In Defense of Rap Music:
Not Just Beats, Rhymes, Sex, and Violence

THESIS

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Abstract

This study critically analyzes rap through an interdisciplinary framework. The study explains rap’s socio-cultural history and it examines the multi-generational, classed, racialized, and gendered identities in rap. Rap music grew out of hip-hop culture, which has – in part – earned it a garnering of criticism of being too “violent,” “sexist,” and “noisy.” This criticism became especially pronounced with the emergence of the rap subgenre dubbed “gangsta rap” in the 1990s, which is particularly known for its sexist and violent content.

Rap music, which captures the spirit of hip-hop culture, evolved in American inner cities in the early 1970s in the South Bronx at the wake of the Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, and Women’s Liberation movements during a new technological revolution. During the 1970s and 80s, a series of sociopolitical conscious raps were launched, as young people of color found a cathartic means of expression by which to describe the conditions of the inner-city – a space largely constructed by those in power. Rap thrived under poverty, police repression, social policy, class, and gender relations (Baker, 1993; Boyd, 1997; Keyes, 2000, 2002; Perkins, 1996; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994, 2008; Watkins, 1998). Rappers rapped about the scenes, sights, and sounds of hip-hop culture, which began among young Blacks as a mass youth arts movement in reaction to the inequities that constructed that very culture.
In defense of rap music, this study argues that sexism and violence in rap, particularly in “gangsta rap,” is a product of the U.S. inner-city environment. Though rap is infamously associated with cursing, pushing drugs, smoking weed, drinking, and slingling guns, it has redeeming qualities, as well. This study argues that rap has become a ploy for the real issues in the United States today, issues such as race, class, and gender, all of which have plagued the U.S. since colonialism. It concludes that rap has more to offer than its limited qualities the record industry promotes; it has the ability to engage and impact its audience with its rich cultural elements.
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Fields of Study

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Chapter 1: Introduction

*A specter lurks in the house of music, and it goes by the name of race.*

(Radano & Bohlman, 2000, p. xii)

As the music of hip-hop culture, rap is defined by its use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and “street” vernacular, recited over a musical soundtrack. As rap evolved in America, particularly in inner cities, rappers rapped about the scenes within hip-hop culture, which began among young Blacks as a mass youth arts movement (Keyes, 2002) in the early 1970s during the beginning of a new technological revolution in the South Bronx. Hip-hop is comprised of disc jockeys (DJs/turntables), breakdancers (b-boys and b-girls), emcees (MCs), and graffiti writers (aerosol artists), which are commonly referred to as hip-hop’s four elements. Hip-hop further encompasses “an attitude rendered in the form of stylized dress, language, and gestures associated with urban street culture” (Keyes, 2002, p. 1). In this manner, hip-hop is more than an arts movement, it is “. . . a culture, and a way of life” (Pough, 2004a, p. 3), whose spirit is captured in rap music.

When asked about his goals as the leader of a rap group, Chuck D. said, “My job is to write shocking lyrics that will wake people up” (Dery, 1990, p. 94). The critical works of Houston A. Baker (1993), Todd Boyd (1997), William Eric Perkins (1996), Russell Potter (1995), and Tricia Rose (1994) reveal that rap is a poignant account of
urban life, expressing sentiments of poverty, police repression, current social policies, class, and gender relations. Owing to these works, we know that the lyrics within rap, particularly before rap entered mainstream popular culture, were originally about people of color’s thwarted desire for a safe community.

In this study, the researcher will give a brief history of hip-hop culture and rap music. Through Critical Race Theory (CRT), this research explains the violence and sexism in rap as results of larger societal structures; and through signifyin(g), this study shows that rap, particularly socio-political conscious rap, has been a cathartic means of expression, allowing artists to describe the conditions in which rap is situated. For example, the following rap lyrics by Melle Mel describe what it is like to live in the Bronx.

It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under

[FIRST VERSE]
Broken glass everywhere
People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far
'cuz a man with a tow truck repossessed my car
[REFRAIN]

Don't push me 'cuz I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
Uh huh ha ha ha
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under

These lyrics, for the most part, convey inner-city life, as it is often experienced by both the rapper and some of rap’s consumers. As Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice (2003) notes, music cannot be examined without its context, hip-hop largely being rap’s cultural context; and while this study locates rap’s song-speech elements in the West African bardic tradition, it also locates rap, specifically the content of the lyrics and images of rap, as products of urban American neighborhoods.

This study critically analyzes rap by incorporating the perspectives of ethnomusicology and cultural studies. The study will utilize an ethnomusicological perspective because rap is music and it should be studied as such. Rap is also part of various cultural fabrics and one of these cultures is largely the hip-hop culture. In order to understand the music, it is important to also know its cultural context. Thus, this study uses the perspective of cultural studies, as well. Further, the study will utilize a cultural studies perspective since most of the scholarship on rap and hip-hop has been propelled in the direction of cultural studies.

This analysis includes an examination of the interconnections between rap and its socio-cultural history, as it pertains to multiple identities, such as race and ethnicity, age,
class, and gender. When incorporating these three perspectives, the research defends rap music by arguing that the depiction of sex and violence in rap, particularly “gangsta rap,” is a product of the U.S. inner city environment, the main context from which rap evolved.

1.1 Background

Though many scholars (Baker, 1993; Boyd, 1997; Hager, 1984; Perkins, 1996; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994, 2008; Toop, 1984; Watkins, 1984) position their studies of rap as a cultural expression that is distinctly African American, rap is a confluence of African American and Caribbean cultural expressions (i.e., sermons, game songs, blues, toasts, and toasting) and the defining musical quality within rap, that is, its song-speech element, can be traced back to the West African bardic story-telling tradition, in which call-and-response is a distinguished characteristic (Keyes, 1984, 1996, 2002). Due to cultural memory (Berry, 1988; Floyd, 1995) and social memory (Gilroy, 1993), much of the sound coming out of African American music resembles that of African music. According to critical race theorist Derrick A. Bell (1995), “the use of unorthodox structure, language, and form. . .” in African American music is also utilized in CRT (p. 910).

