

# IMHOTEP JOURNAL

*A Discourse Analysis of Value Orientations  
in Hip Hop Lyrics*

**Volume 9, May 2012**

*By The Students*



A Treble Clef

(Blank Back of Front Cover)

(Blank Back of Front Cover)

San Francisco State University  
College of Ethnic Studies, Department Africana Studies

*Student Publications*

***Imhotep Magazine***

Volume 1, February 2000

*On Methodology*

Volume 2, February 2001

*On African Philosophy*

Volume 3, February 2002

*On African Education Ancient and Modern*

Volume 4, February 2003

*Ideology of Race and Slavery from Antiquity to Modern Times*

Volume 5, May 2005

*Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*

Volume 6, May 2008

*African Rites of Passage*

Volume 7, May 2010

*African Healing Traditions*

Volume 8, May 2011

*African Ancestral Veneration*

Volume 9, May 2012

*A Discourse Analysis of Value Orientations in Hip Hop Lyrics*

For further information contact:

San Francisco State University  
College of Ethnic Studies, Department of Africana Studies  
1600 Holloway Avenue  
San Francisco, California 94132  
Tel: (415) 338-1054  
Fax: (415) 405-0553

## **Editors**

Justin Metoyer and Christine Burke

## **Production\ Design**

Kenric J. Bailey

## **Contributors**

AFRS 111 Black Cultures and Personalities:

2008/9 Academic Year

## **Faculty Advisor \ Co-Editor**

Serie McDougal, III, PhD

*We would like to express our thanks and appreciation to  
Madame Chair Dorothy Tsuruta PhD for her leadership and guidance,  
as well as the IRA for their support of this publication.*

**Copyright © 2012 San Francisco State University**

All rights reserved. No part of this material may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, recording or any information storage and retrieval systems, without the prior express written permission of San Francisco State University, College of Ethnic Studies, Department of Africana Studies.

# Table of Contents

**EDITORIAL** .....4  
Tandraya Eckert-Berry

**INTRODUCTION** .....6  
Serie McDougal, III, Assistant Professor

## A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF VALUE ORIENTATIONS IN HIP HOP LYRICS The Students

*The Conceptualization of Success in Hip Hop Lyrics* .....7  
By Rejeane Biala

*Transitions from Poverty to Wealth in Hip Hop* .....16  
By Brittany Galland

*Religion and Spirituality in Hip Hop Lyrics* .....29  
By Bria Grant

*Brotherhood in Hip Hop Lyrics* .....39  
By Jimmy Commins

*African American Interdependence and Collectivism in Political Hip Hop* .....50  
By Patrick Tuck

*Racial Identity in Hip Hop Lyrics* .....59  
By TanDraya Eckert Berry

## Editorial

By Tandraya Eckert-Berry

Hip hop music is an important cultural component of the African American community, it influences our young and old and shapes our society. Whether it is recognized or not hip hop music displays many morals that the community passes on. In this ninth volume of the Imhotep Journal we implement a *Discourse Analysis of Value Orientations in Hip Hop Lyrics*. Here you will see the many value orientations that we receive and follow from Hip Hop music. In this AFRS 111-01 class, we have been given the chance to look at hip hop lyrics in their different context and analyze them in the fullness of their meaning. Sometimes when you hear a song you do not capture the deeper meaning in it. In the following writings the students were able to look past the beat and focus on the meaning in of the words. I would like to thank Dr. Serie McDougal III, for giving me the opportunity to help in this final process and for expanding my knowledge of the African culture in this past January-May 2012 semester. I personally have been exposed to so many different concepts that I did not know before, and for that I am grateful. I would also like to thank my fellow students for all of their commitment, hard work and excellent research on this topic.

In this journal, different aspects of Hip Hop music are explored, described and explained, from different genre's and different topic. From many articles written in the AFRS 111 class, Dr. McDougal picked six articles that represent the diversity of content themes expressed in hip hop music. The six different articles in this volume are about how hip hop music reflects on aspects the Black community and larger society. In Rejeane Bila's *The Conceptualization of Success in Hip Hop Lyrics*, Biala looks at how success is seem in understood by several hip hop artists. She discusses success and how it is defined through fans, talent and money. In Brittany Galland's *Transitions from*

*Poverty to Wealth* in Hip Hop, she looks at the individual struggle, communalism and racial identity. All three themes are expressed in songs about moving beyond poverty. In Bria Grant's *Religion and Spirituality in Hip Hop Lyrics*, she tells us how God and other higher being are understood about in some hip hop songs. In Jimmy Commins' *Brotherhood in Hip Hop Lyrics*, he looks at themes of male collectivism as expressed by some hip hop artists. From brotherhood through death, economic difficulty, and devotion, Commins explains what brotherhood means and how it is expressed by some artists. In Patrick Tuck's *African American Interdependence and Collectivism in Political hip Hop*, Tuck takes this opportunity to demonstrate a major African Worldview shown in political Hip Hop. Finally, in my paper *Racial Identity in Hip Hop Lyrics*, I try to identify the connection between racial identity and the Black community today as the topic is explored in hip hop lyrics.

From this journal we hope you take away the knowledge of hip hop value orientations expressed in lyrics. Hopefully these articles will change the way people listen to hip hop music and also how they perceive it and relate it to their own lives. This journal was edited intensively by both Dr. McDougal and the six student contributors. As you make your way through this Imhotep journal, we hope you are introduced to perspectives that you that you were not previously exposed to.



## **Introduction**

By Serie McDougal III, Ph.D.

The student authors of this issue of Imhotep use the method of content analysis to go beyond surface level analysis to assess the deeper meaning in the communication messages found in hip hop lyrics. They particularly examine the seldom studied and often ignored topics addressed in the lyrics of hip hop artists. As an art form, hip hop is in large part an extension of the African oral tradition; a means of conveying and transmitting information, meaning, values and beliefs from one generation to the next. Because of the stirring and productive power of the spoken word, hip hop lyrics deserve critical attention and analysis. The students in this issue of Imhotep have taken a systematic approach to analyzing value orientations in hip hop lyrics. Each student begins by introducing the importance of their topic and the purpose of their investigation. They explore the contours of the present research on each of their respective topics. Each student explains the strategies they used to select songs and analyze lyrics. Lastly, each student explains the lyrical themes they have discovered and the evidence based claims that can be made about the hip hop lyrics they analyzed. After presenting the results, each contributor discusses the meaning and significance of their findings for the African\Black community and larger society.

## The Conceptualization of Success in Hip Hop Lyrics

By Rejeane Biala

Culture, by definition, is the patterns of thinking, feeling and acting among a group of individuals. According to Triandis (1991), the different aspects of culture can be illustrated in the model of an onion. The outer most layer of the onion represents the aspects of culture most susceptible to change, such as practices in music, art, rituals, symbols, food and more. Conversely, the inside of the onion houses the aspects of culture least susceptible to change, such as values, morals, and beliefs. Looking further into the cultural practices of music, Hip-Hop music can be considered as a contributing factor influencing the patterns of thinking, feeling and acting in society. Like other forms of art, Hip-Hop music was created in response to the environment and experiences of the African American people. Employing the heritage of the Black oral tradition, rap music became a cathartic outlet (Richardson and Scott, 2002). African American experiences are often improperly essentialized into the stereotype of hardship, drugs, violence, and vulgarity set by depictions in multimedia. The problem is posed in Wright's (2004) analysis is that corporate America's control of hop-hop's production, marketing and distribution subsequently translates into a great degree of control of the African American image and voice. As the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates would presume, every opposite comes to be from its opposite (i.e. hot comes from cold). It is possible that there is a positive to the negative criticisms in hip-hop music. Not only does hip-hop depict the lives and experiences of African Americans, but it also depicts the positive behaviors of self-determination and success. This paper will explore the various ways hip-hop music presents self-determination and success. Many criticizers of hip-hop have overlooked these positive images due to the lack of studies done on hip-hop's influence of self-motivation and determination

on the African American psyche. Understanding that hip-hop music can be seen in a brighter light is exemplified in Richardson and Scott's (2002), assertion that hop-hop is the only one of many music genres that captures the attention of a vast amount of youth across distinctions of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. With its growing popularity, hip-hop music has changed conceptualizations of success from its beginnings compared to the hip-hop music today.

Scholars seldom discuss success and its relation to hip-hop music, but its counterpart of negative behavior is the center point of many articles. Observing the amount of violent lyrics in relation to crime rates during 1979-1997, Herd (2009) used content analysis and found that hip-hop artists' portrayal of violence and graphic sexuality was a display of declining artistic creativity and quality due to the increased driving force of profiteering. The lyrics evoking violence during the latter years were put in a brighter light as shown in their increased association with glamour, wealth, masculinity, and personal prowess. Following the changing themes represented in hip-hop, Henderson (1996) agrees that hip-hop has changed from its origins of making political statements. Having outlined the synonymous terms of hip-hop music, rap music and gangster rap as each having different characteristics, Henderson (1996), asserts that rappers should return to the nationalistic focus in hip-hop. In doing so, the rappers would help to promote a national culture to replace the popular (faddish) culture of violence and sexism. Maher (2005) breaks hip hop music down into the two subunits of commercial hip-hop and underground "conscious" hip-hop. Maher (2005) explores the effects of hip-hop lyrics on the youth. He finds that the Euro controlled industry of music villanizes Black men. The more profitable themes of hip-hop, violence and sexualism, are the most outputted in multimedia over the underground "conscious" hip-hop themes. The underground themes, which are political, social and positive, are buried and are not exposed to the media driven youth. As with any movement the number of participants and informed citizens determines the success, in other words "power by numbers". Without the exposure of political conscious and positive attitudes the youth have been corrupted and furthermore, there is no self-

determination and a loss of character in the stereotype.

### **Methods**

Success, self-determination, and motivation are intangible aspects of the human psyche and they differ from person to person. The themes expressed by hip-hop lyrics, and music in general, remain the same but over time the phrases change. Phrases of hip-hop lyrics motivate listeners to different ends. Through content analysis, this paper explores two eras of hip-hop music, the beginnings and the current. In order to obtain songs from the beginnings of hip-hop music, every other song from the top song list from [www.allmusic.com](http://www.allmusic.com) in the genre “old-school rap” were chosen, totaling a number of fifteen songs. For the current hip-hop songs the [Billboard.com](http://Billboard.com) top rap song list used. Current songs were acquired from the number one rap song of the week for the past four months. When a song repeated as number one for multiple weeks, the number one songs of even earlier weeks were added until there were twenty-one songs. After the reading and analysis of all 36 song lyrics, all the motivational phrases expressed were noted in a chart under several themes. Ultimately this research project measures the difference between the meanings, reasons, and themes for success in the two eras.

### **Results**

#### **Theme One: Affiliations and Fans**

Upon analyzing the different phrases one of the themes that success is most expressed by is defined by a rapper’s affiliations and fans. In this theme, success is defined by who one is affiliated with and the praise received from their fans. Both the songs from the beginnings and present day hip hop music iterate the importance of networks. 13 out of 36 songs had lyrics representing this theme. The following are three examples of success by “affiliations and fans”.

Song 10/ Sugarhill Gang – 8th Wonder

“Well I’m the Master G, and I’m the best\ All the ladies say my voice is rated X\ I’m a touch of lightning, a taste of fire\ Well I’m the Master G, and I’m your desire\ Young ladies, I said I rock the nation\ Cause I got my own, transportation\ I can rock just about, any age\ So let your fingers do the walkin through the yellow page”

Song 17/ Drake f/ Nicki Minaj/ Make Me Proud

“Gotta r-r-row, gotta row your boat\ It’s Pink Friday Records and O.V.O.\ Done did the pop tour, I’m the realest still\ The best legal team so the deals is ill\ It’s Mac, OPI, and a fragrance too\ Apparel, I’m dominatin every avenue”

Song 22/ Chris Brown f/ Busta Rhymes, Lil Wayne /Look at Me Now

“I get what you get in ten years, in two days\ +Ladies Love+ me, I’m on my Cool J.”

