with action appropriate to street life. Several respondents identify trend followers and distinguish them from those who keep it real, remaining hard and committed to the group.

They studio ass niggas, man, they just just wanna be down, you know what I'm sayin? They never done no hard shit before, never been down, never put no macks on, did no real shit, never went down for no clique, they just imitatin' a style so nobody won't mess wit em . . . we know they fake.

Roe puts it this way:

A hard person for one gotta done been through some stuff, you can't just wake up in the morning and say, 'Fuck that, I'm hard, I'm a go out there and just punk someone . . . You had to go through stuff, seen stuff to where you just really been to the point to where you like, fuck it. (Roe)

Studio thugs are the ones who dress and talk the part but demonstrate little substance behind the style. Spook says that those who are true hustlers and are truly his friends are the only people to whom he is loyal. Those who follow trends are not his friends. He will talk to them and be friendly, but his loyalty is with his true

friends, those who really know the streets. He is quick to 'fuck over' any fake thug who has conflict with a true friend.

Sporting thug styles does not equal living a thug life, although sporting the styles sends a message of resistance that authorities associate with thug life and the behavioral consequences implied. John and Ross talk about studio thugs who follow the crowd, wear RocaWear and are tempted to back the look up with action – but they do not really want to do it. These young people are aware of the negative labels placed on them by authorities, especially those they encounter face to face like police and teachers. A few adopt thug styles and actually turn to crime, while many others adopt the style without the deviant behavior. These weekend or studio thugs are still demonized and discarded by mainstream authorities because their hairstyles and dress display resistance against institutional pressure to conform.

### **Fashion, subculture affiliation, and status**

Many black inner-city youth respond to the experience of marginalization, poverty, and racism as bricoleurs in a subculture that reinvents uniform fashion requirements for inclusion in a resistant status order. Subjectivity and identity are expressed as these youth navigate between capitalist media and hip-hop fashion entrepreneurs who sell signs of rebellion, school officials who enforce conformity to fashion and behavioral standards, and peer pressure to take a stylistic and behavioral stand between the demands of authority and the extremes of a resistant status order. The process reveals the contested nature of hegemonic and subcultural ideals and how that contest provides a context for the strategic enactment of identities negotiated between dominant institutions and resistant subcultures. Most youth interviewed fit the designation of studio thugs but even the distinction between real and studio thugs does not completely capture all internal dimensions of the subcultural status order. The construction of identity and status between conflicting normative orders allows for the embrace of individualist and consumptive values in tune with the mainstream but embraced with a non-conformist twist to defy authority. That defiant resistance of authority is an effort to capture cultural capital available in the subculture without necessarily behaving like a thug. In the end local youth do more than simply conform or resist, they negotiate identities that illustrate various levels of commitment and rejection of local subculture and dominant institutional norms (Thornton 1995, LeBlanc 1999, Bose 2003).

Short of living the thug life, subculture affiliation is most resistant among bricoleurs who wear sagging black pants and long braids without necessarily stealing, dealing drugs or getting violent like a real thug. A less extreme form of resistance is wearing baggy pants with over-sized t-shirts and shorter braids that violate uniform dress codes and fit the police profile of a thug but are clearly less extreme than wearing sagging pants or acting like a criminal. The distinction is explained by one respondent:

What people get confused the most about is you got baggy and you got saggy. Baggy is when you a 30 [inch waist] and you get 34. That's baggy which means I'm going grow in my jeans, you know, it's not really growing, it's the whole purpose of having them a lil bit bigger than what it really is cause your pants not tight, it's not the old days. Now you need a lil bit more room if there's things you want do. But see, bagging is when you

know, you a 30, get a 34. Sagging is just ridiculous, when you're 30 and you pop up with a 46. (Reginald)

How low pants are worn stakes a symbolic claim to identity in relation to institutional authority and the extreme behavior of thugs that defines one extreme in a resistant subculture. Reginald represents this intermediate approach by wearing baggy rather than sagging pants.

I feel that there's not really cause for to be that much baggy. You ain't gotta prove nothin'. All you gotta do is just at least have your belt a lil' bit loose to where it could sit a lil' bit off your waist, not too much.

The hip-hop culture has always celebrated wearing prevailing styles with a personal twist. Status is gained when clothes and hairstyles are customized to make the wearer stand out. Consumption with a twist can be read as expressions of resistant consumption and identity politics (Lipsitz 1994). Ross wears braids to feel like himself but he does not wear them like everyone else, he wears them with a twist. Roe makes a similar statement: 'that's just me, like I wear certain things but I might not wear it the same way as everybody else wear. I might just twist it up a little bit or add some stuff.'

Many respondents are like Reginald who wears hip-hop styles to visibly express personal excellence, revealing how clothes express status and lay claim to respect. They are not 'down all the way' with the subculture, they just want respect:

It's always better to have nice clothes. You, you lettin' people know, I'm bout money, see what I'm sayin,' when you first look at me, I'm bout money. Don't think I'm out here just grindin' all day, lookin' ashy and stuff. . . . For boys, when they got expensive clothes, they impress the girls. When girls do it, like first they tryin' to impress the boys or whatever . . . If you got RocaWear from top to bottom, a girl who got on Rainbow is not going come holla at you cause she have lower self esteem, like she can't compete with you. That's what most thugs is all about, competition, bottom line.

