



“Guilty By Association”

An investigation into the media’s demonisation of Black rap artists leading to discrimination and social exclusion

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Introduction

This PIP investigates the media's demonisation of Black rap artists and the extent to which it has led to discrimination and social exclusion as a result of perpetuated ideals as seen in all forms of media, from news outlets to politicians. Demonisation is defined as "the act of portraying, treating, or speaking of a person, group, or concept as evil, dangerous, or diabolical"¹, Rap has been treated as something to fear and or ignore in prior years whereas in more modern days most have accepted it, the issue now lays in the racist ideologies of large corporations leading to excessive blackballing and or violence as a result of race.

Hip-hop emerged in the South Bronx, USA, in the 1970s as a response to poverty, racial inequality and social neglect by large political parties, Richard Nixon launched his war on drugs campaign in 1971, this "war" targeted Black neighbourhoods through increased policing and mass incarceration, gutting the already displaced community. By the 1990s, the genre born from that wreckage had become the dominant force in mainstream music globally, today it shapes fashion, language, politics and culture in ways that few artistic movements have matched. Despite this cultural influence, the genre and the Black artists behind it have continued to face a persistent form of demonisation, one rooted not in moral concern but in racial bias and cultural elitism. As early as Summer 2003, City Journal described rap as filled with "violence, misogyny and lawlessness" arguing that "hip-hop identity keeps Blacks down". By 2024, outlets like the Shreveport Times was still publishing opinion pieces characterising gangster rap as a "toxic environment" that embeds "harmful stereotypes and dangerous behaviours" in young minds. The language changes across the decades but the narrative remains the same.

To investigate the issues, this PIP draws on a content analysis of news media and video sources, spanning 2003 to 2026, examining both demonising voices and those that challenge them, including the Harvard Crimson, BBC Culture and NPR's Louder than a riot. The investigation further explores hip-hop's cultural influence on fashion and identity and the institutionalisation of anti-rap bias through the use of lyrics as criminal evidence, most notably in the YSL RICO trial. A focus group and interview provide firsthand insight into whether the demonising narratives identified in the content analysis are reflected in everyday attitude toward Black rap artists.

¹ "Demonisation Definition - Google Search" (Google.com2026)
<<https://www.google.com/search?q=demonisation+definition&oq=demonisation+definition&sourceid=chrome&source=chrome.ob&ie=UTF-8>> accessed August 3, 2026

What emerges is a fundamental contradiction, the same institutions that profit from hip-hop's influence remain among the loudest voices in its condemnation.

Log

The final product for this Personal Interest Project began with a decision to investigate the media's demonisation of Black rap artists, after noticing recurring news coverage that framed rap, most notably Kendrick Lamar's 2015 BET performance, as dangerous or destructive. Early diary entries record narrowing this broad interest into a specific research question about discrimination and social exclusion and locating an initial anchor source in a Fox News segment featuring Geraldo Rivera's response to that performance.

The next stage of this process involved secondary research, gathering media commentary across three areas being news reporting, video content and fashion commentary. Sources were selected deliberately from 2003 through to recent 2026 articles to capture how coverage of hip-hop had or had not changed over two decades and were logged in a content analysis table recording the platform date, main portrayal, supporting quotes and my judgment of each source's stance.

Primary research followed once the secondary sources had established a working thesis. I drafted interview and focus group questions designed to test whether the patterns identified in the media matched the lived experience and assumptions of peers. Running the focus group involved recruiting participants, conducting the session and recording responses across five questions covering fairness of coverage, examples of unfair treatment, real-world effects, genre double standards and fashion appropriation. I also carried out a non-participant observation at a concert, in the Sydney CBD and at a school study camp to see whether the identity and fashion patterns described in my sources appeared in an Australian setting.

With both secondary and primary research complete, I moved into drafting the essay itself, structuring it around the demonisation of rap in news media, its treatment in video content, fashion based stereotyping and a cross-cultural comparison with white artists such as Eminem and Jack Harlow. This section was added later in the process after further research surfaced sources on racial double standards in rap's reception that strengthened the argument considerably.

The final stages of the PIP involved incorporating feedback, correcting footnotes and reflecting on sources used.