While rap’s dominant musical elements are traced back to (West) Africa, the culture of rap music, that is, hip-hop culture, evolved out of urban American cities, as we learn from the ethnographic works of Steven Hager (1984), Cheryl Keyes (2002), David Toop (1984), and William H. Watkins (1984). Hager and Toop assert that the urban environment influenced the development of rap. As Paul Gilroy (1993) notes, “hip-hop grew out of the cross-fertilization of African American vernacular cultures with their Caribbean equivalents rather than springing fully formed from the entrails of the blues”
Although hip-hop is a cross-fertilization of African, Caribbean, and African American cultures, Latin Americans have also long been a part of the conception of rap, as it allowed young people of color to share their experiences and express themselves. Rap was also greatly influenced by Western technological advancements.

Many scholars credit Kool Herc, nicknamed Hercules, an immigrant from Jamaica, for starting and developing rap music when he began to use popular disco tunes as he was spinning records for parties. He made use of technology such as a loud sound system to play funky rhythm and blues records from the 1960s – records from artists like James Brown and Madrill’s “Fencewalk.” In these records, there was a break, when the only music left playing was the drum beat, and Herc used this break time to rap and talk to his audience between songs. Following in Herc’s footsteps, DJs found creative ways of telling a story that was couched in rhyming street vernacular. In neighborhood parties and street corners, DJ performers rapped to keep up the momentum at a party. Thus, with the help of technology, a new art form called “rap” was born, and caught like wildfire, allowing young people of color to share their experiences and express themselves.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

For centuries, there has been a problem of how to frame art; this struggle is schematized as “high art” versus “low art.” “High art,” that is, architecture, literature, and art (broadly define), are traditionally seen as works coming out of the Western European tradition. “High art” has been regarded as the center of greatness, while popular culture has been regarded as “low art,” that is, art most accessible to the people (Hall, 1997), and rap, belonging to popular culture, has traditionally been framed as “low art.”
According to Stuart Hall (1996), the introduction of Black popular culture, in which, the signifier, that is, “Black,” leveled the playing field, and popular culture was no longer seen as “low art,” but seen as equal to high art. As Hall (1996) writes, the ‘Black’ in Black popular culture displaces “European models of high culture. . . [because it takes] the focus off of classic European works” (p. 465). Hall (1996) calls this “decentering. . . the western narrative” (p. 468). The main reason for this displacement is to give non-western models, that is, the marginalized cultural models, voice and validation. One of the ways in which the signifier, that is, “black,” decenters the European model is through its utilization of America as an emergent world power and “centre for global cultural production and circulation” (Hall, 1996, p. 465). If Black popular culture levels the playing field between works coming out of the Western European art cannon and works coming out of the African Diaspora, how is it that much of the 1990s was spent harassing many Black artists within the rap industry? (i.e. 1990 Public Hearings of several rap artists). Later, this study will address censorship in rap.

In the last twenty or thirty years, rap has been criticized for being too violent, sexist, and noisy, and therefore, not really qualifying as “music.” In the Newsweek article entitled “The Rap Attitude,” critics (Adler et al., 1990) call rap “noisy,” with unrelenting power thumping bass lines. In that same issue of Newsweek, there was another article (Adler et al., 1990) that argued that rap’s sounds, lyrics, and images were violent, misogynistic, and sexist, and therefore could not be considered music. However, to say that rap is not music undercuts and dismisses the experiences of those writing and listening to rap. This research utilizes CRT’s narrative component, especially, its use of vocal scholarship, to validate the experiences of young people of color. According to
CRT scholars, narrative allows for the demand of recognizing “. . . the experiential knowledge of people of color” (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 6). CRT’s vocal component is most valuable for this study, as it recognizes that “those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen” (Matsuda, 1995, p. 63).

We can trace the reputation of rap as violent and sexist to minstrelsy, in which Whites were the first to perform “blackness” in a violent and sexist way. Some years later, both Whites and Blacks were employed to perform “blackness” in this way. Originally, rap music was intended to incite political and cultural awareness. We know this because some of the foundational figures of rap have made comments along these lines. For example, Chuck D, the lead rapper of Public Enemy, says, “my job is to write shocking lyrics that will wake people up” (Dery, 1990, p. 94). As the music spread around the world, however, the record industry selectively promoted the sexism, violence, and homophobia seen and heard within rap, particularly in “gangsta rap” (Rose, 2008).

The first commercial release of a rap record which had marked success was Sugar Hill Gang’s *Rappers Delight* with the now famous line, “I said a hip, hop, the hippie, the hipidipit, hiphop hopit, you don’t stop” (Banfield, 2010, p. 171). Nowhere in this line is there violence or sex. In fact, according to hip-hop guru, Tricia Rose (2008), one of the early rappers, Hercules, remarked that “kids who wanted to. . . [get] on the microphones at his parties had to find a way to be creative without cursing or promoting violence” (p. 165). As Rose (2008) notes, “Gangstas, hustlers, street crimes, and vernacular sexual
insults (e.g., calling black women ‘hoes’) became a part of hip-hop’s storytelling” as the record industry began to promote them as a part of rap (p. 2).

Prior to mainstream rap, most of the rappers were complex and interesting social critics. Some examples include West Coast “gangsta” rappers, such as N.W.A., W.C., and the Maad Circle. In their music, they “featured stories that emphasized being trapped by gang life and spoke about why street crime had become a ‘line of work’ in the context of chronic black joblessness” (Rose, 2008, p. 2). Given the historical and socio-cultural context of rap, particularly systematic racism and sexism, combined with technological “advancements” (i.e., music videos, the Internet, iPods, iPhones, iPads, and the Soundscan) the face of rap has changed from being music that promotes socio-political awareness to one that is violent and misogynistic, and, more recently, to a whole new image of rappers as living the lives of the rich and famous – all of which are a part of the “gangsta” rap aesthetic. This study defends rap by examining the various images of rap and rappers.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The first objective of this study, by following the works of Keyes (1984, 1996, 2000, 2002), is to explain the socio-cultural history of rap; in so doing, the researcher establishes the relationship between rap’s song-speech elements to the West African bardic tradition. Second, this study will show the relationship between CRT’s narrative component to rap’s song-speech characteristics by showing how the use of narrative in song has been passed down from the bardic tradition to the Caribbean toasting tradition to the Black American Folk Preacher traditions and then to the rap and CRT traditions.
Third, this study will establish how rap evolved out of urban neighborhoods in America – neighborhoods like the Bronx in New York and parts of Los Angeles. Fourth, the study will reveal that the content within rap originally included descriptions of urban life in America. By utilizing CRT as one of my frameworks, this study shows how politics have created the urban spaces that rappers, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s were rapping about, thus contributing to the sound, more specifically the imagery within “gangsta rap.”

