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Boardwalk Empire

Truth Thomas

Atlantic City is a good trip
if you want to teach your children
about pimps and screaming

and gunshots screaming
at three o'clock in the morning,
and seagulls that eat better

than people do, and wheelchairs
parking people with oxygen
tanks for guards – people

with canyons, instead of bags,
under their eyes, addiction lighting
their eyes like LEDs in flat

screens, at the boardwalk,
on the boardwalk, Under
the Boardwalk, where only

sirens sing, at the Trump
Taj Mahal, at 3 o'clock
in the morning. At 3 o'clock

in the morning, you can order
Buffalo chicken pizza, with blue
cheese on the side, from South

End Pizza, and they will bring it
to your room – if you have
a room. Say you have a room,

and paper to flame for a pie,
and you're not sleeping
in the shadow of "The Donald,"

of "The Donald Duck,"
of the "Dick," also known
as Donald, at Trump Taj Mahal,

BOARDWALK EMPIRE

where even seagulls
have comb-overs, yours will be
a good room. Wet bars thirst

for these rooms. All pimps know
these rooms, like lipstick tricked
knows sucky sucky sounds.

You might be on the 42nd floor.
You might be loopy in loot.
If you are loopy with loot,

your good time sugar will be glazed,
but if you are not buttered and hot,
thick with bread, you will be

a Happy Meal for seagulls,
in Atlantic City – in America
City – and tourists will clap

for these birds, finger them in phones,
as they Hitchcock into storm,
tornado into pecks,

scavenge whimpers of your children,
and shit them out, up and down
the Ferris wheeling street.

Sojourner

Karl Carter

A Memorial for Leon Damas

I.

What do I say now to my children
 That you wrote poems and made promises
 Do I hand them a book and say
 here read and understand
 that his life was here with us in this World
 And now Shango has received your soul
 At the end of the dawn I see
 You sitting cigarette in hand
 Sipping a glass of wine
 Listening to the cries of island birds
 and barefoot children
 At the tip of an archipelago in the Caribbean
 on that rock where Frenchman
 Made hell on earth for men white and black.

II.

Now in this time of sorrow in this time, in this world
 I have traveled a little ways
 with you,
 knew you,
 loved you
 Eyebrows arched, your voice
 pot-marked with the
 Accent of a different land
 The quality of hurt and sorrow traversed through
 Years of work to preserve a peoples Culture
 To you life had not been a fair exchange
 their clothes,
 their speech,
 their manners,
 their hopes,
 their music,
 their art
 In exchange for being the child of a former slave
 and a Citizen of France

III.

But what of it now when death finds us on every corner
 You who sang with Sanghor, Rabiminjara, and Caesar
 Who played the banjo not the guitar

The strings and tom-toms of your heart are silenced
Only the melody will be left of a torch bearer
Who told us we looked ridiculous in
 their shoes,
 their pants,
 their coats,
 their shirts,
 their top hats
Who remembered a world where bare feet
 and brown earth
Touched and danced before they came

IV.

It is at the end of the morning
I will look for you
At the edge of this world I will hear
 you singing in the cane break
Coming home, at the end of the day
And we will dance together embrace as brothers
 brown feet on brown earth
Spirits of red clay and tin shacks rise
 on barren rock
Ancient ones will greet us and
Welcome home the Deputy,
 the lover
 the poet
 the Giuanaman

V.

Tell me now Obiaman, what do I tell my children
How do I explain
That you wrote poems and made promises
And now Shango has received
 your soul and Demballa has his son again
I hearing you singing in the fields
Your voice a murmuring on the warm island winds
I see you sitting at the end of the day
Reedy, thin, laughing,
 telling tales to brown children

FOOT NOTES

to be self evident that all men
are created equal.”

Representations and Discourses of Black Motherhood in Hip Hop and R&B over Time

Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown

This study will examine how representations and discourses regarding Black motherhood have changed in the Hip Hop and R&B genres over time. Specifically, this scholarly work will contextualize the lyrics of 79 songs (57 Hip Hop songs; 18 R&B songs; 2 songs represented the Hip Hop and R&B genre; 2 songs represented artists who produce music in 5 or 6 genres) from 1961-2015 to identify the ways that Black male and Black female artists described motherhood. Through the use of Black Feminist Theory, and by placing the production of these songs within a sociohistorical context, we provide an in-depth qualitative examination of song lyrics related to Black motherhood. Results gave evidence that representations and discourse of motherhood have been largely shaped by patriarchy as well as cultural, political, and racial politics whose primary aim was to decrease the amount of public support for poor, single Black mothers. In spite of the pathological framing of Black mothers, most notably through the “welfare queen” and “baby mama” stereotypes, a substantial number of Hip Hop and R&B artists have provided a strong counter narrative to Black motherhood by highlighting their positive qualities, acknowledging their individual and collective struggle, and demanding that these women be respected.

How has patriarchy influenced the production and release of Hip Hop and R&B songs related to Black motherhood? In what ways has Hip Hop and R&B supported and challenged dominant representations and discourses surrounding Black¹ motherhood? How has Black Feminist Theory validated the experiences of Black mothers in Hip Hop and R&B? This manuscript will respond to these three questions by examining how societal changes have directly influenced how Black mothers in Hip Hop and R&B² are intellectualized. Within this context, it is important to focus on both *representations* and *dialogue* of Black mothers in these music genres over time. Specifically, when discussing *representations* we address how Black motherhood has been depicted, and when discussing *dialogue* of Black motherhood we address how members of society have specifically talked about Black mothers. Thus, *representations and dialogue* simultaneously highlight how outside entities have created negative perceptions of who Black women are, but more important, how Black male and female artists have used Hip Hop and R&B to provide a resounding counter narrative to help Black mothers retain their power.

¹ The terms “African American” and “Black” will be used interchangeably in this manuscript.

² Hip Hop and R&B are not the same. In fact, Rap is only one form of the Hip-Hop culture, which includes other elements such as dance, graphics, slang, and fashion. For a detailed discussion of all the elements of Hip Hop culture see: Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. (New York: Macmillan, 2005). Nelson George, *Hip Hop America*. (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998); Robert Price Jr., “Hegemony, Hope, and the Harlem Renaissance: Taking Hip Hop Culture Seriously.” *Convergence* 38, no. 2 (2005): 55-64; Michael Ralph, “Hip-Hop.” *Social Text* 27, no. 3 (2009): 141-146; Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Be-Bop to Hip Hop*. California: University of California Press, 2003; James Stewart, “Message in the Music: Political commentary in Black popular music from rhythm and blues to early hip hop,” *Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3(2005): 196-225; Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005).

This topic is important for four reasons. First, this study recognizes the current trend of “broken homes in the Black community.” Between 1960 and 1995, the number of African American children living with two married parents dropped from 75% to 33%, yet currently 72% of African American births are to single mothers as compared to 33% nationally. In light of this startling statistic, a new documentary from Moguldom Studios, “72%,”³ tackles what is known as the “baby mama epidemic” among the African American community.⁴ In light of this statistical reality, this study will bridge the family studies and Hip Hop cultural studies literatures by examining how representations and discourses of motherhood have been shaped by political agendas, patriarchy, and the reclaiming of Black women’s power.

Second, this study examines how Black mothers have been perceived by male and female Hip Hop and R&B artists over time. Thus, an historical lens allows us to highlight how patriarchy has denigrated Black women via the “baby mama epidemic” as well as how Black artists have used Hip Hop and R&B to actively resist pervasive and negative representations of Black mothers. Third, this topic builds on Black feminist scholarship by highlighting the voices of a historically marginalized group, Black men and women, in two very popular music genres among the Black populace (i.e., Hip Hop and R&B) discuss how Black motherhood is demonstrated and perceived. Last, and most important, instead of reinforcing the historical negativity associated with single Black mothers, this study upholds this “significant marker of womanhood” for many Black women⁵ by drawing attention to how forces outside of the Black community have shaped how single Black mothers are generally depicted and discussed.

Review of Literature

This section will highlight key scholarship related to Black motherhood. Included within this review is the historical interest in single Black mothers, changes in the structure of Black families over time, how Black mothers have generally been described in Hip Hop and R&B, as well as how patriarchy effects the representation and discussion of Black mothers in these genres. Next, we provide the theoretical framework on which this study was built. Then, we describe the methodology that was utilized in this study. Following this, we present Hip Hop and R&B lyrics that support the primary themes that were foundational in this study. Finally, we discuss how negative representations of Black motherhood are generally resisted within the dialogue of the Hip Hop and R&B genres.

³ This documentary won the Audience Buzz Award at the Black Women’s Film Festival in June 2014.

⁴ Brande Victorian. August 1, 2014. “New Documentary Tackles Startling Statistic That 72% of Black Children Are Born To Single Mothers.” Retrieved from: <http://madamemoire.com/453912/new-documentary-tackles-startling-statistic-72-black-children-born-single-mothers/>

⁵ Lawson Bush, “Solve for X: Black Mothers + Black Boys = X.” *Journal of African American Men* 5, no. 2 (2000): 31-51. Cassandra Chaney, “The character of womanhood: How African American women’s perceptions of womanhood influence marriage and motherhood.” *Ethnicities* 11, no. 4 (2011): 512-535.

The Black Family during the 1950s and 1960s

Even though the 1950s have been generally described as the “golden age” of marriage in the United States,⁶ after at least seventy years of rough parity, African American marriage rates began to fall behind those of European Americans. In 1950, the percentages of White and Black women (aged 15 and over) who were currently married were roughly the same, 67 percent and 64 percent, respectively.⁷ In the first comprehensive study of the family life of African Americans, *The Negro Family in the United States*,⁸ the African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier,⁹ chronicled changes in the Black family that extended through colonial-era slavery, the years of slavery and emancipation, as well as the impact of Jim Crow and migrations to both southern and northern cities in the twentieth century. Although this sociological work was published in 1939, Frazier discussed many issues that are relevant for the contemporary Black family. Specifically, he discussed the effects of matriarchy and patriarchy, the impact of slavery on family solidarity and personal identity, the impact of long-term poverty and lack of access to education, migration and rootlessness, and the relationship between family and community. Frazier insisted that the characteristics of the family were shaped not by race, but by social conditions.

As Frazier noted, changes in the structure of the 1950s African American family coincided with “Jim Crow,” which posed tremendous educational, legal, social, and economic constraints on Black Americans.¹⁰ By the late 1800s and until 1965, the term “Jim Crow” became more than a term to mock the stereotypes of Blacks, but also a legal system to promote White supremacy and Black inferiority in a land that no longer made slavery mandatory. This legal structure created separate schools, parks, churches, and businesses as well as certain seating arrangements on buses and buildings for people of color. At some facilities, the mere presence of African Americans was not allowed and it has been noted that the sign “Negros and Dogs Not Allowed” was not unusual in the South.¹¹ Comparing human beings to dogs perpetuated the ideology that Blacks were

⁶ Stephanie Coontz, “Historical perspectives on family studies.” *Journal of marriage and family* 62, no. 2 (2000): 283-297. Stephanie Coontz. *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. Basic Books, 1992. Cherlin, Andrew. *Marriage, divorce, remarriage*. Harvard University Press, 2009. Cherlin, Andrew J. “The deinstitutionalization of American marriage.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 4 (2004): 848-861.

⁷ Douglas J. Besharov and Andrew West, “African American Marriage Patterns,” *Beyond the Color Line* (2001): 95-113.

⁸ E. Franklin Frazier and Anthony M. Platt, *The Negro Family in the United States*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1939).

⁹ E. Franklin Frazier was the first African American to be elected to the American Sociological Society.

¹⁰ The term “Jim Crow” was used as early as 1828 when a white minstrel performer did a routine that was created to mock the dancing, singing, and demeanor of African Americans. He named it “Jump Jim Crow” and Abolitionist newspapers further popularized the term after discussing railroad separation based on race in the North in the 1840s. See Leon F. Litwack, “Jim Crow Blues,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 2 (2004): 7.

¹¹ Litwack, “Jim Crow Blues,” 8.

subhuman and deserved dehumanized treatment. Furthermore, restricting Blacks from certain schools and libraries perpetuated the lack of knowledge among this group and structurally enforced a particular entertainment culture and other ways of life.¹² Although the system of chattel slavery was removed, Jim Crow laws stood in the way of African American freedom.

Starting in the late 1950s the Civil Rights movement made a tremendous impact on African American life, being responsible for the removal of “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws by the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954. While being the catalyst for integration, the Civil Rights movement brought forth the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination on race, sex, or any other category illegal. Shortly after, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made voting discrimination illegal.¹³ The Civil Rights era was a time of Black leadership, unity, and progression where African Americans first gained a sense of power. However, in March 1965, that power was threatened by a national report that painted the Black family as pathological, dysfunctional, and broken.

Black Motherhood as Pathological and Dysfunctional

In a well-publicized national report published over four decades ago, “The Moynihan Report,”¹⁴ sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan proclaimed the rise in mother-headed families was not due to lack of economic opportunities (e.g., stable jobs) afforded Black families, but rather a ghetto culture that encouraged and glorified out-of-wedlock childbirth. In “The Tangle of Pathology” section of this report, Moynihan proclaimed:

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.¹⁵

In essence, by “presuming male leadership” is the natural “arrangement of society,” Moynihan simultaneously espoused patriarchy as well as negated the racist, sexist, and classist experiences of Black women in general, and Black mothers in particular. Several prominent Black scholars and civil rights leaders asserted the image of Black families

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jacob U. Gordon, “Black Males in the Civil Rights Movement.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 569, (2000): 42.

¹⁴ Daniel Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” Office of Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor (March 1965), www.dol.gov/asp/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and Black motherhood offered in The Moynihan Report advanced negative stereotypes and blamed the victim for their disadvantaged plight.¹⁶

While many radicals have asserted Frazier's¹⁷ groundbreaking sociological discussion of the Black family, *The Negro Family in the United States*, promoted patriarchy, this scholarly work provided fodder for the "Black as pathological" narrative that was subsequently advanced by Moynihan.¹⁸ Since that time, a growing body of Black scholars have highlighted glaring limitations of "The Moynihan Report" as well as heralded the complexity of Black motherhood.¹⁹

Black Motherhood in Hip Hop and R&B

Although regarded by his supporters as "the great communicator," former president Ronald Reagan frequently engaged in rhetoric that stigmatized the poor, and coincidentally, gave birth to what is perhaps one of the most damning images of Black motherhood. While dutifully promising to roll back welfare, during his stump speeches Reagan frequently told the story of a so-called "welfare queen" in Chicago who drove a Cadillac and had ripped off \$150,000 from the government using 80 aliases, 30 addresses, a dozen social security cards and four fictional dead husbands. Although journalists searched for this "welfare cheat" in the hopes of interviewing her, they discovered that she did not exist. Sadly, even though the majority of recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are White,²⁰ Reagan's public advancement of the fictitious "welfare queen" resulted in wide-sweeping representations of poor Black mothers as lazy, promiscuous, the primary recipients of public aid, and deserving of their lot in life.²¹

¹⁶William Ryan, "Blaming the Victim." Vol. 226. Vintage, 1976; Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81.

¹⁷E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

¹⁸Vernon J. Williams, "E. Franklin Frazier and the African American Family in Historical Perspective." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 23, no. 4 (1999): 246.

¹⁹Juan J. Battle and Michael D. Bennett, "African-American families and public policy: The legacy of the Moynihan report," *African Americans and the Public Agenda* (1997): 150-167.

Alan S. Berger and William Simon. "Black families and the Moynihan Report: A Research Evaluation," *Social Problems* (1974): 145-161. Jill Quadagno, "The Color of Welfare," (Oxford: University Press, 1994): 119-120. Jerry Gaston and James Sherohman, "Origins of Researchers on Black Americans," *American Sociologist*, 9, no. 2 (May 1974): 75. James T. Patterson, "Freedom is not enough: The Moynihan report and America's struggle over Black family life--from LBJ to Obama," (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

²⁰According to 2013 data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the program, 40.2 percent of SNAP recipients are white, 25.7 percent are black, 10.3 percent are Hispanic, 2.1 percent are Asian, 1.2 percent are Native American, 0.7 percent are multiple races, 12.8 percent are unknown, 7 percent did not participate.

²¹Avila, "The 'Welfare Queen,' The 'Homeless by Choice': Reagan's Toxic Legacy," (Sunday, October 6, 2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2013/10/06/1243243/-The-Welfare-Queen-The-Homeless-By-Choice-Reagan-s-Toxic-Legacy#>. Peter Dreier, "Reagan's Legacy: Homelessness in America," May/June 2004. Retrieved from: <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/135/reagan.html>

During the same time that the “Black welfare queen” was gaining political traction, an increasing number of Black women, many of whom were mothers, were incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses.²² Furthermore, the multidimensionality of Black life was heralded on Black Entertainment Television (BET), the first American basic cable and satellite television channel for African Americans. Launched 35 years ago on January 25, 1980 (as a Program block on Nickelodeon), BET has the distinction of being the most prominent television network targeting African American audiences, and currently reaches more than 88 million households. Programming on the network consists of original and acquired television series, theatrically- and home video-released movies, and mainstream rap, Hip Hop and R&B music videos. As of February 2015, approximately 88,255,000 American households (75.8% of households with television) receive BET.²³ Thus, BET has historically and contemporaneously given Black artists the platform to provide a strong counter narrative to negative discourses of Black motherhood.

Four years after the introduction of BET, America was introduced to The Huxtable family on *The Cosby Show* (First episode date: September 20, 1984), an upper-middle class African American family that resided in Brooklyn, New York. Unlike prior media representations of Black mothers, Claire Huxtable had the distinction of being an attorney, mother of five children (four daughters and one son) and wife of a pediatrician. Although *The Cosby Show* ended after eight seasons (Final episode date: April 30, 1992) for many Americans this show is a beacon of successful Black families and provided an affirmative representation of Black motherhood. Although this decade gave birth to grossly conflicting representations of Black motherhood in the printed and televised media, several Black scholars drew attention to the extended family networks of Black mothers,²⁴ the propensity for Black mothers to rely on family and friends,²⁵ the higher likelihood for Black mothers of infant children (1 year of age and younger) to work outside of the home,²⁶ as well as how Black mothers help their children cope with racism.²⁷

Conflicting Images of Black Motherhood

²² Stephanie R. Bush-Baskette, "The war on drugs as a war against black women." *Crime control and women: Feminist implications of criminal justice policy* (1998): 113-129.

²³ Robert Seidman, "List of how many homes each cable network is in as of February 2015." *TV by the Numbers*. Zap2it (February 22, 2015). Retrieved February 24, 2015.

²⁴ Harriette Pipes McAdoo, "Black mothers and the extended family support network," *The black woman* 21 (1980): 125.

²⁵ Joseph H. Stevens Jr, "Social support, locus of control, and parenting in three low-income groups of mothers: Black teenagers, black adults, and white adults," *Child Development* (1988): 635-642.

²⁶ Howard Hayghe, "Rise in mothers' labor force activity includes those with infants," *Monthly Labor Review* (1986): 43-45.

²⁷ Barbara B. Richardson, "Racism and child-rearing: A study of Black mothers," PhD diss., ProQuest Information & Learning, 1981.

Societal increases in the number of poor single mothers coincided with the War on Poverty, which produced legislation that reduced federal support to impoverished people during the 1990s.²⁸ In addition, during this decade a particular form of Hip Hop, namely Gangsta Rap, which largely highlighted the ghetto's frustration with law enforcement,²⁹ violence, misogyny,³⁰ as well as conflicting images of Black motherhood, in the form of "The Black Lady" and "Welfare Queen" stereotypes. Tia Tyree's³¹ study revealed clear distinctions between how Black male rap artists perceived Black mothers and the juxtaposition of these women in either "good" or "bad" terms. While their biological mothers earned a Queen status due to the trust they instilled within their sons, Black male rappers did not trust their "baby mamas" or deem them worthy of respect.³² Generally, rap artists characterized their biological mothers as comforting, trusting, supportive, understanding, and compassionate and "baby mamas" as freaky, sleazy, scandalous, cold-hearted, revengeful, and lazy. Furthermore, rap lyrics that described baby mamas were often saturated in misogyny and sexism and generally described these women as opportunistic "gold diggers" and "drama queens." Specifically, 11 out of 12 songs contained negative content about the mothers of their children. Women were described as "gold diggers," who get pregnant for wealthy rappers to secure and/or elevate her financial standing.

Although rappers' position of their mothers as "good women" and queens merit virtue, respect, and admiration, misogynistic attitudes toward unmarried Black mothers maintain the racist experiences they endure. According to Pough, "When misogynistic songs couch baby mamas as bitches and hoes, listeners are lead to believe young Black mothers are worthy of the centuries of oppression, hatred, and racist condemnation experienced at the hands of the patriarchal male social systems in America. Further, the misogyny within Hip Hop and American culture threatens the lives and stunts the

²⁸ The most notable of these forms of legislation was the Republican-sponsored Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which, as President Bill Clinton claimed, "end[ed] welfare as we know it."

²⁹ In April 1992, four California police officers were not indicted for severely beating Black motorist Rodney King on March 3, 1991. Although there were several police brutality cases and lawsuits in the city of Los Angeles prior to King's case, this particular incident became the representation of police brutality against African American men and riots were initiated nationwide after the verdict was released. As the story was aired on all major news channels, many commenters and writers considered this to be a great tragedy for the Black community, and the incident fueled harsh feelings of disdain towards the LAPD and general law enforcement.

³⁰ Edward G. Armstrong, "Gangsta misogyny: A content analysis of the portrayals of violence against women in rap music, 1987-1993," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 8, no. 2 (2001): 96-126.

³¹ Tia C. M. Tyree, "Lovin' Momma and Hatin' on Baby Mama: A Comparison of Misogynistic and Stereotypical Representations in Songs about Rappers' Mothers and Baby Mamas," *Women & Language* 32, no. 2 (2009): 50-58.

³² Ronald Weitzer and Charis Kubrin, "Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings," *Men & Masculinities* 12, no. 1 (2009): 3-29.

growth of Black girls as well as denigrates Black womanhood.”³³ Correspondingly, Oware³⁴ found that Black males subscribed to a conservative and patriarchal view of male-female relationships,³⁵ in which males financially provide for the family and women physically and emotionally nurture the family. However, it is important to recognize the conservative and patriarchal dialogue advocated in Hip Hop and R&B may be largely influenced by the record-labels of Black artists, which are primarily owned by wealthy, educated White men from privileged backgrounds.³⁶

Black Motherhood during the Age of Obama

After the 2008 Presidential election of Barrack Obama, many African Americans believed this election epitomized triumph over the many milestones that they faced. Prominent Black individuals who took part in the Civil Rights movement, such as Reverend Jesse Jackson and Senator John Lewis, were filled with joy as President Obama entered the White House. The 2008 election was a time of celebration for African Americans but it also perpetuated and deepened the notion of color-blindness, which is the ideology that race does not matter and racism does not exist. Subscribing to color-blindness is harmful because when racism is not acknowledged, individuals feel no need to act on a problem that does not exist.³⁷ Furthermore, the renowned lawyer and scholar Michelle Alexander asserted the election of President Obama coincided with a “New Jim Crow” that has led to the mass incarceration of Black men and established a caste system that maintains generational poverty for the families of these men.³⁸ While the election of President Obama in 2008 was an historical moment, increases in the number of poor Black mothers have been found to be especially deleterious for the African American family.³⁹

Black Motherhood as a Symbol of Strength and Courage

In spite of the re-election of President Obama in 2012, in many respects, the state of the Black family remained precarious. To illustrate, the media’s targeting of alcohol

³³ Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Matthew Oware. "Decent Daddy, Imperfect Daddy: Black Male Rap Artists' Views of Fatherhood and the Family." *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 3 (2011): 327-351.

³⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (New York: Routledge, 2005).

³⁶ Paul Resnikoff, "The Music Industry: It's Still a White Boys' Club," *Digital Music News*, Monday, January 20, 2014.

³⁷ Helen Neville, et al., "Color-Blind Racial Ideology: Theory, Training, and Measurement Implications in Psychology," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 6 (2013): 455-456.

³⁸ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2012).

³⁹ Dorothy E. Roberts, "Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers," *UCLA L. Rev.* 59 (2011): 1474.

and tobacco sales to people of color,⁴⁰ high rates of AIDS/HIV infection,⁴¹ the stress experienced by poor Black mothers,⁴² and the substantial number of Blacks that are murdered by police each week⁴³ demonstrate the multiple stressors experienced by Black families. In the face of these stressors, Black mothers have gained national attention. For example, when former neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman killed the 17-year old Black male, Trayvon Martin, in February 2012, his mother Sabrina Fulton became a social activist and beacon of strength and courage.⁴⁴ While Zimmerman's acquittal of the shooting of Martin outraged and saddened Black America, the same pattern continued two years later with the deaths of 18-year old Michael Brown and 43-year old Eric Garner in 2014. Tragically, Brown was fatally shot by White Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in Missouri, and Garner died due to a chokehold by a NYPD officer while four other officers were present holding Garner down. None of the officers in these instances were indicted and this yielded riots, protests, and forums across the entire world in a myriad of spaces—from Black neighborhoods to predominantly White universities. Clearly, these tragic incidents are a patent reminder of the social structures that dominate and oppress Black men, however, it is important to recognize how *all men* may oppress and dominate Black women.

Patriarchy

We concur with British sociologist, Sylvia Walby's⁴⁵ view of patriarchy, in which she defined patriarchy "as a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." Absent from this cursory definition is the *privileges* that men receive from the oppression of women. While men are the

⁴⁰ Elizabeth C. Hirshman, "Motherhood in black and brown: Advertising to US minority women." *Advertising & Society Review* 12, no. 2 (2011).

⁴¹ According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, African Americans, more than any other race, have the highest rates of HIV infection in the nation. Although just 14% of the U.S. population, blacks account for nearly half of those living and dying with HIV and AIDS. Among African Americans, gay and bisexual men are the most affected, followed by heterosexual women. AIDS is the third leading cause of death among black women aged 25–34 and 35–44 and among black men aged 35–44.

⁴² Lisa Rosenthal and Marci Lobel, "Explaining racial disparities in adverse birth outcomes: Unique sources of stress for Black American women." *Social Science & Medicine* 72, no. 6 (2011): 977-983. According to these scholars, Black American women are subject to unique sources of stress throughout their lives and particularly during pregnancy based on their multiple identities as women, Black, and pregnant.

⁴³ In an article written by Johnson, Hoyer, and Heath for *USA Today* (August 15, 2014), African American males are killed by police almost twice a week.

⁴⁴ After the death of her son, Sabrina Fulton created the Trayvon Martin Foundation, which aims to "create awareness of how violent crime impacts the families of the victims and to provide support and advocacy for those families in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin." Moreover, Fulton created the Circle of Mothers as a way to empower women and whose purpose "is to bring together mothers who have lost children or family members to senseless gun violence for the purpose of healing, empowerment, and fellowship toward the larger aim of community building."

⁴⁵ Sylvia Walby, *Theorising Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 154.

beneficiaries of patriarchy, Elaine Neunfeldt⁴⁶ found it important to not view patriarchy as an individualistic system in which a few individuals create oppression; rather, an intricate social system in which everyone plays a part and has some level of responsibility in its perpetuation.

According to Dorothy Roberts,⁴⁷ patriarchy specifically affects the notion of motherhood by sustaining the ideology that women are defined by motherhood. She asserted that in this patriarchal society, women are strongly encouraged and pressured to become mothers,⁴⁸ and that pronatalism causes many to “define women as mothers or potential mothers.”⁴⁹ Because patriarchy promotes the oppression of women and the privileges of men, it is sexist. However, Roberts⁵⁰ believed that patriarchy is also *racist*. Patriarchy encourages and appreciates motherhood for White women, but devalues motherhood for Black women.⁵¹ Because patriarchy is racist and sexist, Black women face the additional racism plight compared to their white female counterparts. Cheryl Gilkes⁵² asserted this double plight gives Black women a “clear view of oppression.” In other words, Black women in a White patriarchal society are better able to understand the consequences of racism and sexism than others. Given this reality, it is important to utilize a theoretical framework that highlights the unique experiences of Black women who must navigate in a patriarchal society.

Black Feminist Theory

Although the National Feminist Organization was created in 1973, Black feminist theory has been around for hundreds of years as historical women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and many others have critically analyzed the unique experiences of Black women.⁵³ A major part of Black feminist theory is the notion of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 that explained the unique and oppressing experience of Black women due to their race and gender.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Elaine Neunfeldt, "Identifying and Dismantling Patriarchy and Other Systems of Oppression of Women," *International Review of Mission* 104, no. 1 (April 2015): 20.

⁴⁷ Dorothy E. Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood," *American University Journal of Gender and the Law* no. 1 (1993): 1-38.

⁴⁸ Martha L. Fineman, "Images of Mothers in Poverty Discourses," 1991 *Duke Law Journal* 274, 276, quoted in Roberts, 10.

⁴⁹ Martha E. Gimenez, "Feminism, Pronatalism and Motherhood," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot, (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 287, quoted in Roberts, 10.

⁵⁰ Roberts, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Cheryl Gilkes, "From Slavery to Social Welfare: Racism and the Control of Black Women," in Amy Smerdlow and Helen Lessinger (eds.) 288-300, "Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control," (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981).

⁵³ Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement." nd, 1982.

⁵⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139-167.