Across the project, the diary shows a shift from a narrow, news-focused investigation into a broader argument supported by triangulated primary and secondary evidence, with research procedures becoming progressively more structured as the topic was refined.

Chapter 1 – Media Demonisation of Black Rap Artists

1.1 Demonising Narrative

Mainstream conservative media has, for over two decades, framed Black rap artists and their music as a direct danger to society, exercising a form of meso-level institutional power, the capacity of large media organisations to define which cultural expression is acceptable and which is criminal. John McWhorter's *City Journal*² essay argues that "hip-hop holds Blacks back", treating the genre's language and imagery as evidence of a self-destructive Black identity rather than as art responding to structural conditions³. A 2024 Shreveport Times opinion piece repeats this framing, blaming "gangster rap" for youth violence.⁴

These two sources intersect on a consistent pattern, both locate the cause of social harm inside Black cultural identity rather than inside the poverty, policing and disinvestment that produced the music in the first place. Reading them together reveals that the demonising narrative is not really lyrical content, it is about assigning blame at the level of an entire racial group, a macro-level judgement, for conditions that are structural. This is the first clear instance of power and authority in this investigation; media institutions hold the authority to decide whose explanation of Black disadvantage receives a national platform.

Television personalises this narrative further. When Fox News host Geraldo Rivera criticised Kendrick Lamar's 2015 BET Awards performance, which referenced police violence, he told viewers that hip-hop "has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years".⁵ The claim inverts cause and effect, treating an artist's commentary on racism as more dangerous than racism itself, which demonstrates identity and status operating in real time, a white broadcaster positioned

² John McWhorter, 'How Hip-Hop Holds Blacks Back' (*City Journal*, Summer 2003) <<https://www.city-journal.org/article/how-hip-hop-holds-blacks-back>> accessed 20 April 2026.

³ John McWhorter, 'How Hip-Hop Holds Blacks Back' (*City Journal*, Summer 2003) <<https://www.city-journal.org/article/how-hip-hop-holds-blacks-back>> accessed 20 April 2026.

⁴ 'The Toxic Influence of Social Media and Gangster Rap on Young Minds' Shreveport Times (6 July 2024) <<https://www.shreveporttimes.com/story/opinion/2024/07/06/the-toxic-influence-of-social-media-and-gangster-rap-on-young-minds/74307610007/>> accessed 20 April 2026.

⁵ Fox News, 'Geraldo Rivera Rips Kendrick Lamar's BET Award Set' (*YouTube*, 30 June 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3_hi8eWdbY> accessed 20 April 2026

himself as more authoritative on anti-Black harm than the Black artist describing his own community's experience.

This same rhetorical move recurs in more recent commentary. Tom MacDonald's track "Facts", made with Ben Shapiro, and a widely viewed video by Duplee both replay the McWhorter and Rivera arguments almost twenty years apart, showing how little the underlying narrative changes even as its messengers do.⁶ At the micro level of a single song this looks like an artistic disagreement at a macro level, tracing McWhorter in 2003 to Rivera in 2015 to MacDonald in 2024, it is evidence of a stable, generational script for demonising American Black cultural expression.

1.2 Counter-Narratives & Pushback

Not all commentary accepts this framing. A Harvard Crimson column argues that mainstream criticism of rap reflects "a flawed perception of hip-hop" that ignores the genre's function as social commentary, quoting 21 Savage's line from "Nothin new", in which he raps that the media only wants Black artists to perform rather than speak, as evidence that Black artists are aware of and actively resisting this narrow role.⁷ The synthesis here matters, the same industry that profits from Black artists also polices what they are permitted to say, a clear expression of power and authority operating meso-institutionally through record labels and media platforms.

Akala's "hip-hop & Shakespeare"⁸ situates rap within a much longer continuity of oral, rhythmic storytelling traditions, arguing that the same poetic devices praised in Shakespeare are dismissed as crude when performed by Black artists in modern idiom.⁹ The Kansas City Public Library's discussion of rap's cultural politics extends this, tracing a line from jazz and blues, once condemned by white commentators as morally corrupting, to rap's present day demonisation.¹⁰ Read together, these sources demonstrate continuity and change, the genre and its critics change every generation

⁶ Tom MacDonald ft Ben Shapiro, 'Facts' (*YouTube*, 26 January 2024) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kGpohEpuTE>> accessed 20 April 2026; Duplee, 'Meet Hip-Hop's Biggest Hater' (*YouTube*, 17 June 2025) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg2nGQE-i1c>> accessed 20 April 2026.