By exploring the messages in rap, the study demonstrates how technology was first utilized as an innovative musical tool which has been overlooked and how mediated technologies, in particular, the media, has taken the opportunity to distort the messages within rap, thus globalizing exaggerated depictions of the Black experience. Fifth, this research shows how technology more specifically, the media, has distorted and globalized specific messages in rap.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions this study aims to answer are as follows:

Question #1: How does critical race theory (CRT) inform my scholarship?

Question #2: How has the West African bardic tradition of storytelling been passed down in songs and then to CRT? If rap has its origins in the West African bardic tradition, how then, does it also have origins in American cities such as the South Bronx?

Question #3: What musical elements are utilized in rap and what messages dominate the rap industry?
1.5 Definition of Key Terms

For the sake of consistency throughout this document a list of key terms and their definitions for the purposes of this study are included below.

- **audio-mixer** – is a piece of equipment that sits between two turntables, helping the DJ transition smoothly back and forth between records.
- **backspinning** – refers to a disc-jockeying technique in which the DJ spins a record counterclockwise to the desired beat which is then followed by a rotation of one record counterclockwise, creating a loop-like effect.
- **bi-musicality** - in short this concept infers that one understands, a part from his/her native musical culture, one that is different from his/her own.
- **cross-fader lever** – helps the DJ to smoothly transition from one turntable to the next.
- **hocket** – is a Western musical idea whereby all of the musical, in particular, rhythmic parts, fit to form a whole rhythmic idea.
- **International phonetic alphabet (IPA)** - is an alphabet system of phonetic notation based largely on the Latin alphabet.
- **phasing** – refers to a turntablist technique in which, the DJ accents a short phrase of a record while the second record is manipulated by the turntable’s cross-fader. This technique is somewhat similar to a technique called “riding gain,” which was commonly employed by Black radio disc-jockeys in the 1950s. The only difference between riding
gain and phasing is that phasing is executed with two turntables, while riding gain is done with one.

punch-phrasing – is a technique that combines punch-phrasing and backspinning

quadri-musicality – in short this concept infers that one understands four musical languages and cultures.

Riding gain – see phasing

Scratching – refers to a disc jockeying technique in which distinct sounds are produced through a moving of records back and forth on the turntable

tri-musicality – in short this concept infers that one understands three musical languages and cultures.

1.6 Terminology

For the sake of consistency, this study includes examples of hip-hop culture’s alterations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainstream English</th>
<th>Hip-Hop Alteration</th>
<th>IPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>brotha</td>
<td>‘br-tə</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deft</td>
<td>def</td>
<td>‘def</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangster</td>
<td>gangsta</td>
<td>‘gan-stə</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapping</td>
<td>rappin</td>
<td>‘rap-.pin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>sista</td>
<td>‘sis-tə</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While rap was being marginalized by the public (i.e., social commentators whose opinions eventually stood in for the American public) and by the academy, who believed that rap was a fad and did not deserve proper analysis, several pop culture journalists (Toop, 1984; Hager, 1984; Watkins, 1984) began historicizing hip-hop culture by writing informative, ethnographic studies of the scenes from which hip-hop was derived. In their projects, Toop and Hager positioned rap as a subgenre of the urban street culture called “hip-hop,” a phrase utilized to describe the art styles – disc jockeying, emceeing, breakdancing, and graffiti art.

By the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, scholars who were fascinated with rap, particularly with the DJ’s ability to reconstruct old tunes into new tunes through digital sampling, began to place rap at the center of postmodern criticism (Baker, 1993; Goodwin, 1988, 1992; Hebdige, 1987; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994; Willis, 1990). These interpretations furthered Black “techno” forms into a discourse on popular mainstream scholarship. However, due to their theoretical frameworks, they also began to marginalize the artists creating the music. This particular paradigm led African Americanists to become concerned about the “decentering of the subject,” more specifically, the performer (Diawara, 1992, p. 7).

While much of the 1980s was spent establishing rap as a thriving tradition, there was an emergence, commercialization, and sensationalism of the rap subgenre dubbed
“gangsta rap” in the 1990s. Coupled with technological “advancements” and the rap aesthetic (Keyes, 2002), in particular, rap’s song-speech quality, “gangsta rap” was produced, dispersed and globalized. Since rap is embedded in “powerful and dominant technological, industrial, and ideological institutions,” as Rose (1989, 1994, 2008) points out through critical and cultural theory, the face of rap has been altered, that is, “gangsta rap” has become a representation for all of rap, in particular for those who are unfamiliar with the intricate history of rap and the cultures from which rap has evolved. Even further, these new technological “advancements” have aided in the dispersion of “gangsta rap,” in which the industry has selected to portray rap on the whole as misogynistic and violent.

During the 1990s, Keyes (2002) says that she witnessed “a proliferation of negative writings in the press that questioned rap’s cultural significance, dismissed its artistic value, and claimed that it promoted violence” (p. xiii). Despite these views, academics outside of music, more specifically, cultural studies scholars (Baker, 1993; Dyson, 1993, (1997 [1996]), 1997; Gilroy, (1987 [1991]), 1993; Hall, 1996, 1997; Neal, 1999; Perkins, 1996; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994), many of them, through cultural, critical, and/or social theory, began to seriously question the deceptive and negative publicity surrounding rap. This initiated a more balanced investigation of rap, revealing that it was music about urban life, which expressed sentiments of poverty, police repression, current social policies, class, and gender relations (Baker, 1993; Boyd, 1997; Perkins, 1996; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994, 2008; Watkins, 1998).

The new movement in academia, that is, the study of popular culture in which rap is situated, led to the development of new subfields in the academy. For example, scholars writing about rap in Education (Best & Kellner, 1997, 1999; Crichlow & McCarthy, 1993; Giroux, 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 1997, 1998; Gresson, Kincheloe, & Steinberg, 1997; Kellner, 1995; Kincheloe, & Steinberg, 1995, 1997, 1999; Willis, 1990) have largely been categorized under the subfield called “Cultural Studies in Education.” Cultural Studies in Education is largely a field that strives to bridge gaps between the Humanities and the Social Sciences. However, the field of Education is not the only academic field predisposed to Cultural Studies scholarship. Communications scholars writing about rap (Forman, 1994; Frith, Goodwin, & Grossberg, 1993; Grossberg, 1992, 1997; Grossberg & Pollock, 1997; Sexton, 1995) have also been exposed to Cultural Studies scholarship.