Similar to intersectionality, terms such as “multiple jeopardy”⁵⁵ and “interlocking nature of oppression”⁵⁶ both focus on Black women’s subordinate identities—being Black, being a woman, and their social class. Kimberlé Crenshaw explained the importance of incorporating intersectionality into feminist frameworks and antiracist policies in her 1989 article:

Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.⁵⁷

Crenshaw echoed the words of Mary Church Terrell,⁵⁸ the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, from 1904 when she stated that Black women’s sex “handicapped” them and their race brought about mockery.⁵⁹ It is clear that Black women suffer from overt consequences of their “multiple jeopardy”⁶⁰ identity such as discrimination, ostracism, and marginalization, but there are also more covert, yet detrimental, consequences facing Black women, such as health problems. In 2011, Ailshire and House⁶¹ found that low-educated and low-income Black women in two particular age ranges (25-39 and 45-54) had the highest increase in BMI while their high-educated and high-income white male counterparts had the lowest BMI increase. These findings show the interplay of identities (i.e., gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age)⁶² many Black women face.

Recognizing and resisting the oppression from this interplay of identities is at the core of many Black feminists’ arguments. Deborah King⁶³ asserted that the major parts of Black feminist ideology are visibility, self-determination, challenging oppression, and maintaining a positive image. The visibility piece gives credence to Black women’s “special status” in society in the midst of privileged identities. Similar to Patricia Hill Collins’ idea of self-definition and self-valuation, King’s notion of self-determination means to make meaning of one’s own reality and create priorities to better the status of

⁵⁵ Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." *Signs* (1988): 42-72.

⁵⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 14.

⁵⁷ Crenshaw, 140.

⁵⁸ Mary Church Terrell, "The Progress of Colored Women," *Voice of the Negro* 1, no. 7 (July 1904): 292.

⁵⁹ King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology" *Signs* (1988): 42.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ J. A. Ailshire and J.S. House, "The Unequal Burden of Weight Gain: An Intersectional Approach to Understanding Social Disparities in BMI Trajectories from 1986 to 2001/2002" *Social Forces*, 90, no. 2 (2011): 397-423.

⁶² Olena Hankivsky, "Intersectionality 101," [PDF document] Retrieved from: http://www.sfu.ca/iirp/documents/resources/101_Final.pdf (April 2014) *The Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy, SFU*.

⁶³ King, 72.

Black women on a personal and political scale.⁶⁴ Having a focus of liberation and having “feminist consciousness” in the midst of intersectional plight challenges oppression.⁶⁵ Lastly, King believed that maintaining a positive image while resisting oppression is important. This includes not viewing Black women as victims, but recognizing their strengths and crucial part in society.⁶⁶ Patricia Hill Collins⁶⁷ also believed that giving attention to African American culture is an essential part of Black feminist ideology.

Turning attention to Black motherhood within the context of Hip Hop and R&B, Chaney and Brown’s⁶⁸ recent qualitative content analysis of song lyrics in these genres revealed the elevated status of motherhood. In particular, the lyrics of songs in these respective genres largely heralded Black motherhood as the source of emotional comfort and support, the reason for children’s strength and self-confidence, the superiority of this form of parentage to Black fatherhood, the teacher and disciplinary role of Black mothers, as well as the unconditional love that Black motherhood instills within the child-artists in these genres. Through the use of a Black Feminist Theory lens, these authors emphasized how artists in these respective genres have provided affirmative and strong counter narratives to societally-constructed negative discourses and representations of Black motherhood.

Method

This study used a qualitative approach that examined contextual themes present in song lyrics. In order to determine the songs that were chosen, several steps were taken. First, all songs had to be sung by or featured a Black Hip Hop or R&B artist and had to be specifically related to motherhood. Initially, we focused on songs that had the word “Mama,” “Baby Mama,” “Mamma,” “Momma,” “Mami,” “Mommy,” or “Mother” in the song title, yet broadened our examination to include songs that were specifically related to motherhood that did not use any of the aforementioned words in the song title. Sole singers and groups were included in the analysis if the song’s title and/or lyrics met the aforementioned criteria. This involved analyzing the song titles of over 100 songs between the years 1961-2015 from Billboard Research Services. Second, the complete lyrics of all songs were then analyzed, which were obtained from the following websites: <http://www.aalyrics.com/>, <http://www.azlyrics.com/>, <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/>, <http://www.lyrics-now.com/>, http://www.metrolyrics.com, <http://www.sing365.com/index.html> and <http://www.songs-lyrics.net/>. (The song title, singer or singers, year released, the

⁶⁴ King, 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Collins, 21.

⁶⁸ Cassandra Chaney and Arielle Brown. “Is Black Motherhood a Marker of Oppression or Empowerment? Hip Hop and R&B Lessons about ‘Mama.’” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*. 21, no. 1 (2015): 8-37.

individual or individuals that composed the song and the genre are provided in the Table).

Second, after the songs were identified by the authors, the next part of the study involved: (1) identifying whether the song was provided by a solo artist or group; (2) determining the year that the song was released; (3) providing the individual or individuals that composed the song; (4) identifying the music genre; (5) running statistical analyses on the aforementioned.⁶⁹

Song Title, Singer, Year Released, Composer, and Genre

Song Title	Singer/s	Year	Writer/s	Genre
"Mama Said"	The Shirelles	1961	Luther Dixon and Willie Denton	R&B
"Tell Mama"	Etta James	1967	Wilbur Terrell, Marcus Lewis Daniel, and Clarence George Carter	R&B
"I'll Always Love My Mama"	The Intruders	1973	Kenneth Gamble, Leon Huff, Gene Mcfadden and John Whitehead	R&B
"Sadie"	The Spinners	1974	Charles Simmons, B. Hawes, Bruce Jefferson, & Joseph Banks	R&B
"Thanks for My Child"	Cheryl 'Pepsi' Riley	1988	Full Force	R&B
"Always on the Run"	Lenny Kravitz	1991	Lenny Kravitz and Slash	Rock; Funk Rock; Hard Rock; Neo-Psychedelia; Neo Soul
"Step Daddy"	Too Short	1992	Todd Shaw, Donna L. Clinton, Ronald Dunbar, and Donnie Sterling	Hip Hop
"I'm Outstanding"	Shaquille O'Neal	1993	Alisa Yarbrough O'Neal, Erick Sermon, and Raymond Calhoun	R&B
"Keep Ya Head Up"	Tupac Shakur	1993	Tupac Shakur	Hip Hop
"Sadie"	R. Kelly	1993	R. Kelly	R&B
"Dear Mama"	Tupac Shakur	1995	T. Shakur, J. Sample, and T. Pizarro	Hip Hop
"Guess Who"	Goodie Mob	1995	Robert Barnett, Thomas Burton, Cameron Gipp, Willie Knighton, and	Hip Hop

⁶⁹Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

			Organized Noize	
"Wonda Why They Call You Bitch"	Tupac Shakur	1996	T. Shakur and Johnny Lee Jackson	Hip Hop
"All I Got Is You"	Ghostface Killah	1996	D. Coles, M.J. Blige, R. Diggs Jr., B. Gordy, D. Richards, A. Mizell, and F. Perren	Hip Hop
"A Song for Mama"	Boys II Men	1997	Kenneth Edmonds	R&B
"4 Page Letter"	Aaliyah	1997	Melissa A. Elliott and Timothy Z. Mosley	R&B
"My Baby Mamma"	Luniz	1997	Tone Capone	Hip Hop
"Every Ghetto Every City"	Lauryn Hill	1998	David Axelrod, Lauryn Hill, Johari Newton, Tejunold Newton, Vada Nobles, and Rasheem Pugh	R&B
"I Honor U"	Canibus (featuring Jenny Fujita)	1998	Germaine Williams and Wyclef Jean	Hip Hop
"Mama Raised Me"	Master P. (featuring Snoop Dogg & Soulja Slim)	1998	Daryl Anderson, Calvin Broadus, Percy Miller, Jr., and James Trapp	Hip Hop
"I Love My Momma"	Snoop Dogg	1999	Calvin Broadus, Lenny Williams, and Cecil Womack	Hip Hop
"Ed-ucation"	Dr. Dre (featuring Eddie Griffin)	1999	Andre Young	Hip Hop
"My Homie Baby Mama"	Insane Clown Posse	2000	Mike Clark, William Dail, and Joseph Bruce	Hip Hop
"Mom Praying"	Beanie Sigel (featuring Scarface)	2001	Dwight Grant, Brad Jordan, Harvey Scales, and Justin Smith	Hip Hop
"Baby Mama"	Three 6 Mafia (featuring LaChat)	2001	Paul Beauregard and Jordan Houston	Hip Hop
"This Woman's Work"	Maxwell	2001	Kate Bush	R&B

"Blueprint (Momma Loves Me)"	Jay-Z	2001	Shawn Carter, Al Green, and Roosevelt Harrell	Hip Hop
"Baby Mama Drama"	Daz Dillinger	2001	Ran Dogg	Hip Hop
"Survivor"	Destiny's Child	2001	Beyoncé Knowles, Anthony Dent, and Mathew Knowles	Hip Hop and R&B
"Baby Mama Drama"	Grand Puba	2001	Grand Puba	Hip Hop
"Baby Mama"	Lil Boosie (featuring Webbie)	2001	Jeremy Varnard Allen and Torence Hatch	Hip Hop
"Dance"	Nas	2002	Nasir Jones	Hip Hop
"Big Mama (Unconditional Love)"	LL Cool J	2002	Charles B. Simmons, Bruce Hawes, Joseph B. Jefferson, James Todd Smith, Mark Curry, and Joe Woolfolk	Hip Hop
"Momma Knows"	Will Smith	2002	Lennie Bennett, Willard Smith, Lance Bennett, Lemar Bennett, and C. Wilson	Hip Hop
"Motherfather"	Musiq Soulchild	2002	Taalib Johnson, James Jason Poyser, and Vikter Duplaix	Hip Hop
"Not My Baby"	Bone Thugs N Harmony	2002	Edward Theodore Riley, Tim Middleton, Anthony Henderson, Anthony, Steven Howse, Bryon Mccane, Charles Scruggs, Timothy William Gatling, / Gene Griffin, and , Aaron Robin Hall III	Hip Hop
"She's Alive"	Andre 3000 (Outkast)	2003	Kevin Kendricks and Andre Benjamin	Hip Hop
"To My Mama"	Bow Wow	2003	Geoff Gurd, Martin Lascelles, Gina Foster, Jalil Hutchins, Lawrence Smith, Shadd Moss, Jonathan J. Smith, Tenaia Sanders, and Rahman Griffin	Hip Hop

"Baby Mama"	Holla Point	2004	James Glasper, Michellin Barnwell and Robert Getfield	Hip Hop
"Momma"	Brand Nubian	2004	DJ Alamo, Al Green, and Willie Mitchell	Hip Hop
"If..(My Mommy)"	Saigon	2004	Brian Daniel Carenard (aka Saigon)	Hip Hop
"Reason"	Nas (featuring Emily)	2004	Zoe Schneider, Manougazou, Martin Kilger, Mirta Junco Wambrug, and Ras Pyton	Hip Hop
"Look at Me Now" (featuring Mr. Porter)	Young Buck	2005	David Darnell Brown (aka Young Buck) and D. Porter	Hip Hop
"Nobody Knows"	Nelly (featuring Anthony Hamilton)	2005	Jermaine Dupri, Paul Maurice Kelly, Cornell Haynes, James Phillips, and Anthony Cornelius Hamilton	Hip Hop
"You Only Get One"	Skillz	2005	Shaquan Ian Lewis (aka Mad Skillz)	Hip Hop
"Hate It or Love It"	The Game (featuring 50 Cent)	2005	Jayceon Taylor and Curtis Jackson	Hip Hop
"Hey Mama"	Kanye West	2005	Kanye West and Donal Leace	Hip Hop
"We Ain't"	The Game (featuring Eminem)	2005	Songwriters: Rufus Cooper, Katari Cox, Jean Yves Ducornet, Michael Elizondo, Henry Garcia, Malcolm R. Greenidge, Curtis Jackson, Steve King, Marshall Mathers, Luis Resto, Delray M Richardson, Tupac Amaru Shakur, Jayceon Taylor, and Andre Romell Young	Hip Hop
"Benediccion Mami"	Fat Joe	2006	L. Brown, J. Cartagena, L. Glover, H. Gordy, A. Story, and N. Warwar	Hip Hop
"I Made It"	Jay-Z	2006	Shawn C. Carter, / Khalil Abdul Rachman, and	Hip Hop

			Dontae Winslow	
"Freedom of Preach"	Ludacris (featuring Bishop Eddie Long)	2006	Christopher Brian Bridges, William Larkin Jones, Craig King, and Eddie Long	Hip Hop
"Dreamin"	Young Jeezy	2006	Jermaine Jackson, Bill Summers, Claytoven Richardson, Jay Jenkins, Larry Batiste, and Andrew Harr	Hip Hop
"Bury Me A G"	Young Jeezy	2006	Jay Jenkins, Kevin Crowe, Donald French, Clifford Brown, Mildred Jackson, Erik Ortiz, iii, Tupac Amaru Shakur, Iii Clifford Brown, and Randy Walker	Hip Hop
"Big Brother"	Kanye West	2007	Kanye West	Hip Hop
"Mama"	The Dream	2007	Terius Youngdell Nash, and Christopher Stewart	R&B
"Mama"	Chris Brown	2007	Christopher M. Brown, Eric Hudson, and Atozzio Dishawn Towns	Hip Hop and R&B
"No Hook"	Jay-Z	2007	Sean Combs, Shawn Carter, Barry Eugene White, Levar Coppin, and Deleno Matthews	Hip Hop
"If (My Mommy)"	Saigon	2007	Brian Carenard	Hip Hop
"Future Baby Mama"	Prince	2007	Prince Rogers Nelson	Funk; R&B; Rock; Pop; New Wave; Minneapolis Sound; Synthpop
"I'm Only Human"	Rick Ross	2008	James Harris III, Rodney Kohn, Terry Lewis, Johnny Mollings, Leonardo V. Mollings, J Newman, William Roberts, and E Williams	Hip Hop
"Superwoman"	Alicia Keyes	2008	Alicia Keys, Linda Perry, and Steve Mostyn	R&B
"Momma Can You Hear Me"	Talib Kweli	2008	Talib Greene	Hip Hop

"Woman"	Raheem DeVaughn	2008	Braun, Robin Hannibal Moelsted, and Michael Edward Milosh	R&B
"Hey Lil' Mama"	Vic Damone (featuring Lil Wayne)	2008	Shatek	Hip Hop
"Mother"	Ashanti	2008	Ashanti	R&B
"3 Peat"	Lil' Wayne	2008	Dwayne Carter, Vaushaun Brooks, and Colin Westover	Hip Hop
"Playing with Fire"	Lil' Wayne	2008	Dwayne Carter, Nicholas M. Warwar, and Jason Joel Desrouleaux	Hip Hop
"I'm Sorry"	Ne-Yo (featuring Cristal Q)	2009	Shaffer Smith	R&B
"Rap Cemetery"	Lil Wayne (featuring Juelz Santana)	2009	Leak Jones	Hip Hop
"Blessed"	Jill Scott	2011	Andre Harris and Vidal Davis	R&B
"Mama Nem"	Tech N9ne	2011	David Sanders II, Samuel Watson, and Aaron Yates	Hip Hop
"I Love My Momma"	E-40	2011	E. Stevens, Mic Conn, and R.O.D.	Hip Hop
"Look What You've Done"	Drake	2011	Jesse Graham Shebib Woodward	Hip Hop
"Maybach Curtains"	Meek Mill (featuring Nas, Rick Ross, and John Legend)	2012	Rick Ross and Robert Williams	Hip Hop
"I Love My Mama"	Lil' Wayne	2013	Lil' Wayne	Hip Hop
"Future Baby Mama"	Jacquees	2014	Jaycee	Hip Hop
"Blessings"	Big Sean (featuring Drake and Kanye West)	2015	Boi-ida and Vinylz	Hip Hop
"I've Got Life"	Lauryn Hill (featuring Nina Simone)	2015	Lauryn Hill and Nina Simone	Hip Hop
"Hey Mama"	David Guetta (featuring	2015	David Guetta, Giorgio Tuinfort, Ester Dean,	Hip Hop

	Nicki Minaj and Afrojack)		Sean Douglas, Nicki Minaj, Bebe Rexha, Nick Van De Wall, John Lomax, and Alan Lomax	
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Table 1

Presentation of the Findings

There were a total of 79 songs related to motherhood and 57 songs (74% of the total number of songs) represented the Hip Hop genre; 18 songs (22% of the total number of songs) represented the R&B genre; two songs (2% of the total number of songs) represented the Hip Hop and R&B genre; two songs (2% of the total number of songs) represented artists who produce music in 5 or 6 genres, respectively. In addition, 48 songs (61%) were provided by a sole artist; 20 songs (25%) were provided by the artist and a featured artist and 11 songs (14%) were provided by a group. In addition, 44 songs (56%) were written by an individual or individuals other than the artist, 23 songs (29%) were written by the artist and another individual or individuals, and 11 songs (15%) were written by the artist. Furthermore, two songs (2.5%) were produced in the 1950s; two songs (2.5%) were produced in the 1970s; one song (1%) was produced in the 1980's; 17 songs (22%) were produced in the 1990s; 47 songs (59%) were produced between 2000 and 2009; 9 songs (13%) were produced between 2011 and 2015. Furthermore, 61 artists offered one song related to Black motherhood.

The following artists produced two songs related to Black motherhood: (1) Kanye West ("Hey Mama" in 2005 and "Big Brother" in 2007) and (2) The Game ("Hate It or Love It" (featuring 50 Cent) in 2005; "We Ain't" (featuring Eminem) in 2005). Three artists produced three songs related to Black motherhood: (1) Tupac Shakur ("Keep Ya Head Up" in 1993; "Dear Mama" in 1995 and "Wonda Why They Call You Bitch in 1996); (2) Jay-Z ("Blueprint (Momma Loves Me)" in 2001; "I Made It" in 2006; and "No Hook" in 2007) and (3) Lil' Wayne ("3 Peat" in 2008; "Playing with Fire" in 2008; and "I Love My Mama" in 2013).

The following 14 songs (18% of the total number of songs) were related to "Baby Mamas;" (1) "Step Daddy" by Too Short (1992); (2) "Wonda Why They Call You Bitch" by Tupac Shakur (1996); (3) "My Baby Mama" by Luniz (1997); (4) "Ed-ucation" by Dr. Dre (featuring Eddie Griffin) (1999); (5) "My Homie Baby Mama" by Insane Clown Posse (2000); (6) "Baby Mama" by Three 6 Mafia (featuring LaChat) (2001); (7) "Baby Mama Drama" by Daz Dillinger (2001); (8) "Baby Mama Drama" by Grand Puba (2001); (9) "Baby Mama" by Lil Boosie (featuring Webbie) (2001); (10) "Not My Baby" by Bone Thugs N Harmony (2002); (11) "Baby Mama" by Holla Point (2004); (12) "Future Baby Mama" by Prince (2007); (13) "Hey Lil' Mama" by Vic Damone (featuring Lil Wayne) (2008); (14) "Rap Cemetery" by Lil Wayne (featuring Juelz Santana) (2009).

There were three aspects of these songs that were particularly noteworthy. First, one song was first offered by a singing group and the same song was later released by a solo artist. In particular, the song "Sadie" was originally produced by the R&B group

The Spinners in 1974 and later released by the R&B artist R. Kelly in 1993. Second, three songs shared the same title, save for different spellings for the word Mother. These songs were: (1) *I Love My Momma* by Snoop Dogg (1999); (2) *I Love My Momma* by E-40 (2011); and (3) *I Love My Mama* by Lil Wayne (2013). Furthermore, the song "Future Baby Mama" was released by Prince in 2007 and Hip Hop artist Jaycee in 2014. Lastly, The Dream and Chris Brown shared the same song title (*Mama*), and both released their songs in 2007, yet the genre of these artists differed in that the former is an R&B artist while the latter is both a Hip Hop and R&B artist. In addition, three songs shared the title of "Baby Mama" yet were produced by different artists. These songs were: (1) "Baby Mama" by Three 6 Mafia (featuring LaChat) (2001); (2) "Baby Mama" by Lil Boosie (featuring Webbie) (2001); (3) "Baby Mama" by Holla Point (2004). Two songs shared the same title of "Baby Mama Drama" and were both produced by Hip Hop artists Daz Dillinger and Grand Puba in 2001.

Discussion

This study had three primary goals. The first goal of this study was to examine how Hip Hop and R&B songs challenge and counter dominant representations and discourses surrounding Black motherhood. The second goal of this study was to examine how patriarchy influences the production and release of Hip Hop and R&B songs related to Black motherhood. The final goal of this study is to highlight how Black Feminist Theory validated the experiences of Black mothers in Hip Hop and R&B. In this section, we deliberate on the cultural, political, and racial interventions that have shaped and continue to shape *representations* and *dialogue* of Black mothers in these music genres over time.

Black Motherhood during the Motown Era

Prior to 1961, the Black mother was, for all intents and purposes, invisible in R&B.⁷⁰ During the 1960s, the Motown Record Label, was mainly a male-dominated industry that catapulted the success of Black male singing groups such as The Spinners, Smokey Robinson & The Miracles, The Drifters, The O'Jays, and The Temptations. Yet, within this largely male-dominated space, a few Black female groups, such as The Marvelettes (the first girl group of Motown), The Chiffons, The Supremes, and Aretha Franklin, gained entrée to success. In the representative song from this decade, "Mama Said" (produced in 1961), The Shirelles represented the love-gained/love-lost dichotomy that was perhaps one of the definitive marks of many songs from this decade. However, when the female-protagonist "almost lost her mind" when she met and fell in love with "a little boy named Billy Joe," it was the wise "mama" who assured

⁷⁰ Hip Hop did not begin until the late 1960s/early 1970's. See Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Macmillan, 2005). Joseph G. Schloss, *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125.

her child that “there'll be days like this,” or times of emotional pain for which her daughter must be prepared.

Two years after this song was produced, however, a number of historical events forever changed the musical miscellany that currently exists. According to *The People History*, “In 1963 and the years to follow, a number of social influences changed what popular music was and gave birth to the diversity that we experience with music today. The assassination of President Kennedy, the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the forward-progress of the Civil Rights Movement all greatly impacted the mood of American culture and the music began to reflect that change.”⁷¹ In spite of this time of societal upheaval, the Black mother remained a beacon of stability and comfort. In the R&B song, “Tell Mama” by Etta James (produced in 1967), the son is deeply hurt and embarrassed by a woman that he loved, yet publicly rejected him (“She would embarrass you anywhere, She'd let everybody know she didn't care”), yet the Black mother tenderly requested that he “tell her about it” so that she could comfort him.

Black Motherhood during the Post-Civil Rights Era

Several years after the negative representation of Black mothers that was offered in The Moynihan Report, an increasing number of songs provided a strong counter narrative to this form of parentage. The songs “I'll Always Love My Mama” (produced in 1973) by The Intruders and “Sadie” (produced in 1974) by The Spinners,⁷² acknowledged Black motherhood by placing these mothers on a pedestal. In “I'll Always Love My Mama,” the male artists recognized the hard work engaged in by the Black mother (“How mama used to clean somebody else's house / Just to buy me a new pair of shoes”), as well as their deep fondness (“She's my favorite girl”) and love (“I'll always love my mama”) for her. In “Sadie,” The Spinners dedicated this song to “young mothers like the ones, that were around when I grew up,” and who through their love, discipline, nurturance, and love continued to “live on in memory.” Interestingly, the positionality of the Black mother is so high that even in heaven, her children are confident that “she's teaching angels how to love.” Still, 14 years after the release of “Sadie,” one song, produced by a Black female R&B artist provided perhaps ones of the strongest and most unapologetic dialogues to single, Black motherhood. In the song “Thanks for My Child,” the R&B artist, Cheryl “Pepsi” Riley, shared that although the father of her child abandoned her (“And though your daddy / He ran away free”), she thanked God for her “love child” who “brought her so much joy,” “made everything right,” and gave her strength to face life's challenges (“With you right here with me / I'll have the strength to go on”). Societally, this song was released during the Reagan-years (January 20, 1981 - January 20, 1989), and under the auspices of a president who

⁷¹ Patricia Poole, *The History of Music* (May 31, 2014). Retrieved from: <https://prezi.com/l0foyed0srr/the-history-of-music/>

⁷² The song “Sadie” was later produced by R&B artist R. Kelly in 1993.

cut many programs that assisted mothers, children, and minorities.⁷³ In spite of the financial and emotional difficulties experienced by many single Black mothers, Riley's R&B song was a defiant declaration that Black single mothers had nothing to be ashamed of, could successfully rear their children alone, and daily be thankful for the existence of their child/children.

Black Motherhood during the Age of Hip Hop

To be clear, the fictitious "welfare queen" that emerged during the 1980s was fueled by racial, class, and gender politics whose true mission was to justify decreasing government support for poor single women and their children. Yet in spite of negative representations of poor, Black, single mothers, several Black Hip Hop and R&B artists during the 1990s provided strong dialogues of Black motherhood. For example, in "Guess Who," the Hip Hop artist Goodie Mob shared that even though his mother was young when she gave birth to him ("She was barely even grown and became my Moma"), he credited her for helping him turn his life around and ultimately become the man that he is today. Crediting the single poor Black mother for her parenting success was a resounding theme in "All I Got Is You" by Ghostface Killah (i.e., "What made me the man I am today"), "A Song for Mama" by Boys II Men (i.e., "You showed me right from my wrong"), "I Honor U" by Canibus ("And the reason people love they mother so much...besides the fact she carried you for nine months, is trust"), as well as the primary parental role assumed by these women. In the song "Mama Raised Me," Hip Hop artist Master P (featuring Snoop Dogg & Soulja Slim) acknowledged the reason why he was reared in a single-mother home ("Daddy wasn't home, so mama raised me") as well as his conflicting dual-identities of thug and mama's boy ("I'm a thug but still mama baby"). In "4 Page Letter," the late R&B artist Aaliyah shared that her mother "always told me to be careful who I love," and in "Every Ghetto, Every City," R&B artist Lauren Hill exclaimed that when she was "just a little girl, skinny legs, a press and curl," her "mother always thought she'd be a star."

Paradoxically, even during the emergence of what has been commonly referred to as 'Gangsta Rap,' several Black Hip Hop artists' highly-praised Black mothers. For example, in "I'm Outstanding," the physically-imposing (7'1", 325 pound) Hip Hop artist Shaquille O'Neal thanked his mother for successfully rearing him ("Mom's you never let go, mad thanks for raising me right, bro"). Although Snoop Dogg and the late Tupac Shakur are widely known for songs that glorify misogyny and violence,⁷⁴ in their

⁷³ In the first year of the Reagan Administration, the real median income of all Black families fell by 5.2 percent. The number of Americans living below the federal government's poverty line grew by over two million in a single year. In 1982, over 30 percent of the total Black labor force was jobless at some period during that year. In June 1982, Congress reduced federal assistance programs by 20 percent and cut federal assistance to state and municipal governments.

⁷⁴ Examples of misogyny are "I Wanna Fuck You" by Snoop Dogg and "I Get Around" by Tupac Shakur. Examples of male-driven violence are Snoop Dogg's "Serial Killa" and "Gunz on My Side" by Tupac Shakur.

offerings they expressed admiration, respect, and love for their biological mother (“I Love My Momma” by Snoop Dogg) or Black mothers in general (“Keep Ya Head Up” and “Dear Mama” by Tupac Shakur). Given society’s condemnation of Black women in welfare, in two songs, Tupac Shakur highly esteemed these women. In the song “Dear Mama” Shakur specifically gives homage to the “poor single mother on welfare” by showcasing their work ethic (“And I could see you coming home after work late / You’re in the kitchen trying to fix us a hot plate”), their commitment to rear their children without their child’s father, and assured them that he truly appreciates them. Even though society castigates poor Black women for being mothers, Tupac engages in a form of Black Feminist political resistance by showcasing the visibility of Black women on welfare (“I give a holler to my sisters on welfare”) as well as how the children of these women “place no one above” them.

Patriarchy, Black Feminism, and Black Motherhood

There are several ways that patriarchy and a Black Feminist resistance are manifested in these musical offerings. For one, it was noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of Hip Hop and R&B artists only had one song related to Black motherhood. As stated previously, since most record labels are owned by White males from privileged backgrounds, these individuals are at the helm of which songs are produced as well as when these songs are produced. In order to secure and grow the Black female fan base, these record executives may deem it financially prudent for their artists to produce songs for the large army of Black women that are rearing Black children.⁷⁵ So, while it may appear that Black Hip Hop and R&B artists have a great deal of agency in regards to the type of songs that are released, in reality, there are covert reasons why the Black mother is the focus of the song. On the other hand, the Black Feminist perspective demands that society acknowledges and respects the experiences of Black women. This is especially true since Black women are most likely to give birth as single mothers.⁷⁶ Since the experiences of poor, Black single mothers are not at the forefront of Hip Hop and R&B, a patriarchal push for positivity muffles the voices of Black women as well as minimizes the ways that society can support them. In addition, and related to a point that was made earlier, the Civil Rights movement was greatly led by African Americans’ demands for respectability, and since poor, Black mothers are a subset of this group, White male record executives may believe these songs are a cultural nod to anti-Black racism, that allows them to become active agents of change.

