

THE DIAMOND EFFECT

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by

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## The Diamond Effect

In the late 1970s in the Bronx, a cultural and artistic phenomenon known as hip-hop emerged. Hip-hop culture developed as a form of social and political resistance intended to empower powerless and disenfranchised youth and to give voice to their frustrations and their sense of alienation from mainstream culture. Artistically, hip-hop was manifested in visual arts, graffiti, competitive break dancing, fashion, vernacular speech, and a spoken-word musical expression (the MC) called rap. In the approximately 30 years since it first appeared, rap has spread around the globe, and it has become a multi-million dollar industry. One of the most notable features of the rapper's image is self-advertisement via what Lil Wayne calls "bling." According to the VH1 documentary, *Behind the Music*, Lil Wayne coined the term "bling" in 1998 on a track entitled "Millionaire Dream" (Wikipedia). He says: I got ten around my neck, and baguettes on my wrist, Bling!" Lil Wayne calls attention to the ten carat gold chain around his neck and the glittering diamond bracelet on his wrist. His jewelry becomes a symbol of his wealth and success. With Lil Wayne's boast, the term "bling" enters the hip-hop vocabulary/lexicon, giving a name to the extravagant display of diamonds and gold jewelry that defines the rapper's public image. However, most rappers fail to ask crucial questions: Where do the diamonds originate? How are Africans miners affected by the diamond industry? My thesis explores the cultural roots of the rappers' obsession with bling and its impact on hip-hop culture in the United States and on African diamond

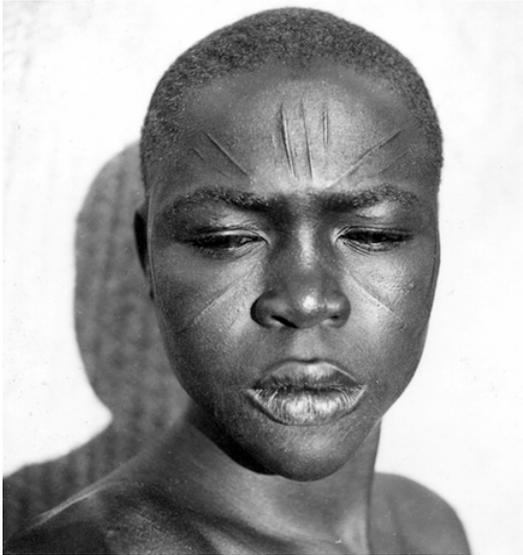
miners in Sierra Leone.

Additionally, my thesis establishes a link between body adornment practices in Africa and the evolution of “bling” in hip-hop culture. For hundreds of years, Africans have adorned their bodies with elaborate scarification, body paints, beads, shells, and other objects to enhance their beauty, and announce their economic and social status within the tribe. Similarly, rappers seek status within the community of rappers by adorning themselves with expensive, flashy, custom-made, medallions, rings, watches, bracelets, all encrusted with diamonds. Furthermore, to gain a deeper understanding of the role of bling in rap music, male and female displays of bling are compared and contrasted; rap lyrics and music videos that celebrate bling are analyzed carefully. Moreover, the thesis promotes an awareness of the devastating effects the hip-hop icons’ insatiable desire for diamonds has on African miners. Not only do the rappers’ impulse toward body adornment reflect African roots, but the rap music itself mirrors African tradition. Indeed, the precursors to rap music such as The Last Poets, spoken word artists of the 1960s, acknowledged a debt to the West African griot tradition.

The rappers’ impulse to engage in extravagant displays of body adornment can be traced back to African cultural practices. According to the *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, “tribal people practiced scarification, body painting, and other forms of body adornment for hundreds or thousands of years” (107). According to the *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, Africans use “scarification to beautify women, and as an indication of a man’s success in warfare” (107). A look at figure 1.1 indicates that the woman’s facial scars are not as deep as the man’s facial scars in figure 1.2. The woman’s softer scars suggest feminine beauty, whereas the man’s scars highlight his manhood and warrior

status. In hip-hop culture, elaborate tattoos are an urban equivalent of the African scarification practices that may cover large segments of the torso. The rappers' reputation for participating in urban warfare is reflected in their tattoos. For example, rappers such as Lil Wayne and Birdman get open teardrops tattoos to signify the number of years spent in prison, or the number of prison terms served. Dwayne Michael Carter, Jr., stage name Lil Wayne, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1982. His rap career began in 1997 when he was signed by Cash Money Records. He joined the group Hot Boyz and performed on their debut album, *Guerrilla Warfare*, released in 1999. Lil Wayne released his solo debut album; *The Block is Hot*, in 1999. The Album sold over 2 million copies. Lil Wayne Collaborated with rapper Birdman in 2006 on an album entitled *Like Father, Like Son*. He has received many honors and awards. For example, an MTV poll (2007) selected Lil Wayne as the "Hottest MC in the Game," and the *New Yorker Magazine* ranked him as "Rapper of the Year" in 2007. He has also won Grammy Awards. Like many rappers, he has been arrested many times for drug possession and weapons violations (Wikipedia). Lil Wayne's collaborator, Birdman, whose given name is Bryan Williams, was also born in New Orleans (1969). Birdman is the founder of Cash Money Records. Lil Wayne was featured on several singles produced by Birdman. Like Lil Wayne, Birdman has been arrested for drug possession. Also, tattoos underscore the rappers' desire to assert their rebellious, outsider status (Wikipedia –Chennault, Sam).

Figure 1.1 A photo showing female scarification



Source: Five Traditional Body-Modifications in the name of Beauty  
([blog.hotelclub.com/.../](http://blog.hotelclub.com/.../))

Figure 1.2 A photo showing male scarification



Source:( [www. Interpolnyc.com/.../index.php/t21068.html](http://www.Interpolnyc.com/.../index.php/t21068.html))

Most hip-hop icons advertise the self via tattoos. For example, Lil Wayne's tattoos cover 90% of his torso; he claims his tattoos tell a complete story. In figure 1.6 Lil Wayne is "tatted up" as it is expressed in the vernacular. He has a cross tattooed in the center of his forehead, and he is wearing a diamond cross necklace. It is interesting to note that in the African tradition and hip-hop culture, the cross is the most popular adornment (*Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* 107). Frequently, hip-hop icons get the name of their "hood" as in the place they grew up tatted or even branded on their body. Lil Wayne has New Orleans and Cash Money Records on his chest and stomach. Lil Wayne has so many tattoos that it is difficult to focus on just one. In African culture, scars on the men commemorate victories in war. In hip-hop culture the closed teardrops tattooed around the eye commemorate the deaths of friends involved in gang-related activities.