As “gangsta rap” emerged and crystallized, cultural studies scholars (Baker, 1993; Dyson, 1993, (1997 [1996]), 1997; Gilroy, (1987 [1991]), 1993; Hall, 1996, 1997; Neal, 1999; Perkins, 1996; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994) began questioning the deceptive publicity surrounding rap, as did educational scholars (Dimitriadis, 2009; Giroux, 1996). However, these educational scholars somewhat exacerbate issues surrounding rap, race, and representation as they argue for a textual analysis of various artistic elements within
hip-hop culture. Though rap is heavily coded with wordplay, rhyme, and storytelling, it is also music that is a part of various cultural fabrics. Giroux (1996) argues that many youth identify with iconic figures like Tupac and have begun to negotiate their identities based on his life. Analyses such as these provide a contextualization of rap in educational research by analyzing rap as “text.” This contextualization however, has caused a retreat in a type of evidenced-based research, which often does not speak to the needs of youth. This study contextualizes rap in its various cultural and artistic forms.

Further, in tandem with Cultural Studies (broadly defined), Ethnomusicologists of popular music in the 1990s began to critically examine mass mediation, cultural identity, authenticity, and appropriation (Austerlitz, 1997; Averill, 1997; Berger, 1999; Erlmann, 1991, 1996; Fikentscher, 2000; Guilbault, 1993; Hernandez, 1995; Keil & Feld; 1994; Loza, 1993; Manuel, 1988, 1993; Moore, 1997; Turino, 2000; Wallis & Malm, 1984, 1992; Waterman 1990). These analyses in turn began to address some of the issues within rap. Unlike some Cultural Studies scholars however, Ethnomusicologists were engaged in site-specific research – this engagement allowed them to stay clear of the debates on rap, that according to Rose (1994, 2008), have largely been centered around race. As experts on historical, cultural, and social musical practices however, Ethnomusicologists are vital to discussions on rap. Challenged by Ethnomusicologist George List’s (1963) article, “The Boundaries of Speech and Song,” in which the author argues that both song and speech are vocally produced, melodic, and linguistically meaningful, Keyes (2002) set out and proved List’s assumptions through rap. At the nucleus of much of Keyes’s (1984, 1996, 2000, 2002) work are not only ethnomusicological and folkloric tools, but tools that directly stem from Cultural Studies.
In turn, Keyes has been able to participate and engage in many of the discussions on rap, in particular, conversations regarding the intersection (Crenshaw, 1988, 1989, 1991) of rap and race. This new movement in ethnomusicological scholarship to critically (but carefully) examine popular music such as rap – with careful interdisciplinary approaches – approaches like the ones exemplified by Keyes (1984, 1996, 2000, 2002), have helped to initiate an even more balanced view of rap music.

Rap scholars and critics analyzed rap and its performers during the 1990s; and many rappers, freelance writers, journalists, more specifically, popular cultural and/or music journalists spent much of the 2000s restoring the name of rap and rappers. They published accounts of the rappers’ lives (Aaron & 50 Cent, 2007; Abrams, 2007; Abrams & Chuck D., 2007; Als & Turner, 2003; Ariel, 1999; Bailey, 2011; Bankston, 2003, 2004; Barnes, 2007; Baughan, 2008; Bernhardt, 2008; Betha, 2003, Books & Gittins 2002; Bozza, 2004; Brown, 2004; Brown, 2005a, 2005b; Brown, 2006; Bueno, 2005; Cable, 1998; Callahan-Bever, Noah & 50 Cent, 2007; Cantoral, 2010; Coker, 2003; Curry, 2009; Debeauville, 2006; Dogg & Seay, 2000; Dogg & Talbert, 2006; Doggett, 2005; Elliott and 50 Cent, 2007; Eminem, 2002, 2009; Ex, 2006; Faber, 2007; 50 Cent & K’wan, 2007; 50 Cent & Noire, 2007; 50 Cent & Pledger, 2008; 50 Cent & Smith, 2007; 50 Cent & Turner, 2007; Finley, Toiya Kristen, 2009; Flameboy, Legg, & McCarthy, 2004; Gasteier, 2009; Gelfand, 2007; Gigney, & Martin, (2002[2001]); Golus, 2007; Greenburg, 2011; Gueraseva & Ratner, 2005; Haskins, 2002; Hasted, 2011; Hauslein, 2010; Heos, 2009; Hillstrom, 2009; Hunter & West, 2007; Huxley, 2000; Jay-Z, 2010; Kenyatta, 2001; La Bella, 2009; Lane, 2004; Lang, 2007; Lathan, Rowe, Simmons, D., & Simmons, R., 2005; Leffel & Oliver, 2006; Lommel, 2007; Marcovitz, 2007; Mattern,
2007; McGibbon, 2003; Miller, 2007; Nacerous, 2011; Nelson & Witheridge, 2008; Norton, 2006; Ogg, 2002; Plympton & West, 2009; Ro, 2001; Rockworth, 2008; Scott, Cathy, 2000; Scott, Celia, 2007; Schaller, & Schaller, 2009; Sheen, 2009; Simmons, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011; Snoop Dogg, & Talbert, 2007; Snoop Dogg, & Seay, 2000; Stubbs, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Tarr, 2010; Torres, 2004; Traugh, 2010; Weiner, 2001, 2003; Wells, 2008; Weicker, 2009; Williams, 2000; Wolny, 2006; Wutang, 2005). These accounts revealed the nexus and/or intersection between rap and the lived worlds of their various communities – be it the “Black” community, the urban community, celebrities living in particular communities, hip-hop and/or rap communities, etc. Further, some of these accounts reveal how the rappers achieved their fame. In so doing, these accounts give a timeline of rap’s development from being an expression of people of color’s thwarted desire for a safe community, to their living the life of the rich and famous via the rap tradition, and/or to rap’s representing an exaggerated version of Black life in America on the whole.

Grossberg; 2006), and a sociology (Dimitriadis, 2008, 2009) have together continued to publish massive amounts of literature on rap.