The substantial number of Black children that are currently born out of wedlock has given the mothers of these children a certain degree of societal recognition. Case in point: The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2015) recently added the slang term “baby mama”

⁷⁵ Child Trends Data Bank. Births to Unmarried Women, 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=births-to-unmarried-women>

⁷⁶ Ibid.

to its lexicon, which is defined as “the mother of a man's biological child; *especially* :one who is not married to or in a long-term, intimate relationship with the child's father.” The first act of musical disrespect of these women occurred in 1992 by the Rapper Too Short. In the song “Step-Daddy,” this Black male condemns the Black woman for having children by different men (“Three different daddies and all is well”), only bearing children for financial gain (“As long as them brothers keep making mail”), being his sexual conquest (“And then fuck her, that's how it's done”) of a man who has no interest in being in a relationship with her or rearing her children (“And it's cool, when I come through, Play step daddy for a minute or two”). Since that time other Hip Hop artists (e.g. Tupac Shakur, Luniz, Dr. Dre, Insane Clown Posse, Three 6 Mafia, Daz Dillinger, Grand Puba, Lil Boosie, Bone Thugs N Harmony, Holla Point, Vic Damone, and Lil Wayne) have added their collective voices to the public shaming of unmarried Black mothers.⁷⁷ Sadly, the societal condemnation of Black women by Black men ignores the minimal education, bleak economic realities, and disadvantaged family experiences that make motherhood a more attractive and viable option for many of these women.⁷⁸ With that said, the Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur embodied a patriarchal degradation of poor unmarried Black mothers by referring to these women as both “Queen” and “Bitch.”

From the start of the new millennium until the present, an increasing number of Hip Hop and R&B artists have dramatically shifted the representation and dialogue of Black mothers in a positive direction. Since the fictitious welfare queen” spun by former President Reagan during the 1980s gave steam to the 1990s War on Poverty, and its subtle condemnation of single Black mothers, Hip Hop and R&B artists have become a strong voice for poor Black single mothers by engaging in politics built on positivity, anti-Black racism, and strong demands for respectability. Even though the government claimed to provide greater support for these women and their families, during 1999 and 2000, the poverty rate for Blacks and Hispanics was virtually the same as in 1975. These artists demanded that Black women be respected for their hard work (within and outside of the home), for protecting their children from harm and rearing them to be successful adults, and that their experiences of being Black, female, and mothers take priority. In the song “Motherfather,” the Hip Hop artist Musiq Soulchild prioritized the Black mother by placing her name before the father. Furthermore, during the Obama administration, R&B artist Alicia Keyes elevated Black women/mothers to the status of

⁷⁷ (a) “Wonda Why They Call You Bitch” by Tupac Shakur (1996); (b) “My Baby Mama” by Luniz (1997); (c) “Ed-ucation” by Dr. Dre (featuring Eddie Griffin) (1999); (d) “My Homie Baby Mama” by Insane Clown Posse (2000); (e) “Baby Mama” by Three 6 Mafia and LaChat (2001); (f) “Baby Mama Drama” by Daz Dillinger (2001); (g) “Baby Mama Drama” by Grand Puba (2001); (h) “Baby Mama” by Lil Boosie and Webbie (2001); (i) “Not My Baby” by Bone Thugs N Harmony (2002); (j) “Baby Mama” by Holla Point (2004); (k) “Hey Lil’ Mama” by Vic Damone (featuring Lil Wayne) (2008); (l) “Rap Cemetery” by Lil Wayne (featuring Juelz Santana) (2009).

⁷⁸ Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, “Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage.” Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

“Superwoman,” which was no doubt due to their strength, focus, stable work ethic, and determination to successfully care for themselves and their families.

In light of the decades-long cultural war that has been raged against poor Black single mothers, one song in particular, is noteworthy for its transparent acknowledgement of racism, sexism, classism and the demand for Black female respectability. In “I’ve Got Life” Hip Hop artist Lauryn Hill sings: “Get caught in the hype, it's tight from morning 'til night, I'm demanding my rights, Women's suffrage then black suffrage, Or Jim Crow, the KKK, American terrorism.”⁷⁹ In essence, in this musical offering, Hill acknowledges specific historical events that have made life difficult for Black women (e.g., Black Suffrage, Jim Crow, the KKK, and American terrorism) as well as the importance that Black women “demand their right” to be seen, heard, and respected. Since a hostile law enforcement system does not give special consideration to Black female bodies,⁸⁰ several Black women have recognized and accepted the charge to protect *all Black people*. Case in point: The contemporary Black Lives Matter (#BlackLivesMatter) movement, was started by a trio of strong Black women, namely Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, whose philosophical mission is to protect the very lives of the men in Hip Hop who publicly castigate them in their lyrics.⁸¹

In the last Hip Hop offering, “mama” has the connotation of a female that demonstrates idealized traits for a romantic male partner. In “Hey Mama,” Nicki Minaj, who is one of the most successful Black female artists in the Hip Hop industry,⁸² advances the patriarchal belief that women’s sole aim is to serve men. Furthermore, the ideal female respects her man and allows him to take the lead (“Yes you be the boss / yes I be respecting”), is willing to assume traditional roles (“Yes I do the cooking / Yes I do the cleaning”) and is the perfect representation of the “good” and “bad” dichotomy (“Keep him pleased, rub him down, Be a lady and a freak”) highlighted by previous

⁷⁹ I’ve Got Life Song Lyrics by Lauryn Hill (featuring Nina Simone). Retrieved from: <http://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-ive-got-life-lyrics>

⁸⁰ Chaney, Cassandra and Ray Robertson. “Armed and Dangerous? An Examination of Fatal Shootings of Unarmed Black People by Police.” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 8, no. 4 (2015): 45-78. Chaney, Cassandra and Ray Robertson, R. “Racism and Police Brutality in America.” *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 4 (2013a): 480-505. doi: 10.1007/s12111-013-9246-5. Chaney, Cassandra and Ray Robertson, R. “Media Reporting of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Angels.” *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 5, no. 6 (2013b): 74- 114.

⁸¹ BlackLivesMatter is “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” Retrieved from: <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>

⁸² Nicki Minaj who clocked in at no. 4 with an estimated \$29 million, is the only woman on the list, earning more than Snoop Lion (who was formerly Snoop Dogg but changed his name in 2012 after a trip to Jamaica and converting to the Rastafari movement), Eminem and Kendrick Lamar combined. In fact, Minaj, who made her 2011 debut raking in \$6.5 million has been the only female to ever make the Cash Kings list since its inception in 2007 (Natalie Robehmed, *Forbes*).

scholars.⁸³ Given the increasing amount of policy geared toward stabilizing Black families via stable marriage and strong fatherhood,⁸⁴ it would be advantageous to link the joys and challenges of Black mothers to the Hip Hop and R&B genres.

Limitations of the Current Study

There were several limitations of this study. For one, this study's focus on the representation and discussion of Black motherhood in Hip Hop and R&B obscures how these women are discussed in other genres. Therefore, the findings in this study cannot be generalized to Black mothers in other musical genres (i.e., Blues, Country, Gospel, and Popular). Second, as the majority of songs were mainstream, this study may not have highlighted songs from underground Hip Hop and R&B artists. So, although they may produce songs that are directly related to Black motherhood, the obscurity of the independent artist signed to an independent record label would invariably decrease the likelihood that the majority of the population would be aware of them. Finally, as the increasing number of songs were not written solely by the artist, it is possible that mainstream record executives may exert a tremendous amount of influence in regards to the songs that their artist will release, as well as the focus of those songs. While we cannot assert that Hip Hop and R&B artists have no agency in this regard, it is important to realize that the creative work of these artists may be shaped by the record labels of which they are under contract.

Directions for Future Research

There are three ways that scholars can build on the present study. First, future research can examine how the counterpart of Black parenthood in Hip Hop and R&B is discussed, namely Black fatherhood. Given the societal positionality of Black men, future work in this area would reveal how Black fatherhood, whether through choice (unwillingness to rear their children) or circumstance (lack of education, unemployment, incarceration, addiction, death), is directly related to specific times in history. Second, future research can explore how other genres of music besides Hip Hop and R&B discuss Black motherhood. At this point, we briefly acknowledge the songs provided by two artists who produce music in multiple genres, namely Lenny Kravitz ("Always on the Run" in 1991) and Prince ("Future Baby Mama" in 2007). Both of these artists elevate the Black mother. Specifically, the mother in "Always on the Run" is a strong

⁸³ Tyree, "Lovin' Momma and Hatin' on Baby Mama: A Comparison of Misogynistic and Stereotypical Representations in Songs about Rappers' Mothers and Baby Mamas."

⁸⁴ Administration for Children and Families – African American Healthy Marriage Initiative. Retrieved from website: <http://www.aahmi.net/focus.html>; National Fatherhood Institute. 2014. Retrieved from: <http://www.fatherhood.org/father-absence-statistics>

Black woman that assures her son that life will be difficult (“There’s much weight you will lift”), to avoid unscrupulous associates (“Leave those bad boys alone”) and to not give up (“You must push with much force”). In addition, in “Future Baby Mama,” Prince acknowledges the mental stability of the Black mother (“You’re too secure to ever want to fuss and fight / That’s why your man never ever got a reason to doubt you”) her strength (“None of them got what it takes to be a future baby mama / Gotta bend in the wind but don’t break to keep your man”) as well as his promise to keep her life drama free (“I’ll make her mine with no more drama”). Since these artists are able to extend their musical message to a broad audience, future work in this area would highlight what to any extent, the experiences of Black mothers are similar or dissimilar to those of mothers in other music genres such as Alternative, Blues, Country, Gospel, or Popular. Finally, future research can explore how Black motherhood is influenced by specific historical events. Future work in this area would pinpoint the language that Hip Hop and R&B artists use as a form of political resistance to narratives that put Black families, and in particular Black mothers, in a negative light.

Conclusion

As evidenced by these Hip Hop and R&B songs regarding Black motherhood, race, class, and gender politics have largely influenced how Black mothers have been represented and discussed. Even though the political agendas advanced half a century ago sought to castigate poor, single Black mothers, a substantial number of artists in the Hip Hop and R&B genre have engaged in a form of social resistance by demanding that these Black women be heard, appreciated, and respected. As the Obama administration comes to an end, it will be interesting to monitor how artists in these genres support existing narratives of Black motherhood as well as uncover and highlight new ones. As society continues to observe and critique the status of Black mothers, it will be interesting to note whether the representations and dialogue that Hip Hop and R&B creates around these women diminishes, deems neutral, or elevates their place in society. Although we cannot predict what future work in this area will uncover, the findings in this study are evidence that although most single Black mothers do not presume “male leadership in private and public affairs,”⁸⁵ these women are hard-working, resilient, and committed to rearing their children with love.

⁸⁵ Moynihan, 1965.

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About Gods, I Don't Believe in None of That Shit, the Facts Are Backwards: Slaughterhouse's Lyrical Atheism

Marquis Bey

Hip Hop group Slaughterhouse's multi-membered, perversely holy quadrinity provides a fertile site for a pseudo-non-theological theological reading—a theology with and without god, that is, with god's titular presence but bereft of any ethos of a mover and shaker god. God, in my reading of Slaughterhouse's lyrics, is impotent. Rather than the Word, Slaughterhouse publishes sacred texts (albums and mixtapes) that speak to Black embodied life; their albums are the scriptural holy ghetto-Word, the Gospels that of Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Joey, rather than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Through the lyrics of Slaughterhouse's songs, they craft a god that is but is not; a god that does lyrical "work" in the sense that the name of god has cultural capital and produces effects, but is not "God," that is, a being that commands the heavens and the Earth.

"About gods, I don't believe in none of that shit, the facts are backwards. Nas is the rebel of the street corner..." — Nas, "Represent"

"Hip-hop was more like the blues that signified religious beliefs than the spirituals that informed the content of my faith. I thought my religion provided liberation, provided an answer to life's worries, but hip-hop raised questions about this assumption." — Anthony B. Pinn, *Writing God's Obituary*

To me, hip-hop says, "Come as you are." We are a family. It ain't about security. It ain't about bling-bling. It ain't about how much your gun can shoot. It ain't about \$200 sneakers. It is not about me being better than you or you being better than me. It's about you and me, connecting one to one. That's why it has universal appeal. It has given young people a way to understand their world, whether they are from the suburbs or the city or wherever. — DJ Kool Herc, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*

Hip Hop's origins are complex and multifarious along racial, gender, cultural, economic, and geographical lines. It is comprised of a medley of voices from various communities. But one of the more popular genealogical strands of Hip Hop touts that it stems from Clive "DJ Kool Herc" Campbell, a Jamaican-born American DJ, who is often credited with originating Hip Hop music in the early 1970s in the South Bronx of New York City. While some scholars argue that Hip Hop and a distinct Hip Hop generation begin after DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, the conditions of possibility for Hip Hop can be pinpointed to 1968: the year of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, assassination and the demarcated end of the Civil Rights Movement, ushering in a "post"-Civil Rights mentality: more militant, more individualistic, and in search of a new cultural ethos. Amidst gang violence, poverty, and a dearth of job opportunities, this brand of Hip Hop festered, fed by the abject conditions of Black and Latino life.

What's often talked about are the four elements of Hip Hop: DJing, spinning and scratching records, providing the musical backdrop for emcees; B-boying, or "breaking," a form of dance in which one would begin upright in "the top-rock, hands up and stabbing like a gang-member in motion, feet moving side to side like Ali in a rope-a-dope," then "explode into a Zulu freeze, tossing in a spin and punctuating it all with a Bruce Lee grin or a mocking Maori tongue" – B-boying was a way for dancers to write their generational narratives through the movement of their flesh;¹ emceeing, throwing down rhymes on the mic, rocking the party, and giving voice to those historically erased from the vocal tablet of society; and graffiti, the "outlaw art," an art that blazed trails out of the gang generation and left people's aliases, serving as extensions of themselves, in marker and spray-paint with the inherent message "I'm here" and "Fuck all y'all." Hip Hoppers—the generation of youth born, as Bakari Kitwana narrowly demarcates, between 1965 and 1984²—sought to create themselves for themselves drawing from their own lived conditions. They flouted the norms of everyone else: "Hip-hop was not just a 'Fuck you' to white society, it was a 'Fuck you' to the previous Black generation as well."³

But even though these four elements are the most noted aspects of Hip Hop culture, there are numerous others: the way one walks, talks, looks, communicates, and generally inhabits the streets. Indeed, the stylization and mobilization of one's walk for African Americans has long been a means toward liberty – from the Great Migration to those who walked for miles each of the 381 days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott – and reflects the din of footsteps in the political and social sphere – "speak through your feet if I'm who you thinkin' 'bout steppin' to," as Joell Ortiz says.⁴ Afrika Bambaataa even adds "right knowledge" to the list of Hip Hop's elements, explaining that "right knowledge, right wisdom, right 'overstanding' and right sound reasoning, mean[s] that we want our people to deal with factuality versus beliefs, factology versus beliefs."⁵

Hip Hop is a realm for music and lyrics to speak the lives of the marginalized; it is what Josh Kun calls an audiotopia: the space in which "music functions like a possible utopia for the listener, [where] music is not only experienced as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones," but becomes a "space that we can enter into, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, [and] learn from."⁶ With this audiotopic

¹ DJ Kool Herc, "Introduction," in Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 118.

² Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003).

³ Quote by Bill Stephney in Eric Gutierrez, *Disciples of the Street: The Promise of a Hip Hop Church* (Church Publishing, Inc., 2008), 73.

⁴ Scott Poulson-Bryant, "'Put Some Bass in Your Walk': Notes on Queerness, Hip Hop, and the Spectacle of the Undoable," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 2 (2013): 217; *Slaughterhouse - Funkmaster Flex Freestyle Part 1/2*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huUNrumwrNM&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

⁵ Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*. 90.

⁶ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jessica N. Pabón and Shanté Paradigm Smalls, "Critical Intimacies: Hip Hop as Queer Feminist

ethos, Hip Hop has also exuded a theological ethos. God has appeared in Hip Hop music, lyrics, and iconography since its inception. This essay, however, will argue for a lyrical atheism in Hip Hop, via the rap group Slaughterhouse. Slaughterhouse reveals that Hip Hop can be read to refuse physical transcendence—refuse theological deification and immortalization of the body—and emphasize its life affirming inverse: entrenchment. Underlying Hip Hop's historical nihilistic existentialism and angelic sanctification of rap legends is a tumultuous wrestling with god and Black embodiment. As I will argue through Slaughterhouse, Hip Hop artists seek to rewrite the theological narrative of transcendence and give divine importance to their (Black) embodiment. Furthermore, this divinity is one that is not pure or perfect like the traditional god but one that is a polysemously Black fugitive.

Slaughterhouse, a veritable multi-membered, perversely holy quadrinity provides a fertile site for a pseudo-non-theological theological reading—a theology with and without god, that is, with god's titular presence but bereft of any ethos of a mover and shaker god. If Hip Hop and spirituality scholar Daniel White Hodge argues that "Hip Hop has taken theology outside the box. It is new. It is creative. It is holy. It is hostile," then perhaps here I can push that a bit further—Hip Hop, through my reading of Slaughterhouse, is hostile even toward god.⁷ Ultimately, Slaughterhouse lyrically renders god impotent. Rather than the biblical Word that is "with God, and [a] Word [that is] God" (John 1:1), Slaughterhouse publishes sacred texts (albums and mixtapes) that speak to Black embodied life; their albums are the scriptural holy ghetto-Word, the Gospels of Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Joey, rather than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Through the lyrics of Slaughterhouse's songs, they craft a god that is but is not; a god that does lyrical "work" in the sense that the name of god has cultural capital and produces effects, but is not "God," that is, a being that commands the heavens and the Earth.

I concede that in genres like Gangsta Rap, while scholars have critiqued its religious superficiality, have demonstrated a seeming obsession with god: thanking god first and foremost upon receiving awards; wearing large diamond and gold crucifix necklaces around their necks ("Jesus chains"); rapping lyrics like "ask ya reverend 'bout me, I'm the young god," "Homie chill, listen, I swear I'm God, / I give tracks a Holy-feel...," "God love us hood niggaz / 'cause next to Jesus on the cross was the crook niggas," and dubbing themselves "Jay-Hova" (Jehovah) and "God's Son."⁸ Extensive study has even been done on Hip Hop and the theological life and corporeality of specific artists, namely Michael Eric Dyson's books *Know What I Mean?: Reflections on*

Pedagogy," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 1-2, doi:10.1080/0740770X.2014.902650.

⁷ Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2010), 28.

⁸ Lil' Wayne, "Ain't That A Bitch" (Cash Money; Universal, 2004); Eminem and Slaughterhouse, *Session One* (Aftermath; Shady; Interscope, 2010); Nas, *God Love Us*, 1999. "Jay Hova," or simply "Hov" for short, is artist Jay-Z's alternative name, and Nas has called himself, on his eponymous album, *God's Son*.

Hip-Hop, Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture, and his study of Hip Hop legend Tupac Shakur, *Holler If You Hear Me*. But for the purposes of this essay, I contend that Hip Hop-through-Slaughterhouse presents a lyrical atheism. While meritorious is the claim that Slaughterhouse does not, in fact, debunk god, but has instead constructed a parallel deity functioning with some of the same patriarchal practices and perspectives, this is a misguided assertion. The assumption of a parallel deity in Slaughterhouse's lyrics does not acknowledge their radical deconstruction of deity-ness. That is to say, Slaughterhouse, as I will show, lyrically debunks god insofar as god-as-deity is emptied of all that is characteristic of powerful, god-like beings and thus is no longer "god." Indeed, it is true that Slaughterhouse attempts to venerate many of the same patriarchal and misogynistic templates as many other artists do, but this template is not a god or deity; Slaughterhouse, through their lyricism, dismember god and, rather than deify, ascribe abundant value to grungy, Black, embodied life.

Overall, there are numerous displays of divinity in rap and Hip Hop lyrics, and this essay will explore the specific Christian discourse of Hip Hop's symbols of divinity.⁹ In light of this pervasive display of Hip Hop's Christian ethos, it is worth noting that Hip Hop's relationship with god is far from the traditional mainstream interpretations. Hip Hoppers like Tupac and Nas reimagine god; indeed, they *recreate* god for themselves, a god that speaks to the grammar of Black ghetto life. Always, however, is the focus on *lived* Black experience. God is not abstracted from, but imbued into Blackness.

House Gang's Fugitive Atheistic Lyrical Resonances

I will use the rap group Slaughterhouse as a site of Hip Hop representation, their multi-member crew diversifies my study and speaks more accurately to the eclectic aspects of Blackness and Hip Hop. As the presence of rap groups wane, giving way to the post-Civil Rights bourgeois individual, Slaughterhouse follows in the footsteps of groups like Public Enemy whose theme was Black collectivity. Slaughterhouse, like Public Enemy, "roll[s] deep, because Black people always overcame through strength in numbers."¹⁰

The Hip Hop supergroup Slaughterhouse officially spawned after the members—Joell Ortiz, Royce Da 5'9", Joe Budden, and Crooked I—all rapped on Joe Budden's song "Slaughterhouse" from his 2008 album *Halfway House*. After vibing on the track, all four decided to form a group named after the song.

After releasing a few songs to build a buzz for their upcoming album, the crew released their self-titled first album in 2009 on E1 Music. After signing with Eminem and Shady Records in 2011, the group released the *EP* for their first album (2011); they released a mixtape entitled *On the House* to promote their second album, *welcome to: Our*

⁹ It is also important to note, however, that there are indeed rappers and Hip Hop artists who are avowedly atheistic, including Hopsin (see "Ill Mind of Hopsin 7") Angel Haze (see "Battle Cry"), and Ras Kass (see "How to Kill God").

¹⁰ Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 252.

House (2012), the album debuting on the *Billboard* 200 at No. 2 and No. 1 on the *Billboard* Top Rap Albums selling 52,000 copies its first week; and they expect to have their third album, *Glass House*, forthcoming soon.

Each member had successful individual careers before joining the group, their own individual styles and following. Coming together gave way to a melding of personas and lyrical proclivities, much like Hip Hop groups of the incipient Hip Hop nation. Wrestling with racism, Blackness, and personal hardship, Hip Hop groups, Slaughterhouse in particular, provide a fertile locus for examining the interworking of language as it relates to race, music, and history. Furthermore, considering the tumultuous history notions of god and spirituality have within Hip Hop music, an examination of god in the music of Slaughterhouse reveals a new, nuanced description of a Hip Hop god, if you will. Slaughterhouse's "god" is discursively constructed in a way that puts the traditional god on the backburner, quite literally out of the way of their affairs, useful only in terms of "doing Him [*sic*]." Slaughterhouse, to be clear, is not avowedly atheistic, as they all believe in a nebulous version of a traditional monotheistic god. Rather, their lyrical and para-lyrical allusions to god and the spiritual have atheistic, this-worldly, Black life-affirming resonances. Their theological views as expressed in interviews and their lyrics provide fertile ground for the explication I seek to convey and illustrate a veiled theological atheism and fugitive Blackness.¹¹

To speak briefly to the notion of fugitive Blackness that will color this essay's deployment of "fugitive" and "Black/ness," I draw from Black Studies scholar Fred Moten. What is being spoken of when referring to Blackness-as-fugitivity is the contingency of a fugitivity that operates on the ontological modality Moten describes as "that desire to be free, manifest as flight, as escape, as a fugitivity that may well prove to veer away even from freedom as its *telos*, is indexed to an original lawlessness...an inability both to intend the law and intend its transgression and the one who is defined by this double inability is, in a double sense, an outlaw."¹² To be noted, though, is that Blackness as fugitive and an ontological modality is not entirely severed from ontic beings. Blackness rests at the nexus of the social and the ontological, historical/temporal – which is to say the Blackness of raced bodies – and the essential. "The lived experience of blackness," writes Moten, nodding to both subjects said to be

¹¹ Commenting on Fred Moten, who says that Black lived experience is "fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic – a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said...to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life..." Erica Still says the following about Blackness and its fugitivity: "Already figured as pathological, black social life exists beyond the boundaries of normative social constraints – 'whatever externally imposed social logic' – and through its very existence interrupts all such logic. 'This movement is stolen life' precisely because it results from the agency of the black subject, an agency already pronounced impossible and illegal. Nevertheless, 'attained in this zone of unattainability' is the fugitive movement that gives evidence of the black subject – evidence that demands an alternative understanding of blackness itself." Erica Still, *Prophetic Remembrance: Black Subjectivity in African American and South African Trauma Narratives* (University of Virginia Press, 2014).

¹² Fred Moten, "Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 2 (July 1, 2007): 223, doi:10.1080/07407700701387317.

Black as well as the experience of the nothingness and insurgency of lawlessness, "is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events."¹³ This Black ontology of disorder is tied to the complex lived experience of Blackness. Thus the fugitivity of Blackness, or rather, the Blackness of Blackness, Blackness-as-fugitivity, is the refusal and subversion of categorizable logic, a logic governed by whiteness.

Like fugitivity, then, Hip Hop is not merely a "way of life" but more specifically a "way of struggle," a mode of inhabitation that is characterized by constant tension and ontological/epistemological/metaphysical fisticuffs—it is musical Black fugitivity. Hip Hop is an epistemological framework that nourishes those lives that are in Fred Moten's "break"; it speaks validity into those lives and bodies that do/are not "matter" in the cultural white gaze, which sees (god's) whiteness as the transcendental signified; Hip Hop, as Joell Ortiz says, "ain't just a way of life / It's all I know, it's what fill up my kid's cutty day and night"¹⁴—all while refusing normativity and existing in that liminal "vestibule."¹⁵ Slaughterhouse structures their Hip Hop ethos through an epistemology that figures them as a priori "dope," an example of which occurs in the refrain of their song "Y'all Ready Know." In the five-second interlude between each artist's verse resounds a scratchy "y'all [al]ready know." The refrain alludes to the fact that Slaughterhouse, their lyrics that "set it off," and their Hip Hop dexterity is always already known, always apparent to "y'all." Knowledge itself—or the only knowledge that matters: who has the dopest bars—operates under the assumption that what is axiomatic and self-evident is that Slaughterhouse's "bars [are] just as slick as my dick, and both stay up." All presumably because they "took a bite out the rotten apple by the poison tree."¹⁶ Their knowledge flies in the face of presumed normative knowledge; they supplant hegemonic means of knowledge acquirement with their own epistemological framework.

In this Black musical fugitivity, Slaughterhouse enacts a kind of theological play with the concept of god, in effect Blackening god-language. While this move is certainly not original and has been used by Black liberation and Womanist theologians, Slaughterhouse's discursive creation of god lends itself to a reading that *gives up* god in

¹³ Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 187.

¹⁴ Slaughterhouse, "Back the Fuck Up" (Shady Records, 2012). The lyric means, essentially, that Hip Hop allows Joell to make money and put food on his family's table. Also, the last line is an allusion to Kid Cudi, another Hip Hop artist, and his song "Day and Night," signaling a kind of transhistorical Hip Hop dialogue.

¹⁵ Here I am drawing from Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 177–218. Moten writes that Blackness "is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object's vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. The air of the thing that escapes enframing is what I'm interested in—an often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions."

¹⁶ Royce Da 5'9", "Detroit Vs. Everybody," 2014. Here, Royce makes a clear reference to Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit from the forbidden tree of Knowledge in Eden. Royce's apple, however, is "rotten," perhaps connoting the perverseness, the Blackness, of the knowledge he now possesses.

exchange for the artist himself, but holds the name of god in lyrical abeyance. Other emcees who have been influential to Slaughterhouse like KRS-One, Ras Kass, SKECH185, and Aesop Rock, were doing similar kind of work before Slaughterhouse, providing a template for the rap supergroup. (Ras Kass himself would likely identify as an atheist, considering the anti-religious bent of his songs “B.I.B.L.E,” “How to Kill God,” and “Nature of the Threat,” thus giving Slaughterhouse an atheistic lyrical forebear.) While none of the members of Slaughterhouse identify as atheist – all, in fact, believe in a presumably monotheistic, Christian god – Slaughterhouse gives up god via their concern with themselves and the physical realm; one could say that they engage in the Hip Hop adage “I’m doing me,” relegating god to “out there” and thus of little to no concern for the artists’ lived experience. But “god” still has linguistic purchase. My goal is to give a different account of Hip Hop, one that is different from the traditional nihilistic readings of the death-bound Hip Hop subject. Through Slaughterhouse and their lyrics, I seek to give a new perspective of an atheistic Hip Hop that reconceptualizes god by discarding a “mover and shaker” god and affirms (Black) life with a focus on lived, embodied Blackness.

“Cause I’m a Muhfuckin’ Renegade!”

“The Black Language is constructed of – alright let me take it all the way back to the slave days and use something that’s physical. All the slavemasters gave our people straight chittlins and greens, you feel me, stuff that they wasn’t eatin. But we made it into a delicacy. Same thing with the language. It’s the exact same formula. How our people can take the worst, or take our bad condition, and be able to turn it into something that we can benefit off of.” – Interview with JT the Bigga Figga

The primary means through which this paper will articulate Slaughterhouse’s atheistic reimagining of god is through lyricism, that is, Hip Hop language. Much of Hip Hop language, especially in its earliest stages, can be read as a countercultural language. It sought to express the lives and voices of those on the margins by writing those lives into the fabric of America, forcing hegemonic discourse to alter its narrative and shift under the pressure of the marginalized voices of Hip Hoppers. Slaughterhouse continues in this tradition. They in fact practice, like many Hip Hop artists, what I call “muhfuckin’ renegade” language. I am drawing from Eminem and Royce Da 5’9”’s song “Renegade,”¹⁷ in which the chorus states:

*Renegade!
Never been afraid to say what’s on my mind
At any given time of day
‘Cause I’m a renegade!*

¹⁷ The song was originally recorded by Eminem and Royce Da 5’9”, but after a falling out Eminem dropped Royce from the song and replaced him with Hip Hop artist Jay-Z, the song then appearing on Jay-Z’s 2001 album *The Blueprint*.