⁷ 'A Flawed Perception of Hip-Hop' *The Harvard Crimson* (4 April 2018) <<https://www.thecrimson.com/column/where-rap-meets-race/article/2018/4/4/whererapmeetsrace-installment4/>> accessed 20 April 2026.

⁸ Akala, 'Hip Hop & Shakespeare' (*TEDx Talks*, *YouTube*, 7 April 2016) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNPBRrYkwxI>> accessed 20 April 2026.

⁹ Akala, 'Hip Hop & Shakespeare' (*TEDx Talks*, *YouTube*, 7 April 2016) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNPBRrYkwxI>> accessed 20 April 2026.

¹⁰ Kansas City Public Library, 'The Culture and Politics of Rap' (*YouTube*, 20 February 2023) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFbYlqBfZrY>> accessed 20 April 2026.

but the pattern of treating new Black art forms as dangerous when they first threaten the mainstream persists unchanged.

What this counter-narrative research reveals is that demonisation has always required active labour to sustain. Artists, scholars and commentators have continually had to argue against it, and the labour is itself evidence of an unequal power relationship. If rap did not need defending, no defence would exist. The consistency of that defence across genres and decades connects the identity-based prejudice examined here to the legal consequences explored next.

1.3 Criminalisation of Rap Lyrics

The demonisation of Black rap artists has not stayed confined to the media commentary, it has moved into the American legal system, where rap lyrics are used as criminal evidence in ways unthinkable for any other genre. This shift from cultural narrative to legal weapon is the clearest possible evidence of macro-level institutional power. American Courts, an authority far more consequential than any single broadcaster, now enact the same racialised suspicion that sections 1.1 and 1.2 documented in media commentary.

NPR's *Louder Than a Riot* documents how, since the 1990s, police and prosecutors have routinely used rap lyrics to build criminal cases, describing the practice as “weak evidence and lazy prosecution that blurs the distinction between entertainment and criminal activity”¹¹. The implication is significant: if a novelist writes a murder scene, nobody charges them with homicide, yet when Black artists write lyrics exploring violence, those words are handed to a jury as proof of guilty, prejudice functioning through genre and identity rather than actual likelihood of the described conduct.

The YSL RICO trial illustrates this most starkly. Young Thug (Jeffery Lamar Williams) was indicted alongside his label Young Stoner Life (YSL) on racketeering and gang charges, with prosecutors treating the label itself as a criminal organisation and rap lyrics as primary evidence of intent.¹² The case did not happen in isolation. It happened in a culture where media outlets, examined in Section 1.1, had spent two decades priming juries and the public to view Black rap artists as inherently criminal before a single lyric was read in court.

¹¹ Sidney Madden and Rodney Carmichael, 'The Racist Roots of Rap on Trial' (*Louder Than a Riot*, NPR Music, YouTube, 16 March 2021) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS0NFPI4Qvc>> accessed 20 April 2026.

¹² 'YSL Records Racketeering Trial' (*Wikipedia*, last modified 2024); Nick Valencia and Devon M Sayers, 'Judge Rules Some of Young Thug's Lyrics Can Be Used as Evidence in YSL Trial' (*CNN*, 10 November 2023) <<https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/10/us/ysl-gang-trial-lyrics-evidence>> accessed 20 April 2026.

The 2026 Supreme Court petition filed by Travis Scott and Young Thug makes this connection explicit, arguing that using rap lyrics in court “capitalises on anti-rap bias and the anti-Black bias triggered by rap music”.¹³ The Paramount+ documentary *As We Speak* frames the legal use of lyrics as the institutional endpoint of a longer cultural process, in which media demonisation creates the conditions under which legal criminalisation becomes possible.¹⁴ This is the clearest point in the investigation where meso-level media narrative visibly hardens into the macro-level consequence.