Figure 1.3 A photo of lip plugs in lower lip

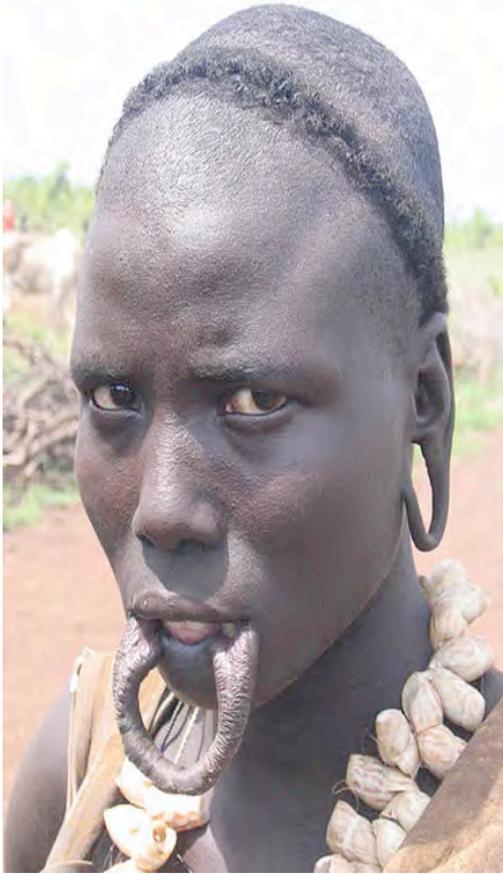


Figure 1.4 A photo of lip plugs in lower lip



Source: Five Traditional Body-Modifications in the name of Beauty (blog.hotelclub.com/.../)

Lip plugs, another form of adornment, correspond roughly to body piercings (ears, nose, tongues) that rappers often display. To the Western eye, a lip plug in the lower lip or labrets may look like a disfigurement. However, in African culture, the lip plug represents beauty. One observer asserts that “They are the only beautiful things women have. Men have beards, women have none. What kind of person would she be without pelele (lip plug)? She would not be a woman at all”([www.ezakwantu.com](http://www.ezakwantu.com)). African parents often initiate this practice when a girl is born, a process that extends over several years. The rappers’ gaudy gold and diamond covered medallions and rings may signal

poor taste to cultural outsiders, but for those who embrace the philosophy of bling, gaudy, elaborate jewelry is highly desirable.

Figure1.5 A photo of Africans wearing jewelry



Source: [www.photographersdirect.com/buyers/stockphoto](http://www.photographersdirect.com/buyers/stockphoto)

In addition to body altering practices such as lip plugs, Africans also create beautiful jewelry with which to adorn their bodies. In Africa, decorative jewelry “can serve as a woman’s dowry, and can serve as amulets to ward off evil” (*Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* 107). Typically, designs for African jewelry are simple with geometric and abstract symbols. Aside from religious and traditional reasons for wearing the jewelry they “also wear large bead necklaces to indicate status and wealth” (*Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* 107). They wear shells and beads dug up out of the ground, something that others might have trouble finding. The eye-catching layers of jewelry suggest the rappers’ tendency to “pile on” the jewelry.

Figure 1.6 A photo of Lil Wayne with his tattoos



Source: thinkcontra.com/blog/archives/tag/gq-magazine

Currently, the most requested tattoo, often tattooed on the face, is the Coptic cross” (*Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* 107). In figures 1.7 and 1.8, the cross is displayed in numerous pieces of bling. In figure 1.7 the star-shaped eyeglasses are decorated with diamonds, and the hip-hopper is wearing a diamond ring with a cross on it. Figure 1.8 was pulled from an article about the economy. This is rather interesting considering that bling often represents excess, which is a connection politicians, were trying to make.

Figures 1.7 and 1.8 reflects the hip-hoppers’ desire to decorate a decoration. Hip-Hoppers love to over accessorize their bodies, homes, clothes, shoes, and automobiles. The elaborate accessories, diamond encrusted, star-shaped eyeglasses, multicolored hat and shirt, and the gaudy name and pinkie rings, shown in figure 1.7 almost make the wearer look like a clown. In figure 1.8 the photo-shopped image of President Barack Obama adorned with bling and tattoos creates a striking link between the “ghetto fabulous” style of hip-hop culture and the mainstream values that President Obama

represents. Decorating the President in tattoos, bling, a do-rag and hat invests his image with humor and undermines class distinctions.

Figure 1.7 A photo of crazy bling and the cross



Source: bantuworld.wordpress.com/.../

Figure 1.8 A photo of Obama in bling with the cross as well

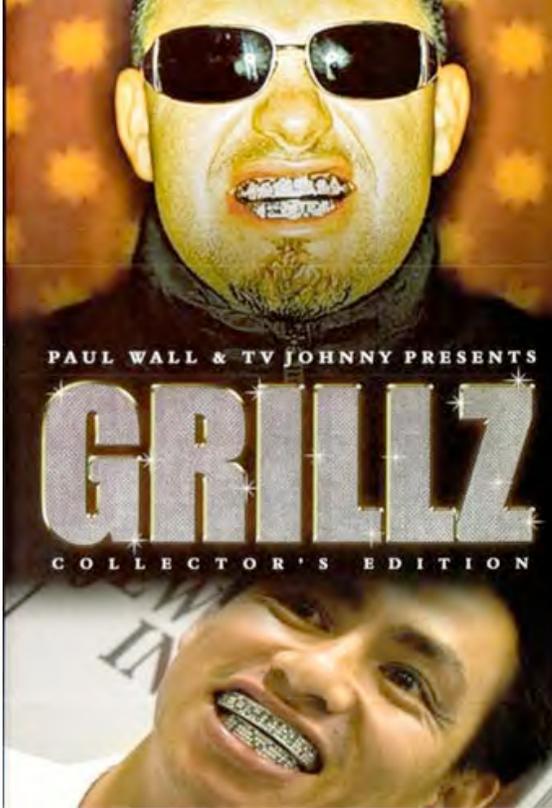


Source: policulture.wordpress.com/.../22/economics-101/

Hip-hoppers express their love for bling in their preference for diamond-encrusted mouthpieces, “grillz” as seen in figure 1.9 and 2.0 below. Paul Wall and Johnny Dang own a jewelry store called T.V. Johnny’s in Sharpstown Mall in Houston, Texas. They make custom grillz for celebrities such as rappers. The grillz are not made to be functional because they slur speech and damage teeth. Paul Wall says, “they took a thing of poverty ‘gold caps’ and made it a thing of success” (Grillz, Wall). The grillz are the equivalent of the lip plug in African culture. Prior to the full bling grill hip-hoppers and the community wore “golds” and gold plates over 1 or 2 teeth as seen in figure 1.7. Wall

and Dang have made a fortune creating unique grillz for their hip-hop clients. ‘Detailed examples of “grillz” expressed in lyrics are given in the Appendix (page 33).’