*Never been afraid to talk about anything.*¹⁸

“Muhfuckin’ renegade” language—not merely renegade—is to enact a lyrical Hip Hopness, a Black linguistic fugitivity that even in its appellation breaches the confines of “appropriate” language with the use of profanity, and it also bucks against proper spelling: “motherfucking” is redacted to read and sound like “muhfuckin’,” and on the track listing on Jay-Z’s album *The Blueprint*, the official version of the song (Royce and Eminem’s version was never produced and released on an album) after Royce and Eminem’s feud, is spelled “Renegade.” Not only is their language renegade, one that deserts or betrays a particular structured organizational establishment, but a “muhfuckin’ renegade,” one that betrays the very expected propriety of suitable desertion.

This “muhfuckin’ renegade” language follows from the Satanicness of Blackness. Blackness is Satanic in that it is an accusatory, critical, light-bearing adversarial stance in relation to the hegemonic forces attempting to govern (control) the unruly. “Muhfuckin’ renegade” language is Satanic because it flouts the established norms of language, critically altering the tenets of what should and can be said. Indeed, since hegemonic language erases Blackness—Black language being in fact the “breaks” in the hegemonic language—“muhfuckin’ renegade” language reveals its Blackness, critiques via its existence the realm of linguistic possibility, Blackens it. The hegemonic language acts as god, and “God’s objective is to secure order; He [*sic*] is the basis and foundation of the political, economic, and legal system of the United States of America.” Opposing this language—speaking like a “muhfuckin’ renegade”—is to oppose god; “It is to be a renegade angel, a Lucifer who must be cast into perdition.”¹⁹

Afrika Bambaataa, Hip Hop’s “Godfather” and “Amen Ra of Hip Hop Kulture,” speaks directly to the renegade nature of Hip Hop language: “The record companies would try to tell us what we should make, what we should do. We said, ‘Listen, we’re the renegades, we sing what we want to sing, dress how we want to dress and say what we want to say.’”²⁰ Slaughterhouse continues in this Hip Hop tradition. They, as Royce says, come “From the depths of he city where sinners dwell.” Where they come from, then, is where sinners dwell: Hell. Slaughterhouse hails from the home of Satan, the cozy den of Lucifer’s study. In fact, they not only dwell in Hell but also are in line to inherit it: “we inherited Lucifer’s property,” says Crooked I.²¹

But along with their linguistic fugitivity, Slaughterhouse also reimagines god, effectively rendering god un-god-like. God for them becomes less the established white discursive image surrounding them and more the (Black) legends of Hip Hop. Beloved Hip Hop legends become imbued with godliness, which dismembers the “God” of

¹⁸ Jay-Z and Eminem, “Renegade” (Roc-A-Fella Records; Def Jam Records, 2001).

¹⁹ Michael Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith*, The History of African-American Religions (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 107.

²⁰ Quoted in Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 190.

²¹ Slaughterhouse, “Where Sinners Dwell” (Shady Records, 2012).

popular religious lore and does away with it. Royce says in "Truth or Truth Pt. 1," an aptly titled fourteen-minute confessional track, "Jay-Z is god to me! / Nas is god to me!" Jay-Z and Nas, notable figures in the Hip Hop world, are akin to god. Turning briefly to the godly Nas, we can see the relationship between the divine and the realities of lived Black experience.

One of Nas's most well received songs, "One Mic," is a ballad for the importance of the extension of his voice: his microphone. For Nas, "all I need is one mic." His livelihood is adequately nourished simply by being able to voice his subjectivity. What's more interesting for this paper is what Nas says about god's son (interestingly, the title of Nas's sixth studio album), Jesus.

He raps,

*Jesus died at age 33, that's 33 shots
From twin Glock's, that's sixteen apiece, that's 32,
Which means one of my guns was holding 17
27 hit your crew, 6 went into you.
Everybody gotta die sometime.²²*

Here, Nas converts the biological clock of Jesus into murderous, mortalizing firearms. It acts as a kind of transubstantiation that converts the flesh and sin-erasing blood of Christ and uses it as deadly ammunition. Jesus, the immortal, is made mortal by being made akin to bullets, which have the sole purpose of killing and ending life. Jesus's very life-years are made into shells that kill. Moreover, Jesus and god are Blackened: by titling his album *God's Son*, Nas implies that he is the son of god, that he is Jesus, and Royce Da 5'9" calls Nas, a Black man, "God." Nas is both Jesus and god; Nas came from his own Black loins and subsequently converted himself into deadly ammunition, murdering others, quite literally through his flesh. So while the traditional begotten son saved the world, effectively opening Heaven and allowing immortality, Nas-as-Jesus kills, makes the world mortal, and ironically affirms human life by refusing immortality, actively quashing it in fact.

God, at least for Nas and Royce, is refashioned and Blackened. This god is very different from the traditional old white man god. The white man god is not needed; the white man god has effectively been killed by many Hip Hop artists. God for Slaughterhouse is embodied, entrenched in Black (male) skin, so while god is influential lyrically and artistically, god does not govern the world or mandate morality. Jay-Z and Nas are god; Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Budden are god; Hip Hop is god. They are all god. But if they are all god, then no one is "God." The traditional, immortal, abstracted god is traded in for these artists who put in lyrical work.

YAOWA!

²² Nas, "One Mic" (Ill Will Records; Columbia Records, 2002).

Real 'Em In

"Keeping it real' has become just another fad word. It sounds cute. But it has been pimped and perverted. It ain't about keeping it real. It's got to be about keeping it right."
— DJ Kool Herc, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*

"Real' is to the rap industry as 'All-Natural' is to the fast food supplier, as 'New and Improved' is to the ad agency. As 'I Solemnly Swear' is to the politician." — William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn*

Hip Hop seems to be obsessed with "realness" these days. Mention of "keepin' it real" and "real niggas" pervade the genre's lyrical culture and work to discipline the words and performances of artists. To be a "real nigga" has become the barometer of rap artist authenticity; "real nigganess" acts as the ticket to one's Hip Hop respect, stamping a V.I.P. label onto those artists knighted with its moniker and granting them access into Hip Hop's most sacred spaces of respect and approbation. Ironically, however, to be "real" in Hip Hop is characterized as a vapid adorning of glamorous signifiers of "ghettoness": being raised "in the 'hood" and coming "from the bottom," cappin' muhfuckas if they cross you, "fuckin' bitches," rockin' chains and fly whips, and being "down." As Black bodies make up the significant portion of Hip Hop artists, it is revealing to consider the historical parallels between Hip Hop's fictive creation of Blackness and what Alain Locke calls the "fiction" of the Negro. Locke states that the Black body "has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction," that "the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden." This is what we are dealing with in the realm of Hip Hop real nigganess: that shadow of a creature, that "fiction" prancing around as real. This, as MK Asante incisively defines, is "reel Blackness."²³ To be real marks the overt performance of a constructed persona. It is not authenticity but one's ability to engage in the minstrel-like show of "niggadom." Hip Hop "is just like Halloween. / A world where I masquerade, where rappers display acts of buffoonery not seen since massa's days."²⁴

To keep it real is to be as close to the ghetto, and all it's said to mean, as possible. Everything "ghetto" is real; that which is not ghetto is fake, bullshittin', "that shit that a real nigga won't."²⁵ But since performance of the Ghetto—real—is actually reel Blackness, then the "Ghetto" does not exist as such; it, too, is reel. All that is marketed

²³ Taken from M. K. Asante, *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009), 22. Put succinctly by Asante on the following page, "The reel becomes the real" (23).

²⁴ Joshua Bennett, *Hip Hop* (The Strivers Row presents "Viewers' Choice," 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZu00zpcD4k&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

²⁵ Slaughterhouse, *Party*, 2013, (Joe Budden).

to be of the Ghetto is reel: “from the ignorant, womanizing, hypermasculine thug to the oversexed, loud, quick-to-get-an-attitude-over-nothing bitch. It’s all reel.”²⁶

The attributes of realness – or, more accurately, “reelness” – are not qualities that authentically exude from the artist but rather performed behaviors that are deemed to be representative of some kind of Black/Hip Hop authenticity. In fact, to “represent” is an apt descriptor considering that it too has also been used to hail artists into a mode of behavior deemed suitable for Hip Hoppers. But representation is in fact antithetical to the perceived definition of “realness,” that is, that which is self-evident, un-performed, authentic, and effortless. Because realness is always mediated through a vehicle of deferred representation, it stands to reason that “representation is the absence of presence...[;] the real is never wholly present to us.” In the context of particularly mainstream Hip Hop culture and commercial rap, signifiers of Black urbanity are reified and disseminated across the genre, making ghetto life, Blackness, and often times racially caricatured performative behaviors – a small sect of the vastness of Hip Hop culture – “represent” all of Blackness and rap. The danger in viewing that which is “represented” as real is that we lose the “insight into the institutions, actions and episodes through which the real has been fashioned,” a fashioning not the product of the conscious acts of everyday people acting independently and autonomously but rather “a historically developing kind of imposition, now largely institutionalized in the prevailing kinds of meanings deeply inscribed on things, persons, and structures.”²⁷

How does the idea of realness play out in the lyrics of Slaughterhouse? What does it have to do with god? To begin, the very notion of realness as it is defined through lived experiences, the very grit of the world, inherently refuses transcendence. Rather than seeking meaning for oneself through an abstracted, divine realm, that meaning is gleaned from the world and the ghetto’s begotten sons, the locus that births

²⁶ Asante, *It’s Bigger Than Hip Hop*, 29. Later on in the chapter Asante creatively inserts a fictional conversation/interview between him and a personified “ghetto.” The fictional interview begins with the denizens of a ghetto and its historical origins:

All right then, so, who are you? Who is the African-American ghetto?

I’m a place where people are and have historically been forced to live.

Which people?

All types of people: brilliant, courageous, beautiful, crazy, funny, talented, strong, injured, soulful. All types. Geeks. Shoemakers. Scholars. Comedians. Athletes. Scientists. Lovers. The whole spectrum.

The common denominator is that they’re economically poor and African-American.

I’m curious about your name, “Ghetto.” What does it mean? Where does it come from?

Linguists trace it back to the Italian words “getto” (to cast off) and “borghetto” (small neighborhood), the Venetian slang “ghetto,” the Griko “ghetonia” (neighborhood), and the Hebrew word “get” (bill of divorce).

The first time my name was written was when English traveler and writer Thomas Coryat, on a foot journey through Europe, described “the place where the whole fraternity of the Jews dwelleth together, which is called the Ghetto.” The conversation continues and goes through the processes of redlining, Urban Renewal (unofficially called “Nigger Removal”), and white flight, all of which had direct effects on creating and perpetuating the abject conditions of Black ghettos pp. 34-52.

²⁷ Michael J. Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation: Writing Practices in Biography, Photography, and Political Analysis* (Madison, Wis: Univ of Wisconsin Pr, 1988), xii. One could say that this representation is *vertreten*, a speaking for, as in politics.

"grimy niggas"²⁸ rather than Christs. The search for "real niggas" is a search for the antithesis of god; it is a search for worldly, sullied personas instead of pristine, other-worldly deities.

Slaughterhouse's songs are riddled with calls for realness, veneration of realness, and denigration of non-realness. "I just wanna be the illest MC (That's all I want) / The same time being as real as can be"; "just a real nigga straight from my mother's stomach," says Joe Budden in "Our House" and "Hammerdance," respectively. What is also worth examining, though, is how realness relates to god in their lyrics. Joell Ortiz spits, "My real name my rap shit / The messiah of real rap shit" in "Who I Am." "My real name [is] my rap shit" is a line Ortiz has used in numerous other songs, which connotes the oneness of his Hip Hop persona and his everyday lived identity. But his realness is also juxtaposed with his identity as the messiah of rap, a sentiment echoed by Crooked I in their Funk Flex Freestyle in which he raps, "I'm the West Coast savior, why you think they yelling 'church' when the verse done?" To be real for Slaughterhouse is to be godly, but the godly is the gritty street of Crooked I's hometown of Long Beach, California, or the source of Joell Ortiz's unadulterated and seamless identity, that is, Cooper Projects in Brooklyn, New York. God is not out there watching over the ghetto, god is *made* in the ghetto; god is, as numerous Hip Hop artists tout for themselves, a product of its environment: grungy, elevator piss-filled, cracked concrete, crime-ridden 'hoods.

So if the god of the ghetto that bespeaks Joell and Crooked's personas is not that of the traditional snow-white god, what is its nature? As the god of the violent, Black ghetto, is it still in fact "god"? This god they speak of can actually be more accurately read as Satanic; Slaughterhouse's god is devilish, paradoxically a Satanic god. The artists tap into the divine not when they are lucid and clear-headed but when they are "cuckoo." In their song "Cuckoo" the artists rap about performing inane acts and being out of their right minds, "diss[ing] every legend that started it [Hip Hop]," "the insects is actin' like me, and me, I'm buggin'," being "into voodoo," having sex with menstruating women, and "hanging my baby mother off a thirty-foot balcony." *Cuckoooooo!* This state of being is what allows them to actualize their lyrical genius. By being "kin to sinning," as Royce says he is, Slaughterhouse demonizes themselves, which is welcomed, and thus is able to spit sicker than any other rapper. Sin lyrically oozes from their genealogical roots, which bolsters their ability to spit fire (hot lyrics), so much so that they're "on fire tryna make the devil proud of me." It is sin rather than virtue that marks them with sick lyricism, an inversion of the negative connotation imbued into the meaning of Cain's mark or Canaan's curse. The mark of sin (Blackness) is not a mark of ostracism for Slaughterhouse; it is a mark of dope lyricism.

*And I don't need a [b]ook for this one!*²⁹

²⁸ This alludes to Joell Ortiz's line in "Y'all Ready Know" in which he raps, "[I'm a] grimy nigga, might wanna hold on to your bitch."

²⁹ The veritable "hook" for the song "Cuckoo" ("I'm cuckoooooo. / I don't need a hook for this one") redacted and substituted with the word "book," in reference to the Holy Book, for "hook," playing

Black Prayers

Slaughterhouse's most overtly religious song, "Pray (It's a Shame)," offers a lamentation of the trials of living in poor ghettos and the hardships of Black life. God, or Lord, however, is addressed explicitly and taken to task for the less-than-glamorous upbringings the artists have had. Slaughterhouse's lyrical conception of god is one that places primacy in fugitive Blackness—theological and terrestrial—and critiques, even threatens, the sanctity of god.

Joe Budden, who has no verse of his own in this song, recites the intro and hook, asking god to "please continue to guide, direct, and protect my niggas from the world, and from themselves." But immediately following this brief prayer, Budden calls god out for god's seeming indifference to those same "niggas": "They sent you a million prayers, you ain't answered near one"; "I'm down on both knees, Father talk to 'em please / All you put 'em through is pain, but will it ever cease?" God here is being made to answer for god's lack of response regarding the troubles god's Slaughterhouse sons have faced. Joell Ortiz in the first verse provides a list of hardships from his childhood: his cocaine addicted mother, ill-fitting clothes and disheveled appearance, absent father, insufficient funds to pay for heating during winter months, cheap canned Beefaroni for dinner every night, and a dying grandmother. All of which he can only respond to in the form of the recurring echo interposed throughout each verse: "Oh it's a shame baby, baby." This "it's a shame," a veritable "tisk, tisk" and shaking of the head at the troubled experiences recited, because of its echoed and seemingly ethereal and omniscient characterization, can be read as god's response as well. Since god "ain't answered near one" of their prayers one is led to believe that god is also merely looking on in indifference or impotence saying "it's a shame."

Royce Da 5'9"'s verse, which follows Ortiz's, accosts the world and, more importantly, accosts god. Royce is under no illusions about the consequences of his actions as they pertain to his afterlife sentence: because he "pop[s] pills, abuse[s] liquor, and kill[s] niggas" he is under the impression that he is "going to Hell in a hand-basket." Perhaps this was his first-class ride to "the city where sinners dwell." But simply because he believes himself to be Hellbound does not mean he will never see god. In fact, he notes in the following bar, "When I die, God ain't gon' judge, he gon' deal with us," making clear that god is in no way off the hook. Royce does not ascribe to an image of god that fashions god as perfect, inscrutable, or off the hook. God will have to deal with Royce rather than judge him. In essence, Royce revokes god's right to arbitrate, which calls into question god's omnipotence and imbues Royce and his lyrical Blackness with a power that exceeds god's, and demands that god "deal" with him, meaning that god will have to answer to Royce, not vice versa, possibly by way of a kind of heavenly pugilistic bout.

with the notion of how Slaughterhouse, in the actual song, foregoes a traditional hook (chorus) for the song and, in this chapter's analysis, don't need a Holy Book for their pseudo-atheistic rap lyrics either.

The final verse, *Crooked I's*, reaches the apex of the tumultuousness that characterizes ghetto life and puts this in conversation with god and angels. As a "lost soul," Crooked remarks that he's "challengin' the Devil standing at the crossroads," this being less literal than illustrative of his theo-mental state, the crossroads being a crucial point especially where a decision must be made, the Devil being a kind of tempter which he must overcome or succumb to. After getting in a shootout with a "dirty snake" Crooked finds himself at the Pearly Gates confronted by the angel Gabriel to whom Crooked "came real." One can only wonder if Gabriel listened and relayed to god a message of understanding and forgiveness – or even approbation. Crooked himself asks god if having to kill someone who accosts you and challenges one's masculine being-in-the-world is "something that [god] can't feel?" How did god respond? "My man Crooked! That's what I'm talkin' 'bout – a lame step to you, you gotta aim that steel. Break yo'self, fool!" Or was Crooked castigated and sent to Hell with alacrity? Surely Crooked's god understands his situation, one which is centered in the 'hood, a place "that'll leave your mind baffled" and "Where we put haters in the past like time travel." Crooked's 'hood and his life, which is indeed a result of that 'hood, have constructed his experiences as a "murder story" that has taken him "past Purgatory." His very life is one thoroughly pierced with murder – or, one could say with Blackness, "murder" acting as a synecdoche for all that is fugitive and subversive – and shows no ambivalence as it bypasses the limbo state of Purgatory.

Because it counters the structuring and arbitrational tenets of (white) hegemony, Blackness, then, in all its subversiveness and fugitivity, is a site of pathology. But pathology qua Blackness is extracted of its negative connotation in Hip Hop and Slaughterhouse's verses. Hip Hop is awash in the postivizing of pathological acts and states of being: to be "sick," to have a flow "so retarded," to be the "illest," to spit crack (cocaine), to have bars "so ugly," to go dumb, and to be "crazy," among other things, are all desirable qualities when rapping. In the context of Slaughterhouse's songs, pathology is beatified and venerated as pseudo-divine traits. Joell Ortiz rhymes "Pick a disease, we got it, I vomit, snuffle, and sneeze lyrics..."³⁰ Here Ortiz equates the value of Slaughterhouse's lyrical abilities to how disease-ridden they are, lyrics actually being the residue of vomiting, sniffing, and sneezing. Furthermore, the song "Asylum" off of their album *welcome to: Our House* (the implication here signifying the lunacy of their "house," that is, the familial and lyrical structure they all familiarly inhabit) casts all of Slaughterhouse, as well as Eminem, as "lunatics" who "now run the asylum" and have killed the doctors and tied up the nurses – all of this, of course, being a metaphor for how Slaughterhouse has taken over the rap game ("They've taken it over and barricaded themselves inside it") and now run it. But "sick" lyricism is not only pathologized in the form of bodily and mental pathogens; the positive pathology of lyricism ventures into the realm of de jure pathology. To be a criminal is also a valued way to fashion oneself and one's lyrics. In the same song, Crooked I eloquently raps,

³⁰ Slaughterhouse, "Onslaught 2" (E1, 2009).

*I'm predicted to bring this G shit to its pinnacle zenith, lyrical genius
So sick with ridiculous English, niggas get squeamish
When they hear this criminal linguist...*

Again, Crooked draws on the “sickness” that makes lyrics in fact good, but he also makes linguistic criminality a desirable lyrical quality as well, illegal—or renegade—linguistic behavior making the artist more credible and valuable in the Hip Hop realm. Royce Da 5'9" even goes so far as shrouding lyricism itself in criminal activity, comparing it to illegal drugs: “I’m a lyrical ounce of piff!,” he says, equating himself and his lyrics to an ounce of a potent strain of marijuana. And of course the valorization of incarceration cannot be overlooked as to have been imprisoned in the U.S. prison industrial complex has become almost a rite of passage and badge of gangsterness in hardcore rap. But imprisonment’s glorification extends beyond the physical and into the linguistic and meta-lyrical realm as well: you have to bring your hottest “bars,” write so truthfully that you “put [your] life in this *sentence* like a convicted felon,”³¹ concoct those bars and sentences with your “pen,” and the entirety of one’s lyrical canon is metaphorically catalogued on their Hip Hop “rap” sheet.

Biblically, then, the positive connotation imbued into “Black” lyrics subverts and usurps the “pure white” (à la Amiri Baraka)³² discourse permeating Christianity in particular. As the Christian color dichotomy, many scholars have noted, has been used to demonize Blackness—indeed, *create* Blackness, that is, a Blackness that was epidermalized as all that was said to be “perverse”—Slaughterhouse’s lyrics invert that dichotomization and deem Blackness desirable and that which is of value. They supplant an “Egyptian ankh” for the Christian cross, reconfiguring it as a “Kemetic cross,” which Crooked I himself said is supposed to signify how

Kemet is the name for Alkebulan, which we call Africa. Before it was taken over by different continents and countries, Africa was referred to as Alkebulan. The Kemetic cross is another term for the Egyptian ankh, which is the symbol of life. If you’re a Christian you wear a cross to symbolize what you believe in: I wear a Kemetic cross. It’s a way of dealing with the motherland and origins: I’m a combination of Semitic and Kemetic.³³

³¹ Los, “Moment for Life” (*Freestyle*) (Platinum Records, 2011).

³² Amiri Baraka, “Dope,” accessed November 3, 2014, <http://poem.oftheweek.org/?p=4>. This is an allusion to Baraka’s poem “Dope,” in which he sardonically comments on the biblical rhetoric in the context of the constant denial of white supremacy and blaming of Black people for their plights: “It must be the Devil!” the refrain goes as a sarcastic response to the ever-present denials. Toward the end of the poem he alludes to the world-denying Christian imperative (“It’s all gon’ be good once you die,” Baraka say, “yo soul be clean, be washed pure white” once you get to Heaven, after experiencing Hell on Earth, so to speak.

³³ Kxng Crooked, “Slaughterhouse – Y’all Ready Know Lyrics | Genius,” 2014, <http://genius.com/4297920/Slaughterhouse-yall-ready-know/Egyptian-ankh-hanging-thats-my-kemetic-cross>. The full line, for context, is “Jewish tats on my arm like a Semitic boss / Egyptian ankh hangin’, that’s my Kemetic cross.”

Crooked I *crosses* over from the Christian discourse into a Blackened theological terrain that rewrites the Christian one and, effectively, Blackens it. As the historical locus of darkness and Blackness, Africa here is figured as the site of salvation—salvation becomes Black.

Linguistic Weaponry

"The most powerful part about me [hip hop] is my spirit – the spirit of resistance. Of rebellion against oppression. An outlaw." – MK Asante's personified Hip Hop, *It's Bigger Than Hip-Hop*

"Ayo! I shoulda been out, I'm deadly when I pull the pen out." – Big L, "Size 'Em Up"

Rappers specialize in harnessing their words in order to effect change and perform acts that cast them in a particular identificatory light. Hip Hop lyrics are veritable speech acts that often *do* what they say. To rhyme about how one has killed, fucked, and slang crack is to, in part, perform those acts, authenticating one's Hip Hop persona and sedimenting the "truth" of one's lyrically described life. The Hip Hop lyric has profound powers: as a form of truth-telling, to rap about deeds and acts is to speak those deeds and acts into existence. This lyrical "double duty"—being musical entertainment and cleverness while also alluding to the realities of the artists' historical experiences—works in the context of artists' Hip Hop personas (stage names) being not separate identities but extensions of the same agent: "the logic is an extension rather than a negation. Alias, a.k.a.; the names describe a process of loops. From A to B and back again. Dig beneath what lies on the surface only to arrive where you started."³⁴ Royce Da 5'9" is not a person unto himself but rather an altered iteration of Ryan Montgomery (his birth name), a limb, if you will, stemming from a single agential source. Therefore, it is believed that what Royce raps, Ryan has also felt, seen, heard, and did.

These words spewing from artists' mouths into microphones and broadcast to the masses after being sent to mastering and fine-tuned act as studied, researched, peer-reviewed narratives. Truth is a barometer of sorts for the impact of lyrics; rappers that spout lies are denigrated for their linguistic injustices: "I don't care if my profit rise, 'long as I prophesize, / 'long as I'm the nonfiction documentary and you the nigga that dramatize," says Crooked I.³⁵ Hip Hop lyrics are not merely words—they are Word. "Come on! You know I'm proud to' be Black / And *my Word is born*."³⁶ The Word is

³⁴ DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid, "The Idiot—A Freestyle," in *Rhythm Science* (MIT Press, 2004).

³⁵ Slaughterhouse, "I Ain't Bullshittin'" (Shady Records, 2014).

³⁶ Run-D.M.C., *Word Is Born*, 1990. The popular Hip Hop phrase "word is born" started with Run-D.M.C. and essentially means that something is new and important, or serves as a way to say "truth be told." It derives from John 1:1, which reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word then answers, "I am the way and the truth and the life." "Word is born" is to speak truth, to give language—the Word—to such a divinely truthful event.

“the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) and Hip Hop is the vehicle for that Word, it speaks that truth, and gives resounding life to those whose lives were historically silenced.

And this Word, like much of Hip Hop’s utilization of hegemonic forms of language, is altered, “Blackened” one could say. Rather than the clean Word of the biblical terrain, Slaughterhouse enacts a “ghetto-Word”: the gritty, filthy, martial Word that, while speaking truth to the “sinners” of “Lucifer’s property,” also redefine the meaning of truth as that which is bound by Black life. The ghetto-Word is akin to Amiri Baraka’s militarization of poetic words: ghetto-Words are “like fists beating niggers out of Jocks”; ghetto-Words are

"[Words] that kill."
Assassin [Words], [Words] that shoot
guns. [Words] that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out...³⁷

Slaughterhouse deploys this ghetto-Word most explicitly in their songs “Sound Off” and “Lyrical Murderers.” “Sound Off” has militaristic resonances in its musical backdrop as military trumpets play as if to fire up the troops, the chorus has the military “hut!” ad-libbed in the background, and the lyrics ooze bellicosity. The song that rapgenius.com calls a “sort of blitzkrieg punch in your mouth,” “Sound Off” is a loaded semi-automatic that fires nonstop for almost six minutes. Coming out the gates “run[ning] up on you with an army” brandishing a style that’s “Stalin mixed with sick lyrics,” Slaughterhouse takes their ghetto-Word and uses it in the same way one uses a loaded gun to another’s head. Their words “[come] outta the barrel of my fifth [*click-click-BANG sound*].” The Word is a deadly type of ammunition that can indeed kill; rap lyrics are what Royce Da 5’9” calls “gun harmonizing” — “every bullet’s a note”; “that trigger’s my tongue.”³⁸

“Lyrical Murderers” puts forth the same kind of fatal lyrics. In it, they “bring them verbal Llamas³⁹ out.” Let’s lay ‘em out: “With the double-edged triple syllable sword, I’m iller than or – / – dinary, see I’m a literary genius / Bury niggas with words, a cemetery linguist”; “We them copycat killers, unleashing venom / Commit them lyrical murders and then we re-commit ‘em”; “Independently penning the best words that were ever said / The mixture of Leatherhead and Everclear”;⁴⁰ “This is lyrical murder / Me and every track have a physical merger when I stab it in the chest, I’mma

³⁷ Amiri Baraka, “Black Art,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Valerie A. Smith, Third edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

³⁸ Royce Da 5’9”, “Gun Harmonizing” (M.I.C. Records; One Records, 2006).

³⁹ A “Llama” has become slang for a gun in the Hip Hop world, primarily because of the gun distributor Llama Firearms.

⁴⁰ Royce is referring to Leatherface—the Texas chainsaw murderer—but uses Leatherhead to maintain the internal rhyme with “said” in the previous bar.

bit of a curver / So it bleeds to death, like the middle of a unfinished burger." Their "verbal Llamas" protect them from harm and off any other artist who attempts to cross them. Royce even invites his crew to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," a citation from Psalm 23:4, because, instead of an ineffectual god whose "rod and...staff comfort me," all the protection they would need is their murderous lyrics. God falls behind their linguistic weaponry in effectiveness. Stand in the way of sick lyricism at your own risk.⁴¹

And even while god wanes in effectiveness, falling behind that of their lyrics, these very lyrics become scriptural, dirty-sacred, messy-sanctimonious. The Gospel becomes one that is militarized and weaponized: "I'm about that Art of War Gospel," Royce Da 5'9" says in "Y'all Ready Know," "that Basquiat Picasso drawing a Roscoe / Usin' the blood of a usual thug..." Royce himself explains the lyrics' meaning on genius.com:

When you say gospel it automatically puts you in the mindframe of "preach." When you read that book, the Art of War, you know that's some real shit. Real spit. Basquiat Picasso puts you in the mindframe of being artistic, and then draw is a play on words: you can draw with a paintbrush and you can draw a Roscoe.⁴²

Joell Ortiz responds on the same site "Basically, just the dopest shit ever." Guest contributor Tyrant gives even more insight into the lyrics:

With reference to Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, plus painters Jean-Michel Basquiat and Picasso – Royce describes himself as a lyrical killer. From drawing in a literal sense, to drawing a roscoe (gun) – Nickel Nine's weapon of choice is his pen. Put your money on Royce! His raps are so dope that he paints a lyrical masterpiece in the blood of his enemies.⁴³

The Gospel becomes an "art of war," a blueprint of sorts for surviving in the gritty streets of Black life. Just as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John provide guidance through troubled times, and inspiration for Bible-readers, Royce's Gospel is one that guides one through a world that is hostile and filled with gunshots. Further, he conflates the Haitian-American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat with Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, a way to Blacken Western artistic expression, and likens painting—that form of art so saturated with connotations of the apogee of Western artistic intelligence—to *drawing* a gun, which stands in as a Black signifier. Royce effectively situates the "Gospel," the Word, in Black ghetto life. Moreover, Royce uses "the blood of a usual thug," rather

⁴¹ It should be noted that the comparison of lyrics to deadly ammunition is pervasive in Hip Hop: Eminem has a song called "My Words Are Weapons"; Anilyst, a relatively underground Hip Hop artist, raps, "I don't claim I'm a killer, but I murder syllables / I don't turn for my burner my words are killable"; Jarren Benton spits, "Every word I spit is murder on the page of this tablet"; Joell Ortiz: "I do niggas harm with these bars"; and Crooked I says that "Crooked's verses put 'em in hearses call 'em funeral bars."