1.4 Cross-Cultural Comparison: Racial Double Standards in the Reception of Rap

A cross-cultural comparison sharpens this argument by testing whether the demonisation documented above is really about race or purely about content. If identical lyrical themes, violence, misogyny, materialism and criminality are met with dramatically different institutional responses depending on the artist’s race, then demonisation is a function of power, identity and status rather than the music itself. Eminem, rap’s most commercially successful white artist and Jack Harlow, one of the most prominent white rappers of the current decade, provide two clear case studies against which the treatment of Black rap artists documented above can be measured.

Adam levin’s analysis of white privilege in rap draws on Harry Allen’s observation that “the treatment of Eminem, in the press and society generally has always been different from that accorded non-white artists in the hip-hop genre’, arguing that white society effectively told him “You’re special. You’re different. You’re not like the rest of them. We expect more of you”.¹⁵ Eminem’s most violent and misogynistic lyrics, including a matricide fantasy on “Kim”, were absorbed as evidence of individual artistic daring rather than treated as confirmation of a dangerous racial stereotype. This intersects directly with section 1.1’s analysis of Geraldo Rivera’s response to Kendrick Lamar: Identical subject matter, violence and social commentary, is read as personal

¹³ Amicus curiae brief filed on behalf of Travis Scott, Young Thug, Killer Mike, T.I. and Fat Joe in *Broadnax v Texas*, No 25-939 (US Supreme Court, filed 9 March 2026), quoted in 'Travis Scott, Young Thug Petition Supreme Court Over Use of Rap Lyrics in Death Sentence' (*Pitchfork*, 10 March 2026) <<https://pitchfork.com/news/travis-scott-young-thug-petition-supreme-court-over-use-of-rap-lyrics-in-death-sentence/>> accessed 20 April 2026.

¹⁴ *As We Speak: Rap Music on Trial* (dir J M Harper, Paramount+ 2024), official trailer (*YouTube*, 24 January 2024) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p53ir4yTAgo>> accessed 20 April 2026.

¹⁵ Adam M Levin, 'White Privilege In Rap' (*RapReviews*, 20 September 2011) <<https://www.rapreviews.com/2011/09/white-privilege-in-rap-by-adam-m-levin/>> accessed 26 July 2026, quoting Harry Allen, 'The Unbearable Whiteness of Emceeing'.

expression when the artist is white and as group-level threat when the artist is Black, exposing status and identity, not content as the deciding factor.

This double standard is a matter of institutional power, not only individual perception. New York Times critic Jon Caramancia describes today's landscape as a "post-accountability era of white rap, when white artists are flourishing almost wholly outside the established hip-hop industry, evading black gatekeepers and going directly to overwhelming white consumers".¹⁶ Jack Harlow's rapid ascent to mainstream approval fits this pattern. He has not needed the "co-sign" from Black hip-hop authorities that earlier white artists required, nor has his material attracted the legal scrutiny detailed in section 1.3. Mary Gordon's 2025 review of the literature found that rap lyrics have been used as evidence in over 500 criminal proceedings, compared with a single documented case involving another genre.¹⁷ No comparable prosecution pattern exists for Eminem, Harlow or any other white rap artist despite comparable violent content, confirming that macro-level institutions, courts, media outlets and record labels, exercise power differently according to race.

Chapter 2 – Cultural Impact: Fashion, Identity & Appropriation

2.1 Rap's Influence on Fashion & Mainstream Culture

Hip-hop's influence on fashion is one of the most significant cultural shifts of the last fifty years. What began as the dress of Black and Latino youth in South Bronx USA, has evolved into the global phenomenon that now sits at the centre of mainstream culture. As Caroline Shackelford notes, "hip-hop is not part of mainstream culture but rather is mainstream culture".¹⁸ This transformation exposes the same power imbalance examined in Chapter 1: an aesthetic born from marginalised Black identity became legitimate only once institutions decided it was profitable.