Other fields within the academy have also started to analyze rap – namely, Folklore, Linguistics, Music Theory, and Musicology (Alim, Ibrahim, Pennycook, 2009; Chang, 2008; Dimitriadis, 2009; Dyson, 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Forman & Neal, 2004; Krims, 2007; Kitwana, 2002, 2005; Miyakawa, 2005; Morrell, 2004, 2008; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Stovall, 2006; Wang, 2003). However, since Keyes’s (2002) study, there have been no extensive studies that look at rap through the lens of Ethnomusicology. In 2005, Ethnomusicologist Felicia Miyakawa put out a study on rap. Miyakawa’s (2005) study however, was about The Five Percent Nation and its use of commercial rap as a way to proselytize its beliefs and recruit and comment on relevant issues. This music is better known as God’s Hop.

2.1 Research Gap

Within the lyrics of rap, researchers have addressed issues of identity as they pertain to gender and sexuality (Keyes, 2000, 2002; Pough, 2004; Rose 1994, 2008), social justice issues such as poverty, police repression, class relations, and social policies (Baker, 1993; Boyd, 1997; Lipsitz, 1994; Johnson, 1993-4; Perkins 1996; Potter 1995); these have all been explored within the context of hip-hop and rap. Owing to sociologist W.E.B. DuBois (1995 [1903]), who showed the significance of race and community in music by writing about the protest songs of the slaves, some studies have addressed issues of race as it pertains to music (Banfield, 2010; Carby, 1998, 1999; Chuck D. & Jah, 1998; Costello & Wallace, 1997; Crichlow & McCarthy, 1993; Cross, 1994; Dixson, 2006; Dyson, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Floyd, 1983, 1991, 1995; Forman, 2002;

2006) have largely been addressed by researchers outside of Music, and in particular, Ethnomusicology, a discipline that studies the social, cultural, and historical elements in music. When conducting a literature review, Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice (2007) found that “ethnomusicologists. . . have produced. . . [a] corpus of work. . . [that]. . . take[s] for granted identity as a category of social life and of social analysis” (Rice, 2007, p. 20). Rice (2007) continues, they “do not, with a very few exceptions, cite more general work on identity in the social sciences and humanities, nor do they define the term” (p. 20).

Though Ethnomusicologists Alan Merriam (1964) and Bruno Nettl (1983) see the field of Ethnomusicology inherently dealing with issues of identity, they argue that the field utilizes music to understand culture and history, in which race and ethnicity are constituted. Merriam (1964) writes, “the use of music as a technique for. . . understanding and reconstruc[ing]. . . culture history has long been a part of Ethnomusicology” (p. 277). By incorporating CRT in this ethnomusicological analysis, this analysis will integrate the perspectives of social scientists as these perspectives pertain to identity, more specifically age, gender, race, and class identity.

In his literature review, Rice (2007) contends that “the theme of identity and its relationship to musical practice developed relatively recently in American Ethnomusicology” (p. 18). As noted feminist and musicologist Susan McClary (1991) declares, “. . . the traditional priorities of the field . . . served to shield music not only against feminist criticism but also against cultural interpretation of any sort” (p. x). A decade before her pioneering work, McClary (1991) noted that there was an outpouring of articles and books addressing the relationship between music and feminist theory. As
she writes, in “. . . the 1980s, an increasing number of cultural theorists began to posit that the Self can usefully be understood as a construction formed at the intersection of a wide range of discourses” (McClary, 1991, p. xvi). Further, Black feminist scholars (Carby, 1986, 1987, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 1990, 2006; hooks, 1984, 1993a, 1993b) who have problematized identity by coining the phrase, “identity politics,” not only posited work in their own fields, but also in the field of Music.

Due to the construction of various identities in society, Black feminists have been relegated to the undesirable position of the “subordinate other” (Crenshaw, 1988). If the academy and society allows Black women to voice their concerns, this would give more opportunities to various groups of people who have historically been silenced, thereby opening up the discussion on oppressive regimes. As Black feminist Hazel Carby (1987a) argues, “we can point to no one single source of oppression . . .” (p. 65).

By following the works of Black feminists (Carby, 1986, 1987, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 1990, 2006; hooks, 1984, 1993a, 1993b), Ethnomusicologists, more specifically, Ethnomusicologists of American popular music (Cole & Guy-Sheftfall, 2003; Davis, 1990, 1998; Forman, 1994; Gaunt, 2006; Goodall, 1994; Griffin, 2001; Hampton, 1992; Jackson, 1985; Kernodle, 2004; Keyes, 1984, 1996, 2000, 2002; Kirk-Duggan, 1997; Mahon, 2004; Morgan, 1999), have begun to analyze music through a particular lens, that is, through the lens of Black feminist theory. Though these studies address gender and race relations through Black feminist thought, only a few (Gaunt, 2006; Keyes, 1984, 1996, 2000, 2002) extensively and explicitly address gender, race, and ethnicity. By looking at a group of people who have been triply oppressed “. . . on the basis of sex, colour, and [on the whole] class” (Weiner, 1994), this study utilizes
Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectionality to examine the multiple identities in not only rap, but music in general. In so doing, this study expands on Professor Emeritus of Spanish and Portuguese at Stanford University Sylvia Wynter’s (1990) and curriculum theorist Beverly Gordon’s (1997) call for a (re)conceptualization of humanity. This study particularly calls for a (re)conceptualization of humanity as it pertains to rap and the field of Music.

Further, by utilizing intersectionality, in particular as it is posited in CRT, a framework first used in (critical) legal studies, this research examines how oppression is constructed and maintained through the legal system and how it is experienced in particular by adults. Even further, by using CRT as it is utilized in Education – hence the movement, CRT in Education – the researcher examines how oppression is constructed and maintained through education of the youth. In so doing, this research analyzes the ways in which and the degree to which music, particularly (“gangsta”) rap, constructs and maintains the oppression of both adults and children.