⁴² "Slaughterhouse, Y'all Ready Know Lyrics | Genius," *Genius*, 2014, <http://genius.com/Slaughterhouse-yall-ready-know-lyrics/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

than the purifying blood of a Christ-like figure. A usual thug – that subject so mired in thoughts of perversity and criminality – is who will be used, presumably, to sanctify the world via the Gospel. The Gospel is the thug's – a thug Gospel.

The stakes are high for Black ghetto-Words, that is, Blackened language that subverts and casts prophetic light. Not only does Slaughterhouse's rhymes have the potential to "Bite your ear with a syllable, lay a hook that'll finish you,"⁴⁴ the fugitive nature of the ghetto-Word disrupts the very foundation of the traditional Word. As Joell Ortiz says, "they say the tongue is the perfect weapon."⁴⁵ Indeed it is: the tongue – particularly the Black tongue; the tongue that shrouds its words in subversive, weaponized meanings; the ghetto-Word – possesses the ability to foment revolution, violence, and uproar. The ghetto-Word is deeply Black as, in Gloria Anzaldúa's words, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language"; the Black tongue is a "tongue of fire." And "Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified."⁴⁶ Speaking with these tongues of fire, with this ghetto-Word, and drawing on the confessional, truth-telling nature of Hip Hop language as stated earlier, it becomes all the more striking considering the stark parallel between rappers throwing down rhymes in the studio booth and the Catholic confession booth, a site of truth-telling and confession. Instead of speaking one's sins to a proxy for god and asking for forgiveness, rappers enter the booth and spit that shit raw, speaking themselves for themselves while others get to listen in on the divine conversation, divine insofar as the artists themselves are the locus of importance rather than a heavenly god; the artist is not a deified saint like B.I.G. and Pac but rather something better, a "mixture of me and me."⁴⁷

The power of the ghetto-Word extends deep into a divine-like realm, drawing from the discourse of heaven and imbuing that divine ethos into the Word of the streets. As stated, the ghetto-Word and Hip Hop is a form of truth-telling, hence why rapping is the medium through which Royce can "...tell it like it is, fuck it, it's my Jeremiah (W)right."⁴⁸ The words that Slaughterhouse spits have meaning not because of god but because of the approval of other Black lyricists, fugitive wordsmiths, and "'hood niggas." Since identities and the "sickness" of lyrics are determined in large part by others – and those others that matter here are respected rap artists – the measure of one's linguistic dexterity is decided by the legends of Hip Hop culture, gods in a sense. Joell Ortiz raps, "ain't shabby with the nouns, . . . ain't shitty with the verbs / when I reach heaven I

⁴⁴ Joell Ortiz and Slaughterhouse, "Weight Scale" (Shady Records, 2012).

⁴⁵ Slaughterhouse, *Offshore* (Shady Records, 2014).

⁴⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, 1990, 203–11.

⁴⁷ Slaughterhouse - Funkmaster Flex Freestyle Part 2/2, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeLjBHnSIPk>.

⁴⁸ Royce Da 5'9", *I'm Me Freestyle*, 2008. An allusion to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who is notable for his media controversy of delivering a caustic sermon in which he stated, in the context of overly patriotic rhetoric at the expense of wrestling with America's historical racial injustices, "God damn America!"

want that nigga Biggie to be like 'Word.'"⁴⁹ Here, clever lyricism is equated with the utter divinity of god's Word. But god is replaced with someone much more important: Hip Hop legend Biggie Smalls (Notorious B.I.G.). The "shabbiness" or "shittiness" of Ortiz's words rests on whether the eternally venerated Biggie Smalls gives them his (or, "His") approval—whether Ortiz's words meets the requirements to qualify them as Word, as ghetto-Word.

Ortiz further showcases the waning need for god as opposed to the Black ghetto-Word, rapping in Slaughterhouse's song "Sun Doobie," "As long as I got my pen I don't need a friend, / we got ears that we each'll lend each other..." The physical manifestation of his ghetto-Word—the pen—serves the function god is said to, which is provide an ever-present listening ear. God's Word is supplanted by Ortiz's own Word spilling from his pen. The ink that stains the notepad of his rhyme book is truly Black: subversive of the whiteness, that is, hegemony, of the traditional god, the transcendental signified.

The ink from their pens proves to not only do the work of god but also the work of Jesus. As stated above, the pen listens to the lyrical prayers of the artists, but it is also their messiah. On a literal level, writing—an act of self-creation and for many a means of escaping the hellish environment of violent ghettos—has literally saved a number of artists from gang life. Symbolically, the pen's ink is the salvific blood that is shed for Slaughterhouse each time they write their rhymes—"I don't write, I kill a pen, leak its blood on the page," Crooked I says in the group's first song together, "Slaughterhouse." Instead of the blood of Christ, Slaughterhouse offers the ink of their pens as that which saved their world: "my ink take 'em to church, / guess you could call it Pentecostal," "this music so therapeutic, it could be our religion."⁵⁰ And since ink is the saving grace of these Hip Hop artists, it would follow that the words that this ink pens are divine, truly Word, truly *logos*, that is, Word and Way. They are "Messiah[s] of a dying art" who in "Cut You Loose"⁵¹ lament the fallen state of Hip Hop—" (What's goin on?) I thought you had to be mad nice, / but apparently you could be trash as long as you look good and have ice"; "this rap shit done gone a different way"; "Think I'd rather be water-boarded (you feel me?) / than to listen to what y'all recorded (for real, G)" — which parallels the biblical Fall of humanity. Slaughterhouse has come to save rap; Slaughterhouse is the Father that gives their one begotten son—their lyrics—to save the Hip Hop world. The divine "I" is no longer "the way, the truth, and the life," but Royce, Crooked, Joell, and Joey are. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that Joell Ortiz's catchphrase "Yaowa," a neologism he inserts into almost every song and is meaningless (in response to the question "What does 'Yaowa' mean?" Joe Budden interjects and gives a terse answer: "Not a fuckin' thing"),⁵² sounds so similar to the biblical god,

⁴⁹ Slaughterhouse, "Onslaught 2."

⁵⁰ Slaughterhouse, *Get Up* (Shady Records; Interscope Records, 2012); Slaughterhouse, *Ill Mind Interlude* (Shady Records, 2014).

⁵¹ Slaughterhouse, "Cut You Loose" (E1, 2009).

⁵² As well, however, Ortiz has said that "Yaowa" can also stand for "You're actually one world away."

Yahweh. With the utter biblical nature of their lyrics, with each album Slaughterhouse produces they are, in effect, writing and publishing a new kind of Bible, one in which god, Yahweh, means “not a fuckin’ thing.”

Infidels

“Dresses?! Nah, man. . . .What good is lookin’ fly if you rappin’ like a bum?” – Joell Ortiz, “Interview with Jenny Boom Boom”

And yet one can imagine that any religious grouping is deemed such by way of distinguishing itself from those who fall outside of its religious limits, in other words, by determining those who are so-called “infidels,” “heathens,” and “apostates.” First, Slaughterhouse creates the boundaries of their own “inside” by way of house, gang, and family metaphors. Not only in their group name are they constructing an inside that separates their “house” from those outside of it, their songs contain a number of house, gang, and family allusions and denotations that do this work as well. From their album *welcome to: Our House*; to their self-appointed group nickname “house gang,” which operates familiarly on the level of the gang and the structure that contains the family; to lyrical religious references like “house gang, rap’s holy alliance,” the interconnectedness of each Slaughterhouse member’s mereological importance to the group as a whole – “we merged, we’re an alliance... / Crooked I’s equivalent to four arms. / Joell Ortiz is the body... / Joe Budden is the pair of legs / he run shit alongside I, the apparent head” – which both bears resemblance to the Christian notion of members of the church being part of the body of Christ, as well as the 5% Nation and the Moorish Science Temple of America’s rendering of A.L.L.A.H. (Arm, Leg, Leg, Arm, Head), an acronym Crooked I echoes in “Wack MCs,” saying “I Malcolm X the track, that mean arm-leg-leg-arm-head / Body the beat, the torso too, heh” – all of these instances cast the group’s members as a family, a collective community against which those who do not fit in with them are deemed outsiders or, more perniciously, negatively connoted infidels and “non-believers.”

Slaughterhouse’s ghetto-religious clique also has its own version of the well-known Ten Commandments. But rather than tenets forbidding coveting neighbors’ wives or stealing, they have “House Rules” that dictate their conduct:

[Royce] *Uh, no phones inside the telly, pics inside the celly
Baby, you know the House Rules.*

[Joell Ortiz] *Yeah, respect over a dollar, death before dishonor,
Partner, you know the House Rules.*

[Crooked I] *Uh, if I'm up you can't be down and I'm down
to tear shit up for you, homie, you know the House Rules.*

[Joe Budden] *Yeah, all bitches with flat stomachs, no cars under a hundred*

*My nigga, you know the House Rules!*⁵³

These tenets, or “House Rules,” demarcate the limits of acceptable behavioral conduct, less authoritative than the Ten Commandments, more concerned with loyalty to one another and others involved in the Hip Hop world considering the repeated familial terms (baby, partner, homie, my nigga). This sets them up as a collective governed, however loosely, by a certain set of rules and codes of conduct that distinguish them from others, from infidels.

As a “four-headed monster,” Slaughterhouse, as fleshed out throughout this essay, serves as a kind of perverse site of fugitive divinity and godliness. As such, they buttress that divinity by casting others as antithetical to their godliness, thus making those others heathens and infidels, in effect. Crooked I labels himself “Sinister LBC [Long Beach California],” who “came to give ‘em Hell / I’m Judg[ment] day, I’m judgin’ all you infidels” thereby making him the ultimate determiner of the quality of people’s souls in this allusion to the Christian rapture, Judgment Day, on which day Crooked I, not god, will judge the sins of the infidels. But what form do these infidels take? For Slaughterhouse’s conception of Hip Hop, the veritable biblical milieu of their world, those who flout their codes of conduct are not adulterers or idol-worshipers but primarily “rappers in skirts” and “ringtone rappers.” Most people who have any awareness of Hip Hop’s reputation know of its sexist and misogynist aspects, which here act as Hip Hop’s “thou shalt not”s. Slaughterhouse, for example, like many Hip Hop artists, make liberal use of the term “bitch.” Joe Budden offers a justification for its use, noting that “bitch is not gender-specific.” An interesting but unconvincing rationale as “bitch” denigrates women by virtue of its historical use and implied denigration of female subjectivity, and men (or even trans folks) by likening them to women, who themselves are seen as gender-ontologically inferior. (One wonders if Budden would say that with the term “nigger.” If a white dude goes around calling Black folks niggers or niggas and says, like *The Boondocks* character Ed Rummy [who is also white, but whose voice is played by Samuel L. Jackson], “Don’t start trippin’ and shit calling me a racist, ‘cause I don’t mean nigga in a disrespectful way. I mean it as a general term for ign’ant muhfucka,” one can imagine he wouldn’t fair too well if confronted with the at-times volatile Joe Budden.)

In response to Budden’s justification, Black female Hip Hop scholar Tricia Rose asserts:

If you wanna find the most blatant, celebrated brand of sexism against Black women – let me go back to that, Mr. Slaughterhouse; I appreciate being called a young lady in some ways, but in other ways I am a full professor and I would appreciate that to be on the record – but unless we can take very seriously the degree to which Black women's bodies, and Black male bodies, are

⁵³ Slaughterhouse, “House Rules” (Shady Records, 2014).

celebrated *only and primarily* when they capitulate to these narrow images, we're doing Hip Hop no favor by making room for that over and over again.⁵⁴

Through this exchange, we see that Joe Budden, and Slaughterhouse by proxy (in the video Joell Ortiz sits next to Budden and approvingly gesticulates), deeply disapprove of the academic reception of their work, particularly the charges of misogyny, sexism, and toxic masculinity. To these charges, Slaughterhouse, like the originary origins of U.S. Hip Hop, gives a big "Fuck you."⁵⁵

Any sign of femininity or effeminacy in Hip Hop's hypermasculine terrain is an immoral act, a blasphemous sin that shrouds its enactor in the miasma of abomination and infidelity, inviting the appellation of "bitch," a fraught phenomenon as indicated by the exchange between Budden and Rose. As such, rappers in skirts, used most by Joell Ortiz, are used as effete caricatures against which he buttresses his own masculinity. For Ortiz to say "Skinny jeans don't mean yo ass shoots, / it means your booty claps" or "you fashion rappers wear the kind of jeans that hardly get zipped" is for him to define his own holy Hip Hop masculinity against the derogated "femininity" of rappers who wear skinny jeans at the expense of devoting more time to lyricism rather than fashion trends. Under the umbrella of "rappers in skirts," Ortiz deploys typical feminization of other artists as a way to gain masculine brownie points and, in the context of Slaughterhouse's redefined capital "G"-Godless holiness, demarcate where their divinity ends and others' religious infidelity to "real" (or more accurately "reel") 'hood-nigga-gangster-thug Hip Hop begins. Secondly, "ringtone rappers" are those who seek only to make money by creating a catchy song, one that sounds good as a cellphone ringtone. Slaughterhouse implies that these artists defile the name of Hip Hop artists and put up no lyrical challenge; ringtone rap is bereft of lyrical complexity, lacking the clout given by "real" Hip Hop canonization by Slaughterhouse-as-musical gatekeeper. Ringtone rappers' lyrics are akin to apocryphal biblical texts, those books that were deemed unfit, or too unholy, to go into the divine Hip Hop Word.

And these infidels are given biblical faces as well. A metonym for all who don't ascribe to Slaughterhouse's conception of Hip Hop or possess inadequate lyrical skill, infidels are also those who naively challenge Slaughterhouse and think they can

⁵⁴ See Aaron McGruder, "Let's Nab Oprah," *The Boondocks*, 2005 and *versusdebates, Joe Budden versus Professor Tricia Rose!*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW_ZRO9aoTQ. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵For more about Slaughterhouse's relation with academics, see Andres Tardio, "Slaughterhouse: Rap In The Key Of Life," *HipHopDX*, August 12, 2009, /interviews/id.1391/title.slaughterhouse-rap-in-the-key-of-life. In this interview, Ortiz notes that he attributes the downfall of his academics to "the decision to not go to college with academic scholarships on the table and some athletic scholarships also. I think at that time," Ortiz says, "I don't think I made the smart decision, but I think I made the right decision. My mom was going through some things with her drug addiction and I just didn't want to be off away in school and get some kind of phone call or letter like, 'You gotta come see your mother.'" As well, Budden remarks that "My academics went wrong because I was smart. I was way ahead of the class...I was way smarter than everybody else in the class so my attention span was very short so I would go in there to crack jokes. The teachers never liked that. They always used to call my mom from school like, 'We see the potential! He's such a bright, bright kid. If he could just...' You know, that story. Until, I dropped out."

lyrically spar with them. Joe Budden and Joell Ortiz were unwaveringly confident that no other artists were on Slaughterhouse's level. When Funkmaster Flex off-handedly states "I don't know if a lot of you rappers, MCs...are touchin' this [Slaughterhouse's aforerapped freestyle], man," Budden and Ortiz interject with "*Budden*: They're not. *Ortiz*: They not. *Budden*: They're not. Let's be clear on that one. Let's remove the 'I don't know.'"⁵⁶ If these proverbial rappers who aren't touching Slaughterhouse's rhymes were to indeed try to touch them, the group would see it as a foolish act; they'd be, to quote Crooked I, "Foolish as Judas, nigga you're lost, / now I'm feeling like Black Jesus, wrong nigga to cross."⁵⁷ It is apposite that Crooked I compares artists who challenge his divine lyricism to he who ultimately betrayed Jesus (Jesus being the synecdoche for all that is holy): Judas Iscariot. As Black Jesus, Crooked I – and Slaughterhouse as a whole, since they are all parts of the same (ho)lyrical body – is the "wrong nigga to cross," meaning obviously one who others shouldn't make angry or wrong in any way but also the wrong person to crucify – to literally put on a cross – which signifies the taint with which Black-Jesus blood would saturate the world, rather than the salvific blood of the biblical Jesus. Crooked I's or any one of Slaughterhouse's members' crucifixion would "Ghettoize" the world.

Slaughterhouse's lyrics assert a discursivity that empties "God" of the deified, pristine, omnipotent ethos said to characterize the religious deity. God, in the lyrics of Slaughterhouse, is disjointed and rendered shallow, un-god, hollow. Herein lies the atheistic strain I argue. Slaughterhouse lyrically speaks a-theos ("without god") insofar as they shift the importance often given religious holy divinity to embodied Black life and, in a sense, terrestrially carry out what Nas says in "Halftime": "'Cause when it's my time to go / I'll wait for God with the .44." Slaughterhouse does the previous work of god, indeed, performs god-ness themselves by creating themselves ("How's Tyler the Creator when I keep reinventing myself!").⁵⁸ Through their lyrical ghetto-Word, linguistic fugitivity, and radical rewriting of theological language, Slaughterhouse voids god of, well, god.

⁵⁶ Slaughterhouse, *Freestyle – Hot 97 With Funkmaster Flex*, 2011.

⁵⁷ Slaughterhouse, "Get Up."

⁵⁸ Slaughterhouse, *Freestyle – Hot 97 With Funkmaster Flex*. Here, Budden plays on the Hip Hop artist Tyler the Creator's name, using him as a stand in for artists who claim to recreate and reinvent the Hip Hop game and playing on the last part of his name – The Creator – to allude to the popular conception of god as "The Creator" of everything. The implication, then, is that Budden does not need other artists telling him that they are doing significant lyrical work in Hip Hop but also he does not need a god commanding his perennial becoming because he, Joe Budden, does that for himself.

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Hip Hop Videos and Black Identity in Virtual Space

Joel Rubin

In this paper, I present an understanding of music videos as useful representations of the dynamism of blackness and black identity and in fact indicative of a post-regional turn in Hip Hop. In order to illustrate, I first examine how blackness is expressed in physical space with the advent of New York City's block parties and the Bay Area's "hyphy" movement. I then situate the importance of the music video in a contemporary understanding of visualized culture in virtual space. Applying this understanding to the performance and perception of blackness, I use the example of Canadian Hip Hop artist Drake's journey of self-representation and identification, following the trajectory of his career through music video creation. In doing so, I argue that technological innovation serves as the moment and the means to visualise evolving identity as is articulated by Hip Hop and the music video.

Blackness as an identity has never been fixed to place but rather finds itself articulated through space and, more importantly, time. Movement has defined black identity and served as an origin in and of itself. Simultaneously, technology has provided Hip Hop and the black community with the necessary vehicle to communicate the fluidity of American blackness. In this paper, I argue that technological innovation serves as the moment and the means to visualise evolving identity as is articulated by Hip Hop and the music video.

While plenty has been written on the political, economic, social and sexual nature of Hip Hop and its contribution to underscoring the black experience in North America, often the narrative is simply essentialised into monolithic blackness with a fixity rooted in time, as if to present an identity that is static and unchanging. I argue that further exploration of the music video as a tool will aid in the effort to problematize a monolithic black American narrative that has been fixed in time. I will first explore Paul Gilroy's work on the Black Atlantic, which frames the background of black music's emergence directly as a consequence of enslavement and forced migration out of West Africa.¹ I will then briefly explore two case studies, which relate a spatial understanding of contemporary Hip Hop movements and resistance in American cities. I will then pursue a critical analysis of the music video as a tool and emerging art form, which is useful in representing the black experience in virtual space. Lastly, an analysis of one artist's journey of self-representation and identification through music video production will challenge the temporal fixity of this experience, one that is often misconceived as "doggedly monocultural, national and ethnocentric,"² and provide insight into an understanding of blackness that defies Hip Hop regionalism and archaic geographic binaries.

The ubiquity of the screen is undeniable. Resting in our pockets, on our desks, and next to us when we sleep; screens have become the first thing we see in the morning and the last thing we check at night. Thus spatially, the screen has become

¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993)

² *Ibid.*, 80.

more pervasive and the visual, more powerful. Doreen Massey writes that, "As a result of the fact that it is conceptualized as created out of social relations, space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation."³ It is precisely this concept of space that I will apply to the scope of this paper. In doing so, I hope to address the following questions: Where is black identity contested? How is black identity asserted? What role do music videos have in representing black identity?

The Music Video

The music video has been overlooked as simply a by-product of an overly commercialised music industry. Relegating it to the status of commercial rather than art, however, detracts from meaning and, consequently, as Diane Railton and Paul Watson contend in their work on the music video and the politics of representation, "academic work on music video is not common."⁴ I argue that the music video is important as a site of technological advancement as well as an articulation of spatial presence. Through an exploration of these elements, the usefulness of the music video as an instrument to articulate identity will become evident.

No longer confined to cable television programming and MTV-curated playlists that dominated the television screens of the 1980s and 1990s, the advent of mobile technology has created a venue whereby artists can produce music videos that necessarily challenge previously enforced restrictions and censorship rules. Additionally, videos can challenge the tastes of image producers who previously held the reigns in video production and distribution. Consumers are not forced to adhere to the old top-down system of media distribution and, as technology democratises the process of production and consumption, "the same technological infrastructure that allows record companies to promote their products more widely [enables] consumers to circumvent these official channels of broadcast and, instead, redistribute the music videos which they deem significant."⁵ Railton and Watson contend that this process allows music videos to experience a much longer shelf life and to find reintroduction into pop culture more readily due to their immediate availability on websites that host content and make it available, largely, for free such as Youtube and Vimeo.⁶ More importantly, contemporary video production is able to easily bypass corporate taste making and produce more culturally salient work. This process of democratisation has provided black artists the ability to hire black production companies to better articulate their own identity. Baldwin writes, "Due to video training, these positions have

³Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile, (London: Routledge, 1993), 156.

⁴ Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

bypassed the white male unions that control apprenticeship systems and employment networks."⁷

The prominence of the music video also rests in its accessibility. When the desktop computer became mobile in the first decade of the twenty-first century, media achieved emancipation from the living room and screens began to occupy public space. Railton and Watson take this even further: "Indeed, in the planning and organisation of the social environment the design and management of screen light is often seen to be every bit as vital as the design and management of natural light."⁸ Thus the video is no longer consumed as a secondary product but rather as primary content. Additionally, the impact of an increasingly visualised culture requires that we examine the visual with a more nuanced approach. Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff contends that, "This globalisation of the visual, taken collectively, demands new means of interpretation."⁹ Mirzoeff's work on the exploration of the visual reinforces the cultural impact of the music video and necessitates a stronger focus on visual content production. If we are to comprehend the music video's power as a tool, we must first explore the role of music in black movement.

Black Movement, Music, and (Post) Regionality

Hip Hop has had a considerable amount of influence in the communication of black identity in North America. To better understand this phenomenon, attention must be paid to the migratory nature of black music, which has always been characterised by movement. Artist KRS-One raps on the track "Hip Hop Lives," "Hip and Hop is more than music / Hip is the knowledge, hop is the movement / Hip and Hop is intelligent movement."¹⁰ But the movement we're discussing here is not restricted to dance; rather it is related to the manner in which Hip Hop emerged as a result of black migration across the Atlantic and the resulting flows of music and style from Africa to North America and from North America back to Europe and beyond.¹¹

Gilroy's argument in his chapter "Jewels Brought from Bondage," asserts that music and musical style were the only forms of language that were transportable for enslaved Africans coming to the new world. In what he refers to as the "Topos of Unsayability," Gilroy contends that inaccessibility to traditional western forms of literacy gave black music disproportional importance as it replaced written and spoken language.¹² The mobility of music and its ability to trespass social and linguistic lines lent Hip Hop its necessary rootedness in intertextuality. Stuart Hall remarks that this

⁷ Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," *Black Renaissance* 2.2 (1999), 156.

⁸ Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), 7.

⁹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

¹⁰ KRS-One, *Hip Hop Lives*, Koch Records, 2007, MP3.

¹¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993)

¹² *Ibid.*, 74.

tendency is part and parcel of “the black experience as a diaspora experience, ...the consequences which this carries for the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and ‘cut-and-mix’ – in short, the process of cultural *diasporia-zation* which it implies.”¹³ The reduction of black identity to one idea is impossible. Gilroy remarks that there can be no one “totalising conception of black culture” and that to believe that such an identity could exist only detracts from the complexities of black identity. He further explains that “what is more significant for present purposes is that in the Africentric discourse on which both sides of opinion draw, the idea of a diaspora composed of communities that are both similar *and* different tends to disappear . . .”¹⁴ Gilroy’s concept of diaspora mirrors the contemporary shift in what I term “post-regional Hip Hop” geography. For Gilroy and Hall, there is a tension in the implicit desire to articulate blackness while simultaneously allowing for an evolving experience upon which the black diaspora is rooted.

While region-specific Hip Hop gained visibility through music video proliferation and as consumption of music has shifted from purely aural to a mixture of aural and visual, I argue that Hip Hop has entered a post-regional phase wherein the virtual space of the internet and mobile media have allowed artists to dissolve regional borders and foster more fluid identities. The popularity of a song is now measured in views on Youtube rather than plays on the radio. Hip Hop regionalism, in a sense, has become obsolete as Kendrick Lamar (from Los Angeles) can insist that “I’m Makaveli’s offspring / I’m the King of New York / King of the Coast, one hand, I juggle them both”¹⁵ while Drake (from Toronto), boasts that, “All my exes live in Texas like I’m George Strait / Or they go to Georgia State where, tuition is handled / By some random nigga that live in Atlanta.”¹⁶ Music videos, now a product of mobile media, directly reflect the fluidity of Hip Hop and black identity. Digital media provides Hip Hop the opportunity to defy archaic binaries and regionalism, and instead foments unity around a post-regional blackness that opposes white supremacy, police violence and deeply rooted racial inequality. With the focus of anxiety no longer directed towards other black communities, rappers like Kendrick Lamar reinvigorate claims to unified blackness with lyrics like, “I’m African-American, I’m African / I’m black as the moon, heritage of a small village / Pardon my residence / Came from the bottom of mankind” and “You sabotage my community, making a killin’ / You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga.”¹⁷ Additionally, Lamar’s lyrics mirror the anxiety and the fear of impure art, commodification and dilution while establishing the desire for “real” blackness. Earl Sweatshirt explains in the song “Chum” that he’s, “Too black for the white kids, and too white for the blacks / From honor roll to cracking locks off them

¹³ Stuart Hall, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge 1996), 447.

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 87.

¹⁵ Big Sean featuring Kendrick Lamar, *Control*, Def Jam Records, 2013, MP3.

¹⁶ Drake, *HYFR (Hell Ya Fucking Right)*, Cash Money Records, 2011, MP3.

¹⁷ Kendrick Lamar, *The Blacker The Berry*, Interscope Records, 2015, MP3.

bicycle racks / I'm indecisive, I'm scatterbrained, and I'm frightened, it's evident."¹⁸ With anxiety surrounding difference and definition, the assertion and preservation of blackness are at the heart of post-regional black identity formation. The struggle becomes that of maintaining authenticity and is best exemplified in spatial resistance. In other words, since relevance is no longer directly tied to origin, importance rests in developing authenticity by other means. In this instance it can be derived and asserted through physical resistance in space (be it physical or virtual).

Space and Authenticity

For Hip Hop artists, rooting music in place was a means of asserting authenticity. Knowing, defending and representing one's origin has persisted as a key tenet of Hip Hop music production and with the music's beginnings rooted in the South Bronx, the focus on Hip Hop relied on the New York Hip Hop scene. This reliance, or "overemphasis" as Caspar Melville and David Hesmondhalgh contend, "can lead to difficulties in accounting for other variants of Hip Hop culture, not only on the U.S. West Coast, but in Houston, in Jamaica, in Britain, and elsewhere."¹⁹ In response, the contemporary American Hip Hop scene has made a point to generate regionally specific Hip Hop sounds and styles. From Southern to Midwestern, Los Angeles to the Bay Area, success in the music industry was tied to regional representation in order to challenge the perceived homogeneity of black music and identity in America. Michael Keith and Steve Pile, introducing their collection of works on place and the politics of identity, echo this point:

Narratives of identity formation in mainstream social science have frequently spoken to an interplay of commonality and difference that erases spatiality through a homogenization of the specific – not a process of *misrepresentation* through over-generalization but instead a naturalization of particular experiences within a frequently implicit spatial frame of reference.²⁰

As the lines and divisions that forged early Hip Hop rivalries have diminished in post-regional Hip Hop culture, authenticity has remained a necessary component of Hip Hop and black identity.