Figure 1.9 A photo of Paul and Jonny with mouthpieces



Source: [www.tvjohnny.net/grillz-the-dvd-p-1268.html](http://www.tvjohnny.net/grillz-the-dvd-p-1268.html)

Figure 2.0 A photo of Nelly with a mouthpiece



Source: [www.popandpolitics.com/.../](http://www.popandpolitics.com/.../)

Hip-hop fans admire the bling that their favorite performers display. Of course, bling includes not only jewelry, but it also includes customized automobiles (so-called “pimped-out rides”), designer clothes and sneakers, elaborate houses, pimp cups, cell phones, and other electronic devices, etc. The hip hoppers love of excess and conspicuous consumption is a hallmark of hip-hop culture. The hip hoppers prefer to invest their wealth in diamonds instead of in stocks and bonds. In their zeal to win the competition for the most fantastic bling, hip hoppers decorate their decorations. ‘Detailed examples of “bling” as wealth, expressed in lyrics are given in the Appendix (page 35).’

For many male hip-hoppers, the ultimate expression of bling is not a heavy gold chain or a diamond encrusted grill; the highest expression of bling is an attractive, light-skinned, scantily clad woman. The media often highlight the negative images of women depicted in hip-hop videos and lyrics, but reporters rarely comment on the blatant dehumanization of women, the use of women as adornments for male rappers.

The women are frequently called whores and bitches. The idea is simple; the more women a man has, the more respect he commands from his peers. This attitude toward women is not new. Hugh Hefner's world-famous Playboy Bunnies were dehumanized, objectified, treated like men's toys.

Ludacris claims that Bling is worn to get women and "that's all guys do is buy stuff for women to see and notice and hopefully admire" (Bling Bling VI). Ludacris goes on to say "females can't resist some cat with 100 carats of ice on his wrist" (Bling Bling VI). This remark changes the perspective because now Ludacris claims that women view men as objects. However, the video images and magazine layouts depict a different reality. From Nelly's infamous Tip Drill credit card swipe between a female's buttocks to the vivid details highlighted in Confessions of a Video Vixen, women are robbed of their humanity. Ludacris insists that "bling is so crucial to hip-hop, because for us it's all about making that impression, getting the shine, showing off success...even before you have any. When you first sign that first deal or record the first record, you get that first bling because that means I'm successful; I've made"(Mukherjee 605). The ultimate symbol of success for male hip-hoppers is often a harem of beautiful women who are "worn" like a fine watch or heavy gold chain. 'Detailed examples of the importance of the chain expressed in lyrics are given in the Appendix (page 30).'

This definition of bling as a “we made it” statement is directly related to the middle class black Americans, as a statement that not everyone has to go to school and get a degree to have riches and fame. Bling also suggest that hip-hoppers are “keeping it real” with their roots whereas the middle class black Americans have forgotten where they come from. “Black consumerism sustains vitriolic attack from working class blacks themselves” (Mukherjee 605).

Although jewelry is the most recognizable expression of bling and bodily adornment, the ultimate and perhaps the most problematic form of bling is the female body. The media often decry the demoralization of women in hip-hop lyrics and videos, but they often fail to note the use of women as adornment figures. According to Randolph and Gill, “men who are highly concerned with adornment, as one might suggest of Ras Kass, are traditionally thought to be un-masculine,”(Gill et al., 2005) (p. 205) in an effort to massage their ego and build their masculinity they often demoralize women for their benefit. (Gill et al., 2005) (p. 205). It is quite common for people who lack self-esteem in certain areas to pretend and portray themselves with weak coverage for self-esteem purposes.

Hip-hop videos and live concerts reveal many examples of women who are objectified, dehumanized adornments for the hip-hop performer. Hip-hop icons seek to redefine masculinity by embracing adornment as a manly trait, while reclassifying women as a form of bling. When a woman is placed in the same category as a ring or gold chain, the hip-hopper often feels relieved of his obligation to relate to her as an equal human being who deserves respect. Not surprisingly, many hip-hoppers exploit women; they have not learned how to talk to women, how to affirm their personhood.

Black people's bodies, both male and female, always have been scrutinized. In the slave era, black bodies were treated like commodities to be bought, sold, and traded. Potential buyers subjected slave bodies to the indignities of public examinations while the slaves stood naked on the auction block. With that history in mind, it seems ironic to see black women as objects of adornment. For many hip-hoppers, using women as bling enhances their sense of power and authority in a culture that has traditionally denied black men access to power and authority.

Hip-hoppers who achieve success often feel like they "keep it real" because they still talk, walk, and even act the same as they did when they weren't wealthy. Many people assume that educated lower class African Americans speak "white." Conflict or tension between lower class African Americans and middle class African Americans develops when either group accuses the other of trying to deny their past and adopt "white" values. While hip-hoppers do not adopt the social and verbal behaviors of white people, they consume, live, and purchase like wealthy whites do; so how "real" is that? Clearly, the male rappers set the standards for the hip-hop community

Women rappers frequently imitate the male rappers' conspicuous consumption, spending lavishly on jewelry, designer clothes, automobiles, etc. The women also tend to mimick the male rappers' performance style and manner of dressing on stage. Many female rappers wear baggy pants, expensive leather jackets, and gold chains like the male artists. For example Queen Latifah, probably the most famous female rapper, often dresses like male rappers. Her performing style is also very masculine. On stage she is very aggressive and dominant. Although she is a full-figured woman, Queen Latifah has used her success in the hip-hop industry to build a career as a spokesperson for Cover

Girl cosmetics, and she has made a name for herself in the film industry as well. In her song *I'm Gonna Live Till I Die*, she directly confirms my argument for classifying her as a female rapper who is deeply influenced by the performance style of her male counterparts. She asserts:

They're gonna say "What a guy!" I'm gonna play for the sky. Ain't gonna miss a thing, I'm gonna have my fling, I'm gonna live, live, live until I die...(*I'm Gonna Live Till I Die*, Queen Latifah)

These lyrics suggest that Queen Latifah believes she must adopt a male persona to gain the approval of the male hip-hop stars. According to Geneva Smitherman in her article “The Chain Remain the Same”: *Communication Practices in the Hip Hop Nation*, Queen Latifah and many male rappers such as: Snoop Doggy Dogg, Dr. Dre, 2Pac, and Ice-T “are the artistic representatives of the Hip Hop Nation. Through their bold and talented productions, they are fulfilling the mission of the artist: “disturb the peace”(“The Chain Remain the Same,” Smitherman). In the early years of its development, hip-hop aimed to “disturb the peace” by exposing the poverty, despair, and exploitation that overwhelmed the black community. While mainstream America enjoyed a period of prosperity, much of black America struggled to survive under conditions (poor health care, joblessness, high crime rates, inadequate housing, high teenage pregnancy rates, overcrowded and underfunded schools, and unstable family units) found in third world countries. The “message rap” of the 1970s performed by groups such as Public Enemy challenged poor blacks to “disturb the peace” by demanding social justice. Female rap artists like Queen Latifah insist on participating in the consciousness raising process that the male rappers initiated. Latifah demands to be heard, even if she must adopt a male persona. Moreover,

she will “play for the sky,” which suggests breaking through the glass ceiling that limits many women.

Although Queen Latifah’s lyrics suggest a feminist point of view in the rap culture, she still performs and dresses in a masculine style, which seems to contradict her feminist stance:

Who said the ladies couldn’t make it, you must be blind  
If you don’t believe, well here, listen to this rhyme  
Ladies first, there’s no time to rehearse  
I’m divine and my mind expands throughout the universe  
A female rapper with the message to send the  
Queen Latifah is a perfect specimen...(*I’m Gonna Live Till I Die*, Queen Latifah)

In the first line, Queen Latifah challenges Male Dominance in hip-hop. Many male rappers question the ability of female rappers to achieve the male rappers’ level of skill. Therefore, female rappers feel the pressure to prove themselves. Queen Latifah insists that female rappers can succeed in hip-hop and remain ladies. Yet, her acceptance of the male performance style undercuts or contradicts her affirmation of the role of “ladies” in hip-hop culture. Not only do some female rappers feel the pressure to dress like men, but they are also expected to use the frequently vulgar, explicit language that is far from lady-like.

Another notable female rapper who competes with the male rappers for respect as a serious artist is MC Lyte. Lyte was one of the first female rappers to receive national exposure. Her single, Lyte as a Rock promotes female self-confidence and pride in the male dominated hip-hop industry. MC Lyte is an aggressive rapper with a hard edge that reflects the influence of her male counterparts.

According to Tricia Rose in *Never Trust A Big Butt and a Smile*, Emcee-songwriter, narrator, mentor, and actress Mc Lyte is second in importance to Queen Latifah in terms of women in hip-hop. Mc Lyte (born Lana Michele Moorer) is one of the world's greatest hip-hop female artists. Lyte promotes self-confidence and pride in little girls and women through her appearance in magazines, film, and interviews. The theme of her debut album, *Lyte As a Rock*, is female confidence. MC engages in wordplay with the title of her album. Not only does she substitute "Lyte" for light; she also constructs a paradox since rocks usually suggest heavy rather than light. Female confidence is a clearly expressed concern in the very popular *I Am Woman*, from the same album, *Lyte As A Rock*. She declares:

I am woman, hear me roar  
 When I grab the mic it's never a bore  
 When I'm on stage, sayin' a rhyme  
 I often wonder what ya think of mine  
 Is it fresh or weak, or is it live or dead?  
 Yo, it's got ta be somethin' if you're boppin' your head  
 To the beat, can I get an amen brother?  
 Liked that rhyme? Well here goes another...(I Am Woman,  
 MC Lyte)

The famous first line is a quote from *I Am Woman* (1972) by Helen Reddy. The song became the anthem of the women's liberation movement, and it reached number one on the Billboard charts in 1972. With the first line, Lyte makes a conscious reference to the women's rights movement which continues in her efforts to gain equality in the hip-hop industry. Lyte confidently asserts her ability to compete with the male rappers; her style is exciting, and her rhymes are "fresh" and powerful to cause listeners to bob their heads to the beat.

Mc Lyte affirms Tricia Rose's point in "Never Trust A Big Butt and a Smile," the idea that "black woman rappers are integral and resistant voices in Hip-Hop and in popular music. They sustain an ongoing dialogue with their audiences" ("Never Trust A Big Butt and a Smile," Rose). Mc Lyte is one of the most articulate female rappers in the United States. As seen in her Lyte As A Rock song:

Do you understand the metaphoric phrase 'Lyte as a Rock?'  
 It's explaining, how heavy the young lady is  
 You know what I'm saying King?  
 [King of Chill]  
 Yes my brother, but I would consider 'Lyte as a Rock'  
 a simile because of the usage of the word 'as'  
 And now.. directly from the planet of Brooklyn  
 MC Lyte -- as a Rock!  
 [MC Lyte]  
 Must I say it again, I said it before  
 Move out the way when I'm comin through the door  
 Me, heavy? As Lyte as a Rock...  
 Guys watch, even some of girls clock  
 Step back, it ain't that type of party....(Lyte As A Rock,  
 MC Lyte)

This song was also featured in the hit film *Love & Basketball*. Mc Lyte is true to her fans because she has had great success. Her "1988 release, "Paper Thin," sold over 125,000 copies in the first six months with virtually no radio play"(Rose, 114). Needless to say without a great fan base, heart, and passion this would not have been possible.

"In the early stages, women's participation in rap was hindered by gender consideration"(Rose, 113). The women's apparent appreciation of the masculine performance and dress style is not by choice. In order for female rappers to express themselves and be completely accepted by the general public, the hip-hop community, and the commercialized world of hip-hop, they had to make the sacrifice. Female rapper Ms. Melodie says:

It wasn't that the male started rap, the male was just the first to be on wax. Females were always into rap, and females always had their little crews and were always known for rockin' house parties and streets or whatever, school yards, the corner, the park, whatever it was. (Rose 113)

However, it doesn't seem as if the men just started rap, they also defined the way the public recognizes commercialized rap. This is to say who is Ms. Melodie? A quick google search indicates that she is a one-hit maybe two-hit wonder. Needless to say her statement above and her status in society confirm that female rappers exist, but very few succeed commercially. Whether it is clothes, "swag," performance, delivery of the lyrics, the power behind the voice, the voice, and the overall unique style the hip-hop industry brings to the music genre, female rappers often fail to meet the standards set by male rappers. Although Ms. Melodie claims that female rappers were always into rap and performing everywhere locally, where is the mention of the many non-local and or commercial places that women have performed?