### **Claim**

Both the old school and new school hip hop lyrics displayed by song 10 and song 22 mention how the approval of the female audience is a factor to success. In some ways the affiliation with different areas of business represents success. In addition, as noted earlier, it is evident that success has become signified by being the most profitable and adored by the opposite sex.

### **Theme Two: Career/ Talent**

The second theme of success is linked to career and talent of the artist. In this aspect, artists promote that success is determined by what one does and how skillfully they do it. According to the career of an artist, these songs demonstrate that one must be original and work hard. Seven out of thirty-six songs had lyrics that represent this

theme. The following are three examples.

Song 13/ Cold Crush Brothers/ Fresh, Wild, Fly and Bold

“Cause it’s about makin rhymes like no one else can design\ I do everything I can to make myself better\ Live on a steady diet of stages”

Song 11/ Dana Dane/ Cinderfella Dana Dane

“If you can rap, also dress fresh\ You might win a date with the sweet princess”

Song 20/ DJ Khaled f/ Drake, Lil Wayne, Rick Ross / I’m On One

“ I’m gettin so throowed\ I ain’t work this hard since I was eighteen”

### **Claim**

There are few of the current era songs that focus on career and talent. Most of the songs sampled from the beginnings of hip-hop focused on the genuine origins of hip hop, which is a means of expression, an art, and not a simple job. Although through the years the habits of greed and profiteering became influences of the all media and entertainment, Song 20 subtly notes the difficulty of obtaining success.

### **Theme Three: Extravagance and Money**

Lastly, another theme that has had many song lyrics associated with it, is extravagance and money. Within this theme, it is emphasized that money and spending it on luxurious things is an indicator of success. Nine out of 36 songs had quotes that represented this particular theme. The following are three examples.

Song 19/ Drake/ Headlines

“And Drizzy got the money, so Drizzy gon’ pay it\ Those my brothers, I ain’t even gotta say it\ That’s just somethin they know”

Song 21/ Big Sean f/ Chris Brown /My Last

“I work too hard to be ballin’ on a budget\ Me and my people do it big out in public\ Cause if you don’t do it Big bitch, you ain’t doing nothing”

Song 28/ Drake f/ Mary J. Blige, Swizz Beatz, T. I./ Fancy

“Girl you got it, let ‘em know that everything big, uh\ Nail done, hair done, everything big”

### **Claim**

The majority of the songs from the current billboard charts of hip-hop music present this theme of success while old school hip-hop does not. The themes of popular hip-hop lyrics have changed over time as this theme demonstrates.

### **Conclusion**

Among several themes of success, the most significant ones expressed from the sample of music used in this study, are career/ talent, affiliation/ fans, and extravagance/ money. By looking at the songs from the beginnings and current era of hip-hop, these themes support the previous studies of Denise Herd (2009) and Henderson (1996). Both of these authors have asserted that hip-hop has changed, and these themes provided support their claims. Old school hip-hop presented a vast focus on the art, talent, and career that hip hop brings, while both eras note the importance of the fans and affiliations, the recent era seldom iterates the previously stated themes and focuses more on extravagance and money. Because of the heavy emphasis of today’s hip hop on money and ultimately, materialism, African worldview in some youth and some adults has changed. The traditional African worldview would focus on the success of one’s spirit but due to the never-ending output of the greed driven media, many artists focus on success as measured by material acquisition. The African worldview is not the only one to be pushed into this materialistic view of success, since the audience of hip-hop is greater than any single race, sex, culture, and

age. The themes identified by this research project are important for understanding of hip hop because, while sexual graphics and violence are still present in this form of media, there is also a greater influence that these lyrics pose. All music has a message, and for the well-known genres of music, they speak to a large audience, and for hip-hop, it promotes different forms of success.

### Works Cited

- Albertson, C., & et al (2012). *Old school rap (top songs)*. Retrieved from <http://www.allmusic.com/explore/style/old-school-rap-d2926/songs>
- Henderson, E. (1996). Black nationalism and rap music. *Journal of Black Studies*, 26(3), 308-339.
- Herd, D. (2009). Changing images of violence in rap music lyrics: 1979–1997. *Journal Of Public Health Policy*, 30(4), 395-406. doi:10.1057/jphp.2009.36
- Maher, G. (2005). Brechtian hip-hop: Didactics and self-production in post-gangsta political mixtapes. *Journal of Black Studies*, 36(1), 129-160.
- Peterson, L. (2009). Turning the tables. *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response To Pop Culture*, (42), 35-40.
- Rap songs*. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.billboard.com/charts/rap-songs>
- Richardson, J., & Scott, K. (2002). Rap music and its violent progeny: America's culture and violence in context. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 71(3), 175-192. Retrieved from...
- Sawyer, D. (2008). StupidfFresh: Hip-hop culture and perceived anti-intellectualism in urban Black youth. Conference Papers -- Association For The Study Of African American Life & History, 196.



*The original hip-hop lyrics archives.* (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.ohhla.com/>

Trafimow, D., Triandis, H., & Goto, S. (1991). Some tests of the distinction between the private self and the collective self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(5), 649-655.

Wright, K. (2004). Rise up hip hop nation: From deconstructing racial politics to building positive solutions. *Socialism & Democracy*, 18(2), 9-20.

## Appendix

### Song List

1-15 Top Old-school Hip Hop Songs

16-36 Top present day Hip- Hop Songs

1. Kurtis Blow – Basketball
2. L'trimm – Cars That Go Boom
3. Whodini – Freaks Come Out At Night
4. Kool Moe Dee – To Go To Work
5. Grandmaster, Melle Mel, and Duke Bootee – The Message
6. Dana Dane – Nightmares
7. Afrika Bambaata – Planet Rock
8. UTFO – Roxanne, Roxanne
9. Doug E Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew – The Show
10. Sugarhill Gang – 8th Wonder
11. Dana Dane – Cinderfella Dana Dane
12. Egyptian Lover – Egypt, Egypt
13. Cold Crush Brothers – Fresh, Wild, Fly and Bold
14. Kool Moe Dee – How Ya Like Me Now

15. Beastie Boys – Rhymin’ and Stealin’
16. Drake f/ Lil Wayne – The Motto
17. Drake f/ Nicki Minaj – Make Me Proud
18. Jay-Z & Kanye West – Niggas in Paris
19. Drake – Headlines
20. DJ Khaled f/ Drake, Lil Wayne, Rick Ross – I’m On One
21. Big Sean f/ Chris Brown – My Last
22. Chris Brown f/ Busta Rhymes, Lil Wayne – Look at Me Now
23. Nicki Minaj f/ Drake – Moment 4 Life
24. Wiz Khalifa – Black and Yellow
25. Waka Flocka Flame f/ Roscoe Dash, Wale – No Hands
26. Rick Ross f/ Chrisette Michele, Drake – Aston Martin Music
27. Drake f/ Lil Wayne – Right Above IT
28. Drake f/ Mary J. Blige, Swizz Beatz, T. I. – Fancy
29. Eminem f/ Rihanna – Love the Way You Lie
30. Nicki Minaj – Your Love
31. Drake – Over
32. B.o.B. f/ Bruno Mars – Nothin’ On You
33. Timberland f/ Drake – Say Something
34. Young Money f/ Lloyd – Bedrock
35. Jay-Z f/ Alicia Keys – Empire State of Mind
36. Eminem f/ Drake, Kanye West, Lil Wayne – Forever

## Transitions from Poverty to Wealth in Hip Hop

By Brittany Galland

Within the world of hip hop music there is one message that speaks to many: it is a message of hope, empowerment, and determination. This message is the ability to transition from poverty to wealth. A good example of hip hop emerging from a low income area would be in Atlanta, Georgia where the, “inner city still retained levels of crime, spatial segregation, and racial poverty that ranked among the highest of any American metropolitan area... Atlanta’s first rappers emerged from this forgotten environment ...[with the] style bass music of rappers like Mojo, Kilo, and Raheem (Grem,2006, pg 57). The difficult task that these artists had to overcome becomes a message in their music. It is the message that all people in society, regardless of racial oppression and financial standing are capable of great things and anyone can achieve their dreams if they pursue them. This message is important to society and the Black community because it is a message of hope, it gives those who struggle with finances or any other aspect in their life the inspiration to believe in their dreams and also the determination to pursue those dreams.

There are many people throughout history who have believed in this message of transition from poverty to wealth and the empowerment of the African race. One credible source would be Coretta Scott King; a rights activist who spoke of a better quality of life for people of African descent. King’s message is one that, “today’s youth have...same high aspirations for a better quality of life and a resolute determination not to be satisfied with an impoverished mindset or living condition” (Simmons & Chavez , 2006, pg. 13). Great leaders such as Coretta Scott King, have paved the way for youth and hip hop artists alike to fight and pursue for any dream or desire they have. This is important because ever since the civil rights movement African-Americans have fought for equal rights and a better future, and now this message is

being spread through hip hop and the empowering message that anyone can transition from poverty to wealth.

The message of transition from poverty to wealth is important because it shows that anyone is capable of achieving their dreams. The purpose of researching the transition from poverty to wealth is to bring light to the history of this topic and the struggle people have endured. It is important to show that hip hop artists have worked hard for what they have considering the circumstances that they had to overcome.

### **Review of Existing Literature**

Hip hop music is used to express stories, experiences, or thoughts through music and lyrics. Many have analyzed these messages and have conducted research on this topic to solidify their findings. One theory of how hip hop artists sing about certain topics, such as poverty, is exemplified in previous research from, “Adam Krims [who] proposes that hip-hop necessitates a ‘symbolic collapsing’ of the artist onto the performer, so that in lyrics the artist must appear to speak ‘from authentic experience’ “ (Hess, 2006, pg. 61). This shows that people who listen to rap prefer to listen to an artist who has experienced a life of poverty over those who have not. It can be seen that hip-hop artists must establish credibility and that is the only way to gain access into the music industry and be respected; so the artists who rap about poverty must come from a poor background. Hess has taken research done by others and explained how it related to their research. What Hess has found from the research is that artists “born into poverty, the desire for wealth becomes a more survivalist form of consumerism, and artists often connect the disadvantages of their formative years to their desire to get rich through success in the music business” (Mickey Hess, 2006, pg. 61). From this perspective it is speculated that one reason hip-hop artists pursue wealth is because they associate wealth with success. Becoming successful compensates for the artists previous experiences with poverty.

In the analysis of African-Americans and poverty it can be seen that factors such as poverty, family structure, community violence, child welfare, and education affect income level. African Americans face poverty because they are not provided

the necessary resources in order to succeed. This article's perspective was one that looked at the background of a person's life and found out why they grow up and live out the circumstances they do. It is found that people who grow up in poverty and the culture associated with it, "view rap stars, with "thug" mentalities, as their heroes and belittle their colleagues who work hard to achieve academic success (Rozie-Battle, 2002, pg 3). Poverty is affecting an African –American's culture and creating a life-style; which gives them a strong sense of racial identity because they are able to relate more with their race and others through music. A different take on the research of how hip-hop affects economic background is exemplified in the therapeutic benefits of the music. At-risk youth were a part of a study that incorporated the use of hip hop as a form of self-expression. A common argument against rap music is that rap music, "perpetuates antisocial and violence-laden attitudes and behaviors; however, this line of reasoning leads to a throwing out of 'the baby with the bathwater.'... Rap and hip-hop served as a starting point from which the [at risk youth] was then able to move forward into interactions that allowed for therapeutic self-disclosure and connection" (Olsen-McBride, 2012, pg. 134). This shows that rap music can be used as a therapeutic outlet and commonality among many people. It was found that an at risk youth can express themselves and relate to hip hop music to deal with their struggles. It is a common misconception that all rap music provokes violent behavior, however it is proven that rap is capable of nurturing therapeutic environments for at risk youth.