Authenticity in Hip Hop has relied on purity and resistance. Davarian Baldwin, in his article on the spatial politics of identity in the age of Hip Hop, contends, "Racial authenticity is best articulated in these instances through the stance that the artistic production is pure and untouched by any means of dilution."²¹ With the following two

¹⁸ Earl Sweatshirt, *Chum*, Tan Cressida, 2012, MP3.

¹⁹David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville, "Urban Breakbeat Culture - Repercussions of Hip Hop in the United Kingdom," *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop outside the USA*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 106.

²⁰ Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), 16.

²¹ Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," *Black Renaissance 2.2* (1999): 141.

examples, I will illustrate the connection between purity, resistance and space in Hip Hop and the manner in which they inform authenticity.

The Block Party and the Sideshow

In 2005, American comedian Dave Chappelle, with French director Michel Gondry, ventured to organize (and document) a concert in the heart of one of Brooklyn's oldest black communities, Bedford Stuyvesant. The goal, Chappelle articulates in the documentary, was to bring together some of the most influential black Hip Hop artists and to stage a free performance in the centre of the historically black community. The documentary and the performances are rife with symbols and statements regarding American black identity and Hip Hop as a site of resistance.

Situating the concert in the streets of Bed Stuy, rather than a formal venue in Manhattan for example, is Chappelle's first site of resistance. He refuses to support the commodification of black music in mainstream markets and he necessarily situates the concert in a poorer community in order to emphasise his classist critique of the music industry. Davarian Baldwin, in his article "Black Empires, White Desires," explains that much of black authenticity has rested in a rejection of middle class consumptive practices. He writes that, "The gatekeepers of 'authentic blackness' are anxiety-ridden over public displays of the black good life society, exemplified in the emergence of a new hip hop identity".²² Notably, this is exemplified in the emergence of gangsta rap and "ghetto authenticity" as a rejection of "black bourgeois respectability".²³ Locating the performance within a historically black community, Chappelle attempts to preserve the purity of the music, unburdened by commercialism and distortion. Hip Hop drummer, Questlove, explains in an aside with Chappelle, "All of us have...what we have in common, is that our audience doesn't look like us. And it's the same for [Dave Chappelle]."²⁴ In other words, American black artists are faced with the predicament whereby the material they produce and intend for black audiences is being shared and consumed, largely, by white middle class communities, who are less equipped to receive or interpret the art in the manner in which the artist intended. Thus the art might not resonate with some audiences as effectively as it will with others. It is worth noting that the name of the documentary and the performance was simply "Block Party." The block party in New York has always held a very special social, political and spatial significance for poorer diaspora communities. It has served as a space for gathering, cultural exchange and of course musical performance, similar to the "autonomous black

²² Davarian Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires: The Spatial Politics of Identity in the Age of Hip Hop," *Black Renaissance* 2.2 (1999), 151.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Dave Chappelle's Block Party*, DVD, Dir. Michel Gondry (2005; Prod. Bob Yari Productions; Distr. Rogue Pictures) Film.

cultural spaces" that were created in the United Kingdom, which led to sound system culture.²⁵

Similarly, the hyphy movement in the Bay area of California emerged in the late 90s as a social movement articulating American blackness in the midst of deep social and racial inequality on the American west coast. DJ Vlad's documentary, *Ghostride the Whip*, explores the beginnings of hyphy music in the Bay Area, as well as the advent of the *Sideshow*, a term for the public displays of reckless driving, as well as music and dance specific to the Bay Area Hip Hop style. Mac Dre, the godfather of the hyphy movement, explains that the " 'Street gatherings [are] called 'sideshows'. A sideshow is just super campaigning. It's a parade. It's a mobile party. It's cats swingin em. Cats stuntin.'" ²⁶ Like the block parties of New York and the sound systems of London, the sideshows of the Bay Area provide the community with a space to explore cultural difference and to establish "autonomous black spaces" that stand in resistance to the white power structure.

Hyphy, which essentially draws its meaning from a manipulation of the word hyper, connotes an entire spirit as well as a genre of music and a style of dance. Hyphy performance is a rejection of the mainstream and an intentional deviation from what is socially acceptable. Thus the dance moves are seemingly arrhythmic and the parlance often unintelligible. Hyphy serves as a direct response to under-representation through subversion. During a *sideshow*, the driver spins his car around in circles, producing smoke in a show of prowess and symbolically asserting control over the street and public space in general. Another style of hyphy driving is called *ghostriding* whereby a driver will exit the car while it is in motion and walk alongside it for several blocks. Using the car as an instrument and the street as a canvas, the youth challenge authority and establish an identity against the perceived order. Thus hyphy is not simply a style of music or a type of dance. It is not reducible to one particular idea. Rather, it is part of the story of Hip Hop, which, as Hesmondhalgh and Melville conclude, "[can be seen] as one of a number of elements that can be recombined to make important statements about cultural identity."²⁷ Cultural theorists place a great deal of emphasis on the idea of recombination as a means of reimagining and representing identity.²⁸ We have seen Hip Hop's ability to construct identity through the subversion of physical space. Using Hip Hop videos as a tool, we can explore identity formation in virtual space as well.

Situating several videos in a post-regional context will not only provide a visual aid but will also support the claim that time and space are inextricably tied to identity

²⁵David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville, "Urban Breakbeat Culture - Repercussions of Hip Hop in the United Kingdom," *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop outside the USA* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 88.

²⁶ *Ghostride The Whip*. Dir. DJ Vlad, (Rugged Entertainment, 2008), Web.

²⁷David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville, "Urban Breakbeat Culture - Repercussions of Hip Hop in the United Kingdom," *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001), 97.

²⁸ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993); Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1996).

formation as I have introduced above. With this in mind, I turn now to four music videos, which, I assert, represent both the fluidity of black identity as well as the video's capacity to represent and communicate mobility.

Drake and the Post-Regional Rap Game

The following case study will focus on the emergence of Canada's most influential Hip Hop artist to date. Aubrey "Drake" Graham started his career in show business as a child actor on the hit Canadian teen drama, *Degrassi*. He began producing rap albums in 2007 and, with a white mother, a black father, and roots in a prominent Jewish neighbourhood in Toronto, Graham's identity has been problematic and, as a result, endured scrutiny and contestation. Following the trajectory of his career, an exploration of Drake's music videos will reveal how his identity has evolved alongside the establishment of his authenticity. I argue that, in order to be taken seriously as a Hip Hop artist, Drake had to first root his identity in obscurity and with respect to his predecessors before he could present himself as a "mixed-race" Jewish rapper from Canada. For this paper I will look at four videos in particular: "Successful," "The Motto," "HYFR" and "Started from the Bottom" produced in 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013, respectively.

The video for the song, "Successful," opens with the artist positioned in front of a blurred cityscape. Drake stares pensively out of a window but the shot focuses on the artist himself rather than following his gaze, thus the audience fails to see what he sees. The remainder of the video alternates between an interior shot to that of Drake and another artist, Trey Songz, driving through an anonymous city at night. A woman, scantily clad and shrouded in darkness, reclines on a bed while Drake and Trey Songz repeat the hook, "I want the money / Money and the cars / Cars and the clothes / I suppose / I just want to be successful." Success for Drake, at this point in his career, resides in the material. The video represents Drake's attempt at solidifying his identity as being rooted in obscurity. He claims to want success and yet it seems to be out of his grasp as he aimlessly roams the streets at night. Jamieson Cox, writing for *Pitchfork* magazine, authored an article on Drake's Toronto. He affirms that, "Drake's lyrical relationship with his city has shifted and grown over the years. On mixtapes like 2009's *So Far Gone*...his interactions with Toronto were vague and distant; any references to the city were typically oblique..."²⁹

The video accompanying the second song, "The Motto," takes the audience and our understanding of Drake's identity even further away from Toronto. The first scene cuts to a shot of a woman speaking to the camera. She says, "So Andre wanted me to be a strong black woman. If you could see me now..." The Andre she is referring to is her deceased son and the aforementioned godfather of the Bay Area's hyphy movement, Mac Dre. Drake not only pays homage to an innovator of Hip Hop but he also removes his identity from regional restriction. Drake embodies post-regional Hip Hop directly

²⁹ Jamieson Cox, "Views from the 6," *Pitchfork*, March 5, 2015

and subsequently provides further evidence of his authenticity as a black artist. Lyrically, the song takes the audience around the country, “Go uptown, New York City, bitch / Them Spanish girls love me like I’m Aventura / Tell Uncle Luke I’m out in Miami too” before returning to one of Hip Hop’s sites of origin as he concludes, “Rest in peace Mac Dre, I’m-a do it for the bay.” Visually compelling, the video is comprised of scenic and spectacular shots of the entire Bay Area.

After paying homage and asserting his authenticity through his struggle for acclaim as well as the escape from the perils of poverty, Drake is ready to explore the more controversial elements of his identity. The artist, in the video for the song “HYFR (Hell Yeah, Fucking Right),” recreates a scene from the Jewish rite of passage, his Bar Mitzvah. The first scene is a home video clip from Drake’s youth. His mother leans over and asks the young boy what he has to say to which he replies, “Mazel Tov.” Then several lines of text appear on the screen: “On October 24th 2011 Aubrey ‘Drake’ Graham chose to get re-bar mitzvah’d [sic] as a re-commitment to the Jewish religion.” The remaining four minutes of the video display Drake, his friends and his family reenacting the Jewish ceremony with scenes of prayer, dance, excessive drinking and partying. The video marks a departure for the artist from earlier image development. Initially, this video would have been impossible when he was situating his identity as a black artist. This moment in his career marks a dislocation. Drake is simultaneously subverting static blackness *and* monolithic Jewishness. Thus he brilliantly positions himself as an emblem of post-regional Hip Hop.

The final video discussed in this paper marks the artist’s homecoming. Having established himself as a true artist, Drake brings the audience back to his hometown of Toronto in the most direct and blatant tribute to his city yet. The song, “Started from the Bottom” (and the main hook of the track, “Started from the bottom now we’re here”) is an anthem for Drake’s progress as an artist as well as a direct statement regarding blackness in North America. The video is rife with borrowing and recombination. Drake is seen *ghostriding* around his old neighborhood, mirroring Bay Area style and again dissolving regional borders. Notably, the cityscape is no longer blurred. Clear gorgeous shots of the CN Tower, Canada’s tallest structure, occupy large chunks of the video. Drake’s Canadianness is unencumbered by a requirement to prove blackness. The final scene of the video is simply a shot of the artist’s jacket, which reads TORONTO in bold lettering. Drake’s journey has taken him back to where he started yet, in order to return, he first had to depart.

Conclusion

I have argued that Hip Hop serves as a means of communicating black identity made necessary by a “Topos of Unsayability” that accompanied black migration to North America during slavery. Challenging fixity and static blackness in North America, an understanding of Hip Hop’s use of space and time to subvert a white supremacist structure was explored through New York’s block parties and the Bay Area’s *sideshow*s. Desiring a tool to better articulate this practice, I asserted that the

growing prevalence of the screen in an increasingly mobile and technologically advanced society has served as a moment of *dislocation* and thus the music video is an excellent tool for such a study. I used the example of Drake's journey in Hip Hop to articulate how blackness and Hip Hop are intertwined and that the necessary steps an artist must take to assert authenticity reflect the complexity of blackness and black identity. Drake exemplifies a movement towards a post-regional understanding of Hip Hop and, subsequently, black identity in general, which reflects the fluidity of blackness as well as the intertextuality that Stuart Hall discusses. Challenging old binaries and dissolving archaic borders, a post-regional understanding of Hip Hop problematizes monolithic and static blackness, which is increasingly finding representation in the media.

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Bigger By the Dozens: The Prevalence of Afro-Based Tradition in Battle Rap

Shingi Mavima

This paper interrogates the linguistic grounding of battle rap in Afro-based cultural practices, and the transformative power the understated art form possesses within the African American community. An integral part of hip-hop from the beginning, 'battling' has grown into a distinct subculture in recent years. Because of its oft-unmitigated rawness, it is often viewed as a lesser artistic form that embodies the worst of the violence, misogyny and other societal ills that hip-hop is accused of promoting. This paper argues that battle rap is not a corruption of Black culture: it is the modern incarnation of long-held oral, competitive, and communal traditions that can be traced throughout the African American experience and, in many cases, to Africa. Understanding the deep-rooted cultural significance of battle rap allows it to be recognized for its nuanced intricacies, as well as its didactic and restorative potential within our communities.

The creative use of language has always been a defining feature of Afro-based communities the world over. From the venerated Griots of West Africa to the crowd-rocking chanters of Jamaica, the battle-ready *Toyi-Toyi* warriors of South Africa and animated American Southern Baptist preachers, men (and women) of words have also held an important place in African communities on the continent and in the diaspora. Today, nowhere is this more visible than in hip-hop culture, in which the artists have become the ambassadors of a community, generation and culture through their stories, dress, demeanor and overall use of language.

Artistic competition has been a part of hip-hop from its very inception. Whether it is the braggadocio-laced lyrics of Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight*, widely considered to be the first commercial hip-hop song, or the territorial graffiti, DJ, and breakdance wars of the late 1970s and 1980s in New York, the culture as a whole attributes its birth and growth to that raw friendly competitive element. Although the culture was birthed in predominantly African American communities, it is important to recognize the contribution of Puerto Rican, Chinese, and other minority populations in hip-hop's early days, particularly in the realms of breakdance and graffiti.¹ Despite the ethnic diversity in the various elements during hip-hop's early days, Mcing was largely the domain of African American rappers, and thus the literal voice of the culture has been laced with storytelling and rhythmic traditions preserved and re-imagined from the African continent and African Diaspora, combined eclectically with the environmental influences of the eclectic big city. With its growth, hip-hop has developed to have its own sub-genres and sub-cultures, and one such prominent example is battle rap. Battles will typically pit two rappers taking turns to rap in an attempt to outwit, outflow, and demean the other, usually before an engaging audience.

¹ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador St. Martin's Press, 2005), 110.

This paper will focus on the subculture that is battle rap, paying attention to its use of language- verbal and nonverbal- and in what ways these cultural and linguistic elements are extensions of traditional Afro-based forms of expression. The study will explore aspects of dress, performance, language use, and the essential interactions between the rappers, their entourages, and the crowd as a whole. While battles now exist in several forms ranging from the organic neighborhood variety to those incorporated into several TV shows, I have centered my research on battles organized by battle rap leagues, for several reasons. Unlike battles on TV, these are not censored and thus showcase the rappers and the audience more authentically. Secondly, a league battle typically lasts anywhere between 25 minutes and an hour (compared to the five-minute battles on TV shows), which allows the rapper to display personality and the crowd to identify with him. Finally, these battles are religiously posted online a few days after they take place, so they're readily accessible.

Literature Review

In examining the revered role of wordsmith in African tradition, I have spent time looking at the enduring history of Griots in West Africa. I incorporated the abridged explanations of the Griot profession provided by the Griot Institute of Africana Studies at Bucknell University. I have also looked at African stories in print and unwritten folktales told to me growing up, and the familial importance of whoever the community's most apt storyteller was.

I have depended on several texts to hone in on the development of the African American language over the centuries and its retention of Afro-based elements while navigating the interaction and imposition of other languages in the USA. *Spoken Soul* by Rickford and Rickford explores African American Language (henceforth referred to as AAL) through the eyes of the 21st century efforts to get it recognized as a language variety in American academia and society as a whole. Geneva Smitherman's *Word from the Mother* provides a deeper cultural context and definition to the different Afro-based language elements, several of which form the core of battle rap. Having established AAL's larger cultural and linguistic context, I focus on Hip-Hop texts. Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* and *Hip-Hop Wars* explain the culture of hip-hop, its criticism and praise.

Despite its presence from the very onset of hip-hop, battle rap has only grown as its own lucrative and increasingly popular sub-genre in the past ten to fifteen years, so formal scholarship dedicated specifically to it is still barely existent. As such, most of my research on the culture and language of battle rap has involved watching actual battles, drawing from over twenty match-ups that took place between 2004 and 2014. While the majority of them were held in the USA, some were held by the King of the Dot (KOTD) league in Canada, and Don't Flop league in the United Kingdom - both bringing in American rappers to face off with local favorites. Furthermore, I have relied heavily on the budding arena of blogs and video logs (vlogs) dedicated to battle rap for rapper interviews and commentary from fans and battle organizers. I have also had the pleasure of interviewing three battle rappers: Pharaoh Soul of Detroit group Awkward

Theory, Chicago-born and Grand Rapids-based BARZ, and Rave of Grand Rapids as well. I also interviewed D. Jones, a veteran battle host from Youngstown, Ohio. Finally, I spoke with three battle rap culture enthusiasts: Nosa Osaretin from Nigeria, Gregory Graves from Detroit, Michigan, David James of Grand Rapids, Michigan and Anthony Elbert of Jacksonville, Florida.

With the insightful assistance of these sources and a few other relevant readings and viewings, I hope to provide a starting point in appreciating battle rap not only as an art-form unto its own, but as an incarnation of a vivacious, witty, and community centered Afro-based tradition.

A Storytelling Tradition

*"Africans are rooted in oral cultures and traditions; therefore they have admired good stories and storytellers"*²

Allen and Boykin (2000) described the "nine interrelated dimensions of African American culture," and among them were movement expressiveness, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, and orality,"³ all essential ingredients in battle rap culture, as we shall see.

The African tradition that places storytellers at the center of community is inseparable from the story of the continent and her people the world over. While written word had developed in various parts of Africa in pre-colonial times, the vast majority of the continent still depended on the communal and intimate nature of oral narration to communicate. The storyteller held, and continues to hold, a venerated yet and often ambiguous role in society. Because storytellers would speak of tales that had been told before or referenced places, animals, people and things that everyone knew, it was crucial that one separates himself from the others through creative use of language, accompanying music, audience involvement, as well as overall presentation. Across the continent, these larger-than-life wordsmiths would gather people in the community to teach, entertain, and relate stories from generations gone by.

Waiting for the Rain, one of Zimbabwe's most celebrated works of fiction, gives insight into this dynamic through the characters of two brothers: Lucifer and Garabha. Lucifer is a city-educated artist (drawer) who has just received a scholarship to a Western university overseas, and thus bears the stigma of "the good child." Garabha, on the other hand, never left the rural home and, instead, is famed for going around the countryside with his drum, singing and telling stories. While, in comparison to his brother, Garabha superficially appears to have disappointed his family through his lack of ambition, he is ultimately far more in touch with his community and its various characters and problems, as opposed to the aloof Lucifer, who is openly embarrassed by

² Octavia Utley, "Keeping the Tradition of African Storytelling Alive." *Yale-New Haven Teacher's Institute* <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/nationalcurriculum/units/2009/1/09.01.08.x.html>.

³ Serie McDougal, *Methodology in Africana Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 48.

his parents and other village folk in the presence of the white priest who is supposed to take him overseas⁴. Such a dichotomy, whereby material and outward success often hold lower rank to one's ability to speak to and behalf of their community, exists today in Afro-based communities around the world.

In West Africa, the continental region directly linked to the heritage of most African Americans, this culture of wordsmiths who are definitive figures is best exemplified in the Griot tradition. While no English word fully encapsulates the essence of a griot, they are largely described as storytellers with such diverse roles as 'genealogists, historians, spokespeople, ambassadors, musicians, teachers, warriors, interpreters, praise-singers, masters of ceremonies, advisors' among others⁵. This venerated tradition survived the African holocaust and, although it has been diluted by centuries of concerted efforts to rob African Americans of their culture, it endures in abundance. Comedians, preachers, singers, rappers, and poets are integral to the African American experience, and it is no surprise that despite being a minority and perpetually marginalized group in the USA, Black America has consistently produced the most notable and influential of these. For all the groundbreaking endeavors, the legacies of Barack Obama and Martin Luther King will- for better or worse- always be defined in large part by their mesmerizing oration. Muhammad Ali is equally renowned for his exploits in the ring as he is for his "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" braggadocio outside the ring. Even institutions such as the church and fraternities, whose modern incarnation has Eurocentric overtones, differentiates itself from their mainstream counterparts through the distinct Afro-based rituals of song, dance, and colorful wordsmithery.

Thus when hip-hop culture came to life in the late 1970s, although it may have seemed a novelty to the unwitting eye, it was merely a continuation in the African-American wordsmith culture and a manifestation of its marginalized existence. Born out of New York ghettos beleaguered by joblessness, poverty and housing problems, hip-hop became a way for "alternative identity formation and social status in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished."⁶ The generally low income, multiethnic convergence that resulted in the birth of hip-hop gave it both its gritty and eclectic character. While the various cultures brought different elements to hip-hop, the MCing (or rap) element was largely synonymous with African Americans. Thus from the onset, the vocal component of the culture was laced with storytelling elements that have survived from as far back as West African griots, and re-imagined and sustained through such African American traditions as the blues, the dozens, and roasts, as well as influenced from the Afro-Caribbean rhythms that were commonplace in 1970s New York. The defensive pride borne thus was evident in the braggadocio-layered lyrics and names of rappers from the beginning, as well as the

⁴ Charles Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain*. (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1975), 179.

⁵ "What is a Griot?" Accessed November 10, 2014.

<https://www.bucknell.edu/Documents/GriotInstitute/What%20is%20a%20Griot>.

⁶ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 34.

territorial battles of rappers, graffiti artists, break-dancers and DJs. It was through DJ Battles that some of hip-hop's pioneers emerged, bringing their neighborhoods and posses to the limelight with them: Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation commanding the Bronx River East, Kool Herc in the West Bronx, among others. Hip-hop's early connection with the African continent, however, consisted of more than just retained or re-imagined practices. One of the culture's most influential figures and founder of the Zulu nation, Afrika Bambaataa, imagined a culture of Black unity grounded on African symbols and figureheads. In 1975, the year the Zulu Nation was founded, Bambaataa won a UNICEF essay contest that took him to Africa, spending time in Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast and Nigeria. The experience was essential to how he would approach and help shape hip-hop in its infancy. He explained that it "was a big inspiration (on the Zulu Nation), seeing black people controlling their own destiny, seeing them get up and go to their own work."⁷

Of course, the repartee of wit and art existed among African American culture from the beginning. One has to look no further than the vintage verbal play of "the dozens" defined as a "verbal game of talking about someone's mother (or sometimes other relatives), using highly exaggerated, sometimes sexually loaded, humorous ritualized insults."⁸ This game played among close African American friends of all ages, forebears the competition in hip-hop, and specifically battle rap. Another form of verbal play that predates hip-hop yet lends its hand directly to the culture is "signifyin," wherein a speaker denigrates another through witty play on words and irony. Much like the dozens, it has been a staple of Afrodiasporic communities since time immemorial, and is ever present in hip-hop and a defining pillar of battle rap.

The age-old flexing of verbal and artistic prowess in more than a part of hip-hop; it is responsible in a large way for its being. This culture of competition has led to several of hip-hop's defining moments: from NWA's fallout and subsequent diss tracks, to Kanye West and Fifty Cent's 2007 bet which involved releasing their albums on the same day to see who would sell more, with the vanquished promising to stop rapping (a bet Fifty has obviously not honored!). At its worst, the competitive element has led to unresolved beefs and even contributed to deaths (RIP 2pac, Biggie,) and at its usual best, it has given us several classic songs, realigned rappers into exciting crews and rivals.

Aside from the DJ battles mentioned earlier, MC battles were integral to the birth and early growth of hip-hop. One of the culture's earliest talking points was the famed battle between Kool Moe Dee and Busy Bee Starsky at Harlem World in 1981.⁹ At the time, battles had not adopted the face-off, confrontational format that is common today. Instead, they focused more on who could rock the crowd the most on a given beat. Typically, several MCs would take to the stage in a night, and then the crowd would

⁷ Afrika Bambaataa, "Afrika Bambaataa," interviewed by Frank Broughton. DJhistory.com, June 6, 1998. Accessed December 5, 2015. <http://www.djhistory.com/interviews/afrika-bambaataa>.

⁸ Geneva Smitherman, *Word from the Mother* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28.

⁹ Dziurawe Sample. "Kool Moe Dee vs. Busy Bee @ Harlem World '81," YouTube Video, 12:24, January 16 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShpDIWK5F7Y>.

decide on who won by virtue of applause. In this instance, consensus has it that Kool Moe Dee won.¹⁰ Although the format of the battle is hardly recognizable in today's battle arena, it is important to note how several elements that mattered then are still contemporarily definitive: braggadocio; crowd rapport, representing your neighborhood, among other things. As time went on, battles were transferred to wax and became more personal. In 1985, for example, Queens, New York rapper MC Shan released "The Bridge," a brazen track declaring that Queens had, in fact, been the birthplace of battle rap (despite incontrovertible evidence that the culture actually came out of Bronx). Incensed by the claim, Bronx MC KRS One retaliated by dropping "The Bridge is Over," famously rhyming that: "Manhattan keeps on makin' it / Brooklyn keeps on takin' it / Bronx keeps creatin' it, and Queens keeps on fakin' it."¹¹ The battle not only strengthened KRS One's status as one of the premier MCs of his time, but also contributed to the ongoing culture of standing up for your neighborhood in battle.

As hip-hop asserted its presence across the country, MC battles were growing in popularity. One of the early predecessors of the contemporary, more confrontational variation of battle rap was the 1994 face-off between Craig G and Supernatural. The battle happened organically, by virtue of Supernatural calling out Craig G while he was performing. As it so happened, Craig G was in the crowd, and the host invited him to the stage. Craig G won the battle that evening. The two would go on to meet on two other occasions during the 1990s, thereby establishing a place in battle rap as one of the earliest and most exciting sagas in the subculture.¹² It also helped set the stage for shows and festivals that centered on battles and began attracting audiences in the thousands. One of the more notable examples thereof is Scribble Jam, a Cincinnati-based event dubbed "America's Largest Hip-hop Festival."¹³ In its inaugural year, 1996, there were three Scribble Jams, and the second one (held in June) introduced the MC battle. Since then, several winners of the annual MC battle have gone on to achieve mainstream success, while some have become staples in the battle circuit. Notable alumni include Chicago native and Kanye West collaborator Rhymefest, and battle icons The Saurus and Illmaculate. It was, however, not until the 21st century that that subculture would experience the explosion that would catapult battle rappers and leagues to international notoriety.

A Culture within a Culture: The Explosion of Battle Rap

As we have established, battling has been a part of hip-hop from its inception. Several of hip-hop's biggest stars including Jay Z, DMX, and Eminem got their start

¹⁰ QD3Ent. "Busy Bee vs Kool Moe Dee from the BEEF DVD," YouTube Video, 3:14; February 11 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kps6XyuWMQ>.

¹¹ Kathy Iandola, "Top Rap Feuds: KRS-One vs. MC Shan," *The Drop FM*. (Accessed December 3, 2015.)

¹² *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*, Film, directed by Kevin Fitzgerald (2000; Los Angeles: Bowery Films, 2000), DVD.

¹³ <http://www.scribblejam.com>. (Accessed December 3, 2015).

battling. The latter, however, would have special impact in the sub-genre's explosion and growth into the standalone culture that it has become through the release of his 2002 semi-biographic movie *8 Mile*. Up until then, battle rap had been an underground culture reserved for exclusive groups who frequented rap halls and were part of immediate communities that battled. *8 Mile*, by focusing on Eminem's battle rapping as the impetus in the American cinematic "Against all odds" cliché, brought the art form onto screens across the nation and world at large. Immediately thereafter, TV stations coopted this "novel" art form into their programming, with MTV introducing both Nick Cannon's *Wild 'N' Out* variety show in 2005 which featured a "Wild Style" segment in which contestants would rap a couple to a few lines with the intention of being funny, and 2006's *Yo Mama*, which was essentially just a dozens competition televised and performed before a judging audience. BET also incorporated battling into their seminal music show *106 and Park* through a segment called Freestyle Fridays, in which two rappers would battle each other for thirty seconds at a time, albeit keeping it family friendly for their audience. Despite its brevity and censorship, several participants in Freestyle Fridays went on to become pivotal figures in battle rap's boom. Battle icons Loaded Lux, Jin, and Hollow Da Don are a few such examples.

Away from the cleaned-up, watered down TV versions, the gritty battle rap scene was taking shape. Several battle rap leagues emerged, including the likes of *Let's Beef* and *Grind Time*, both of which gave an opportunity for rappers from different neighborhoods and cities to face off. While many creative minds were battling and organizing battles in the early 2000s, one entrepreneur in particular is synonymous with the advent of organized league battle rap: Tony "Smack" Mitchell of Queens New York. Gathering battle rappers of hood renown including Serius Jones of New Jersey and Loaded Lux, Murda Mook and Jae Millz of Harlem, Smack began recording battles, printing and hand-selling the DVDs—a cutting edge technological and artistic hustle at the time. While the first set of 1000 DVDS printed in 2004 took a while to catch on since they were all sold by hand, Smack was selling upwards of 40,000 DVDs nationwide by 2007, and by 2009, he had formally organized the growing stable of rappers into a league, which he called the Ultimate Rap League (URL).¹⁴ Rappers now earned thousands of dollars to participate in battles ranging anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour in front of packed halls, and attended by high profile rap names (Busta Rhymes, Diddy, Drake, Q-Tip, Method Man are all fixtures at battles now). Soon, the league model was being duplicated around the country and abroad, with King of the Dot (KOTD) and Don't Flop leagues in Canada and the United Kingdom, respectively. This explosion has been, in a mighty way, propagated by the advent of YouTube, which allows leagues to upload battles in their aftermath so fans around the world can watch and debate online. Thus, we see the evolution of battles from when it consisted of just the crews battling on street corners, to the hundreds of captive fans filling up rap halls,

¹⁴ Maurice Garland, "From Street DVDs to Reviving Battle Rap: How Tony 'SMACK' Mitchell Monetized Both." *Black Enterprise*. October 12, 2012. <http://www.blackenterprise.com/money/tony-smack-mitchell-urltv-battle-rap-smack/>.

to the 50,000 that got their hands on the SMACK DVDs, and now the millions that get to see the videos.