Some female rappers have accepted their status as objects of adornment for men. Thus, their performance style, dress, and lyrical delivery are all in the sex sells category. This category of female rappers fits the definition of rap that Geneva Smitherman offers in her article *The Chain Remains The Same*; "rap refers to romantic, sexualized interaction" (Smitherman, 4) This definition is interesting because beyond the sexualized interaction, there is nothing romantic about rap music. American rapper, songwriter, actress, model, occasional dancer and singer who is well-known for her provocative dress style, Lil Kim, is the queen of the sex sells category in rap music.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 of Lil Kim



Source: [www.egyptsaidso.com](http://www.egyptsaidso.com)



Source: [www.covertcandy.com](http://www.covertcandy.com)

From the looks of figures 2-1 and 2-2, Lil Kim clearly is not in the business of “interpreting and articulating the fears, pleasures and promises of young black women whose voices have been relegated to the silent margins of public discourse” (Rose, 113). Instead, it is this type of image that encourages eating disorders, low self-esteem, and promiscuity in little girls. Of course, one would argue parents should take control of their children, but these problems increase children are raising children. Beyond this, it is the responsibility of the artist, actress, and anyone in the public eye to conduct herself or himself in such a manner that can be respected because being in the public eye is part of the job description. All publicity is not good publicity as figures 2-1 and 2-2 reveal.

Nicki Minaj, a protégé or imitator of Lil Kim, joined the hip-hop industry in August 2009. Nicki Minaj is a “clone” Lil Kim because of her emphasis on sex appeal, and her use of vulgar and explicit lyrics. Her lyrical delivery is very similar to that of rapper Lil Wayne; in fact, one could say she sounds like the female Lil Wayne. Thus, she brings nothing new to the table. She markets herself as a sex object and an adornment.

Figures 2-3 and 2-4 of Nicki Minaj



Source: [www.urbanmusicdirect.com](http://www.urbanmusicdirect.com)



Source: [www.imflashy.com](http://www.imflashy.com)

Nicki's lyrics include the following:

I'm a big bill  
 That's why I get more head than a pigtail  
 I'm getting the muchies  
 I think I'll have a rap bitch for my entree  
 And they be thinkin they can spit spit shine my shoes  
 You know I keep a bad bitch let me sign ya boobs  
 I'm the only thing hoppin like a kangaroo  
 I mean the only thing poppin like a kangaroo  
 Listen, you should buy yo 16 cause I write it good  
 The 808, woof woof, cause I write it good  
 And bitches can't find they man cause I ride it good  
 I'm the wolf, never thought I ride a riding hood. (Itty Bitty Piggy, Minaj)

The sexually suggestive poses in figures 2.1 and 2.2 and the sexual references in the lyrics quoted above firmly place Nicki Minaj in the sex sells category of female rappers. Moreover, Nicki Minaj's single, *Itty Bitty Piggy*, suggests only two topics, sex and girl fight talk. What happened to the day when women were seen and not heard, (physically not verbally)? There was a day when a woman could walk into a room and men would go silent because of the beauty she exuded. Nowadays, women degrade themselves for attention. The idea of little girls chanting these lyrics is disturbing.

Figure 2.5 Ray J and his adornments (women)



Source: [www.Innthebasement.com](http://www.Innthebasement.com)

If one picture is worth a thousand words, this picture of rapper Ray J speaks many volumes about the dehumanization of women in hip-culture. Three scantily clad, sexually provocative women stand behind Ray J, each with a hand resting lightly on his shoulders. Ray J wears a fine, purple silk shirt, revealing only a small portion of his chest. Since purple is the color of royalty, Ray J assumes the pose of a king surrounded by the women who must serve him. The most significant feature of the picture is the fact that the women's faces are cut off below their eyes, making them appear to be objects rather than human beings. The women are reduced to adornments; they are a part of Ray J's bling collection.

BRIT Award recipient and Grammy Award nominee Kelis personally placed herself in this category with her witty album, *Tasty*, that earned her a 2004 Grammy Awards nomination for Best Urban/ Alternative Performance. *Milkshake* debuted at

number 95 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. Kelis delivers the following lyrics: My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard,

And they're like  
It's better than yours,  
Damn right it's better than yours,  
I can teach you,  
But I have to charge

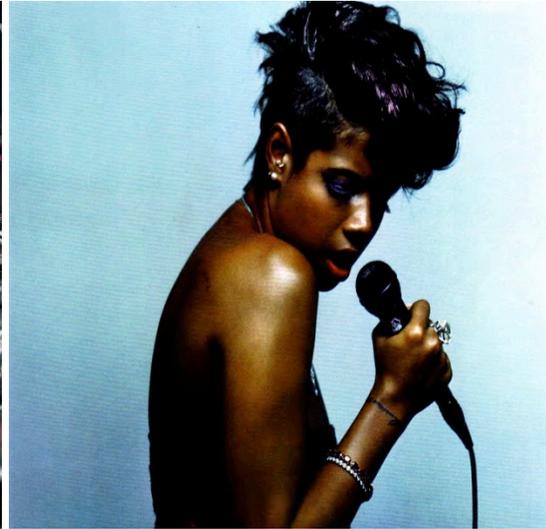
I know you want it,  
The thing that makes me,  
What the guys go crazy for.  
They lose their minds,  
The way I wind,  
I think its time....(Milkshake, Kelis)

This album and song earned critical acclaim from anonymous critic, because this song is very erotic and explicit. The milkshake is a metaphor for sperm, and in connection with the album title Tasty, this is all about oral sex. Now, imagine a three-year-old girl singing these lyrics after hearing it on the radio and saying, “I can teach you, /But I have to charge.” (Milkshake, Kelis) That is unacceptable socially and morally, but it definitely sells cds. Kelis is open and spontaneous in her performance style, for she completely zones out on stage. In figure 2-6 Kelis is on stage performing, and at the end of the song, she turns around to show the audience her rear-end. In figure 1-6 she is naked holding a microphone.