Lastly, it can be seen that Africans from all over the world can share a similar message of empowerment through music. The article is the analysis of the connection between Puerto-Africans and African-Americans through the use of culture terms, reggae music and rap music all of which is compared the artist Don Omar, who is credited for fusing rap and reggae music. For young music fans, "reggaetón represents an urban experience narrated through poverty, violence and racism like that of much rap and hip hop, which enjoys extreme popularity among youth of all racial and ethnic groups" (Rudolph, 2011 pg. 32). In this article the main focus is an artist named Don Omar, who has spread reggae music and its empowering message to people all over

the world. This shows that the message of music is universal and that urban hip-hop is meant to spread positive and empowering messages all over the world. Hip-hop is a universal form of music that creates a strong sense of community to all African-Americans; this is seen as hip-hop music spreads the same message of poverty, violence and racism throughout the world. Hip-hop is important to the African culture because it has therapeutic capabilities, is capable of spreading universal themes across the world, creates a sense of community, empowerment, and inspiration among Africans, and gives African-Americans something to relate to.

### **Methods**

When researching the topic of the transition from poverty to wealth there were many methods used in order to find the most fitting songs. When researching the topic the main genre of music used was hip hop in the form of rap. This genre and type of music is defined by its lyrical organizations of word rhythm. It is often said that rap is “the poetry of the youth who are often disregarded as a result of their race and class status” (Adams & Fuller, 2006, pg. 938). This means that rap music is a form of expression used by those in areas of poverty and as a way to identify with a particular race. In order to find the songs best suited to express the message of the transition from poverty to wealth the first step taken was to research artists that have experienced a life of poverty and are now wealthy. This was done in a variety of ways. One method was searching on the internet data base, “Original Hip Hop Lyrics Archive” for the words relating to poverty, as well as searching on “Billboards” for popular songs that had lyrics relating to poverty. It was important to look for artists that have experienced a life of poverty in order for the research of this topic to be thorough. A variety of artists came up such as J. Cole, Kanye West, ASAP Rocky, Ace Hood and many more. These artists come from a background of poverty which is defined as , “Sociocultural theories of poverty have focused on people and explain poverty as principally the result of behavioral, psychological, and cultural traits among the poor themselves”(Lawson & Jarosz, 2010, pg 656). Once the artists had been established the next step was to search for these artists in the “Original Hip Hop

Lyric Archive” and find out what songs they have performed. Once the artists’ songs have been found the next step was to go through the songs that they have written and read the lyrics to look for songs relating to poverty. The songs found described either the artists struggle to the top, the struggle of their lives during poverty, the challenges they had to overcome during poverty, or their life of wealth coming from a life of poverty. The songs must be found in a way that is not biased in order to provide the most accurate information.

### **Theme One: Individual Struggle**

The First theme found while researching the topic of “transition from poverty to wealth” was that of individualism. This theme is important because it explains the individual aspect of having to only rely on oneself instead of seeking support. All of the songs in this section support the belief that the individual must accomplish their goals and not rely on any other person for support. Individualism differs from the African diaspora because it is not the norm to do seek an individualistic life style. The way a person seeks an individualistic life style is when they put their needs above the community’s needs. An individualistic person is more focused on their needs and seeks goals that are personal goals. If a person seeks to transition from poverty to wealth for their own interests, they are not considering others. Culturally, the theme of individuality is widely seen within commercial rap. The following are lyrical examples of this theme.

#### **Quotes:**

Song Quote One: (Exhibit / Jay Electronica /Exhibit C)

“When I was sleepin’ on the train  
Sleepin’ on Meserole Ave out in the rain  
Without even a single slice of pizza to my name  
Too proud to beg for change mastering the pain”

Song Quote Two: (Fun With Dumb/ Dumbfoundead/ Are we There Yet?)

“Look at what I worked for, everything I built  
When I really think about it, it be giving me the chills  
Cause I’m eating off my music and I’m paying all my bills  
I think I made it y’all, I don’t need a f\*ckin’ deal”

Song Quote Three: (Ambition/Wale (feat. Meek Mills and Rick Ross)/  
Ambition)

“Uh, only hope I had was selling dope  
Was on my grind cause times were harder than a cellar floor”

### **Claim**

The Claim that can be made from the songs provided is that the theme of individualism shows that the artists in these songs have struggled from the bottom and made their way to the top, however this struggle was one that was overcome without any help. The men in these songs are very proud individuals, they sought help from no one and made their own fortune. Rather than turn to community or family these individuals struggled and reached success on their own. The artist’s goal of becoming wealthy was done for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the community. This is a more European centered way of thinking, in which the individual must overcome struggles without the help of the community in order to be proud and independent. Individualism is not seen as part of the African Worldview because it strays from the traditional belief that the community must be put above an individual’s needs. This theme is important because it shows the individualistic view of achieving success and how many African Americans have become too proud to turn to the community for help because they are able to achieve on their own.

### **Theme Two: Communalism**

The theme of communalism and how it relates to “the transition from poverty to wealth’ is seen as the individuals who have overcome poverty and then they reached out to their community or family. The theme of communalism reflects the



African belief that family should be the priority above an individual's needs. Those individuals who are able to obtain success through money in the music industry reflect the ideal of communalism as they make giving back to their community their priority and seek success for the benefit of the community. It is believed that the main purpose for succeeding is to give back to one's family. The communalistic aspect of rap music shows that artists are grateful for those who were in their life during poverty and now that the artist is no longer poor they believe that their poor counterparts should no longer be poor as well. These artists wish to share the wealth because their community is important to them. When this is done the individual shares their success and success is not done for egotistical reasons.

### **Quotes:**

Song Quote One: ( Blood, Sweat & Tears./ Ace Hood/ Hustle Hard)

“Out here tryna get it, each and every way  
Mama need a house, baby need some shoes  
Times are getting hard, guess what I'ma do”

Song Quote Two: (Firewater/Tha Alkaholiks/Poverty's Paradise)

“And when you do make it big give back to the hood  
So when you gotta go back it's still to the good  
Stay loyal to your people, show 'em that you care  
Cause in the end you know they be right there, just remember that”

Song Quote Three: (Life After Death/ Notorious B.I.G./ The Sky's the Limit)

“If the game shakes me or breaks me  
I hope it makes me a better man  
Take a better stand

Put money in my mom's hand  
Get my daughter this college plan so she don't need no man  
Stay far from timid  
Only make moves when your heart's in it  
And live the phrase 'sky's the limit'"

### **Claim**

The claim that can be made from the theme of communalism is that the artists have worked so hard in order to be successful rappers were working for the benefit of their families and community. When working their way from the bottom up the motivation behind the artist's success is their family. Also, it is evident that once success and wealth is accomplished it is believed that the community and family should be the main beneficiaries. These artists work to provide a better future for not only themselves, but also for their families. They show the theme of communalism because they put the needs of the community above their own needs. Based on the songs found to support this theme it can be seen that community is largely valued in the African culture and family is seen as the priority of the artist's life. It is believed that since the artists have poor socio-economic backgrounds that they should remain loyal to those roots and give back to their community.

### **Theme Three: Racial Identity in Hip Hop Lyrics (Determination)**

The theme of determination is reflected in the transition from poverty to wealth because it shows that one must be determined and motivated in order to accomplish their goal. This way of thinking is not individualistic because it does not promote the self over the community, nor does it promote competitiveness. It is a theme that directly shows how artists transition from poverty to wealth. It shows the inner motivation and mind set of the artists who have had to start out in poverty and work their way to success. These artists who have a positive racial identity have high self-esteem and are able to succeed due to their ability to believe in themselves. The artists have a high self-worth and so they know that they can accomplish their dreams

because they are capable of doing anything they want to. A strong association with racial identity gives African Americans the confidence and strong mentality to be able to envision a dream and have the strength to obtain it.

**Quotes:**

Song Quote One: (Ambition/Wale/No Days Off)

“I used to sleep hungry in a bed next to roaches  
Now I wake up, play a beat and burn a couple roaches  
Permanently focused, learning while I’m going”

Song Quote Two: (Section 80/ Kendrick Lamar/ Poe Mans Dreams)

“You gotta get up off your ass and get it, man  
That’s the only way your pockets gonna expand, I  
Tell you everyday, you know what i’m talkin about  
Apply yourself to supply your wealth, only  
Limitations you’ll ever have are those you  
Place upon yourself. church is definitely on  
The move, you know what i’m talkin about  
Exercise your ism and don’t depend on no one  
Else, cathedral, chuch. Ism”

Song Quote Three: (Firewater/Tha Alkaholiks/Poverty’s Paradise)

“I know what it feels like to wake up broke  
And face another day wit’cha back against the ropes  
And I also know how to survive the struggle  
When shit gets tough you gotta up your hustle  
Set some new goals, raise your self-esteem

Don't let nothin intervene or get in between  
If you gotta push weight, keep your money clean"

### **Claim**

The claim that can be made from the songs found under the theme of determination is that in order to succeed African Americans must have a strong racial identity. A strong racial identity is required because it gives them the confidence to up rise from a background of poverty and breakthrough that oppressive environment. It is difficult to transition from poverty to wealth, but because these artists are motivated they are able to make this transition. Without a strong racial identity or connection to their African roots then these individuals would not have the self-esteem required to achieve their goals. A strong connection to racial identity and self-esteem is needed because it gives them motivation and belief that they can accomplish their dreams. Racial identity is an important aspect within rap music because it gives rappers a positive view on African Americans. The artists then in turn rap to make other African Americans understand their message that race is not a boundary, it is something that unites a people and should be a way of identifying with a group and gives people the inner strength to achieve their dreams.

### **Conclusion**

Transitioning from poverty to wealth is a difficult task that many artists in the music industry have had to overcome. It is important to bring awareness to the topic of transitioning from poverty to wealth because it gives hope and inspiration to African Americans that they can overcome poverty and fulfill their dreams. There are many themes found within the topic of transitioning from poverty to wealth that explain how the song quotes relate to the previous research that has been found. Within the theme of communalism it was commonly seen that hip-hop artist's motivation for transitioning from poverty to wealth was either to support their family or give back to the community. This reflects the study done by Olsen-McBride (2012) ; in this study African American's used rap music as a form of therapeutic self-expression. These

two relate because the theme of communalism found in rap-music is also found in the study – they are both using rap as a means of giving back to the community.

The theme of individualism is seen in a study done by Hess (2006); it is believed that African Americans feel a need to compensate for their background of poverty by succeeding in the music industry. This is a theme commonly seen in rap music because many of the artists rap about being too proud to ask for help because they wanted to “make it big” on their own. Racial identity is an important topic as cited in the research previously done by Rozie-Battle (2002); in this research it is shown that rap music gives African American’s a positive view of rap artists. Although many of the artists in the quotes found to support this topic did not achieve their fame through academics, they did achieve their dreams because they had confidence and a positive relationship with their African identity. All of the songs found are from artists who have come from a background of poverty, and so once themes are identified it can be understood why the artist chooses to rap about a particular topic. Artists who have come from a background in poverty generally choose to rap about it because they wish to give back to their community, give hope to others in a position of poverty that their dreams can come true, and how their individual determination is the reason for their success. Rap music is tremendously important to the Black community - especially those facing poverty - because it gives them inspiration knowing that the now wealthy rappers were once in their position.

### **Works Cited**

- Grem, D. E. (2006). The south got something to say: Atlanta’s dirty south and the southernization of hip-hop America. *Southern Cultures*. 12(4), 55-73.
- Hess, M. (2006). From bricks to billboards: Hip-hop autobiography. *Mosaic: A Journal For The Interdisciplinary Study Of Literature*, 39(1), 61-77.