As Hip-hop has continued to grow, vocal performance (i.e. MCing in all its forms; battling included) has emerged from among the culture's various elements as the one most deemed synonymous with the culture as a whole. It thus bears investigating how different cultural components have been and continue to be integrated into MCing, and particularly in the booming sub-culture that is battle rap. In the face of such growth and exposure, and oftentimes without any deliberate intentionality on the part of the battlers, the subculture has been able to retain and repurpose several linguistic and performance traditions that have roots in Africa and have survived and reincarnated in various forms in the African diaspora over time. . In the next section, I look at several enduring elements of Afro-based storytelling and performance and how they permeate battle rap.

The Language of Battle Rap

A rap battle can be defined as a rap contest, almost always performed before a crowd, between two individuals in which the objective is to outwit, outflow and outdiss one's opponent. Born of the African American tradition of storytelling and communal competition, the art form has endured and grown while retaining this Afro-based essence through its reliance on several elements. There are two essential components that are on display during a battle rap: one's linguistic and witty ability, as represented by what one says; and one's profile as an artist, often showcased by one's overall presentation and performance in battle.

Key to Afrodiasporic linguistic practices are the nonverbal elements of communication. Griot storytelling was laced with dance and music, and one has to take one look at the Black church to see the inseparability of performance and verbal delivery. One of the rappers I spoke to, Pharaoh Soul of Detroit, listed stage presence as the most important element in a battle, explaining that "you can't be on stage talking all the tough stuff, yet be standing in a shy position...looking not confident."¹⁵ Thus, rappers will typically adopt what Tricia would describe as a "cool pose," a tough-looking physical stance ideally meant to intimidate your opponent and make your own boastful claims seem credible to the audience. Similarly, how one dresses is essential in establishing their stage presence and swaying the crowd. This Afro-based tradition, known in AAL as *stylin and profilin*, is also evident in the elaborate dress of traditional storytellers both in the motherland and in the diaspora. For example, an informal poll conducted by the author asked six respondents to name their favorite white stand-up comics, to which folks responded with comedians ranging from Dane Cook to Louis C.K. The follow-up inquired what attire they are typically associated with, and the responses were overwhelmingly inconspicuous (Black T-Shirt and jeans etc.). Black stand-up comedians, on the other hand, routinely become synonymous with their

¹⁵ Pharaoh Soul, in personal interview with author, November 2014.

striking outfits. Cosby's sweaters, Eddie Murphy's purple and red leather outfits from his 1980s specials *Raw* and *Delirious* (the latter of which was probably inspired by Richard Pryor's red suit in his 1982 special, *Live on the Sunset Strip*), and Katt Williams's shiny green jacket in *Pimp Chronicles* are examples of how a specific moment in a performance of words becomes defined by the orators' clothes. Battlers are no exception to this ostentatious culture. For example, at 2012's URL signature event "Summer Madness," veteran rapper Loaded Lux dressed up in a full three piece black suit for his battle against a much younger Calicoe. In addition, a flock of women in seeming funeral gowns and some of his entourage carrying a mock coffin escorted him to the stage. In doing so, he was bringing to life the metaphor of "killing your opponent" in a battle, while also asserting his seniority by equating himself to a reverend; a much venerated figure in the black community and commissioner of funerals.

Another nonverbal communicative component central to battles is the crew. The posse and crew have meant more in hip-hop culture in terms of identity than it does for most other genres. Hip-hop's most influential artists have either been groups, part of a group, or been affiliated with crew at some point in their career. Some, including famed mainstream rappers like Snoop Dogg and Lil Wayne, claiming allegiance to street gangs. More than anything, the concept of community is definitive of Afrodiasporic communities. From the totem-based clans to the Black Church, street gangs to civil rights organizations, Black people around the world have always self-identified as part of their community, both for emotional and functional purposes. Even as African history was being interrupted during the Middle Passage, there is evidence of enslaved Africans developing a sense of community and enduring bonds while they were on the ship. This is best represented by the creation of a new class of kin by the enslaved Africans: "Malungo," essentially meaning my brother from the ship."¹⁶ While the purpose of community would have undoubtedly evolved with space and time, it has endured in the global African community. Thus, in its raw form, the rappers' crews are often important to their success. On stage, the crew will serve to cheer your punchlines and are often incorporated into the battle. One of today's foremost battlers, Hitman Holla of St. Louis, has established a style in which he theatrically dialogs with his (non-rapper) brother, Show Out, during a verse, much to the crowd's delight. For example, in a battle against Harlem's Charlie Clips earlier this year, Holla had the following interchange with his brother;

Hitman Holla: *You had the nerve to get a Kennedy Drop?*

Show Out: *What's a Kennedy Drop?*

Hitman Holla: *Something that's gon give him (Clips) what Kennedy got!*

Show out: *What if he shows up with his crew?*

Hitman Holla: *Then his friend will get popped.*

Show out: *What if he shows up in his truck?*

¹⁶ James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the Afro-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2003), 33.

Hitman Holla: *His Infinity's shot!*¹⁷

Other rappers will incorporate their crews differently. In one of the earlier, and what is often argued as one of the best, URL battles between Serius Jones and Murda Mook, the battle had been fairly matched lyrically, but Jones had brought none of his crew with him, and his demeanor was less and less confident as the battle went on, while Mook was flanked by a dozen of his boys who were hyping up anything he said. Famously, the battle ended with Murda Mook's camp simulating a gun attack on Jones and chanting "dot! dot! dot dot dot!" - dots in Jones's body after the attack. That ending alone made the otherwise even battle seem to have gone in Mook's favor. The three battlers I interviewed recognized the functionality of the crew, albeit to different extents in their own experience. BARZ went as far as calling it his "lifeline, especially if you aren't from the area (battle venue)," and compared having the crew to a boxing ring corner to which fighters retreat after each round for solace, encouragement and advice.¹⁸ In July of 2014, Eminem's Shady Records hosted *Total Slaughter*, a battle event that, among many other things, pitted battler-turned-industry rapper Joe Budden against *Freestyle Friday* hall of famer and arguably the best battle rapper on the current scene, Hollow Da Don of Queens, New York. Aside from an overall anticlimactic showing on the part of the rappers, several fans also criticized the event's stage setup. In an attempt to cater to television aesthetics, the rappers did not have their crews on stage and were largely removed from the audience, taking away from the sense of communal and competitive festivity that fans have grown to associate with the art form.¹⁹

Not divorced from the communal recognition element of African culture is the importance of paying homage to the land and those who have either passed on or those who have succeeded in endeavors to which we aspire. This reverence for that which has brought us to this point is evident in a plethora of ceremonial ways: from ancestral worship to libations practiced widely on the continent and the diaspora, and the totem culture in which families and individuals are assigned an animal or force of life spirit such as heart or river, practiced chiefly by Southern African ethnic groups such as the Shona, Ndebele, Zulu, and Herero. Some of these cultures have survived in the diaspora, while some have taken on a different form. Hip-hop is a quintessential exercise in homage-paying: from sampling famous songs to the adaptation of canonical lyrics, the unmistakable regionalization of the genre and the countless songs dedicated to deceased fellow artists. Paying homage to one's hood is standard across battle rap, with virtually all of them incorporating their neighborhood and city into their defining rhymes. For example, Hitman Holla began his battle against Conceited by declaring, "I'm from St Louis, where all year it's Chrome season," while fellow URL battler Tsu

¹⁷ Go-rilla Warfare. "GO-RILLA WARFARE PRESENTS: CHARLIE CLIPS VS HITMAN HOLLA," YouTube video, 23:29, April 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPJMYvpSKm8>.

¹⁸ BARZ, in personal communication with author, November 2014.

¹⁹ Unbias Review, "Total Slaughter Event Recap ((UnbiasReview.))" YouTube, July 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z4pF7-hhrM>.

Surf's slogan is merely "Jersey" in honor of his home state. Routinely, battlers will reference not only lyrics from famous mainstream rappers, but some that may have been used by others in previous battles, albeit adding their own flavor to the lyrics. Consider, for example, the following scheme from Serious Jones in his battle against Charlie Clips at URL's Summer Madness 2

*Since you're a dead rapper, and ain't no way around it
So all the dead rappers watching over us, what you think they have to say about it?
Well Biggie said 'huh, he hit that nigga up more than they hit up me,
And Pac said (in affected Pac tone) 'Yeeeah, that's how you ride up on your enemies...
Eazy E said, that nigga's sick as me...'²⁰*

He also went on to incorporate Pimp C, Heavy D and other well-known deceased rappers. In evoking their memory, Jones simultaneously pays homage to them while giving the audience familiar references to which they can hold on. In her book, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, Monica Coleman explores the idea of ancestral worship and homage to the dead among African Americans and other parts of the diaspora. She explains it as a Yoruba tradition that survived the Middle Passage and has been retained and reimagined as a pillar of Afrodiasporic communities, including "Haitian Vodun, Cuba's Santeria, Brazil's Candomble, and Trinidad's Shango and Orisha worship."²¹ Most critically, however, she notes that communities in the diaspora did not need "a history of Black religion" to live out these retained practices as many of them have become engrained and reinvented in cultural performance, as seen in battling.²²

The language of battle rap is an intertwined exercise in braggadocio, signifyin and storytelling. As Tricia Rose explains, "Rap Tales are told in elaborate and ever-changing black slang and refer to black cultural figures and rituals, mainstream film video and television characters, and little known black heroes."²³ A pillar of AAL interaction, signifyin is a "style of verbal play in which a speaker puts down, needles, talks about a person, event, situation... Depends on double meaning and irony, exploits the unexpected and uses quick verbal surprise and humor."²⁴ It is often represented in traditional African folklore through the mischief of such characters as the hare, fox and signifyin monkey. Subjects of signifyin range from physical appearance to Black institutions to current global affairs, and everything in between. For example, when Hollow Da Don battles the slightly heavy set Big-T, he rapped "I've heard of Big and

²⁰ Ultimate Rap League, "SMACK/ URL PRESENTS SERIOUS JONES VS CHARLIE CLIPS," YouTube, October 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llBpHV0OAnM>.

²¹ Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When we Talk about Hip Hop-and Why it Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 3.

²⁴ Geneva Smitherman, *Word from the Mother*, 43.

Tall, but I've never heard of Big and Small/ Maybe you should open a different store called I'm fat and I can't find my dick and balls." In this, Hollow is playing on the obvious physical attribute of his rival, then referencing a store that the audience would be familiar with, before hitting him with an emasculating sexual organ reference; a poignant rhyme scheme in a competition and culture where one's manhood is often evoked as proxy for their masculinity. Or, for example, when B Magic raps, "I jump up and cap a (Kappa) nigga, step show," he plays on the homophone between the act of shooting someone and a fraternity undoubtedly popular in black culture. Similarly, references to church and black celebrities are frequent in battle rap. In another instance, Conceited was facing a competitor who kept moving around while he (Conceited) rapped to distract him, so he rapped "You keep dancing while I'm rapping (waving his fist), you gon end up puffy."²⁵ The reference here is to hip-hop producer, Sean "Puffy" Combs famous for dancing in the videos of the rappers he produces. The double entendre here, of course, is Conceited would punch his opponent, thus leaving his face "puffy." Anthony, one of the sub-cultures' fans interviewed, expressed his admiration for verbal dexterity, explaining that "the aspect of a guy coming up with a metaphor out of everyday words, or the idea that a word can be broken down, flipped into a different meaning is amazing to me."²⁶

Signifyin may also be done in "marking" fashion. Anthropologist Claudia Mitchell Kernan explains, "a common black narrative tactic in the folktale genre and in actual events is the individuation of characters through the use of direct quotation."²⁷ The marking will often be affected to portray the other as being either weak, feminine, or a fraud. For example in the Hitman Holla and Charlie Clips battle, Holla addresses an incident in which Smack owed Clips almost \$10,000, and raps "You were probably on the phone like (in exaggerated "formal" Standard English) Hi Smack, this is Charlie / Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to know when you were thinking you would pay me." By reenacting the supposed conversation in Standard English, Holla uses the alleged code-switch as proxy for Clips' fraudulence. Yet another popular Black narrative maneuver apparent in battle rap is the employment of self-deprecating humor. In a KOTD battle with White Canadian rapper Hollahan, Charlie Clips had been calling his rival frail throughout the round, and he ended it with "You wanna know how I knew he was soft? It's genetics; my family was always good at picking cotton."²⁸ Not only does he cut the ground from beneath Hollahan's feet by asserting his place in the sensitive history of slavery, he does so wittily by using the dual meaning of 'picking' as to choose and to physically pick.

²⁵ JFox209Sons, "Jungle Presents Conceited vS L-Dot R2." YouTube, February 3, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0-2wr_UN9g.

²⁶ Anthony Elbert, in personal interview with author, January 2015.

²⁷ Russell John Rickford and John Russel Rickford, *Spoken Soul : The Story of Black English*. (New York, New York: Wiley & Sons Inc, 2000), 63.

²⁸ King of the Dot Entertainment, "KOTD- Rap Battle- Hollahan vs Charlie Clips," YouTube Video, 26:03, October 1 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cX0y1dXvD4Y>.

Such self-deprecating humor often shows up in yet another defining characteristic of Afro-based storytelling and battle rap: braggadocio. As Rickford and Rickford explain, “self-abasing remarks are frequently self-praise.”²⁹ Tsu Surf, who has been criticized for “reaching” in battles; that is, mispronouncing words or making unorthodox references in the interest of wordplay, recently rapped “I don’t wanna get shot for shit / but it got so normal that I reach (motioning like he is reaching for a gun) even when I ain’t got shit.”³⁰ By recognizing his flaw and the criticism thereof, he makes it harder for his opponent to use it against him. Also, the double meaning in “reaching even when he doesn’t have shit” -whether a punchline or a gun- thrilled the crowd. Another such instance came in the Math Hoffa versus Dizaster battle. Math Hoffa, whose last battle had ended with him punching his opponent and thus getting banned from that particular league, had offered up the ridiculous explanation that he lashed out because he was irritable from not having eaten all day. Of course, nobody took his explanation seriously. Thus, when he battled Dizaster a few months later, he raps “Ooh you’re lucky KOTD made sure that we had food,” a self-deprecating reference to his absurd explanation that food was the only thing standing between him and acting violent.³¹

In the badman tradition of Shine, Muhammed Ali and many a popular rapper, braggadocio is always best tinged with wit and storytelling. When eccentric battler, Daylyt of L.A, raps “I’m nice round here, like Afro-pickin,” he does not only glorify himself; he uses AAL dialect in dropping the “a” in around, and pronouncing here to sound like “air” before drawing on the Afro-comb, an important black artifact thus responsible for “nice round hair.” In another battle, Conceited raps that his opponent’s girl has been “feelin the kid’s kicks like she pregnant.”³² Aside from the obvious implication of superior masculinity through swaying his opponent’s girlfriend’s loyalty, the wordplay here is genius. By using both the AAL vernacular for being infatuated (feelin) and shoes (kicks), and then comparing it to pregnancy wherein the mother actually “feel kicks” and tying it together with the semantically inverted use of the word “kid” to describe himself, Conceited gets the crowd hyped in all of eight words.

As battling becomes more lucrative and popular, battlers are taking up to six or seven prominent battles a year. This means that a good show takes a lot more preparation and no amount of wit will allow you to freestyle your way through more than one hundred minutes worth of battle—not efficiently anyway. That said, the ability to freestyle (that is, perform unrehearsed) is still crucial to battles, and is often necessary to rebuttal attacks. Consider, for example, the battle between Serious Jones and

²⁹ Russell John Rickford and John Russel Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York, New York: Wiley & Sons Inc, 2000), 82.

³⁰ Ultimate Rap League. “Tsu Surf vs Hitman Holla Smack/URL,” YouTube, October 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PFpLKgDyTU.

³¹ King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Dizaster vs Math Hoffa.” YouTube, July 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tiuudh7Q3s>.

³² King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Conceited vs Charlie Clips | #Blackout4,” YouTube Video, March 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6o6c9ITG5_E.

Charlie Clips, wherein Clips went first and dedicated most of his verse to clowning how Jones is actually a local barber by profession, despite claims of being a “baller.” When Jones’ turn comes up, he begins by saying “Yes, seven years ago I was a barber, so you know I know how to handle Clips.”³³ The crowd went berserk. Not only did he accept the diss, he then flipped it on Clips through freestyled wordplay. Often, if both rappers have prepared well and bring their best to the stage, these unrehearsed portions of the battle will sway the audience’s verdict.

Men vastly dominate battle rap, much like they do the pulpit and the commercial rap scene. Like Kid of Kid-N-Play said more than twenty years ago, “women have to work twice as hard to get half the credit” in hip-hop.³⁴ The audience at major battle events is also reflective of this dynamic, with female attendance estimated at only 20% of the crowd.³⁵ In recent times, however, female battlers have been taking to the stage and negotiating their space in a patriarchal world. The 2014 URL’s Summer Madness 3 show featured one such battle between Jaz the Rapper and Ms. Hustle. While the wordplay, lyricism and energy is not unlike their male counterparts, their value-based topics were representative of their different experience. For example, Jaz raps that she had been away because she “put [her] education first, and graduated, now [she’s] back to school bitches” while Ms. Hustle raps that she had been away raising her daughter “on real bitch time.”³⁶ By declaring she had taken time off to pursue her education in an art form where the men usually distance themselves from the apparent pretension and “softness” of college and applaud the “school of hard knocks,” Jaz asserts a different type of agency as a woman than her male counterparts. Similarly, Ms. Hustle’s re-appropriation of the word “bitch” to connote responsible motherhood turns the misogyny of the word when used by the men into virtue in her hands. Such reclaiming of words is not unlike how the hip-hop community has redefined “nigga” to a term of endearment and often, a man of redoubtable character (as in “real nigga”).

Beyond the wordplay and theatrics of battle rap, it is important to recognize the importance of Afro-based storytelling lies in the impartation of the values thereof. Beyond being a battle of wits, battles are essentially a battle of who is the better man or woman. Topics often addressed are opponents’ drug use, fictional criminal personas, failure to provide for one’s children, and irresponsible criminal records. For example, Detroit’s Calicoe had risen up the ranks in large part due to, in addition to his undeniable battling skills, street cred garnered by claims that his father had been a renowned member of the notorious Black Mafia Family gang back in his day, making him a “real nigga.” Thus at URL’s Summer Madness 2, in what many pundits consider battle rap’s finest third (final) verse, Loaded Lux raps repeatedly “Your father wasn’t a gangsta; he was just another lost nigger” and goes on to condemn the destructive

³³ Ultimate Rap League, “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS SERIOUS JONES VS CHARLIE CLIPS.”

³⁴ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When we Talk about Hip Hop-and Why it Matters*, 142.

³⁵ David James, in personal communication with author, December 2015.

³⁶ Ultimate Rap League, “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS MS HUSTLE VS JAZ THE RAPPER,” YouTube, October 18, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkzFWv3PIIk>.

virtues embodied by gang life, and questions why the father had not gotten a “9-5” like a responsible parent would instead of peddling drugs in the community and being arrested for much of Calicoe’s life.³⁷ In a KOTD battle, Cortez of Queens New York confronts Hollohan about his boasts about being a drug dealer, especially since Hollohan’s friend famously died from a drug overdose:

*Don't be mad, just be real with yourself
Coz every drug that Bruce did, you dealt it yourself
Every line on the canvass, every capsule, every tablet
You're the worst type of friend, you influenced his every habit.*³⁸

Similar themes have shown up in several other battles. In one such battle that one of my interviewee battlers, Pharaoh Soul, singled out as the best battle he had ever seen, Remy D of New Orleans called out opponent T-Dubb on his unrelenting emphasis on gunplay in battles. As Pharaoh Soul explained to me, “he stopped talking about what guns do, and started talking about what guns do,”³⁹ that is, instead of focusing on the glamorized use of guns as an extension of one’s masculinity, and described how violence had been destructive to the hood:

“I don’t respect niggas living your life standards / coz when you categorize the victims your type adds up / they usually classified as innocent bystanders.”⁴⁰ Communal responsibility is the highest value in Afro-based communities, and the particular canonization of such verses is evidence of the values’ extension in battle rap.

Ultimately, all these linguistic and cultural facets of battle rap combine with the goal of doing one thing: moving the crowd in a rapper’s favor. Most battles are left for the crowd to decide who won, and even when judges are employed, their opinion is often based on crowd reaction. Six of the seven people I interviewed (including all three rappers) acknowledged the importance of swaying the crowd. Battle fan Gregory Graves argued, “without the crowd you have nothing. No matter what you say,”⁴¹ while Rave listed crowd control as one of the three fundamentals of battle rap, along with “aggression and lyrical content.”⁴² Veteran battle organizer D Jones explained to me “the crowd is most important second to the battlers themselves. Some battles the crowd makes the decision. They can even decide both are wack.”⁴³ A priceless crowd engagement tactic that is prevalent in hip-hop and traces its roots to African storytelling

³⁷ Ultimate Rap League. “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS LOADED LUX VS CALICOE,” YouTube, September 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1-z2hxXxKg>.

³⁸ King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Hollohan vs Cortez (Co-hosted By RAEKWON).” YouTube video, 27:32, January 30, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K3SPvu6DVg>.

³⁹ Pharaoh Soul, in personal interview with author, November 2014.

⁴⁰ Street Status, “STREET STATUS PRESENTS T DUBB O VS REMYD,” YouTube, December 31, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BwT8aTCpiY>.

⁴¹ Gregory Graves, in personal interview with author, December 2014.

⁴² Rave, in personal interview with author, November 2014.

⁴³ D Jones, in personal interview with author, December 2014.

is call-and-response. Described by Smitherman as a “manifestation of the cultural dynamic which finds audience and listener or leader and background to be a unified whole,”⁴⁴ the culture of call and response provides the counterpoint to traditional Eurocentric perceptions of audience-wordsmith/musician interaction. While European-based performances such as the opera depend on minimal participation from the audience until the end, Afro-based traditions insist on the audience participation throughout the performance, as facilitated by call and response. Consider the South African war cries, or *Toyi Toyis*, whose energy builds up as the leader continues to chant and fellow warriors chant back, or the verbal responses from the Amen corner of the church. The culture is no different in battle rap, and as battlers develop a name for themselves, the easier the crowd can identify with their calls. For example, after a Hitman Holla “haymaker” that is, an incredible punchline, the crowd will typically yell “Remix that Shit!” to which he will say the same thing repeatedly in a way similar to DJ scratching. Conceited will say something one way, then yell, “Slow it down, I just dissed you!” then break it down to reveal a double entendre. Most top billed battle rappers have similar schemes, or will develop slogans to indicate the end of their verses, such as Calicoe’s “Landslide!” or Murda Mook’s “Easy!” None of these are a novelty to Afrodiasporic storytelling. For example, comics Kevin Hart’s “Alright alright alright” or Bernie Mac’s “Y’all don’t understand, I’m not scared of you Motherfuckers!” may be almost nonsensical in the context of the story being actually told, but give the crowd a point of connection with the person on the stage. Similarly, preachers in Black churches usually distinguish themselves with tailored repeated refrains to which the congregation holds on.

In *Signifyin Rappers*, Wallace and Costell explain that “... nothing does the genre (hip-hop) have more scorn than the ‘tired’ or ‘lame,’ the quiescent or mute.”⁴⁵ Put simply, how you communicate your message is as important as the message itself. This declaration is true in hip-hop in general and battle rap in particular. Demeanor, volume, and confidence all add to the battler’s appeal. As stated earlier, battle rap’s two essential points of contest are wit and comportment: the assertion that I am better than you linguistically and as a man or woman. As with any competition, there are rules, albeit unwritten, in battle rap. Linguistically, it is a no-no to choke (forget your lines; stumble to an extent of not being able to proceed). The essence of Afro-based storytelling is to keep going, and being spontaneous should the need arise. Like rapper BARZ explained, even he would be upset if an opponent “choked or came unprepared to a battle that I have put my heart into.”⁴⁶ In one of battle rap’s most disappointing moments, veteran rapper Canibus, who made his name in large part due to his battle records, famously choked in his return to battle rap against California’s Dizaster. As if choking was not bad enough; he pulled out his notepad to rap from it! Much like BARZ

⁴⁴ Samy H. Alim, “Hip Hop Nation Language.” *Language in the USA Themes for the Twenty-First Century* (2004), 401.

⁴⁵ David Foster Wallace and Mark Costell, *Signifying Rappers* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1990), 91.

⁴⁶ BARZ, in personal communication with author, December 2014.

explained, Dizaster was visibly upset, and the battle had to be cut short.⁴⁷ “Reaching” described earlier, is yet another linguistic faux pas in battle rap, although usually more subjective than choking is.

True to the communal essence, one must also never insult the crowd. In the Serius Jones battle where Charlie Clips had been dissing him about working in the barbershop, Clips took time to rap “Enough of that, I got love for all my barbershop folks / I just thought I could help him shape up with a few barbershop jokes.”⁴⁸ While the disses were, indeed, witty and derided Jones, Clips also recognized the centrality of the barbershop to Black culture and thus the crowd: it was important to clarify that his qualms were with Jones and not the barbershop.

Culturally, it is important that the essence of community is preserved in the larger picture of the battle. For all the talk of violence in rap, the battle should never become physical. In the few instances it has happened in the major leagues, the aggressing rappers have subsequently been suspended or banned from the league. One rapper in particular, Math Hoffa, has been banned from several leagues for repeatedly initiating fights on stage. Not only does violence put the rappers at risk and scare promoters and venue providers away, it is inconsistent with the wit and community that form the backdrop of the culture. Nosa, one of the fans interviewed, described the Math Hoffa battles as the worst he has ever seen for that very reason.⁴⁹ Battle rap host D Jones narrated one such instance in which one individual had been rapping “like he was so hood and thought he could scare the crowd into liking him. We love hip hop in all its forms but the Shop don't take to kindly to wannabe gangstas trying to flex so he lost quick and had to shut his happy ass up. He acted like he wanted to fight too and we let him know that wasn't happening.”⁵⁰

To the unwitting eye, battle rap may seem like a hostility-filled contest where people square off to insult each other and earn a few dollars. On the contrary, it is a rich subculture with roots in extensive Afrodiasporic traditions and community values. You may watch one battle that appears to harbor intense animosity between the two rappers, and then see the same two cheering each other on in their next battles. As the art form grows in popularity and battlers now perform up to eight times a year (as opposed to three or four battles in previous years), there are fears from faithful fans that the quality of art will become corrupted and commoditized. While that remains to be seen, battle rap will continue to find avenues to exist in its rawest forms and, if the return of several mainstream rappers to their battling roots in recent years is anything to go by, it will continue to be held reverential in its pure form by those born and bred of the culture.

⁴⁷ King of the Dot Entertainment, “KOTD - Rap Battle - Canibus vs Dizaster - *Co-Hosted by DJ Skee*,” YouTube, June 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9KjsBIsr2g>.

⁴⁸ Ultimate Rap League, “SMACK/ URL PRESENTS SERIUS JONES VS CHARLIE CLIPS.”

⁴⁹ Nosakhare Osaretin, in personal interview with author, January 2015.

⁵⁰ D Jones, in personal interview with author, December 2014.

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Chocolate Star

Brandon White

Chuck Naylor was an officer. Specifically Highway Patrol. There is no magic to that fact or the color of his uniform but it is a detail that allows the story to begin. Chuck Naylor was also from a small town in Texas, small compared to the Houstons, Austins, and Dallases of the world. He was positioned on highway 59, too far from Marshall. People that drove through the town-- before civilians had access to police radar detectors and GPS-- had a sixth sense that told them to slow down or else they'd be pulled over and receive a ticket. But, in present day, despite all of the avoidance equipment sold, business was good. Chuck Naylor was one of those officers that waited on those speedy types travelers whose DNA didn't contain the 'slow down for cops on this stretch of the road' gene.

The good thing about Chuck Naylor was that he was universal. A He-Man type, justice for all. He was as far from being a racist cop as one could be. In fact he was sensitive about the southern highway-patrolman stereotype that "big city folk" projected on him. In truth, he never referred to people that lived in cities as "big city folk" but he did have a crush on that Hollywood trope. He was also sensitive about his coworkers that seemed to flirt with that image. He didn't voice these thoughts and complaints on the job, nor did he soften his approach to anyone that he pulled over. No matter their color, colour or sex, whether brown or blue, Chuck was focused on justice.

Now, it is safe to say that no one, not even the most committed officer that follows everything by the book, is truly perfect. Human beings are too quirky and mischievous for eternal straight lines. And if there were one stand out fact about Chuck Naylor that was worth writing about, it'd have to be his passion for the funk. Funk meaning the music. Not the sanitized sound that wedding bands rely on to get the older crowds dancing to rhythms that might seem stiff and archaic to younger audience members. That "Play That Funky Music," it was-- it was too safe for the funk that Chuck Naylor was into. He'd nod his head to that Pre-Republican 1980s James Brown funk. He'd drive with his windows down to that Parliament funk.