By following the works of M. M. Bahktin (1981) and William Wells Newell (1963 [1884]), Ethnomusicologist Amanda Minks (1999, 2002) contends that children’s music (and other) expressions must be examined, paying particular attention to power relations and ideologies of value. Children, too, participate musically in the tendency of society that divides the world into themselves and others (Minks, 1999, 2002). The music and musical life of ethnic and national minorities, of people who live outside of mainstream society, children included, are different kinds of phenomena (Nettl, 1983). Yet the ways in which inequality is reflected through power in musical life lead to distinctive musical and lived experiences. As rapper Shawn Carter, stage name Jay-Z
(2010) notes that “when Biggie rhymed about how things done changed he could’ve meant from one summer to the next. It wasn’t a generational shift but a generational split” (p. 13). Though the ethnomusicological literature on children’s music includes ethnic, gendered, and class issues (Blacking, 1967; Brailoiu, 1954; Campbell, 1998; Gaunt, 2006; Kartomi, 1980, 1991; Minks, 1999, 2002), they do not, with the exception of one (Gaunt, 2006), investigate the ways in which age, class, gender, and race shape our realities. This study analyzes the function of age, class, gender, and race in the context of rap music.

According to Minks (1999, 2002), the “study” of children and their music is potentially a large field that has also been undertheorized and unexamined. Of course, the field of Music Education has produced a surplus of scholarship on children’s music and there are a few scholars in the field of Education who write about music (Dixson, 2006). However, most studies in Music Education focus on pedagogy and/or class issues (Nettl, 1983). Moreover, these studies have set out to prove the “benefits” of Western classical music, while ignoring other types of music.

Likewise, the topic of race has also been undertheorized. According to Critical Race Theorists Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995), though race has been a significant factor in society in general, and in education in particular, it has remained undertheorized as a topic of scholarly inquiry in education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). By utilizing CRT’s interdisciplinary component, the researcher will examine the intersections among disciplines within the academy; more specifically, this research examines the effects of race as an undertheorized concept in disciplines such as Education and Music.
After conducting several ethnographies in Schools of Music, Nettl (1995) contends that the term “music,” particularly in schools of music, implies exclusively “Western classical music,” “canonic music,” “serious music,” and/or “real” and “normal” music (p. 3). Further, as Ethnomusicologist Merriam (1964) states, “Ethnomusicology has concentrated its efforts primarily upon music sound and structure, thus emphasizing its musicological component and in great part ignoring the anthropological,” race and ethnicity being a part of “the anthropological” (p. viii). In contrast, critical pedagogues in the field of Education have begun to bridge the schism between in-school and out-of-school cultures, by positing an understanding of the loaded term “culture,” that is, by distinguishing between its “traditional” and “non-traditional” forms. This bridge involves an examination of several concepts, one being the performative as viewed by the Social Sciences and the Humanities, namely, Music and Education.

While most of the ethnomusicological literature on children’s music (Blacking, 1967; Brailoiu, 1954; Campbell, 1998; Gaunt, 2006; Kartomi, 1980, 1991; Minks, 1999, 2002) examines non-Western music (Brailoiu, 1954; Campbell, 1998; Kartomi, 1980, 1991; Minks, 1999, 2002), only one study in the ethnomusicological literature (Gaunt, 2006) examines black popular music in American culture. Gaunt (2006) looks into the ways in which girls play games like double-dutch and asserts that these games are also a form of popular music that have been excluded by the music industry. Nettl (1983) contends that Schools of Music tend to regard Western classical music as “high” art and minorities’ music, in this study, rap music, as “low” art. He further contends that limited fieldwork from Ethnomusicologists in children’s music has resulted in the “American

With the exception of a few studies (Giroux, 1996; Dimitriadis, 2009; Kellner, 1995; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997, 2004; Willis, 1990), scholars, in particular Ethnomusicologists, have overlooked the implications and function of age, class, gender, and race in rap music. In addition, even though rap scholar Keyes (2002) acknowledges that rap began as a “youth arts movement,” children are not the focus of her study; rather, the performer is at the center of her study. By utilizing CRT, in particular CRT in Education, this research considers not only adults but children; thus, my study examines age, class, gender, and race as they pertain to rap. It is my hope that my study will make a valuable contribution to the existing literature on rap.
Chapter 3: Methodology – A Content Analysis Just Won’t Do

Discussions by James Clifford (1997), George Marcus (1998), Arjun Appadurai (1997), and Donna Haraway (1997) further indicate that qualitative research spills over traditional paradigmatic and geographic boundaries. This spill has blurred the distinction between, for example, culture and economy, or village and subculture, as well as shattering the notion of an easily definable research subject. In light of all of this, a content analysis just won’t do. Though a content analysis of rap possibly generates a systematic understanding of rap, it does not decode the meanings made in rap. Therefore, this study combines musicology with ethnography, to provide an Ethnomusicological analysis. In addition, the study uses folkloric elements and the Cultural Studies perspective to analyze and contextualize the role of racialized, gendered, classed, and generational identities in rap. This Cultural Studies framework is largely informed by the work of critical pedagogy in education via Critical Race Theory’s (CRT) interdisciplinary characteristics, thus producing a Cultural Studies in Education perspective.

By using CRT’s interdisciplinary component, this study examines the intersection of the above disciplines as well as the intersection of identity and spatial formation in music, in particular in rap. According to Dixson and Rousseau (2006), CRT scholarship is most accurately described as a problem-centered approach in which the researcher should employ any means necessary to address the problem of inequity. Within this approach it is not only necessary to identify the many issues of racism that plague
society, but also to identify strategies that combat the issues of racism. CRT methodology formulates research questions for the purpose of understanding how people construct their identity based on race, gender, social class, national origin, and age, and/or other aspects of culture, while acknowledging institutional interpretations of rigid racial categories that create conflict within these identities (Parker & Roberts, 2005). CRT is most appropriate for this study, as it allows for a critical examination of identity and the products of identity in society, education, and in particular, music.

However, since rap is music and should be addressed within the context of music, this study employs a musicological analysis of rap, which requires, some level of transcription. However, since rap music has its historical origins in various cultural fabrics, such as the popular, hip-hop, and Black cultures, the study will be contextualized in its various cultural fabrics. Therefore, this study will contextualize rap’s musical elements as well as its literary elements of (coded) wordplay, rhyme, and storytelling to uncover and recover the meanings made in rap. In addition to analyzing the musical and literary elements in rap, this study analyzes the sociocultural context of rap. By utilizing folkloric elements of the sign as posited by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1971) and Henry Louis Gates (1988), this study maintains, through signifyin(g), that the meanings made and utilized in rap can be uncovered, recovered, and decoded. Further, by using elements of the sign, the study challenges ahistoricism to demonstrate the legitimacy of rap as well as the validity of race and racism in society, education, and music.