The Cornell Chronicle's study of hip-hop fashion documents how the aesthetic diffused from marginalised subculture into a global mainstream force, noting that it "has

¹⁶ Jon Caramancia, 'White Rappers, Suburban and Self-Aware' *The New York Times* (New York, 21 August 2016) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/arts/music/white-rappers-geazy-mike-stud.html>> accessed 26 July 2026, quoted in Dan Runcie, 'White Rappers and Black Rappers Have Different Business Models' (*Trapital*, 25 July 2019) <<https://www.trapital.com/memos/white-rappers-and-black-rappers-have-different-business-models>> accessed 26 July 2026

¹⁷ Mary Gordon, 'That's a Rap: The Consequences of Racial Bias in Music Perception' (2025) 5(1) *Critical Debates in Humanities, Science and Global Justice* 12, 18.

¹⁸ Caroline Shackelford, 'The Evolution of Hip-Hop Fashion: Origins to Now' (*He Spoke Style*, 25 February 2022) <<https://hespokestyle.com/hip-hop-fashion/>> accessed 13 May 2026.

become a lifestyle that's no longer just associated with African Americans or Latinos"¹⁹ Yet for much of the 1980s and 1990s, the same clothing was, as Shackelford notes, "considered writ large as gang wear". The synthesis is direct, nothing about the clothing itself changed between being labelled dangerous and being labelled fashionable, only who was permitted to wear it and profit from it changed, evidence that status, not the aesthetic, determined its meaning.

BBC Culture's Ekow Eshun challenges the idea that hip-hop fashion was ever simply about clothing. They argue that rappers use dress to "express their own commentary on the position of Black people in America", continuing a long tradition of style as political assertion and identity-making.²⁰ Hip-hop fashion was always deliberate: a statement of identity, resistance and aspiration by communities systematically excluded from mainstream institutions, not a passive style later discovered by the market.

This influence is directly visible at the micro level of everyday life. Non-participant observation at a 2hollis concert in the Sydney CBD and at a study camp recorded consistent hip-hop derived streetwear including Neovision, Converse, Adidas, Supreme, Gucci and Stussy, across age groups and settings with one observation noting a clear "dress to impress" culture driven by hip-hop trends²¹²²²³

2.2 Social Exclusion & Identity

Media demonisation does not remain commentary, it produces consequences that shape how Black youth are perceived, judged and excluded in classrooms, workplaces and courtrooms. When meso-level media consistently frames Blackness and hip-hop as dangerous, those perceptions become macro-level structural discrimination, informing decisions made by employers, teachers and institutions that individual Black people cannot control through identity or behaviour alone.

¹⁹ Tasha Lewis and Natalie Gray, 'Hip-Hop Fashion: From Street Culture to Mass Appeal' (*Cornell Chronicle*, December 2013) <<https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2013/12/hip-hop-fashion-street-culture-mass-appeal>> accessed 13 May 2026.

²⁰ Ekow Eshun, 'How Hip-Hop Style Critiques Society' (*BBC Culture*, 28 July 2015) <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150728-how-hip-hop-style-critiques-society>> accessed 13 May 2026.

²¹ Author's non-participant observation, 2hollis concert (Sydney, 20 February 2026).

²² Author's non-participant observation, Sydney CBD (2 May 2026).

²³ Author's non-participant observation, study hall, study camp (13 May 2026).

City Journal's claim that "hip-hop identity keeps Blacks down and makes employers wary" is telling, not as a legitimate critique of culture but as an admission of the discrimination it describes. The article does not show that hip-hop is genuinely harmful, it shows that employers have absorbed demonising narratives and act on them, placing the burden of exclusion on Black youth to abandon a cultural identity that should never have been made a condition of opportunity in the first place.

This is a racial double standard in the policing of identity, the same cultural expression, music, aesthetic, language, reads as threatening on a Black body and aspirational on a white one, precisely the dynamic already established through the Eminem and Jack Harlow comparison in section 1.4. This is not a perception gap. It is discrimination operating through the logic that demonising media has helped construct and it is consistent across the fashion, employment and legal contexts this PIP has examined.

Chapter 3 – Primary Research Findings

3.1 Personal Reflection

My interest in this topic didn't begin as a result of a class. It began through hearing the prodigious through the music. Growing up, hip-hop was not a constant in my life, it was only as of a few years ago that I began taking note of the things said in these songs. Artists such as Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole who exposed these issues that are constantly suppressed in the modern day by mass media only drew my attention to the matter. These storytellers, documenting their real-world experiences that mainstream institutions refused to acknowledge, that media rarely treated with any seriousness or nuance, are the people we need to listen to otherwise we lose one of the most important parts of music, the rebellious nature.