- Lawson, V., Jarosz, L., & Bonds, A. (2010). Articulations of place, poverty, and race: Dumping grounds and unseen grounds in the rural American Northwest. *Annals Of The Association Of American Geographers*, 100(3), 655-677.
- Olson-McBride, L., & Page, T. F. (2012). Song to self: Promoting a therapeutic dialogue with high-risk youths through poetry and popular music. *Social Work With Groups*, 35(2), 124-137.
- Rozie-Battle, J. L. (2002). African American youth in the New Millennium: An Overview. *Journal of Health & Social Policy*, 15(2), 1-12.
- Rudolph, J. (2011). Pidieron Cacao Latinidad and Black identity in the reggaeton of Don Omar. *Centro Journal*, 23(1), 30-53.
- Simmons, R., & Chavis, B. (2006). A hip-hop salute to Coretta Scott King: Continuing the struggle for freedom, justice and equality. *New York Amsterdam News*, 13.
- Terri Adams, M., & Douglas Fuller, B. (2006). The words have changed but the ideology remains the same: Misogynistic lyrics in rap music. *Journal of Black Studies*, 36(6), 938-957

### **Appendix**

1. Ambition- Wale (feat. Meek Mills and Rick Ross)
2. No Days off- Wale
3. Hustle Hard- Ace Hood

4. Houston Old Head- ASAP Rocky
5. Get Paid- Curren\$y (Feat. Trademark and Young Roddy)
6. Light speed- Grieves
7. Can I live- J. Cole
8. Exhibit C – Jay Electronica
9. Hood Gone Love It- Jay Rock (feat. Kendrick Lamar)
10. Good Life- Kanye West
11. Homecoming- Kanye West
12. Growing Pain- Ludacris
13. Large Amounts- Ludacris
14. Gold Watch- Lupe Fiasco
15. Street Dream(Remix)- Nas
16. The Sky's the Limit- Notorious B.I.G
17. Poe Mans Dreams- Kendrick Lamar
18. Up in the Air- Dumbfoundead
19. Are we there yet- Dumbfoundead
20. Tha Alkaholiks - Poverty's Paradise:

## Religion and Spirituality in Hip Hop Lyrics

By Bria Grant

Hip Hop is a music genre that started in inner city New York in the 1970s. Since then it has exploded into a worldwide phenomenon. Hip Hop is a means of communication and an art form. However, even more widely recognized is the subculture that hip hop music has created. There is a fashion style, a dance style, even a lifestyle that is associated with hip hop. The people who contribute greatly to the growth of this music are the artists. Widely recognized for being a pioneer of this music genre is DJ Kool Herc (Batey, 2011). Today popular hip hop artists are Drake, Wale, and Young Jeezy just to name a few. In part, these artists influence the direction of the culture. The music they create is mainstream and reaches a much larger audience than ever before. The music and actions of these artists are looked at under a social microscope. Despite hip hop's huge success there has been plenty of criticism. Whether it is targeted for the exploitation of women, hyper-sexuality, or violence, hip hop has had its fair share of controversy.

The problem that will be discussed in the present research is love for or belief in a higher power and how that belief is expressed in hip hop music. Love and love like experiences are articulated and expressed in hip hop lyrics. However, much of mainstream hip hop lyrics express love primarily toward romantic partners. This present research project will look into a different form of love by using content analysis of hip hop lyrics to search for themes of platonic love for a higher spiritual power in a variety of hip hop lyrics. The popularity and focus on the theme of sexuality, romantic love, or other mainstream hip hop references make it difficult to find prior research on more platonic love forms. However, a closer look into this topic will help outline themes that are not typically highlighted within hip hop criticism. This research will reexamine the types of spiritual love expressed in hip hop music



and thus the spirituality expressed in the hip hop community and the even broader African American community.

### **Review of Existing Literature**

The growth of the controversial sub-genre called Christian hip hop and how people in the Bronx, New York are reacting to it is discussed in an article in the Bronx Journal. Krystal Wilson (2012) interviews local citizens who are involved with Christian hip hop. Her research explores the motivation of some Christian hip hop artists like The Ambassador, The Truth, and Lecrae (Wilson, 2012). “Christian aficionados use it (hip hop) to express their love for Jesus Christ and God” says Wilson (2012, p.1). This music is expressing love for something which is not often discussed in mainstream rap, a love for a higher power. The combination of hip hop and Christianity relates to people who share in the faith. They can be connected to these songs and share in religious love. Dalila Molina, a student at Lehman College in the Bronx, runs a Christian hip hop radio station. As she states, “Christian hip hop is a reinterpreted version of gospel. It’s the same message as gospel music with a hip hop flavor that is attracting younger people” (Wilson, 2012, p. 1).

Barnes (2008) explores how the African American community and the hip hop community evaluate religious hip hop music. Christian hip hop, also called holy hip hop or gospel rap, has increased in popularity throughout the last few years especially among youth. Christians have questioned this genres’ religious or spiritual authenticity (Barnes, 2008). The materialism and sexuality of mainstream hip hop makes it hard to see this genre mixing comfortably with the religious community. Barnes (2008) also states that secular rap enthusiasts have questioned its cultural authenticity. Some may argue that discussing sensitive topics like religion take away from the hardcore and gritty feel of hip hop. These two opinions make it difficult for religion and hip hop music to coexist.

There is an article that uses multi-level content analysis to look into hip hop lyrics similar to the way the following research will. Christopher Harris (2010) asserts the importance of examining hip hop lyrics by stating that it is necessary to

“understand the orienting philosophes that carry weight in the black community” (pg.5). His research also makes use of lyrical analysis to look for spiritual expression, much like the present research will. The work done in Harris’s (2010) research is basically a blue print for the future research that will be outlined in this paper. One findings in Harris’s (2010) research is that “roughly one ninth of the album title, one six of the hooks, and one seventh of bars that were examined in this study made references to spirituality” (pg. 53). There were surprisingly many references to spirituality that is contradicting to the secular view of hip hop (Harris, 2010). There was also a change in frequency of spirituality over a course of a the few years that the study was conducted. There were more positive references to spirituality than negative ones. In fact, only eight percent of the spiritual lyrics were negative. The present research gives explanations for the differences in spirituality. It also relates everything back to the African American community.

### **Methods**

In this research content analysis was used to examine songs for themes of religion and love for a higher spiritual power. Looking for ways rappers discuss or incorporate a higher power in there lyrics. Twenty five songs were selected from The Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive. After searching with the keyword “God”, five songs were picked (See appendix A Section 1). Every other song was picked, repeating the same artist, and looking for lyrics that had spiritual references. Songs that just merely had the word God in them were avoided. Only songs that discussed God in a spiritual manner were chosen. The next search was on the keyword “Jesus”, repeating the same process and arrived with five additional songs (See appendix A Section 2). The same steps were continued with the words “Islam”, “Faith”, and “Worship” and, five songs were picked each word (See appendix A Section 3, 4, and 5). Islam was chosen so there could be a variety of religions. Also Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions in the world and they have several points of contact (Comparison Chart: Christianity and Islam). There were a wide range of results from mainstream artist like 50 cent, to less know artist like Atmosphere.

## Results

### Theme One: Religion vs. Society

The first theme highlights the battle between spirituality and society, two things that might assume don't mix well together. The following three song quotes state three subtopics including: racial discrepancy, spirituality in mainstream music, and religious tension in politics. There are 7 out of 20 songs that have this theme present.

#### Quotes:

Takin elder advice, read the Bible, the Koran  
Searched scrolls from the Hebrew Israelites  
Hold on, this ain't right, Jesus wasn't White  
(Common f/ Cee-Lo, G.O.D. #1)

So here go my single dog radio needs this  
They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus  
That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes  
But if I talk about God my record won't get played Huh?  
(Kanye West, Jesus Walks #6)

The Question is not whether Islam can embrace Democracy, the  
question is, can democracy embrace Islam  
(The Brotherhood, Taking Charge #14)

#### Claim

In Common's song he refutes the idea that Jesus Christ was of Anglo-Saxon decent. Why has the son of God been depicted as White throughout history? This question can be tied in the infamous master race idea, the idea that Whites are somehow more superior to other races. In the Unites States the largest racial divide

can be seen between White Americans and African Americans. The second quote discusses the acceptance issues with religion/spirituality and mainstream music, more specifically rap or hip hop music. The last quote discusses a more political battle, between the United States and the religious views of Islam.

### **Theme Two: Gods Love**

The second theme found was the concept of love received from God. These artists have completely different tones and styles. These songs share a common theme of God's love, either for them as individuals or for others. There are 4 out of the 20 songs that fit this theme.

#### **Quotes:**

“Our lives are the worst, on top of that, we broke  
That’s the main reason why God, love us the most  
(Nas, God Loves Us #2)

Listen you can call me what you want, black and ugly  
But you can’t convince me the Lord don’t love me  
When my CD’s drop, they sell the best  
You call it luck, why can’t it just be I’m blessed  
(50 Cent, God Gave Me Style #4)

See what we now know is nothing compared  
to the love that was shown when our lives were spared  
(Lauryn Hill, Tell Him #16)

#### **Claim**

This theme expresses a feeling of unconditional everlasting love. A kind of “no matter what happens he still loves me” kind of feeling. For example, in the God Loves Us song, Nas states “we broke that’s the main reason why God loves us the most.” He is referring to the people in his community. There are often situations that

come with living in an impoverished community that are challenging. Some of these problems can have an effect on a person's or group of people's mind set or will power. How can one believe in the goodness of a higher power when one is going through continual hardships? However, with everlasting love they are assured that there is light at the end of the tunnel, a feeling of always being loved no matter what can give individuals in impoverished communities a sense of hope. There is also a relation to the racial tension that appears in minority situations. In 50 cent's song, God Gave Me Style, he states, "you can call me what you want, Black and ugly but you can't convince me the Lord don't love me." This is similar to the community references in the previous theme. 50 cent associates being Black with something looked down upon by others; there are people who don't like him simply because of his ethnicity. However, considering this, he remains confident in the fact that God loves him. This theme of God's unconditional love for people represents a sense of hope that God's follower process, the idea is even more explicate in less fortunate communities or with groups of people who are forced to deal with discrimination. For example, the African American impoverished community, which is whom some of the hip hop artist are focusing on when they discuss this theme of God's love.

### **Theme Three: God as the Ultimate Leader**

This theme represents exactly what it states, God as a leader in the lives of the people that believe in him. Whether it is guiding them in activities or simple serving as a sort of king figure in their lives, God is seen as something or someone who can guide them. There are 6 out of 20 songs that have this theme present.

#### **Quotes**

God isn't finished with me yet

I feel his hand on my brain

When I write rhymes I go blind and let the Lord do his, thang

(2 pac, Ghetto Gospel #3)

Young Islamic brother, you with Christ, the world is cool

Do what, ever the Lord tells you, and the reward is good

(Bone Thugs, Its Still Love #7)

I was made to worship and adore you—enjoy you

Put you on a pedestal and lay there before you

The more you do work in me the more I can't ignore you

(The Ambassador, We Worship You #21)

### **Claim**

This larger than life attitude that the artists express represents the larger community's opinion of God. Having a leader provides a sense of security. Somewhat like how having a parent or guardian provides some type of security for a young child. If one has a person or spirit guiding them throughout life they live with less fear, if there is a mistake made, believers of God look to him for answer and advice. As well as when something successful is accomplished; God is praised and thanked. This idea of God as a leader can instill a type of confidence in believers. Take, for example, quote #7 the artist hints at the notion that doing whatever God says results in a positive outcome. So individuals who have this belief and live their lives accordingly are less afraid of the future. They possess a sort of blind optimistic faith in God and thus in their destiny. Having this opinion represents a strong faith in God, as a higher power, and his abilities to do transforming things in their lives. An example of this is illustrated in 2 Pac's song Ghetto Gospel where he says, "When I write rhymes I go blind and let the Lord do his, thang." 2 Pac obviously has trust in God. God being the ultimate leader also means he has the most powerful of all leaders there is no one else above him. This almighty God is put on pedestal. These artists devote their lives to praising and worshiping him.