One of the common denominators among Ethnomusicology, Folklore, and Cultural Studies, more specifically, a Cultural Studies in Education via CRT, is ethnography – a methodological technique borrowed from Anthropology to study culture.
Ethnomusicology utilizes ethnography to contextualize the musicological analysis with the cultural, social, and environmental practices of the people being studied. Ethnography is also utilized in Folklore to explore and explain everyday life. In everyday living, folklorists examine a specific culture’s uses of music, legend, and/or the folktale, etc. Cultural Studies also borrows the methodological tool of ethnography, since one of its objectives is “to do justice to the lived worlds of other[s] . . . [by] critically analyzing the social and institutional discourses that interlace any lived experience or world” via ‘new ethnographic’ methods (Saukko, 2003, p. 9). CRT scholars Adrienne Dixson and Celia Rousseau (2006) tell us that “much of the literature on CRT in education has focused on the theory’s application to ‘qualitative’ research” (p. 49). However, as Dixson and Rousseau (2006) further write, “qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography, are certainly consistent with particular elements of CRT” (p. 49). For this reason, this study uses CRT’s interdisciplinary and intersectionality components to connect and examine through CRT elements the intersections of Ethnomusicology, Folklore, and Cultural Studies, especially Cultural Studies in Education.

For example, according to CRT scholar Derrick A. Bell (1995), there are several similarities between CRT and African American spirituals. Like rap, CRT utilizes narrative, which “reveal things about the world that we ought to know” (Delgado, 1989, 1990; Matsuda, 1988). As Paul Gilroy (1993) tells us, there are specific elements of narrative rituals and musical performance that serve a mnemonic function in Black expressive cultures; these rituals direct “the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and . . . social memory” (p. 198). Telling and retelling stories plays a significant role in organizing “. . . the consciousness of the
‘racial’ group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 198). Through CRT’s narrative component, the current study shows how multiple identities are utilized in music, more specifically, how racialized, gendered, classed, and generational identities function in- and outside of rap. Furthermore, the ethnomusicological perspective allows for telling the stories of rappers and their respective communities.

As Ethnomusicologists Stephen Blum, Philip V. Bohlman, and Daniel Neuman (1991) argue, ethnomusicologists tell stories. However, the kind of story told depends on where fieldwork is done. For this reason, counter-story is an important element in the current study, as it captures the essence of reality by questioning sensibilities coming from both the left and the right. In this way, the study uses CRT’s interrogation of liberalism and conservatism in examining rap.

In her groundbreaking study, rap scholar Cheryl Keyes (2002) shows how narrative – more specifically, the song-speech qualities – in rap goes back to (West) Africa. In her studies, Keyes (1984, 1996, 2002) shows that what the West African bardic tradition, Black sacred music, and Black popular music have in common is narration and storytelling. As posited by African American theologian James Cone (1972) and CRT scholar Charles Lawrence (1992), CRT is a practice of preaching, teaching, and healing. As Lawrence (1992) states, it is “an interdisciplinary tradition, wherein healers are concerned with the soul and preachers with the pedagogy of the oppressed . . . it is a vocation of struggle against dehumanization, a practice of raising questions about reasons for oppression, an inheritance of passion and hope” (p. 336). For
these reasons, the current study utilizes CRT’s narrative component to show a direct correlation between CRT and rap’s song-speech elements.

Also, CRT scholars and rappers demonstrate their concern for people’s well-being through narrative. According to Keyes (2002), rap artist of Public Enemy, Flavor Flav, “dons a large clock as a necklace to symbolize that it is time for black people to mentally wake up” (Keyes, 2002, p. 86). The “unorthodox structure” (Bell, 1995, p. 910), that is, its song-speech element, facilitates the rapper’s ability to sermonize to people, as Public Enemy so often does.

Furthermore, this study employs storytelling, as it demands the “recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color” (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 6). Narrative in CRT is valuable for this study, as it recognizes that “those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen” (Matsuda, 1995, p. 63). In so doing, this research demands for the “recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color” through various performance and artistic tools in and of CRT and rap. By utilizing narrative and intersectionality, this study allows “… all God’s children … [the ability] to sing their song” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 6).

In this study, intersectionality and interdisciplinary components within CRT allow for an examination of racialized, gendered, classed, and generational identities. This study also uses these components to bridge the schism between in-school and out-of-school cultures. Historically, many Black art forms, particularly rap music, have been

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1 Jeffrey Louis Decker (1993) goes further into the symbolic use of “time” as it is used by Public Enemy. In doing so, Decker shows parallels between Public Enemy’s use of time and Black Arts Movement poet Amiri Baraka’s use of time in his poem “It’s Nation Time” (pp. 64-65).
schematized as “low” art, and therefore the music as well as its performers have suffered a climate of criticism by both the academy and the public.

Since its conception in America, rap was not taken seriously in the academy and was left to be criticized by the public. This launched rap into what critical pedagogues call “out-of-school” culture. This has meant that rap has been regarded as music that is “unworthy” of canonic study, and it has been dismissed by academicians whose job it is to educate students on musical topics and issues within music. By utilizing Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality, a theory that evolved out of Black feminist writings, namely, the writings of Patricia Hill Collins (1990), the current study analyzes the function of various identities to create a space of empowerment via the experiences of Black females, more specifically, Black girls in urban settings, while at the same time working toward eliminating discrimination and oppression on all levels.

According to Poirier (2009), “an intersection is a place where two or more points meet. Within the intersection, a new space is created. The new space shapes how the world is experienced, interpreted, and understood” (p. ii). Since rap and “hip-hop grew out of the cross-fertilization of . . . [Black] vernacular cultures” as well as its song-speech elements being traced back to (West) Africa, this study shows the importance of identity in rap. By using intersectionality to examine the function of multiple identities, this study also examines the formation of rap through space via the convergence of these identities. As Keyes (2002) writes, “during its early development, many hip-hop innovators were of African Caribbean and Latino (mainly Puerto Rican) descent” (p. 49). DJs like Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Charlie Chase, and Bambaataa were African Caribbean and Puerto Rican (Flores, 2000; Hebdige, 1987; Keyes, 2002; Toop, 2000) and as many hip-
hop scholars concur, rap evolved out of the inner-city. By using intersectionality, this study does not only examine the identities involved in rap, but examines the spaces created by the convergence of these identities. Within these spaces and identities, this study analyzes class relations, social policies, poverty, and police repression.