Figures 2-6 and 2-7 of Kelis



Source: [www.djbenzi.com](http://www.djbenzi.com)



Source: [www.a1hh.com](http://www.a1hh.com)

These women might not wear much bling, but they defiantly make sure their bodies are perfectly adorned. From their “ginormous” and outrageous hairstyles, that contain various colors, their skin tight and skimpy clothing, to their fancy stilettos, gaudy costume jewelry, heavy make-up, and unladylike conduct, these exploit their sex appeal, demoralizing and dehumanizing all women in the process.

In 1970, soul singer Edwin Starr’s single entitled “War” was a hit on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. In his anti-Vietnam war protest song, Starr asks “War, What is it good for? Absolutely nothing.” The people of Sierra Leone whose lives have been devastated by eleven years of a horrific civil war would agree with Edwin Starr’s outlook on war. All wars are destructive and disruptive, but a civil war, a conflict in which countrymen kill each other, is particularly evil. The civil war in Sierra Leone began in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front organized by Foday Sankoh, Abu Kamu, and Rashid Mansaray set out to overthrow the Sierra Leonean government. The RUF promised the people free education and healthcare and fair distribution of diamond

revenue. However, the RUF soon abandoned its social and political ideals and became known internationally not for social and political reforms, but for awful acts of cruelty against fellow Sierra Leoneans. For example, to prevent the Sierra Leonean government from funding its army with money from diamond sales, RUF rebels amputated the arms and legs of citizens thought to be sympathetic toward the government.

The American hip-hoppers' seemingly insatiable demand for diamonds in their bling helped to finance the civil war in Sierra Leone. Like many other American celebrities such as Liz Taylor, Jennifer Lopez, Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, wealthy hip-hoppers view diamonds as emblems of their fame and prestige. Many rappers are engaged in a competition to see who can display the most impressive diamonds on their rings, medallions, earrings, goblets, eyeglasses, grills, etc. Unfortunately, they were unaware of the costs in death and misery that the Sierra Leoneans experienced in order to supply diamonds for the hip-hoppers' bling. To raise consciousness in the hip-hop community regarding the connection between the civil war in Sierra Leone and the diamonds on the hip-hoppers' fingers and around their necks, Racquel Cepeda produced a documentary entitled *Bling: A Planet Rock*.

Ms Cepeda's documentary opened the eyes of the hip-hoppers who made the trip to Sierra Leone. Initially, hip-hop celebrity icons Tego Calderon (Reggae ton King), Raekwon (Wu-Tang Clan), and Paul Wall (the face of grills) were extremely excited about their 'vacation' to Africa. Little did they know that their excitement would be replaced by fear and frustration. They were forced to take a hard look at how "blinging" in the flashy world of commercial hip-hop affected the 10-year civil war in Sierra Leone.

These men were dressed to impress, with their flashy medallions, grills, shoes, and clothes. However, after seeing the amputees in shelters, they felt guilty and embarrassed.

Although the rappers experienced disappointments touring Freetown, Sierra Leon, they were happy to learn that hip-hop had saved a few lives. Survivors of the war report that before the war started, people would house and feed strangers, but during the war villagers became very militant. Since there was a notable increase in the number of child soldiers, children were no longer viewed as innocent. Rebel soldiers tried to drown children suspected of being spies or soldiers. The soldiers found hip-hop cassettes in the children's pockets and asked what type of music they had been listening to. The children replied saying hip-hop, and they were forced to perform it. Therefore, in the middle of the jungle children performed Naughty by Nature and LL Cool J's I Need Love, because at that time they really needed love, and it saved them (A Planet Rock, Racquel Cepeda).

The RUF used an image and lyrics by American hip-hop icon, Tupac Shakur, to encourage violence against fellow Sierra Leoneans. For example, in one of his songs, Tupac says, "let's kill each other," which supposedly gave Africans permission to kill each other in the civil war. The RUF rebels wore tee shirts displaying Tupac's picture, while chanting Tupac's lyrics. This shows that the hip-hop community and Africa are experiencing what Jon Oetzel calls intercultural communication conflict, where one culture pulls different messages from the message being sent (A Planet Rock, Racquel Cepeda).

The rebels didn't have enough military gear and could not afford to purchase more so they wore Tupac t-shirts. The villages became very hostile toward people who wore the Tupac t-shirt. In some areas like Kunna, people were being lynched for wearing

the Tupac tee shirts. These rebels were enslaving Africans to mine diamonds for their benefit, and if anyone refused, his/her arms and/or legs were amputated, or he/she was killed. Many women were raped (A Planet Rock, Racquel Cepeda).

It was not a war about ideology, religion, ethnicity; it was a war for control of the country's wealth. According to an African Policy E-Journal, the Sierra Leone Civil War over diamonds has "claimed over 75,000 lives, caused half a million Sierra Leoneans to become refugees, and displaced half of the country's 4.5 million people," and many of those diamonds end-up in the wardrobes of hip hop icons. Who would have thought that glass cups encrusted with diamonds for hip-hop icons would affect the lives, lifestyles and culture of so many? Residents were often asked if they would like to have short sleeves or long sleeves which was code for the rebels' practice of chopping off hands at the wrist or arms at the elbow (A Planet Rock, Racquel Cepeda).

**Conflict diamonds** (often called Blood Diamonds) are diamonds "that originate from areas controlled by forces or factions opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments, and are used to fund military action in opposition to those governments, or in contravention of the decisions of the UN Security Council"(DiamondFacts.org). Rapper, singer, record producer, and extremely outspoken Kanye West wrote a song entitled, *Diamonds Are Forever*. He calls attention to the many hip-hoppers who over accessorize and comments on many important issues facing Sierra Leon from the hip-hoppers' perspective. He starts by saying: "Good Morning, this ain't Vietnam still/People lose hands, legs, arms for real" (*Diamonds Are Forever*, West).

This beginning portion is a great attention getter because it first forces one to think about the horrible results of the Vietnam War. Anyone with a family member, who

experienced the Vietnam War, is quite aware of the many body parts, deaths, and even dysfunctional people who returned after that war.

Little was known of Sierra Leone  
And how it connect to the diamonds we own  
When I speak of Diamonds in this song...(*Diamonds Are Forever*, West).

This next portion enlightens listeners and then puts the blame on the hip-hop community.

The blame is not one sided; West includes himself in the guilt.