### **Conclusion**

The present research project as stated earlier is the use of content analysis to

look through 25 hip hop song lyrics in search of themes of spirituality. A word search was used to find each song. The words God, Jesus, Islam, faith and, worship, set the criteria of this research. After an examination of the lyrics three, main themes were picked and analyzed. These themes were religion vs. society, Gods love, and God as the ultimate leader. The first theme of religion vs. society outlines the difficulty battle between religion and social normality. Some of these norms are racial inequality, the separation of spirituality and media, also the battle between Islam and the United States. The fact that social/political issues conflict with religion causes believers of the religion to be less open about their faith. This intern can lead to spirituality becoming more of a hidden practice and leads to a loss in the belief. God's unconditional love for his people is the next theme represented in the lyrics. These artists either express or give examples of how God shows his love for them. The claim that was found for this theme was that Gods' love gives hope to people that would otherwise feel hopeless. God loves us even if earthly people do not. The final theme is God as the ultimate leader. He is expressed as almighty and all deserving in the lyrics. Viewing God as the ultimate leader provides a sense of security for believers. They go through life with more confidence in the future and they feel more in control. The last theme can tie in with the other two themes. If God is the ultimate leader of the world and he loves everyone so individuals who believes in good can be assured that if they remain faithful the almighty will reward them well. Also the ultimate leader can get people through hard times of social inequality or unfairness. The three claims found can be related to African worldview. The African worldview emphasizes collectiveness and spirituality. Individuals of African descent or in the African diaspora tend to work more together than separated; they also tend to have stronger faith in unseen spirits or higher powers. In conclusion, spirituality is very much a part of hip hop. It is not always explicit but it is there. Hip hop is a form of human expression and human expression is everything.

## Works Cited

- Anonymous. (2004). Comparison chart: Christianity and Islam. Religious Facts.
- Batey, A. (2011). A history of modern music: Part three: Hip-hop and R&B: 1. Dj Kool Herc DJs his first block party. York Way, London: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>.
- Barnes, S. L. (2008). Religion and rap music: An analysis of black church usage. *Review of religious research*. Galva, IL: Religious Research Association, Inc.
- Billboard. (2012). R&B/Hip Hop Songs. [www.Billboard.com](http://www.Billboard.com).
- Harris, C. S. (2010). *Gods, God, & soul food: Young black spirituality in rap music*. Coral Gables, FL: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- The Economist. (2009). Let nations speak peace. *The Economist Newspaper Limited*.
- Wilson, K. (2012). Christian hip hop: The unknown genre. Bronx, NY: The Bronx Journal.

## Appendix

### Section 1 GOD

- 1.Common f/ Cee-Lo - G.O.D. (Gaining One's Definition)
- 2.Nas – God loves us
- 3.Pac - Ghetto Gospel
- 4.50 Cent - God Gave Me Style
- 5.Daz Dillinger f/ Bad A\$\$, Big Pimpin, Tray Deee- Thank God For My Life

### Section 2 JESUS

- 6.Kanye West – Jesus Walks



7. Bone Thugs (Bizzy Bone & Layzie Bone) - It's Still Love

8. DC talk – Jesus freak

9. Killah Priest – Black Jesus

10. DMX – thank you

### Section 3 Islam

11. K-Rino - From the Heart

12. Tech N9ne – Klusterfuk

13. Brand Nubian - Wake Up (Reprise in the Sunshine)

14. The brotherhood - Taking Charge

15. Nefertiti- Mecca to Watts

### Section 4 Faith

16. Lauryn Hill – Tell Him

17. Scarface – faith

18. Sonny Seeza f/ Killah Priest - Lots of Faith (The Recipe)

19. Da T.R.U.T.H. - On Duty

20. Kendrick Lamar f/ BJ the Chicago Kid, Punch - Faith

### Section 5 Worship

21. The Ambassador – We worship you

22. DJ Muggs vs. Planet Asia f/ B-Real (Cypress Hill), Omar Cruz - Pain Language  
(Remix)

23. Unity Klan – Celebrate

24. Three 6 Mafia - In-2-Deep

25. Jehovah's Boy - Let the Lord Use You

## Brotherhood in Hip Hop Lyrics

By Jimmy Commins

Themes in Music are found in every aspect of life; whether they are love, sadness, life, death or brotherhood. Music allows people to feel connected to the world, and brings them together through similar interests and ideas. Hip-hop and rap have a unique heritage that distinguishes it from other genres of music. Hip-hop was derived from other genres in the 1970's like jazz, disco, and gospel, which were primarily of African American influence (Oware, 2010). Since Hip-hop and rap came from the African oral tradition, most of the music in this genre relates to the African American experience. The influence however did not stay in the African American community; it spread to other people and allowed for a better understanding of the African American culture. Many of the themes discussed around African culture and ontology fester in the lyrics of rap songs. A plethora of artists allow the listener to hear many different outlooks on a culture they might know nothing about. One important value common among hip-hop that is deeply rooted in traditional African culture is collectivism, or brotherhood. Since the earliest African civilizations, collectivism has been highly valued by members of that society in order to be successful as a population (Tyler, Love and Brown, 2010). Today this value is still very present, though it is more commonly referred to as brotherhood. One reason that brotherhood has remained an important part of African American culture today comes from the history of oppression they endured as well as post slavery to this day. They come together to support each other and offer comfort to others in difficult situations. In other cases brotherhood has influenced the formation of gangs, as typically young men seek acceptance into a group of peers that share a bond as members of that gang. Regardless of the context it clearly remains an important African value orientation that is expressed through music.

### **Review of Existing Literature**

Unfortunately there has been little research done specifically on African American brotherhood in general and in hip hop in particular. Most articles from scholarly journals focus on religion as the primary reason for brotherhood, whether it is Christianity or Islam. Though Africans are more likely to be religious as a result of African communalism, this is not the primary or sole reason for brotherhood in Africans. Mathew Owares' article entitled *Brotherly Love: Homo-sociality and Black Masculinity in Gangsta Rap Music*, addresses the theme of brotherhood in hip-hop music with relevance. Oware defines "homo-sociality" as individuals of the same sex exhibiting strong social bonds toward one another in a non-sexual manor (Payne 2006). This is essentially synonymous with the term brotherhood in this study. Orware takes the time to clearly identify the predominant aspects and themes that are most commonly associated with popular rap music, such as homophobia, hyper-masculinity, and misogyny. These associations unfortunately depict hip-hop music, as well as African American men, very negatively. Brotherhood, or "homo-sociality", is a positive aspect, which is present in hip-hop but does not receive the same attention. Its goal is to see past the usual depiction of African American rappers as hardened, hyper-masculine and emotionless, and show that they are both emotional and vulnerable by displaying compassion toward other Black men. His work showed that in many cases when the idea of brotherhood was mentioned in rap lyrics the artist would place a high value on these bonds and would consider them as tight as family, if not family itself. Other references to brotherhood that came out of his research included a commonality in the lyrics that discussed looking out for those they care about. This may refer to emotionality, but also more predominant in Hip-hop, are the monetary references. Since many of the hip-hop artists grew up in a low socio-economic positions, when they have come upon success and wealth they express the desire to share that feeling and money with their closest friends. Orware does a good job of identifying brotherly aspects of hip-hop culture and clearly indicates the validity of his points through lyrical examples. One way he could have provided more information concerning

the formation of these male bonds would have been to explain how they originally came into being and why they are so resilient. Yasser Arafat Payne's article entitled *Gangster and a Gentleman* does explore where these bonds arise. His work focuses on the understanding of masculinity of African American men as a result of "street life." Payne refers to street life as a site of strength community and bonding. Many men turn to street life because of institutional racism and a lack of education and economic opportunities. Payne focuses on the construction of a masculine identity as a reaction to their oppressive conditions. The conception of masculinity in street life-oriented men is multifaceted but the idea of brotherhood is an important underlying feature. It is required that one's masculinity must be recognized by other males in order to be valid, and to get approval from the others, one must abide by certain rules. In order to become respected as a man, you must demonstrate loyalty to family and friends as well as provide, and stand up for or defend them (Smitherman 1997). As these qualities demonstrate, it is clear how strong male bonds promote a sense of brotherhood.

### **Methods**

In order to provide a good analysis of the presence of brotherhood as an important theme in hip-hop lyrics, a proper sample of songs must be considered. These samples must refrain from bias, but also be confined so that the songs in the samples will be relevant to the topic of brotherhood. To achieve this, key words or phrases have been searched in the database, OHHLA (Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive). Seven songs from each search have been selected by choosing every other result in order to get a broad selection. Brotherhood is not discussed explicitly in the lyrics rather, it is referenced through more colloquial terminology that will be more viable in a word search of hip-hop lyrics. The resulting phrases with the most relevant brotherhood lyrics included; my homies; my dogs (dogs/dawgs); my niggas; and my partners. From the assessment of these lyrics certain themes began to emerge when an artist was compelled to talk about brotherhood.

## Results

### Theme: Brotherhood through Death

Six out of twenty-eight songs referenced brotherhood through death. Death is a very common theme throughout many of these songs. There are many different ways that artists talk about death all designed to connect the audience to the artist. The artist is using the fact that death is present in all lives to connect the audience and create a form of brotherhood through shared emotions and lifestyles. The following are examples of this theme.

#### Quotes:

“Somebody took my boy from me/ my best friends gone, and I’m so all alone/ I really miss my homies/ even though they gone away/ I know you in a better place/ and I hope to see you soon someday” Master P feat. Pimp C, Silkk and the Shocker, *I MISS MY HOMIES*

“Someday I’m gonna be walkin down the streets/ mindin my own business... and BAM!!/ I’m gon’ be shot by some pig who’s gonna SWEAR/ that it was a mistake. I accept that as a part of my destiny.” Wu tang clan feat. Nas, *LET MY NIGGAS LIVE*

“Imagine this, me dressed in all black/ at a funeral strapped with a chrome gat, who died P, I guess it was my homie, black/ somebody rolled up and shot him in the back, it was sad/ my homie took a damn fall” Silkk feat. C-Murder, Master P, *MY HOMIE*

#### Claim

In the first song, the theme of death is very prevalent. The use of the words “alone and “miss” express the magnitude of the artists feelings. The use of feelings in this song allows the artist to connect to his listeners through the potential for shared

emotions. It is not only a way for the artist to vent, but more importantly away for the artist to help the listener with similar experiences, understand that they are not alone. The fact that many have lost people close to them can form a brotherhood of its own. This song is not only about the death of someone close but it is also a song of brotherhood. The use of the words “homies” and “friends” show a deep relationship that the artist had with the victims.

The next quote provides a much different look on death. This is the death of the artist himself. This artist knows that one day he is going to die and accepts it through the use of the word “destiny.” This quote illustrates how death is part of everyday life for many of the people in the rap and hip-hop culture. This expression by the artist conveys to his audience that he knows, as well as them, that life is going to end and possibly death could come prematurely. Not only is the artist using his own death as a way to connect people through the idea of death, he is also using a common threat to the culture by the use of the word “pig.” He uses a common enemy to portray his own death, which makes that divide much stronger. This last song is another way that death can be used to create a sense of brotherhood through common understanding. The artist is attending a funeral in which his friend got shot in the back. This demonstrates how death can sometimes be unexpected and that fear is very real. Many people fear death and the artist is using that to create a connection to his audience. He himself is scared of death because he brings a “chrome gat” to the funeral. He uses the image of being shot in the back with the image of himself bringing a gun to show that death is waiting for you whether you are ready or not. This idea of fear brings people together and allows them to appreciate friends, and consider them as someone who watches over them.

### **Theme: Brotherhood through Economic Difficulty**

Seven out of twenty-eight songs reference brotherhood through economic difficulty. Economic difficulty is a prevalent theme throughout much of rap and hip hop. This includes growing up in a poor neighborhood that the artist feels a connection to, the rise from that lifestyle and the desire to get others out of that lifestyle. It is

another way an artist connects to their audience and creates a sense of brotherhood through a shared experience.