The messages carried by rap are easily missed because audiences tend to accept the first framing they are given.

My own cultural positioning matters here as it is worth nothing that I am not Black, I did not grow up in the communities that grew this artform nor did I grow up experiencing half the issues these communities have. This means that however deeply I engage with the music, there are dimensions of the experience this investigation documents that I have not lived. My position as a researcher is that of an engaged outsider, someone who cares about the subject and has sought to understand it, but who must acknowledge the limits of understanding. This awareness shaped how I approached my sources, particularly in ensuring that Black voices, artist, academics and journalists,

anchored my analysis rather than being filtered through commentary by those external to the culture.

What surprised me the most was not the existence of the demonisation I had encountered is consistent from City Journal in 2003 to Shreveport Times in 2024, the same language, the same framing and the same deflection from structural racism appears almost unchanged across the two decades. This pattern, more than any single source, convinced me that what I was investigating was not a series of isolated opinions, but something more deeply embedded in how certain institutions relate to Black cultural expression.

3.2 Methodology & Research Reflection

This investigation relied on two primary research methods: A content analysis of news media and video sources, and a non-participant observation conducted across three settings. Together these methods provided both a broad analytical foundation and a grounded, firsthand dimension to the research. Reflecting critically on both is necessary to understand the strengths and limitations of what this PIP can and cannot claim.

The content analysis, spanning 2003 to 2026 across news, video and fashion commentary, allowed patterns to be identified across time and media type. Including both demonising and counter-narrative sources was deliberate, examining only one side would have produced a one-dimensional argument rather than a genuine investigation. Sources ranging from Fox News to the Harvard Crimson to NPR's Louder Than a Riot allowed a more honest picture of how contested hip-hop's representation is in mainstream media.

This method has limitations. Source selection reflects my own judgement of relevance, introducing researcher bias, the analysis is weighted toward American media, which reflects where the demonisation narrative is most documented but limits how far findings generalise to other contexts, including Australia, which is precisely why the cross-cultural comparison in section 1.4 and the local non-participant observations matter, they test whether the American pattern also holds, or is complicated, in an Australian setting.

The non-participant observation, conducted at a 2hollis concert, in the Sydney CBD and at a study camp, allowed direct, unmediated observation of how the aesthetics

documented in Chapter 2 manifest in everyday Australian life without researcher presence influencing participant behaviour.

Despite these limitations, both methods produced findings consistent with and supported by the secondary research, demonisation, appropriation and racial double standards identified in the content analysis were reflected in what the observations documented on the ground. That consistency across two different methods, one analytical and one observational, is what gives this investigation's conclusions a stronger foundation than either method could provide.

Conclusion

This PIP investigated the media's demonisation of Black rap artists and the extent to which it has led to discrimination and social exclusion. Applying the concepts of power and authority, identity and continuity and change across micro, meso and macro levels of analysis, a clear and consistent pattern emerged across three chapters.

Chapter 1 established that hip-hop's demonisation by mainstream media is not incidental but a decades long, racially structured cycle documented from *City Journal* to *Shreveport Times*, a cycle that has moved from cultural commentary into the legal system, most powerfully illustrated by the YSL RICO trial and the 2026 Supreme Court petition and made explicit by the cross-cultural comparison with Eminem and Jack Harlow, whose comparable content was met with markedly different institutional treatment, Chapter 2 demonstrated that while hip-hop's aesthetic has been absorbed and commodified by mainstream culture, both globally and in the Australian settings observed for this PIP, the communities that produced it continue to face profiling and exclusion for the same expression others wear without consequence.

What this investigation ultimately reveals is that the demonisation of Black rap artists was never about the music. It is part of a broader pattern in which Black cultural identity is simultaneously exploited for profit and penalised as dangerous, a contradiction sustained by media, courts and institutions that treat identical expression differently depending on who is speaking. Continuity persists beneath every surface change and dismantling it requires naming the power structures that maintain it, not simply changing the artists within them.

Annotated

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