Clothes make the wearer stand out, gain esteem and recognition from peers:

Oh, you a leader, see what I'm sayin'? You the king. They can't tell you nuttin' . . . It's nuttin' you could do or tell me to hurt my feelings, see what I'm sayin'? I could get shot tomorrow and my momma coulda been done passin', if I put on them clothes, bam. See what I'm sayin'? Nobody never know what happened cause I'm in a whole different world, I'm coolin' y'all off. I look way better than y'all, I'm too hot to be touched. You can't tell me nuttin', it's just me in my zone and my clothes . . . If I rock Girbauds 24/7 and you rock Ecko 24/7 I'm a higher rank than you. If I got more shoes, then I'm in a higher rank than you. Whoever got the most, or gettin' the most or gotta higher amount of money is just poppin.' (Reginald)

Style expressed through bodily adornment is a sign of material success that demonstrates strength and celebrates the self in ways that are essential for recognition in the subculture. The absence of this display is a sign of weakness.

The internal status order at the high school is defined by material success, but success is achieved between conflicting tendencies defined by legitimate authorities and the prison. Most students defy legitimate authority and violate official dress codes, perhaps by wearing baggy pants, long t-shirts, and braided hair; but that is not

the same as wearing sagging pants or acting like a real thug. Subtle distinctions like wearing sagging or baggy pants, or conforming to hip-hop and subculture standards with a twist, show how individual identities are crafted and expressed reflexively in relation to demands of subculture and institutional authority.

### **Conclusion**

Stylistic expression can be resistant and subversive of authority when that expression is treated as resistant by representatives of institutional authority and by an internal status order that unevenly connects individuals with resistant subculture and with conformity to rules enacted and enforced by institutional authority. This is a return to debates about the importance of the social context of stylistic resistance where an internal status order rewards stylistic expression that is appropriated by the culture industry yet presumes a resistant lifestyle that is rewarded internally with status and recognition – while it is demonized and repressed by authorities that demand conformity with an established order.

Prison inspired hip-hop styles like sagging black pants and oversized t-shirts are emblems of the inner-city New Orleans black youth subculture that provoke moral panic from authorities. Demonizing these forms of expression in the media and their repression by local ordinances, school dress codes, and a ‘broken windows’ policing strategy confronts a resistant subculture that in fact includes a variety of stylistic and behavioral expressions. The labeling process criminalizes not only the fashions worn by many young black men but also criminalizes hanging out on the street or in malls where status seeking youth go to show off their styles. Enforcement of dress codes that criminalize status-seeking fashion statements are met with resistance that extends far beyond the fraction of the subculture that is actually engaged in violence and theft. A look inside the subculture reveals variable levels of salience and commitment to thug fashion and behavior. A real thug may kill to uphold their right to wear all black at a Mardi Gras parade, while studio gangsters wear all black outfits and baggy pants and t-shirts to enact an identity that is resistant of institutional authority but is not ‘down all the way’ with the subculture.

Young black males are marginalized and demonized by authorities, and must navigate between capitalist media and hip-hop fashion entrepreneurs that sell signs of rebellion, school officials that enforce conformity to fashion and behavioral standards, and peer pressure to express commitment to a resistant subculture. Examination of the process reveals the contested nature of hegemonic ideals and of culture itself, and how that contest provides context for crafting styles and identities. The construction of identity and status between conflicting normative orders allows for the embrace of consumptive values that are in tune with the mainstream but are embraced with a twist that visibly and symbolically defy authority. In the end local youth do more than simply conform or resist, they enact and negotiate identities that illustrate various levels of commitment and defiance of resistant subculture and institutional authority.

Stylistic consumption can be resistant to institutional pressure to conform, but the question remains of how liberating is the search for status through consumption. The thug or wannabe thug presents an ambiguous challenge to power; they are defiant individuals with considerable drive to succeed but some are violent and steal from others, which fuels the labeling of inner-city youth as folk devils, and that is

counterproductive politically, to say the least. There is also the defiant masculinity and hardness of the stereotypical thug who is desirous and distrustful, vulnerable and controlling of women (Rose 1994, Neal 2004b). Neal (2004b) suspects that the sexism attributed to rappers and hip-hop-inspired youth is an exaggerated label placed on a much more complex reality. Further research is required to clarify the extent to which women are reduced to symbols of male power in this subculture. In the end, the vast majority of participants in the prison and hip-hop-inspired black male youth subculture present an alternative identity and demand recognition through stylistic resistance. These actions can be read as a democratic celebration of multi-culturalism and non-conformity – and that seems a worthwhile political project.

## Note

1. The focus of this paper is on young inner-city African-American males. Attention is directed to a particular male-dominated subculture where a hard form of masculinity is stressed and women are often objectified. The important task of locating young women in the hip-hop-inspired gangster or thug subculture has been ably addressed by others (for example, Rose 1994, Neal 2004b) and remains an essential concern of youth studies.

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