**Quotes:**

“And the ghetto ain’t no joke/ cause every motherfucking day another nigga gets smoked...../ But y’all niggas look at a nigga hustling like its funny/ but i got to feed the family” Master P, *NEVER ENDING GAME*

“I was told it’s all love/ but where’s the love when I need it/ Half these niggas I meet, are disgusted and greedy/ half these niggas are weak, and expecting a freebie/ That’s why I grind dog, its for my own good.” Lil’ Head, *YOU MY DOG RIGHT*

“I’m tryna show love but people take the bad and provoke/ if I give this bum a dollar will he eat it or smoke it? K-Rino, *DOIN’ BAD*

**Claim**

The use of economic difficulty in the song *NEVER ENDING GAME* allows the viewer to see the hustle that a person has to live with to gain money to “feed the family.” This is a very strong message of brotherhood. It shows economic hardship as a tool to filter out people you don’t want to associate with. All of the people who see the struggle as “funny” and get in the way of feeding the family, are obstacles that have to be overcome to get what you feel is necessary. The artist is using this idea to create a sense of genuine family ties. The family is more important than anyone else in the lyrics of this song. The necessity to gain money is only for the profit of the family as a whole. This allows people to create a real brotherhood of family ties. It eliminates the fake people who get in your way and shines light on the people worth enduring the struggle for. The song *YOU MY DOG RIGHT* has a very different message on the idea of economic struggle. This artist internalizes it and makes it

all about him. All of the “greedy” people that surround him are simply challenges that he has to overcome in order to take care of himself. This might not seem like an idea of brotherhood but a deeper examination sheds light on it. The only way to have the ability to provide for those you care about is by putting yourself in a stable economic position. The idea of bettering yourself without the need to rely on others is a very strong idea that can connect people. It is a common goal that many are trying to gain and this song is describing how that can happen. You have to “grind” to make it for yourself. This shows that the artist wants people to make it. He wants a collective group of people to rise from where they are. You can’t “expect a freebie” if you are going to do something for your “own good.” You have to work for what you want. Through that idea the artist is connecting a group of people who wish to better themselves. The last song offers another different view on economic difficulty. In this case, the artist is expressing how he is trying to better a person that has less than himself. The problem with this idea is that he does not know “will he eat it or smoke it” which brings up a moral dilemma. He is making a conscious effort to think for his fellow brother but doesn’t want to create something bad for them. As he says he is “tryna show love” but the reaction he gets from that can be bad. He wants people to come out of this difficult past that he seems to have come from. He is just worried that people do not have the right mentality to escape that lifestyle. The artist himself is trying to create a brotherhood bond with the people he feels connected to as a result of shared past circumstances, experiences and feelings.

### **Brotherhood through Devotion**

Nine out of twenty-eight songs reference brotherhood through devotion. Devotion is the knowledge that no matter what the situation is; certain people will help you out. There is no end to how many different ways a person can show devotion. It is the ability to trust someone fully and have no doubt that no matter what you can depend on that person. This is exemplified in the following examples.

“Yo, I send this to all my DOG/ To my real niggaz that are true DOG/



Niggaz who will bust guns for they DOG/ Niggaz who will spit one for they DOG” Redman, *D.O.G.S*

“Would you take a bullet for your homie/ I got trust up in myself cause most these fools are living phony.” Tru f feat. Big ed, *WOULD YOU TAKE A BULLET FOR YOUR HOMIE*

“If I died, would you cry/ Need, Would you provide/ if I got beef would you be squeezin side by side/ if I face time, would you give me a place to hide/ would you snake me for paper, look in my eyes” Cormega, *R U MY NIGGA?*

### **Claim**

The idea of devotion and brotherhood go hand in hand, especially in the lyrics of rap and hip hop. From people backing you up no matter what, to people caring about whether or not you are dead devotion is everywhere in these lyrics. In the song *D.O.G.S* Redman connects devotion to violence. In his eyes true devotion and brotherhood is brought on by the act of violence that a “DOG” will do for you. This is a very deep devotion because it is asking for, possibly, your life to feel connected to someone. If a person will kill for you they automatically have gained a sense of trust and family ties to you. This idea is further explored by the song *Would you take a bullet for your homie*. In this song, the artist isn’t asking for a friend to commit violence for them, instead he asking if the person will surrender their own life to save his. This is also connected to violence but in a different way. The devotion goes past the act of killing and is made even stronger by the act of dying. If you are not a “phony” friend you will put yourself at risk of dying for your friends and that is a brotherhood that lives forever. If a friend will die for you what more do you need to see the true brotherhood that has been created. In the song *R U my nigga*, Cormega uses a different approach to devotion. Although this idea does involve violence similar to the other two it is not its central theme. The central theme of this song is the knowledge that no matter

what trouble you get into, a friend has a way to help you. This shows that brotherhood can be seen through devotion as a need to have someone in your life no matter what. Whether it is death, concealment, or money the other person will be there to help you out. This song also brings into view the fact that brotherhood and devotion don't stop after death. When a person dies the friend is still expected to be loyal. This idea of brotherhood is very strong. It surpasses our physical being and extends to every aspect of a person, including death. This points to a spiritual connection across the brotherhood that could be traced back to traditional African axiology.

### **Conclusion**

After analyzing hip-hop lyrics that relate to brotherhood, it has become clear that it remains forefront in African American values. Brotherhood is prevalent under a number of different circumstances. Death is a very powerful experience, which can bring people closer and strengthen the ties of brotherhood. It makes people realize what they have could be gone in a second and to appreciate those who are still around. Since "the ghetto," as many artists have referred to the neighborhoods in which they have grown up can be dangerous, it is important to have people who watch out for each other, solidifying the importance of brotherhood. Most of the artist who lyrics were examined talk about coming from a low economic position into a very comfortable one. It is typically the desire to share the dramatic improvement of economic standing with those whom the artist feels tightly connected with as a result of African brotherhood. Since they themselves have come from a difficult economic position, they are well aware of the tribulations that come with it which are not what they want for their homies. Lastly, devotion appeared to be closely related to brotherhood in the minds of the artists. Displays of loyalty or devotion prove the strength of the brotherhood and actually perpetuate it. Devotion also implies a level of selflessness, which places the needs of the others in the group over oneself, which is made clear in the lyrics that speak of sacrificing their life for another. This shows the importance of the brotherhood because it is valued over the artists own lives. Brotherhood and communalism are positive aspects of hip-hop music that are often

overlooked for the illegal or violent aspects. Brotherhood has been centrally rooted in Black society for hundreds of years and will continue to be predominant facet of the African American experience.

### Appendix

#	<u>Artist</u>
1	TRU f/ Big Ed
2	Method Man and Redman
3	Swizz Beatz f/ Baby, Cassidy, Jadakiss, P. Diddy, Snoop Dogg+ Ronald Isley
4	Redman
5	K-Rino
6	Snoop Dogg f/ C-Murder, Magic
7	Insane Clown Posse
8	Rodney O & Joe Cooley
9	TRU
10	Wu-Tang Clan f/ Nas
11	2Pac
12	Master P f/ Pimp C, Silkk the Shocker
13	DMX f/ Big Stan, Loose, Kasino, Dragon
14	Master P
15	Silkk f/ C-Murder, Master P
16	50 Cent f/ Eminem, Notorious B.I.G.
17	E-40
18	DMX
19	Bone Thugs-N-Harmony
20	Master P
21	Daz Dillinger
22	Z-Ro
23	Scarface f/ Lil' Jay

- 24 Wu-Tang Clan
- 25 Cormega
- 26 Snoop Dogg
- 27 Young Zee
- 28 Lil' Head

### **Works Cited**

- Oware, M. (2010). Brotherly love; homosociality and black masculinity in gangsta Rap. *Springer Science and Business Media*, 22-33.
- Payne, Y. A. (2006). "A gangster and a gentleman". *City University of New York*, 08(03), 288-297.
- Smitherman, G. (1997). Communicative practices in the hip-hop nation. *The Journal of Black Studies*, 28(1), 3-25.
- Tyler, K., Love, K., Brown, T., & Roan-Belle, C. (2010). Linking communalism to achievement for black and white undergraduates. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 22(1), 23-31

## **African American Interdependence and Collectivism in Political Hip Hop**

By Patrick Tuck

The African culture and those belonging to its ancestry have a tendency to have collectivistic ideals and approaches towards social problems and understandings (Carson, 2009). Interdependence, which is apparent in the behaviors of African Americans, is derived from West African culture (Hunter & Joseph, 2010). “Amongst African peoples, a collectivistic worldview helped to ensure the survival of the tribe and was characterized by responsibility for others, and protected members from alienation and loneliness” (Carson, 2009, p.328). The commonalities between the African and African American worldviews are indicators that Black psychology has a common ground that is not necessarily geographical. With this knowledge, analyzing the African culture’s most fervent addition to American culture for indications of interdependence and collectivistic ideals should yield results telling of African American culture. “African American music, dance, and style, at the epicenter of American culture, are not only part of this technology-mediated global youth culture, but are absolutely essential to it” (Osumare, 2001, p.171). Hip hop is commonly referred to as “black music” by both layperson and researchers alike (Osumare, 2009; Shonekan, 2011). This research explores and highlights the social interdependent and collectivistic reflections of political hip hop music via content analysis of hip hop lyrics. Given that Black music and African culture are so tightly interconnected, the findings offer researchers a different perspective on the connection between African and African American collectivistic ideals.

### **Review of Existing Literature**

Perhaps the most notable researcher on this topic, Halifu Osumare (2001),

has done extensive research on the cultural, psychological, and global impact of hip hop. Osumare's "Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip Hop Globe" is the most relevant to the research of collectivism in hip hop. In her research, Osumare (2001) evaluated separate studies of hip hop in particular cultures as well as hip hop music from around the world in hopes to connect the different geographical regions by finding the similarities in hip hop fans and artists. "Hip hop's connective marginalities...are social resonances between Black expressive culture within its contextual political history and similar dynamics in other nations" (Osumare, 2001, p.172). Osumare (2001) makes a point that, while researching world hip hop, it "is not difficult to locate. The Internet provides copious sites across the map where one can travel to diverse international hip hop scenes..." (p.173). This amount of representation of hip hop on the internet is simple evidence of how much of an impact hip hop has on the world. Osumare's (2001) research concludes that while "not all of rap's content is about exploring social marginalizations, racial or otherwise" (p.172), "each international site works out its own interstitial relationship with hip hop culture it provides... a cultural bridge to explore other hip hop sites inhabited by young people who have their own issues of marginalization, be they class, culture, historical oppression, or simply being youths in an adult-dominated world" (p.180). While Osumare's research does not directly speak of collectivism and interdependence within the African culture, she evaluates how different parts of the world express their views and cultural understandings about hip hop. It is with more specificity that this research hopes to further Osumare's, and others' research of the reflections and reverberations of hip hop culture.

Stephanie Shonekan (2011) wrote an article similar to Osumare's and this research, called "Sharing Hip-Hop Cultures: The Case of Nigerians and African Americans." In Shonekan's (2011) research, she utilizes hip hop to examine the cultural space shared by Nigerians and African Americans in spite of the vast geographic distance (p.9). "This article traces out the boundaries of this shared cultural space... by focusing first on African and African American hip hop artists who have sampled from the music and political energy from their counterparts on the other side of the

Atlantic” (Shonekan, 2011, p.9). Following African American roots to their African cultural derivative to evaluate African and African American ideologies. Shonekan (2011) analyzed others’ research while also analyzing Nigerian and American hip hop lyrics. Shonekan (2011) concluded that today’s Black music is irrevocably passive on social issues and is in serious jeopardy of using functional utility for young Nigerians and African Americans (p.22). Shonekan’s article rarely touched on collectivistic ideals in African Americans based on hip hop, but her research proved that not only African American culture is rooted within African culture but also that African culture is deeply influenced by African American culture. This research hopes to use these findings to further the understanding of collectivism in hip hop.

### **Methods**

This research will analyze political hip hop lyrics specifically because of its reputation as the most expressive of African American cultural standards and life. The political hip hop genre is defined as hip hop artists often inspired by ‘70s political preachers, who would rap about taking to task the government, the culture of white America and specific sociopolitical issues (allmusic.com). Two random songs will be analyzed out of each of the top 10 political hip hop artists’ discography. The lyrics, from 20 songs, will then be categorized by different collectivistic themes. In order to locate songs that would be more applicable to this research, lyrics that were dedicated to cultural, racial, and societal issues and beliefs were used. The Original Hip Hop Lyrics Archive (ohhla.com) was used to select the 20 songs and the AllMusic website (allmusic.com) was used to select the top 10 political hip-hop artists.