I ain't talkin bout the ones that be glown  
I'm talkin bout Rocafella, my home, my chain  
These ain't conflict diamonds, is they Jacob? don't lie to me  
mayne See, a part of me sayin' keep shinin',  
How? When I know of the blood diamonds..(*Diamonds Are Forever*, West).

“How? When I know of the blood diamonds,” is an important inner battle that West acknowledges because it tells the listener that the hip-hoppers know about the conflict diamonds, but they just don’t care enough to stop “shinin.” This line begs the question; will the hip-hoppers ever curb their appetite for bling?

Though it's thousands of miles away  
Sierra Leone connect to what we go through today  
Over here, its a drug trade, we die from drugs  
Over there, they die from what we buy from drugs  
The diamonds, the chains, the bracelets, the charmses  
I thought my Jesus Piece was so harmless  
'til I seen a picture of a shorty armless...(*Diamonds Are Forever*, West).

West states, “I thought my Jesus piece was so harmless.” Fans of hip-hop are interested in the rappers’ fascination with the cross. Is West suggesting that the cross is just harmless bling? The cross as a Christian symbol had no effect on his sense of compassion for the innocent victims of the war in Sierra Leone. Sadly, it was the image below that opened his mind and heart to the reality of the blood diamonds.

Figure 2-8 of a child amputated in Sierra Leon



Source: [www.thediamondbuyingguide.ca](http://www.thediamondbuyingguide.ca)

And here's the conflict  
 It's in a black person's soul to rock that gold  
 Spend ya whole life tryna get that ice  
 On a polo rugby it look so nice  
 How could somethin' so wrong make me feel so right,  
 right?  
 'fore I beat myself up like Ike  
 You could still throw ya Rocafella diamond tonight, 'cause  
 (*Diamonds Are Forever*, West).

West’s song is significant because it was released at a pivotal point in his career, a time when he had several number one hit and the attention of his many fans and fellow hip-

hoppers. Consequently, his audience was excited to hear his next release. Thus, the messages in this song reached a mass audience. Although many people criticize Kanye West's often impulsive behavior (such as the incident at the 2009 Video Music Awards and combative personality, it is songs like *Diamonds are Forever* that reflect hip-hop's original intent, which was to inform the world of the plight of black America. Also, songs like this encourage political awareness and highlight the need for responsible social action, two areas in which black America can improve.

### CONCLUSION

My thesis defines “bling” as portable wealth. Anything that can be displayed such as jewelry, clothes, shoes, purses, houses, etc. qualifies as bling. Bling is not only used for personal adornment; it is also a mark of status. Most hip-hop icons must have at least one unique gold chain to be considered a legitimate rap artist. Although bling is a primary feature of hip-hop culture, its roots can be traced back to adornment practices observed in African tribal cultures. These practices include scarification, layered jewelry, and lip plugs. Hip-hoppers mimic the African practices with elaborate tattoos, gold and diamond name plates, rings, earrings, chains, bracelets, and custom gold and diamond grills. My thesis also documents the objectification and demoralization of women in hip-hop culture. Many male rappers use women as a form of bling. Men are not totally to blame for this exploitation. The women often consent to their own degradation. Due to the female rappers' skimpy clothing, lack of independence from the men, and their use of their body as adornment, women all over the world are demeaned. Because both women and men in the hip-hop industry desire a never-ending supply of diamonds for their bling, thousands of innocent victims of the war in Sierra Leone suffer loss of life and limbs. Consequently,

the diamond effect, which suggests the connection between bling and blood diamonds, is a serious human disaster that deserves an organized effort on the part of the hip-hop community to rebuild the shattered Sierra Leonean economic, political, and social structures.

## Appendix

### Chain Hang Low by:Jibbs

[Kids]

Beasta!

Do your chain hang low  
 Do it wobble to the flo'  
 Do it shine in the light  
 Is it platinum, Is it gold  
 Could you throw it over ya shoulda  
 If ya hot, it make ya cold  
 Do your chain hang low

[Jibbs]

[Hook]

Is that your chain!?  
 Bout 24 inches is how low I let it hang  
 Hop out the ride n let the diamonds smoke off the range  
 Just by the chain you can tell the big kid do his thang  
 You know the name!

Is that your chain!?  
 Bout 24 inches is how low I let it hang  
 Hop out the ride n let the diamonds smoke off the range  
 Just by the chain you can tell the big kid do his thang  
 I'm off the chain!

[Verse 1]

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah  
 I'm hot kid  
 Chains so low you would think that diamonds never stop it  
 And it's funny cause you could never stop it  
 A bunch of rocks on my hand n I ain't even on the block yet  
 Show em white gold sorta hold em like my tims  
 And a chain hang 24 inches like the rims  
 Diamonds all blown up yeah sorta like a pimp  
 So when I like hit the ice  
 It starts glistening off the tims (off the tims)

My chain hang  
 All it do is blang blang  
 Half blue, half red  
 Like my diamonds gang bang  
 And don't even think  
 We on the same thing

Charms so heavy they couldn't lift it till the crane came

[Chorus]

Do your chain hang low  
Do it wobble to the flo'  
Do it shine in the light  
Is it platinum, Is it gold  
Could you throw it over ya shoulda  
If ya hot, it make ya cold  
Do your chain hang low

Do your chain hang low  
Do it wobble to the flo'  
Do it shine in the light  
Is it platinum, is it gold?  
Could you throw it over ya shoulda?  
If ya hot, it make ya cold  
Do your chain hang low

[Verse 2]

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah  
I'm so icy (do yo chain)  
My trunk so heavy that my neck don't like me (do yo chain)  
Go n no no no is not a game kid (do yo chain)  
Cause I throw my chain in the crowd (do do do do do do yo chain)  
Like game B

Is nothing  
Diamonds is nothing to me  
(do yo chain) Especially when I'm dressing up  
It's just a button to me  
Bling! (could you throw it over yo shoulda) and not to mention my teeth  
Cause they color coordinated  
Complimenting the teeth  
Oh bra (boy) dats!