On his off days, he'd slow his Tundra -- He preferred it over Ford F-150 because it was made in San Antonio-- to a crawl, roll the windows down-his left elbow resting on the frame of the truck door and his body and the truck would sway to the subtle hesitations in the groove. The space after the One. This was the Bootsy Collins funk. For those that might smirk at this, you have to realize that Chuck was a connoisseur. He knew that Bootsy and Catfish both played for and recorded with James Brown as teenagers. He also knew that Bootsy grooved and marinated with George Clinton and the Parliament Funkadelics. Without those juxtaposed musical legends helping shape Bootsy, Chuck Naylor would have more than likely felt emptiness for the majority of his life. He imagined that he would always be brooding or dancing with hesitation. The wordless lectures from those musicians: It was okay to color outside of the lines. And the majority of humans cannot follow straight lines forever.

Admittedly, even at work, he'd program his iPod to the speaker settings and nod his head while he waited to pull someone over. The sound was minimal, to be honest, it was more the comfort of the faint snares than the actual melody. His memory filled in the whispered lyrics and the dangers of his job melted away, the ups and downs of being an adult, all his troubles were gone for small increments of time.

During those contemplative moments he'd think to himself and sometimes laugh, he wasn't sure when or where his love for Bootsy Collins came to fruition but from his earliest memories, when his friends were rebelling by listening to the new Tupac CD or reaching back to the stripped-down country of their fathers' generation, he'd be nodding his head to the static cries of a far-reaching late night radio station as his parents slept. Even now, in the present, after work Chuck would lie in bed, his eyes barely slits, his mind lost in a headphoned world. The sounds of "Vanish in Our Sleep" accompanied him while he fought off dreams.

Chuck's relationships did not suffer from his obsession with the funk. He had done his share of dating – to the delight of his mother and father. He was aware that some of the women did have a man in uniform complex and that the majority of them ended up thinking that he was peculiar. Being used to and accepting his obsession was one thing, well two things, but the women were not used to fucking to the rhythms that Chuck was obsessive about. That was and is an entirely different thing. The funk was slow but when the bass strings were plucked hard and aggressive, a necessary response was expected and for these poor girls- well the majority of them- this rhythm was too hard to learn in all of its subtle glory. They simply did not grow up hearing it.

For the ones that became girlfriends, a tentative truce was met. Their insecurities and questions of where and who had taught him these moves were not asked and in turn for the short but passionate moments, dating, not the lessons in rhythm but during those rare gems of time when they were lost in the moment, the united couple shared something raw and beautiful.

When Chuck was sitting in his highway patrol unit watching the cars move by, their brake lights tapping as they slowed out of respect for him, he'd reminisce about those girls. The ones that he truly loved. He would hope they ended up with someone that breathed music. He wanted them and the person that they belonged with to appreciate the voodoo in the notes. The abrupt transitions.

Chuck sat and daydreamed about sound, wondering how far it had to travel until scientists stopped defining it as sound. Faded waves that eventually lost themselves into others? Possibly. As Chuck wondered, the other protagonist began to play his part.

Brian was from Flint, Michigan but, at the telling of this story, Brian found himself driving on Hwy 59. He had left San Antonio 10 hours prior to his predestined – but not planned-- meeting with Chuck Naylor. The reader can assume that this meeting was not on Brian Daniels' mind. Well, in a sense it was but he had no idea which form of law enforcement he would encounter on his journey. If anything, Brian, the quiet agnostic despite his Southern Baptist upbringing, prayed that he would not encounter

anyone on his trip from San Antonio to Detroit. The reason for this? He had thirty pounds of marijuana in the trunk of his car. This was not by choice; this was by, in his mind, necessity.

Brian Daniels had a Master's Degree in Creative Writing. It was the type of degree that his mother would not brag about and his grandfather did not understand. They would however brag that their blood had made it to graduate school. A badge. But Brian's memories of his time spent obtaining an MFA held a different type of distinction. There were feelings of mistrust in himself and his teachers, uncomfortable and misunderstood conversations with classmates, and the fact that he could not and did not know how to survive on what a typical graduate student focused on creative writing would make. But the exposure to books did help him become a better writer!

Despite the silver lining, a year after graduation Brian found himself tempted to run pounds of marijuana to his home state. Being broke did not make him a smarter writer. It was a reality that the graduates who were not natural editors or adept at obtaining fellowships had to face. Money. Being a smarter writer was not the issue. For the bottom of the barrel so to speak, it meant there was a yearly scramble for adjunct teaching positions at local community colleges. In some of the more heartbreaking places these jobs paid \$1700 dollars per class...per semester. When Brian realized that he could not secure four teaching classes per semester with one institution-- with four classes he estimated that he could eke out a small living but which employers want to provide benefits?-- he, to the shock of his close friends, networked and arranged shipments of marijuana during the summer of 2012.

There was a drought in Michigan, drought meaning a shortage on exotic strands of marijuana and even a need for low-grade schwag – the spelling of this slang term has always been contested. Brian's hometown connections were willing to pay \$750 dollars per pound. Unbeknownst to them, Brian was able to secure the merchandise for 500 dollars per pound and, in turn, he would make \$250 dollars for every pound that he delivered. Brian understood the risks but the IRS, student loans and hospital bill collectors did not understand unemployment or the life of an adjunct professor.

Brian was no fool. The danger did not justify the cost and this made him very nervous. His life was in danger. His future. Some of those hometown friends and the girl that he was currently dating tried to persuade him to not take the job. If anything went wrong with the deal, Brian would owe some well-connected people, who had always been close associates but never true friends, a lot of money. They had to answer to people who did not know Brian. People that reached their status in their particular fields because they were very efficient at collecting money and sending messages that would protect their business brand. Their-his associates-- easy smiles would not greet him kindly on his return trip to San Antonio. If he were to return. Prison. Well, if prison were the outcome...at least he'd get time to write.

The trip, despite Brian's unsettled mind, was going relatively smoothly. The hills of central west Texas were giving way to trees that danced with colors he was not used to. If there were one complaint, it'd be that he left his iPod. That musical mechanism

had been left at his girlfriend's house. Her arguments against him going, her claims that they would be okay – financially and spiritually and her overall optimism made Brian angry. He regretted it now, not the way they had said goodbye to each other but the leaving of the iPod. He was stuck with one CD to listen to for the entire trip. Technically it was a double CD, 2Pac's 1996 release *All Eyez on Me*, but the first CD was damaged and Brian had to skip every song at one point or another. Maybe it was not fair to call it a complaint considering that the CD had been around since he was in the 6th grade. However after ten hours of driving to monotonous radio playlists and listening to the second CD from 2pac's box set, Brian smirked, wishing he had been meticulous in his care for his junior high CD collection. He was a third of the way into his trip and he had already listened to "Rather Be Your N.I.G.G.A." twenty-seven times. Slightly more than 111 minutes of Brian's subconscious was dedicated to that song. Initially he didn't know why he kept replaying that specific song but, after being on the road for so long, his mind wandered towards the strange and abstract. Tracing his sixteen year relationship with a 2pac song helped Brian keep calm and the minutes rolled by. After the 60th listen, his memory kicked in.

In 1996, Brian's mother dated a man named James. James was an avid listener of music – live music-- and P-Funk was one of his passions. One day as James waited for Brian's mother to get ready for their date; James overheard 2Pac's CD being played in Brian's room. James asked him the name of the song. Brian mumbled the title to James. Brian smiled as he reminisced about the story because, at the time, he did not want to say N.I.G.G.A. in front of his mother's boyfriend. He did not want his music to be confiscated. But James had other intentions. He nodded his head when Brian told him who it was. Catching the essential rhythm of the piece, James smiled, and walked away.

A week later, Brian found a Bootsy Collins album that someone slid underneath his bedroom door, *Stretchin' Out in Bootsy's Rubber Band*. There was a note taped to the CD. It read: Track 4. Brian stepped around the typical clutter that invades most teenage bedrooms, and stood with his right ear toward the CD player. The fuzz-tinged bassline blew him away. Instead of N.I.G.G.A. the chorus' "You" was powerful. It was the first time that Brian could remember hearing where his rebellious music came from. If Brian had been more meticulous with his music collection, he would have been able to switch out *All Eyez on Me* with "I'd Rather Be with You." Instead, Brian continued to press repeat. Unfortunately the repeating of that song helped cause Brian's unwanted meeting with the forever waiting and forever listening, Chuck Naylor.

When Brian felt inspired, he would speed. Usually ten to fifteen miles over the speed limit. As an undergrad, back when Wu Tang Clan still had its grips on hip hop culture, Brian was pulled over repeatedly for speeding. His car full of laundry, clean or dirty depending on whether the trip was to or away from home. Music had that effect on Brian. And now, at the time of the telling of this story, music became nostalgic for him. Yes, he was aware of the special package in his truck and he had been careful throughout his journey. But, as history will attest, human beings are strange creatures and, at times, they abandon common sense. Some are just plain and simply attracted to chaos.

CHOCOLATE STAR

As the song played, Brian began to feel good about his life. There was hope. Bills would be paid. He'd have time to write. He could rent a cabin somewhere-- somewhere with snow--and truly be alone with his own thoughts. There would be no responsibility except for him to wake from his dreams and attempt to write down what his brain could remember. The words that were being rapped faded away. The individual instruments fused and the groove grabbed hold of his memory. It shook away all of the doubt that had buried him. He nodded his head, and for a few moments, was almost too free. Driving with his eyes closed for more than a few seconds, he tested the black highways because he felt like there was something out there protecting him. His windows were lowered; the night air caressed him, his foot pressed harder on the pedal. Brian was going to be alright.

Chuck was sitting in his patrol unit and thinking about the last girl that he had slept with. Her name was Chrissie. Things had not progressed into a relationship but he was fond of her. They'd meet up every few weeks. She was a college student in Nacogdoches. Chuck imagined that she had a college boyfriend and when they would fight, she'd storm out and find her way to him. He wondered how long it would last, her escaping to him. Wanting to stay. The moments before things would fall apart. Before attachment became fear and she'd want more of his time or he would want to see her more often. He prayed that things would remain the way they were for at least another month or two. Chuck was attracted to the peaceful times.

He took a breath and then squinted. Headlight beams past a dip in the highway floated up at a dangerous speed. Dangerous enough for Chuck's naked eye to recognize and accept that he was about to pull someone over. His grip tightened on the radar gun. More than likely it was someone who was just trying to rush through the night. If he were poetic he would have said that they were chasing the hidden sun. But human beings are unpredictable and he had to expect the worst. This is why he took deep breaths. Always thankful because he never knew if this would be his last traffic stop.

The combination of Brian's speed and the hills brought to mind rollercoasters. It gave the feeling of childhood magic and wonder. A time before scientific explanations. The relationship between the car's headlights and the white striped pavement created an eerie fog-like effect in his peripherals. Every few seconds he had to shake his head from second-guessing his path, but his foot never eased off the accelerator pedal. He felt confident, testing nature, battling his mind, hoping his memories lasted for a few more moments. His hands squeezed the steering wheel. He continued to smile and nod his head to the groove. The flickering lights that erupted behind him in the darkness did not initially register. Once they did, he slowed down and started to pull over to the side of the road, Brian Daniels was not scared. He was sad, knowing that he would not have a feeling of freedom like that for a long time, whether he went to prison or ended up teaching at a university for the next 30 years.

Chuck ran the plates on Brian Daniels' Toyota Corolla. There were no priors or tickets but the back of Chuck's neck was tingling. Something was off. The driver hadn't turned his music down. He didn't dig in his pocket for his wallet or scramble to the glove compartment for his car insurance. All he did was nod his head to a slow bassline that tickled Chuck's memory.

Brian watched the officer approach from the driver-side mirror. He was expecting the officer to be much older. He had never dealt with an authoritative figure that was in the same age range. He knew not to engage in unnecessary conversation, answer questions with a simple "yes" or "no" and not to make any sudden movements. This would have been easy to do if the guy were old. But his age? Giving tickets? Brian was the amiable sort, a part of his mind calmed and reassured him that everything would be fine. The other half was quiet and this caused each heartbeat to reverberate throughout his body.

The officer walked slowly. His hands were spread, thumbs grazing his hips, his other fingers pointed towards the road. Each step seemed measured but it wasn't hard for Brian to believe that the officer's legs were coiled and ready to spring if anything unusual were to occur. Brian's breathing quickened. If he were taken in, what would he say? What wouldn't he say? The loan would have to be paid. Iron bars couldn't stop that debt. But how would he pay? There was a thought – a small electronic pulse caused his toes to flicker. How many seconds before the turbo charged vehicle caught up to his seasoned Corolla? If he stayed, how would the officer know about what he was carrying? Didn't Jay Z say that the officer could not search his car?

His breathing slowed to the tempo of high-hats and snares. 2pac was not the best choice in this situation but Brian thought reaching for the stereo knob might piss the officer off. It would be easier if he followed instructions. And, so, he sat there with 2pac bragging to a muse in a moment that was recorded twenty years before.

The officer's footsteps seemed to coincide with the kick drum from the song. This crossed Brian's mind more than once, but Chuck's mind was racing with embarrassment. Chuck kept trying to walk off rhythm but the song guided his steps as if he were hypnotized. It was a bastardized rhythm of something he'd grown up with. He didn't want to prejudge and say that it was a Hip Hop sample. And if it were, he was not the type to bash sampling. He appreciated all forms of creativity and was savvy enough to know that all musicians borrowed, whether sampled or through "taking licks" from other instruments. He hoped the driver was not smirking at him for walking like a penguin. The driver seemed calm as Chuck angled himself by the car door. He hoped that his authoritative image was salvageable.

"License and insurance?"

"Yes sir."

Brian searched his glove compartment. Once he found his registration, he handed everything to the officer. The officer returned to his vehicle to examine Brian's information. There was fidgeting in the Corolla. But again all went quiet when the officer's footsteps walked in link with the temp of the song.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"No sir. I do not." Brian found it odd that the officer did not ask him to turn the music off but he kept his hands on the steering wheel.

"You were speeding. I clocked you at 100. That's 25 over the limit. Is there any reason for that?"

Chuck nostrils flared.

Brian's stomach dropped. His foot wasn't on the gas pedal; this didn't stop him from flexing it hard against the floor, his toes curling into his shoe. If he turned on the car would the officer shoot?

"I'm sorry officer. I did not know that I was going that fast."

"Yeah." Chuck's jaw flexed. It seemed like he was chewing his teeth. "I'll be right back."

Brian's eyes flickered with nervousness between his rearview and driver side mirrors as the officer walked back to his patrol car. The officer's silhouette paused. He placed his left hand against Brian's trunk and sneezed. Brian wanted to rub his eyes and wrestle away whatever the hell situation he'd found himself in but his hands remained still. Deep breaths. Fingertips still keeping time with the high hats and snares. His foot tapped on the accelerator pedal. How far could he get? He wouldn't be able to return to his apartment or to the girl he was dating. But what was he returning to anyway? What awaited him? A violent ending after he explained his predicament over and over to people that just wanted their money? His San Antonio friends who had fronted him the product-- relationships built off of drunken nights and schemes that were never meant to come into fruition-- would stand as silent witnesses to Brian's fate. He pressed down on the pedal, trying to be as quiet as possible. His hands tightened on the wheel. He closed his eyes and said a prayer. It was not the first prayer he'd said since being exposed to academia but it was the first one that he believed in.

The knock at the driver's door frame seemed to shake him from a dream. Chuck had a smirk on his face. "I didn't lose you, did I?"

The driver smiled. "No sir. The music. It's just, well, I'm sure you get stories all the time and I'm not giving you reasons. I've just been lost throughout this trip. One of those few times that music seems to matter these days. You know?"

"I've made that drive to San Antonio before. Back in O-seven. When the Spurs won. I was trying to get to where my friends were at. I got so lost in the drive; I ended up driving through downtown without even knowing. Told myself--never again at night."

"Not the worst drive to make at night. I'll tell you where-you ever made it up to the Northwest?"

Chuck shook his head. He'd always wanted to drive around the country but he could never imagine taking that many days off unless he quit. The thought still tickled his mind on occasion. His posture relaxed. If someone were to drive by, they would have thought two friends were catching up on the side of a highway. The officer pulling

a prank, the two of them laughing about it and getting nostalgic about how fast time passes.

"Nothing like those mountains. Down I-10 and then up in Washington. Passed through Idaho at dusk. Drove down a mountain as night grew. Never again! You could feel the road rise and the slope...man...crazy. Your stomach quivers."

"I'd like to make that drive one day." Chuck adjusted his hat as he said those words. He had been talking about making that drive for at least 4 years.

"Do it as soon as you can."

"I imagine I'll have to retire to get that much time off. To really enjoy it."

"You've gotta find that time. You get on the road and on a night like this, there doesn't seem to be anything else moving. If there are random lights passing you by, they are finding their way just like you. All you got is this." Brian tapped the stereo.

Chuck laughed. "Maybe I'll quit tomorrow." Chuck bit the inside of his lower lip. It was becoming a strange traffic stop. He shrugged the thought away with a slight shake of his head. "What is that song that you have on repeat? It sounds like something I've heard before."

"2 Pac? The rapper?"

"I know who 2 Pac is."

"Oh. I didn't know. I mean...no offense but snap judgment...wouldn't expect an officer of the law to listen to this. Even growing up. But I guess that people change."

"We do. That backing track, that's a sample from an older song though, right?"

"From the seventies I think. It's called 'Rather Be with You.' It's by this old-school cat named Bootsy Collins."

"I knew I knew it from somewhere!"

"You've heard of him?"

"James Brown, George Clinton..."

"Yeah sir! That's what I was about to say. But if you listen to the groove, they didn't even sample it. It's an interpolation. Well I think that's what you call it." Brian felt strange calling someone close in age sir but the celebratory nature of the moment allowed him to push past the awkwardness.

"You ever hear the Bone Thugs and Harmony song using that sample? Came out around the same time."

"I know exactly what you are talking about. Did they use a real bass for that one though?"

"Man I couldn't tell ya. I listened to it because they took from Bootsy but I just prefer the original."

"If I took better care of my CDs I'd still have it."

"Amen to that." And just like that, a small laugh brought them back. Chuck glanced at the trunk. Well at least Brian – his registered name-- wasn't nervous anymore. The engine was calm again. For an instant before the conversation Chuck had a feeling that he was going to have to draw his gun or give chase. "Well, look Brian, slow down. Wherever you are headed, take your time. It's hard driving out here at night. Nature has a way of messing with the mind."

CHOCOLATE STAR

“Yes sir. Well...thank you officer. I guess I’m just looking forward to getting home. It’s been a long time.”

They shook hands. Brian waved before he drove off. His speed in check. The same song playing. That interpolation...the original was slower...the warmth of the live instruments...Catfish’s guitar...it was an unfair comparison but the essence of the song intact. Brian’s car lights eventually faded. Chuck’s imagination still carried the melody.

Chuck sat in his car for more than a few moments. He sighed. How many people were able to stay within the lines forever? To explore and then return to the root note – landing on the ONE as his heroes described it. It seemed like humans had to push the boundaries because they had to feel where they were going. Being lost in the moment was unnerving to some. But if you were lucky, you would find your way back and the feeling could be considered exhilarating. If you were lucky...sometimes you had to hope. That thought was pushed towards the back of his mind. Instead he pulled out his phone and wondered if he should send Chrissie a message. Maybe he could visit her on his next day off. Half of the words were typed when he placed the phone down. Chuck sat there, his radar gun positioned but his mind drifting. Tension spread, triggered by the sight of lights rushing towards him in the distance. He’d figured he’d send the message at sunrise.

Book Reviews

Philosophy and Hip-Hop: Ruminations on Postmodern Cultural Form

By Bailey, Julius. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. Pp. xx, 198. Hardcover \$90; Paperback \$39.99. eBook 29.99.

In *Philosophy and Hip-Hop*, Julius Bailey takes the reader through a journey of hip-hop culture and its varied manifestations throughout the world while informed through philosophical incite but in lay terms. The book has the following functions: first, as a sequel to *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* by Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, second, as a means to demonstrate the intersection between hip-hop, ancient and modern philosophy, and third, to serve as a testament to the state of hip-hop culture in light of industry's invasive tendencies. Although, most hip-hop scholars such as Jeff Chang and Bakari Kitwana trace mark the origin of hip-hop as a cultural movement which began somewhere between the historic meeting of late 1971 among mostly African American and Puerto Rican rival gangs geared towards the formation of a peace treaty and unity for the sake of common communal objectives and Cool Herc's block parties in the South Bronx around 1973. Rightfully so, South Bronx owns the geographical and cultural legacy for the advent of hip-hop as conventionally known. However, Bailey argues that hip-hop's origins have roots in multiple cultures ranging from West Africa to American literary movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, and its accompanying subcultures on multiple U.S. coastal regions including the rural south. However, "hip-hop became, very much, an urban phenomena and this encourages its spread at lightning speed within African American and worldwide cultures" (p. 27).

Bailey presents hip-hop as originally intended to serve the public by curtailing violence and gang warfare through culturally transformative artistic means. Throughout the chapters referred to as ruminations, the author emphasizes that twenty-first century hip-hop culture exist in a condition wedged between its nostalgic past of progressive subversion and reinforcing the norm of self-exploitation for commercial viability purposes. According to the text, a unique feature of hip-hop lies in the idea that forty years after its inception, it "is still recognized as a distinctly Black form of culture; the Black roots of jazz as such, though rock ad rolls roots are more often ignored than they are explored" (p. 37). Bailey could have given an explanation and concrete examples on how African-Americans faced systemic exclusion and expulsion from Rock and Roll. As hip-hop experienced commercial growth and expansion, the segregated music industry accelerated its efforts of phasing out African American bands with musicians with the exception for a few tokens. Such practices hinder African Americans from forming their own cultural narrative, but must accept the aristocratically constructed cultural forms which result in a loss of control over individual and collective self-definition. Just as several prominent African American recording artists became so-called "rhythm and blues" musicians because they faced direct denial from major record labels as rock musicians (i.e. Nile Rodgers, Rick James), hip-hop artists began facing similar challenges which produced a split between the

mainstream for those who conform to corporate standards and the underground, if one chooses to remain true to their message and authentic artistic expression.

Bailey critiques “gangsta rap” as more than merely “reality rap” but an aesthetic form of criminality commodification as a response to industry’s demand. In the book entitled *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman emphasizes the idea that Western culture has become increasingly more “other-directed” and less “inner directed”. Although, Bailey does not reference Riesman, the author implicitly hints that African American’s have collectively lost the ability to self-determine their own cultural type. Black urban culture has become subject to a pre-conceived sub-narrative, which provides an inaccurate depiction of African American reality. According to Bailey, the music industry as a business has become so concerned with profits, that it has become negligent in producing representative accounts of the African American experience, but has resorted to sensationalized depictions of exaggerated stereotypes. Industry’s false representation of authentic hip-hop culture has contributed to hip-hop’s cultural divergence. The book would have benefitted from a brief discussion of the idea that the so-called East and West Coast feud of the 1990s was partially a by-product of the media’s use of controversy as a means of emotional manipulation on a mass-level, and a real culture war within hip-hop. Aristocratically constructed industry demands have caused a divide in hip-hop culture in addition to distorting African American reality. By the mid-1980s, “the new breed of rappers delivered raw and vivid depictions of the harsh reality of American inner cities” (p. 51). As the industry became increasingly dominated by an obsession with materialistic success, the artist became increasingly challenged by the accompanying “role conflict” of navigating through the power structures of capitalism and producing a substantive and socially relevant product.

Rumination 3 entitled “Toward a Philosophy of Hip-Hop Education” focuses on hip-hop as pedagogically relevant because it has the ability to link foreign and abstract concepts to real life experiences with culturally specific relevance. Although Bailey does not reference Bloom’s Taxonomy of higher ordered thinking skills, the author focuses on the need for an inclusive educational approach which empowers marginalized youths. However, the author references Malik El-Shabazz (formerly Malcolm X) in terms of describing the goal of hip-hop pedagogy as a means for developing the necessary intellectual growth in order to understand one’s surrounding, the world’s problems, and how the self fits into such a complex system.

The unique feature of *Philosophy and Hip-Hop* entails the author’s presentation of one of Plato’s well known ethical arguments in relationship to the state of hip-hop. “The ideal society that Plato describes will vanish when there is disorder and when there is injustice” (p. 87). Hip-hop exists in a struggle between the will to become an agent of justice and submission to external pressure to conform to a pre-constructed narrative. The thrust of the book deals with the idea that Hip-hop has lost a collective sense of purpose, since its corporate takeover. When society or its parts collectively become driven by individual desires rather than the greater good. However, hip-hop culture has responded favorably to the struggle between morality and pragmatism. Classical sociological theorist Emile Durkheim describes such a condition as *anomie* which can

translate as derangement. "The deterioration begins when individuals no longer have the capacity to act for themselves, as individual actions result to collective repercussions" (p. 87).

The book uses well known philosophical themes and concepts as illustrations for presenting hip-hop culture as a testament to both the African American experience and its international manifestations. Rather than philosophical abstractions, Bailey uses a conversational tone in lay and concrete terms as he articulates the triumphs and struggles of the collective hip-hop community within a global context. Throughout the text, the author focuses on the need to make both philosophy as a discipline and hip-hop as a culture to become applicable for pedagogical strategies, social commentary and a pillar for progress

Toward the latter part of the book, Bailey discusses the commercial pressure hip-hop artists face with regards to reinforcing of what ethnographer Elijah Anderson termed "the code of the street." Failure to conform to such codes through not only through recordings, and performances, but also public appearances can result in "professional suicide" due to the nullification of one's street credibility. Elevation through the ranks of such a code comes with great difficulty; however, status becomes easily lost if not properly safeguarded. However, if corporations control the parameters of "the code of the streets" more than the culture itself, then artistic authenticity consequentially becomes endangered due to their minimal ability to construct one's self definition. The greater socio-political crises results from the disproportionate amount of power that a few possess in terms of controlling ideas, information, and the wills of the masses which in turn results in large scale emotional, cognitive, and behavioral manipulation. "History has proven that control is achieved through the management of information" (p. 106). Hip-hop industry has made a public display of such behavioral vulnerabilities through the tendency of artist to conform to externally imposed stereotypes through commodification processes.

Philosophy and Hip Hop would appeal to scholars who desire to remain current on the state of hip-hop culture as it relates to primarily African American within the rapid emergence of a global context. Bailey does not assume that the reader has philosophical training, but rather expresses sentiments, laments, and aesthetic theory with a broad target audience. "Hip-hop, one of the most far-reaching of postmodern insurgencies, is mistakenly tagged solely as an art form. In essence, it appears in every sense of the word to be a revolution and renaissance" (p. 103) As the title suggests, the book delves into problems and cultural responses to postmodernism as a twenty-first challenge which functions as the culmination of Karl Marx's nineteenth century synthesis of class struggle compounded with the problem of the color line as W.E.B. Du Bois had predicted for the twentieth century. Upon reading the book, the audience should expect to have their self-perceptions, and their assumptions about the depths of systemic exploitation challenged.

Michael D. Royster teaches at Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Tx. His research interests include social stratification, sociological theory, race and criminology.

Religion and Hip Hop

By Miller, Monica. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2013. Pp. vii, 223. Paperback \$39.95

In *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica Miller examines the ways in which scholars of religion theorize socially, contextually and historically the category of “religion” and how this understanding of religion is discussed by Hip Hop. Miller contends that this discourse provides new conceptions of Hip Hop. She does not ask what is religious about Hip Hop, rather, how Hip Hop utilizes religion. Miller argues that religion is socially constructed; therefore the “dirtiness” that religion ascribes to Hip Hop must be reconsidered. Moreover, a scholarly understanding of Hip Hop’s usage of religion challenges the very identification of what should be considered “religious.” Miller asks: “How does popular culture ‘do’ or perform religion-or thought another way, how does popular culture, such as Hip Hop, turn out, disrupt, or call into question the very category the scholar seeks to investigate” (72)?

Miller’s postmodern text, *Religion and Hip Hop*, utilizes several theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. She invokes theorist Mary Douglas, uses queer theory, and engages with theories of religion by Anthony Pinn, Russell McCutcheon and Talal Asad. Methodologically, Miller is not constrained by lyrical analysis; she uses methods across disciplines in order to present a more holistic understanding of Hip Hop. She states: “But not only are new approaches warranted, we also should be looking towards an expansion of new sources—film, dance, virtual spaces. Otherwise, the voices (and life-worlds) of people being signified on remain in a subaltern position, voices that ‘cannot speak’” (7). She examines books written by Hip Hop emcees, analyzes empirical data on youth participation in institutional churches and conducts a “visual ethnography” of Krump culture by reviewing the documentary film *RIZE*.

In addition to Miller furthering methodological approaches to the study of Hip Hop, her examination of “religion” and Hip Hop challenges scholars’ conceptions of the two subjects. She argues against studying in an *a priori* manner and for empowering the subjects to present their own world view. Furthermore, scholars should focus on religious “influences” which “draws attention towards practices as well as offering a window by which to understand human interests in uses of religion” (74). To build her argument of focusing on the ways in which Hip Hop utilize religion, Miller first explains Anthony Pinn’s complex subjectivity which enables “increased agency and liberation of one’s own subjectivity” (102). She then reveals the intellectual lineage of complex subjectivity which includes William James, Charles Long and Paul Tillich. Miller invokes postmodernism by the way of Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and Russell McCutcheon to illustrate the shortcomings of complex subjectivity in particular and religionists study of Hip Hop in general which seeks a “quest for meaning.” Therefore the significant work *Religion and Hip Hop* contributes to the study of Hip Hop is to examine Hip Hop emically because the very categories that scholars used are

tainted and will not render the most accurate results. The publication of *Religion and Hip Hop* marks a scholarly moment in which Hip Hop scholars and religionists can no longer research Hip Hop without giving a “nod” to this text.

Travis Harris is a PhD student at the College of William and Mary. His research interests include race, religion, Hip Hop, media, performance and 20th century African American history.