### **Results**

#### **Theme One: Interdependence as a Negative**

Contradictory to what this research originally proposed, many political hip-hop lyrics refer to interdependence as a negative aspect of life. A total of 3, out of the 20 songs analyzed, had shared this theme. The following lyrics reflect that relying on others tends to be unreliable or not beneficial to one’s situation whether it is a situation

of poverty or fear of violence. This sentiment is expressed in the following quotes:

“Cause inside the jungle, either you do or you die/You got to be aware, you got to have the jungle eye/Take it from a brother who knows my friend/ The animals, the cannibals will do you in” (Jungle Brothers, Straight Out the Jungle, Song #2).

Born to terrorize sisters and every brother/One love who said it, I know Whodini sang it/But the hater taught hate that's why we gang bang it/ Beware of the hand when it's comin' from the left/I ain't trippin, just watch me step/Can't truss it” (Public Enemy, Can't Truss It, Song #5).

“it's a damn shame, 'cause they form the pack/of those who represent my spot, yet they lack/the skill to get raw with words and cold shoot 'em/ stuck in the past, puttin' raps to a drum computer/not even worried that the songs not able/cause they got juice and hook ups at big labels/no uniqueness, no goals or dreams/no creativity's exactly how it seems” (Freestyle Fellowship, Sunshine Men, Song #15).

### **Claim**

Each song refers to interdependence whether with association to society, their community, or fellow rappers as a negative aspect of their lives. This research suggests that even though the rappers are speaking of interdependence in a negative light, the lyrics do not reflect themes of individualism. As seen in the lyrics, individualism is not necessarily regarded as a solution to the problems that interdependence brings about. Perhaps interdependence is so deeply rooted in the African culture that individualism is not a personal option. However, each song has implications of truth saying in which the rapper explains that they are trying to help the listener.



### **Theme Two: Individualism as a Negative**

While the main point of this research was to find themes of collectivism and interdependence as a positive aspect within political hip-hop lyrics, there are many hip-hop songs that promote these themes by evaluating individualism as a negative. A total of 3, out of the 20 analyzed, shared this theme. The following lyrics portray those who do not worry about the collective whole as the enemy. This sentiment is expressed in by the following quotes:

“You ain’t in to it, all you want is profit/So I ask you please to stop it/Leave me alone, get off my bone/Cause I’m doing my own...” (Jungle Brothers, Doin’ Our Own Dang, Song #1).

“CRASH, SMASH, don’t ask\when the negative disrupts the class\How much longer? Get stronger\The battle is getting longer\World, peace, or world talk\Do we run? Or do we walk? (CHARGE)\If you want world peace, take it\Cause a lot of our leaders FAKE IT (fraud)\It’s similar to Armageddon” (KRS-One, World Peace, Song #18).

“The power of words, don’t take it for granted\when you hear a man ranting\Don’t just read the lips, be more sublime than this\Put everything in context, is this a tale of rough justice\in a land where there’s no justice at all?\Who is really the victim? Or are we all the cause, and victim of it all?” (The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, Language of Violence, Song #19).

### **Claim**

Within this set of lyrics, individualism is struck down as a negative aspect of African life and the cause of pain and suffering, or even an “Armageddon.” By proposing that individualism is the cause of these negative parts of society, these rappers are implying dissatisfaction with capitalist society and those who are very

focused on their own needs. Each song implies the ideal of paying attention to each other's needs instead of focusing on oneself.

### **Theme Three: Shift Towards Collectivism to Better Future**

The most prevalent theme out of the set of political hip-hop lyrics analyzed was the lyrical suggestion for a shift towards collectivism to better the future. A total of 6, out of the 20 analyzed, shared this theme. The following lyrics deal with working together to make a change for the better or to care for others in order to better oneself; as represented by the following quotes:

“Brothers gonna work it out\And stop chasin'\Brothers, brothers gonna work it out\You got it...what it takes\Go get it...where you want it?\Come get it...get involved\Cause the brothers in the street are willing to work it out” (Public Enemy, Brothers Gonna Work It Out, Song #6).

“All aboard, freedom train progress\All aboard as we pierce the darkness\ Bonafide soldiers build through mic check\We on track for our freedom,\ Full steam we push the needles like that\Locomotion through the microphone cord\Moving pen has might over the sword\Freedom train we bust down the doors\Every race, color, creed that bangs hip hop abroad\Motivate” (X-Clan, Locomotion, Song #7).

“a pocketful of change it don't mean alot to me\my cup is half full but his is empty \I put back on my cap and I start headin' back\I reach into my pocket and I have a heart attack\well as I'm diggin' deep I scream “oh no!”\there's nothin' in the pocket but a great big hole\While I was busy thinkin' if he would buy smack\the jingle in my pocket it slipped through the cracks\no one has the change and it's fuckin' up my head\But now I know the reason why I had to buy the thread!” (Spearhead, Hole in the Bucket, Song #11).

### **Claim**

All of the lyrics display implications of working together for common goals, which are the society's collective needs. Each song expressed a desire to work together to move forward, but not to work together to stop a certain outside force. This research suggests that the African-American culture tends to believe that misfortunes and shortcomings are not solely due to outside forces, but that it may also be due to inactiveness or hesitation to take part in a solution seeking.

### **Conclusion**

This research has found that most political hip-hop reflects negatively on interdependence and individualism, and reflects positively on collectivism. While the African-American culture may believe that relying on others does not help oneself, they also believe that working together to solve a goal is better than focusing on one's own goals. Hip hop music, and specifically political hip hop music, are inspired by everyday life. However, hip hop music also inspires everyday life. Due to hip-hop music's social significance in African-American culture, these collectivistic themes are shaping the perceptions of consumers of hip-hop, while shaping their cultural and social desires. These perceptions become deeply rooted and effect the actions and desires of everyday life, making hip hop an ever changing, and inspiring art.

### **Works Cited**

- Carson, L. R. (2009). "I am because we are:" Collectivism as a foundational characteristic of African American college student identity and academic achievement. *Social Psychology of Education, 12* (3), 327-344.
- Hunter, C.D. & Joseph, N. (2010). Racial group identification and its relations to individualism/interdependence and race-related stress in African Americans. *Journal of Black Psychology, 36* (4), 483-511.

Osumare, H. (2009). Beat streets in the global hood: Connective marginalities of the hip hop globe. *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, 24 (1-2), 171-181.

Shonekan, S. (2011). Sharing hip-hop cultures: the case of Nigerians and African Americans. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55 (1), 9-23.

## Appendix

<u>Song Name</u>	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Album</u>
“Doin’ our own Dang”	Jungle Brothers	Done By the Forces of Nature
“Straight Out the Jungle”	Jungle Brothers	Straight Out the Jungle
“Brooklyn”	Mos Def	Black on Both Sides
“Fear Not of Man”	Mos Def	Black on Both Sides
“Brothers Gonna Work It Out”	Public Enemy	Fear of a Black Planet
“Can’t Truss It”	Public Enemy	Apocalypse 91: The Enemy
Strikes Back		
“Locomotion”	X-Clan	Return From Mecca
“Weapon X”	X-Clan	Return From Mecca
“The Light”	Common	Like Water For Chocolate
“Soul Power”	Common	Electric Circus
“Love is Da S**t”	Spearhead	Home
“Hole in the Bucket”	Spearhead	Home
“Tennessee”	Arrested Development	3 Months, 5 Years, and 2 Days in the Life Of...
“People Everyday”	Arrested Development	3 Months, 5 Years, and 2 Days in the Life Of...
“Sunshine Men”	Freestyle Fellowship	To Whom it May Concern
“Tolerate”	Freestyle Fellowship	Inner City Griots
“MC’s Act Like They Don’t Know”	KRS-One	KRS-One
“World Peace”	KRS-One	Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop
<u>Song Name</u>	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Album</u>

“Language of Violence” Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy Hypocrisy is the Greatest  
Luxury  
“California Ueber Alles” Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy Hypocrisy is the Greatest  
Luxury

## **Racial Identity in Hip Hop Lyrics**

By TanDraya Eckert Berry

Whether it is gangsta' rap, political, commercial or underground, all rap in some ways showcases the ways that rap artists see themselves, their cultures and communities. Racial identity is the racial background that a person identifies with. Racial identity is identified as an important construct related to psychosocial outcomes for African Americans, including self-esteem, psychological distress, quality of life and attitude towards education (Cokley, 2007). Racial Identity attitudes have been known to be "strong predictors of psychological distress and well-being" (Cokely & Chapman, 2009) (p.193). With Racial Identity being such a strong personal and cultural issue, this research project has been conducted to understand how racial identity is explained in rap music. As the poster children for the black community, the way that rappers talk about their selves expresses to their community how they should see themselves, as individuals and as community members. This is important because these lyrics are the models and examples of how people should and are supposed to act. These are the guidelines that many young people follow in how they live their lives. These lyrics reflect on how some members of the Black community see themselves. The limitations of research on this topic is that much of the research and information do not come directly from the artists; it comes from researchers that have already processed this information in their finding and interpreted it in their own way. It is unwise to make an over- generalization on an entire group of people, such as the Black community since not everyone listens to rap music. The present research is attempting to look at the messages that are being expressed about racial identity in hip hop lyrics. In what light do they paint how the Black community should act and if this really is the social standards that people hold themselves to and also how they see their race? The way this research is going to address the music is by looking at different genres

of rap music and their origins and from there, conduct a word search with “Racial Identity in Hip Hop Lyrics” being the key term. Addressing the different genres of rap will provide a more broad representation of the full range of perspectives in hip hop.

### **Existing Research**

The existing research on this topic ranges from political and hip hop in relation to racial identity to how hip hop music effects racial identity. Gosa’s (2010) addresses the fact that many rappers expressed their political opinion in rap songs during the 2008 election. Before the election, some older African Americans feared that hip hop represented the moral deficits of the young, urban and poor (Gosa, 2010), this stereotype has been the perception of many urban youth for generations. Gosa’s (2010) research explains how Obama’s Black masculinity became a major source of identification for rappers. The analysis explores how Obama was depicted, embraced and defended from scrutiny in hip-hop; he also mentioned how political views in rap had somehow escaped the elections of 2000 and 2004 but moved the forefront when a Black man ran for office. The African American rap community saw Obama’s election as not only a better thing for America, but also a better movement for them as individuals because “racial understandings are created at the intersection of large historical movements and micro-level symbolism, as language and fashion change to reflect how people perform racial scripts” (p.395). This statement proves that racial identity is confronted during large movements and merely on an individual level. Gosa (2010) came to the conclusion that the necessity of an essential black identity has also been negated by generational cleavages, the expansion of the black affluent, black patterns and gender/sexuality dynamics (2010). In another article, Bernd Reiter and Gladys L. Mitchell (2008) discovered a positive relationship between listening to hip hop and racial consciousness among Afro-Brazilians in Brazil. Mitchell and Reiter (2008) stated that “there is a relationship between listening to hip hop music and black racial identity. Hip hop has become an important vehicle to express the struggles faced by poor, urban Afro-Brazilian youth, whose voices are often excluded from the mainstream,” (p.154). Like Gosa’s (2010) research, these authors also relate young