So check out my swag  
Diamonds red, white, n blue like the American flag  
Boy (do yo chain) is so colorful  
N see I got that nice screen  
My money spend on jewels  
I call it my ice cream (chain, chain, chain, chain)

My music give you black eye  
Cuz of the beating  
They think I am a mutant

The way a boy is beasting (chain, chain, chain, chain)  
 I stay when n sometime you call it cheating  
 Yeah, my boys always around  
 Like it's a mee-ting

Is that your (do yo chain) chain!?  
 Bout 24 inches is how low I let it hang (do yo chain)  
 Hop out the ride n let the diamonds smoke off the range (do yo chain)  
 Just by the chain you can tell the big kid do his thang (do yo chain)  
 You know the name! (do do do do do do yo chain)

Is that your chain!?  
 Bout 24 inches is how low I let it hang (do yo chain)  
 Hop out the ride n let the diamonds smoke off the range (do yo chain)  
 Just by the chain you can tell the big kid do his thang (do yo chain)  
 I'm off the chain! (do do do do do do yo chain)

Do your chain hang low  
 Do it wobble to the flo'  
 Do it shine in the light  
 Is it platinum, Is it gold  
 Could you throw it over ya shoulda  
 If ya hot, it make ya cold  
 Do your chain hang low

Do your chain hang low  
 Do it wobble to the flo'  
 Do it shine in the light  
 Is it platinum, Is it gold  
 Could you throw it over ya shoulda  
 If ya hot, it make ya cold  
 Do your chain hang low

### **Grillz By-Nelly**

feat. Ali, Big Gipp, J.D., Paul Wall  
 Rob the jewelry store and tell 'em make me a grill  
 Add the whole top diamond and the bottom row's gold

[J.D.]  
 Yo we bout to start a epidemic wit this one  
 Y'all know what this is... So So Def

[Nelly]  
 Got 30 down at the bottom, 30 mo at the top

All invisible set wit little ice cube blocks  
 If I could call it a drink, call it a smile on the rocks  
 If I could call out a price, lets say I call out a lot  
 I got like platinum and white gold, traditional gold  
 I'm changin girlz errday, like Jay change clothes  
 I might be grilled out nicely (oh) In my white tee (oh)  
 Or on South Beach (oh) in my wife B  
 V V and studded you can tell when they cut it  
 ya see my grandmama hate it, but my lil mama love it  
 cause when I..

[Woman]

Open up ya mouth, ya grill gleamin (say what)  
 eyes stay low from the cheifin' (cheifin')

[Nelly]

I got a grill they call penny candy you know  
 what that means, it look like Now n Laters, gum drops, jelly beans  
 I wouldn't leave it for nothin only a crazy man would  
 so if you catch me in ya city, somewhere out in ya hood just say

[Chorus]

Smile fo me daddy  
 (What you lookin at)  
 Let me see ya grill  
 (Let me see my what)  
 Ya, ya grill ya, ya, ya grill  
 (Rob the jewelry store and tell 'em make me a grill)  
 Smile fo me daddy  
 (What you lookin at)  
 I want to see your grill  
 (You wanna see my what)  
 Ya, ya grill ya, ya, ya grill  
 (Had a whole top diamonds and the bottom rows gold)

[Paul Wall]

What it do baby  
 Its the ice man Paul Wall  
 I got my mouth lookin somethin like a disco ball  
 I got the diamonds and the ice all hand set  
 I might cause a cold front if I take a deep breath  
 My teeth gleaming like I'm chewin on aluminum foil  
 Smilein showin off my diamonds sippin on some potin oil  
 I put my money where my mouth is and bought a grill  
 20 karats 30 stacks let 'em know I'm so fo real  
 My motivation is from 30 pointers V VS to furniture my mouth

piece simply symbolize obsessed  
I got the wrist wear and neck wear dats captivatin  
But its what smiles dat got these arms lookin spectatin  
My mouth piece simply certified a total package  
Open up my mouth and you see more carrots than a salad  
My teeth are mind blowin givin everybody chillz  
Call me George Foreman cause I'm sellin everybody grillz

[Chorus]

Smile fo me daddy  
(What you lookin at)  
Let me see ya grill  
(Let me see my what)  
Ya, ya grill ya, ya, ya grill  
(Rob the jewelry store and tell 'em make me a grill)  
Smile fo me daddy  
(What you lookin at)  
I want to see your grill  
(You wanna see my what)  
Ya, ya grill ya, ya, ya grill  
(Had a whole top diamonds and the bottom rows gold)

[Gipp]

Gipp got dem yellows, got dem purples, got dem reds  
Lights gon head and make you woozie in ya head  
You can catch me in my 2 short drop  
Mob got colors like a fruit loop box

[Ali]

Dis what it do when the lou  
Ice grill country grammer  
Where the hustlas move bricks  
and the gangsta's bang hamma's  
Where I got 'em you can spot them  
On the top in the bottom  
Gotta bill in my mouth like I'm Hillary Rodham

[Gipp]

I ain't dissin no body but lets bring it to the lite  
Yeah was the first wit my mouth bright white  
Yeah deez hos can't focus cause they eyesight blurry  
Tippin on some 4's you can see my mouth jewelry

[Ali]

I got fo different sets its a fabolous thang  
1 white, 1 yellow, like fabolous chain

and the otha set is same got my name in the mold  
 (Had a whole top diamonds and the bottom row's gold)

[Chorus]

[Woman]

Boy how you get grill that way and  
 How much did you pay  
 Every time I see you  
 Tha first thing I'm gon say hey....

[Chorus]

### **Bling By: Gucci Mane**

Gucci mane in the buildng (gucci gucci)  
 Laflare entertainment (laflare)  
 Zaythoven on the track (z-t)  
 That nigga des in the building (that boy des)  
 Badboy in this mutha@#@\$  
 Big cat in this mutha@#@\$  
 laflare in this mutha@#@\$ (done by gucci)

I got your budget on my neck  
 Your deal on my wrist  
 Your whole entire lifesavings on my pinkie n@@!  
 Bling bling bling bling  
 (bling bling bling bling)  
 Bling bling bling bling  
 (bling bling bling bling) (x2)

See I'm smoking on sum bubba kush, come from california  
 funky like your daddy feet is stanking like a bone ya  
 Now I got this plug with this bit in Arizona  
 When I touch atlanta they gonna tell my telephoner  
 Trap niggaz, rap niggaz, wish they could cone us  
 Icy coz I dish bails of marijuana  
 trappin has advanced from just standing on the corner  
 Violators haters would be turned to only doners  
 Chillin in the v.i sippin on coroner  
 Ima get sum head with this this bitch like it's vetrona  
 stop playing games girl coz I don't condone her  
 If you want some work don't come before like it's a zone-r  
 15 inches but my rims that's a grown-us  
 sucker for a minute now a nigga has to blow up  
 Check my mediance look at my spins that they goin on

Check my spins that they goin on

Chorus

((Big tank rapping))

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