Blacks to the stereotypes of being poor and largely influenced by hip hop music. They found that there is incomplete knowledge on the topic on hip hop and racial identity in Brazil. As they stated, “there has been less systematic, quantitative, analysis to test the robustness of the relationship racial consciousness or black racial identity and exposure to hip hop culture” (Reiter & Mitchell, 2008,) (p.155). They came to the conclusion that: “we used this as a proxy for racial consciousness and find a positive, and statically significant relationship between listening to hip hop and racial consciousness . . . not only have Afro-Brazilian Hip Hop and rap artist embraced this cultural art form as their own, but their political messages help to further raise black consciousness among their listeners” (pg.163). Margot Olavarria (2002) discussed how hip hop has influenced the black youth in Cuba. Most of them using it to make a political statement, “A number of groups have begun an important movement for culture and social change, using rap as a vehicle to speak out about racism, prostitution, police harassment, growing class differences, the difficulty of daily survival and other social problems of contemporary Cuba” (pg. 20). Olavarria (2002) talks about the racism that is still taking place in Cuba and how Blacks are referred to as having “bad hair.” Rappers are starting to change these views by “cultivating a sense of blackness through their music, but they are doing it in a way that is specific to their own racialized context” (pg.28). Olavarria (2002) also states that racial identity is mediated by other factors; Afro-Cubans recognized that racial prejudice was more pronounced during their parents’ generation. Olvarria’s (2002) final thought on the subject is “hip hop [in Cuba] is a movement whereby black youth can celebrate and express themselves. To trivialize it as anything else would be to deny art’s political potential” (p.28). All afore mentioned articles state that hip hop has a positive effect on racial identity, mainly in politics. None of them shows the negative messages expressed by rappers towards racial identity. Grant (2002) looks at the connection between racial identity and rap music from 1988 to 1992. By doing this Grant (2002) hoped to understand the cultural and political developments in Los Angeles during the peak of gangsta music. She explored group identities in gangs. In conclusion, Grant finds that even ten years later there is still a large distrust of law enforcement in Los Angeles, all created from



late 80's rap music (Grant, 2002). Author D. Millner (1991) looks at racial identity in rap music of a span of twenty years, 1970-1990, and the change of terms and subject matters. He wrote of how in the '70s was the "decade of the dashiki and the afro; the more elaborate the pattern of the cloth and the higher the do, the Blacker you were" (Millner 1991, pg. 19). Then in the 80's "African Americans were more concerned with maintaining a "corporate" image once they got their foot in the door of free enterprise. "Youngsters started sporting big name-brand clothes and sneakers that came with just as big a price-tag" (Millner 1991, pg.21). He wrote further about how the 90's has returned to the original African looks and styles. Then Millner (1991) explains that "cultural expression also comes today through music. Most notable is Rap, which offers positive messages to youth, who often don't have access to a formal education, and which teaches them to explore their heritage," (Millner 1991, pg. 21) and that rap plays a large part in the change in racial identity. Helbig (2011) explains the raise of rap music in the Ukraine and its role in Racial Identity. This article first takes a step back from the music itself and focuses on the ways the scenes function, paying specific attention to the roles African musicians play in the production and, as will become evident from the ethnographic data, legitimization of hip-hop in Kharkiv (Helbig 2011, p. 316). The rap scene is much different in the Ukraine since the Soviet Union likes to think of themselves as a 'colorblind' nation (Millner, 2011). "African musicians attempt to forge connections with local musicians in Kharkiv through hip-hop music as a Black-identified genre within which they have something to say. Black skin color itself – rather than musical experience or even interest in DJing and rapping – is enough of a way to enter into the Kharkiv hip-hop scenes" (Millner 2011, p. 326). Millner (2011) explores the acceptance of different races through the blended network of the rap community. All of the existing research directly relate to this research paper, because they demonstrate the influence of hip hop music on racial identity.

## **Methods**

For this research paper a word search was conducted to locate lyrics. The site Ohhla.com was used to select the songs used in this research paper. The first word

search was “Racial Identity,” from this site came the song Message to the Black Man by Tech N9ne. While it is the topic of the research paper, very little results that show up had the right context for this paper. The next word search was “Race”; the results for songs: Race War by Ice T, Ultimas Palabras by Immortal Technique, and Negro Wit an ego by Salt N Pepa. The next word searched for this was “Identity,” the results for this was the song: F\* tha Police by N.W.A. The search of Identity turned out to be harder than expected because the word was used in so many different contexts that really needed to be analyzed for to see if it applied to the topic. Thus, the search continued where the song Apocalypse by Wyclef Jean was found. The next word search was on the phrase “Black Community.” This phrase was determined necessary because it could be a direct link to how rappers reached people locally. The song results were: Trapped by Tupac, Us by Ice Cube, Revolution of the mind Ultimate Force. The last word searched for in this research paper was the word “Black,” from this site came the songs: All falls Down by Kanye West, 99 problems by Jay-Z, My President is Black by Young Jeezy, Changes by Tupac, Cause I’m Black by Styles P, If I ruled the World by Nas Ft. Lauryn Hill, Black and Proud by Tragedy the Intelligent Hoodlum, White America by Eminem, N.I.G.G.A by Mopreme Ft. Tupac & Mouse Man, Murder to Excellence by Kanye West and Jay-Z, Black to the Future by Def Jef, 2000 and Beyond by Big Krit, Gorgeous by Kanye West, Black History by Master P Ft. Romeo, Black Republican by Nas Ft. Jay-Z, and I Can by Nas. This last search proved to be the most successful, and where the most material was found. These were the twenty-five songs chosen for this research project on Racial Identity in Hip Hop Lyrics.

## **Results**

### **Theme One: Reject of Authority**

The rejection of authority is a common theme expressed in these songs. In many songs, the rappers are making negative comments towards the government and law enforcement. They show a common distrust authority in relationship to the Black community. Authority is not seen as a positive or helpful resource to Black people;

they are looked at as negative and harmful. There are 7 out of 25 songs that have expressed this theme. This theme is expressed through these lyrics:

Greatest Hit, Tupac, Changes: “Cops give a damn about a negro/Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he’s a hero/Give the crack to the kids: who the hell cares? /one less hungry mouth on the welfare!”

The Martyr, Immortal Technique, Ultimas Palabras: “Many of the founders of this nation were themselves Masons/That is not a Left wing or Right wing conspiracy theory/It is a widely known and accepted fact/So then explain to me how a nation founded by men/Who not only understood the long and complicated history of Europe/But also that of Africa/Could permeate such a lie in convincing the American public/That one race of men was superior and one inferior”

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy, Kanye West Ft. Kid Cudi, Gorgeous  
“Face it, Jerome get more time than Brandon/And at the airport they check all through my bag/And tell me that it’s random/But we stay winning, this week has been a bad massage/I need a happy ending and a new beginning/ And a new fitted, and some job opportunities that’s lucrative/This the real world, homie, school finished/They done stole your dreams, you dunno who did it/I treat the cash the way the government treats AIDS/I won’t be satisfied til all my niggas get it, get it?”

### **Claim**

Based on the theme, it is evident that there is a larger amount of distrust of authority, expressed by rappers. In the Black community there is a large amount of distrust of authority. Negative opinions about authority have been presented in lyrics for years and are still being voiced today.

## **Theme Two: Appreciation of Blackness**

The second theme found is the appreciation of Blackness. In these songs there is an overwhelming amount of Black appreciation. Songs about being proud to be Black, proud of culture, and proud of one's community are demonstrative of this theme. This appreciation of Blackness demonstrates the positivity coming from the hip hop community towards racial identity. There are 6 out of 20 songs that have expressed this theme. This theme is expressed through these lyrics:

Intelligent Hoodlum, Tragedy the Intelligent Hoodlum, Black and Proud:  
"As long as we fight and go all out for each other/Black'll be the color of my brothers/Find your ancestors and what they did/Cause intelligent blacks built pyramids/Seek and obtain, you'll find descriptions/Pyramids were built by Egyptians/Who put up plantations to work the fastest/Mothers and sisters raped by slavemasters/Gamed by the devil and swift talkers/And till this day my brothers are sleepwalkers/Tricked by the devil to feel inferior/ In all reality my people are superior/Freedom of speech, I scream it loud/ Proud to be black cause black I'm proud"

The Recession, Young Jeezy, My President is Black: "Gotta stay true to who you are and where you came from/Cause at the top will be the same place you hang from/No matter how big you can ever be/ For whatever fee or publicity, never lose your integrity"

Blacks' Magic, Salt N Pepa, Negro Wit and Ego: "Put some faith in your race/I'm black, and I'm proud to be a African-American soul sister/Usin' my mind as a weapon, a lethal injection"

## **Claim**

The Hip Hop community places importance of being and feeling positive about one's race. This positivity is relayed to the Black community that they too

should be proud of their race. This appreciation of Blackness is another positive theme expressed about racial identity through rap music.

### **Theme Three: The “Struggle”**

The third theme is the “Struggle,” this theme represent the daily, day to day, struggle these rappers and all people face. The struggle is something everyone has to deal with all the time. This theme is expressed by the struggle of having little to eat, living around violence and facing racism every day. There are 5 out of 25 songs that have expressed this theme. This theme is expressed through these lyrics:

K.R.I.T Wuz Here, Big Krit, 2000 beyond: “Ain’t it crazy, scared to have a baby/How can I protect it from the same streets that made me?/Concrete gladiator blood shed overflowin”

Watch the Throne, Kanye West and Jay-Z, Murder to Excellence: “is it genocide?/Cause I can still hear his mama cry/Know the family traumatized/Shots left holes in his face about piranha-sized/The old pastor closed the cold casket”

Greatest Hit, Tupac, Changes : “I see no changes, all I see is racist faces/ Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races/We under, I wonder what it takes to make this/One better place, let’s erase the wasted”

### **Claim**

Rappers affect racial identity by demonstrating the everyday struggle. This shows all members of the community that were they come from is a struggle, a great amount of people can relate to that and identify with it.

### **Conclusion:**

In this research I discovered three themes about racial identity in rap music.

The first theme was a race based rejection of authority; meaning that there is some degree of distrust of authority expressed by rappers. The next theme found was appreciation of blackness; meaning the hip hop community places importance on being and feeling positive about ones' race. This positivity is relayed to the Black community such that they too should be proud of their race. This appreciation of blackness is another positive theme expressed about racial identity through rap music. The third theme found was the "struggle," and the claim is that rappers affect racial identity being demonstrating the everyday struggle. This shows all members of the community that where they come from is a struggle; a great amount of people can relate to that and identify with it. This appreciation of Blackness is related to the African worldview characteristic, collectivism, being accepting of ones' self and group. Like appreciation of Blackness, the struggle is also a collective view; the struggles noted in the lyrics are the problems of all people in the Black community. When it comes to the rejection of authority there is a high power distance between the people, African Americans, and the government. This high power distance is also a part of African Worldview, because just like parents, people are often expected to respect authority. People still see authority as an obstacle because of their skin color. As a race that is rewarded for rejecting their culture, it is a positive movement that rappers express to everyone the importance of being proud of who they are and not turning their back on the black community. Accomplished African American rappers give people someone to look up to. And, if they accept themselves so can the people of the community. Finally, the struggle gives people hope that one day that can come through their tough situations and be successful.

## **Works Cited**

- Cokley, K. O. (2007). Critical issues in the measurement of ethnic and racial identity: A referendum on the state of the field. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54*, 224 –234. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.54.3.224

- Cokely, K & Chapman, C. (2009) Racial identity theory. In Neville, H.A., Brendesha, M.T. & Utsey, S.O. *Handbook of African American Psychology*. Los Angeles, Ca: Sage Publications.
- Gosa, T. L. (2010). Not another remix: How Obama became the first hip-hop president. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 22(4), 389-415.
- Grant, E. (2002). Gangsta rap, the war on drugs and the location of African-American identity in Los Angeles, 1988-92. *European Journal of American Culture*, 21(1), 4.
- Helbig, A. (2011). 'Brains, means, lyrical ammunition': Hip-hop and socio-racial agency among African students in Kharkiv, Ukraine. *Popular Music*, 30(3), 315-330.
- Millner, D. D. (1991). 20 years then and now--1970 to 1990. *Black Collegian*, 21(3), 19.
- Olavarria, M. (2002). Rap and revolution: Hip-hop comes to Cuba. *NACLA Report On The Americas*, 35(6), 28.
- Reiter, B., & Mitchell, G. L. (2008). Embracing hip hop as their own: Hip-hop and Black racial identity in Brazil. *Studies In Latin American Popular Culture*, 27, 151-165.