Moreover, by employing intersectionality, the study examines the spaces created and utilized in and by academia. For example, when Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) built their argument in “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” on critical legal scholar Cheryl Harris’s (1993) “whiteness as property,” they were able to utilize CRT’s interdisciplinary nature to examine the intersections between legal studies and education. They thus, allowed for “the new song of CRT. . . [to be] transposed from legal studies into the study of education” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4). This in turn allowed for educational scholars (Dixson, 2005, 2006; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s, 1997) to employ CRT in the context of various art forms. For example, Critical Race Theorist Adrienne Dixson (2005, 2006) utilizes CRT to examine race in jazz music.

Although rap has its roots in the West African bardic tradition, the aesthetics of rap are derived from American musical environments that facilitated the creation of rap via vernacular forms and musics such as jive talk, blues, and jazz, this thesis builds on Dixson’s (2005, 2009) jazz methodology. As rap scholar Keyes (2002) observes, “. . . the pretext of rap is embedded in past oral traditions, [however] its development as a discernible musical genre began in the 1970s” during and after the wake of the 1960’s Black Nationalist, more specifically, The Black Arts and Civil Rights Movements (p. 39). In this way, intersectionality via CRT’s interdisciplinary quality allows for an extension of Dixson’s (2005, 2009) jazz methodology. CRT is useful, as it not only allows for an
examination of the multiple identities in American popular musics, in particular rap, but its interdisciplinary nature via intersectionality allows me to bridge gaps in education, namely, gaps between the Social Sciences and the Humanities. CRT’s interdisciplinary and intersectionality components also allow for an examination of intra- and inter-group dynamics among and between multiple identities in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, namely, in the fields of in Music and Education.

By examining intra- and inter-group dynamics, the current study uses Bell’s (1980) interest-convergence theory to show how the interests of these multiple identities converge. This creates an environment in which rap was able to evolve and thus sustains racial representations through rap. Through interest-convergence, the study shows how the spatial products of these merging identities, that is, the urban spaces, have facilitated the development of rap. For example, although rap’s song-speech qualities are traced back to (West) Africa, this study will show how the combination of rap’s song-speech elements with its use of technology as musical elements are derived from urban American spaces.

The current study not only shows how the interest of particular identities in certain generations converge, thus creating rap, but it also utilizes elements within Bell’s (1980) interest-convergence theory. In particular, this study uses “racial remedies” (Bell, 1980) to show that race and racism are pervasive and permanent in American society and thus in American music. As rap scholar Keyes (2002) notes, although policies of the 1964 Civil Rights Act were meant to give African Americans opportunities, they made little to no impact on Black Americans in the ‘ghetto.’ African Americans grew pessimistic as “living conditions steadily worsened, youth gangs multiplied at alarming
proportions, and drugs ravaged the communities” (Keyes, 2002, p. 39). As critical legal scholar Bell (1992) concluded, “racial equality is, in fact. . . [an unrealistic] goal” and until we realize that it’s an unrealistic goal, we will not be able to move out of racial entrenchment (p. 363). This study shows, through its analysis of rap, that racial categories are historical and therefore racism is not going away (Bell, 1990, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). However, by recognizing the permanence and pervasiveness of racism, this study works toward eliminating racial oppression as a part of the larger goal of ending all forms of oppression (Matsuda, et al., 1993).

3.1 Researcher’s Position: “The ‘Missing’ Ethnomusicologist”

*Insurgent artists and scholars of color are working in terrains that are different from the normative landscapes upon which most teachers and teacher educators walk.*

(Gordon, 1993, p. 225)

My interest in rap extends farther back than to the year of my birth. I come from a long line of family musicians, in particular, jazz musicians. In this way, because rap is largely regarded by rappers as an extension of jazz as well as many other Black (popular) musical forms, my interest in rap was in the making, way before I was born. As a little

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girl, I can remember flipping through magazines like *Rolling Stone, Word Up, Right On,* and *Spin,* and admiring artists like Arrested Development, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, and Salt-N-Pepa. I remember wishing I could be just like those musicians, with their stylish clothes, vocal and instrumental abilities.

Besides my interest in music, I had a profound interest in culture. I grew up in the African American church as the child of a minister. On Sundays, I sat on the front pew of the church, listening to my father preach. I believe I inherited my father’s gift for public speaking because as young as six years old, I began speaking in churches across the country, as well as performing as a flautist soon after. This may be where my interest in rap started. According to Joyce Marie Jackson (1981), rap’s song-speech qualities resemble the practices of the African American folk preacher which, as Keyes (1984, 1996, 2000, 2002) explains, is a variation on the West African griot performance practice of the bardic tradition.

Although I had an interest in my respective culture, that is, the African American culture, I was also interested in worlds outside of my own. My parents gave me healthy doses of exposure to other cultures. For instance, besides waking up to the sounds of various “American” musical genres, more specifically musical genres considered distinctly “African American,” I also grew up listening to musical genres considered the anti-thesis of “African American” music, that is, “country,” rock and roll, etc.

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Further, as I grew up in a suburb of Maryland, I had access to cultures outside of my own. For example, the way the transportation system works in my hometown, I had easy access to parts of Washington, D.C., Virginia, and various other cities in Maryland, both affluent and poverty-stricken. These three regions, linked by the public transportation system are better known as the Washington Metropolitan Area. This area, to my estimation, is one of the most culturally (traditionally defined) diverse areas in the United States. In this environment, whenever I accompanied my parents to work, I was greeted with smiles, popcorn, and hugs, by an ethnically and socially diverse group of people. Thus, I was quickly acquainted with not only “Black” culture and issues surrounding it, but culture in general. So I became aware of classed, generational, racial, and gendered issues in various cultures.

My interest in culture and music emerged and was reified through the drastic changes I experienced in environment; enwrapped in these changes, are largely class issues. Although I grew up in a suburb of Maryland, it increasingly grew more “urban” over the years. For example, over the span of my childhood, several of our neighborhood buildings became abandoned and/or torn down. According to sociologist William Julius Wilson (1996), one of the characteristics of an emerging urban neighborhood is the abandonment of buildings due to joblessness. It was an influx of immigrants (mostly Latin American and African) to the area in the 1990s that restored business. These immigrants also brought with them rich cultural elements.

Many of the early writings on rap (Hager, 1984; Toop, 1984) which positioned rap as a subgenre of urban street culture, show how the inner-city environment gave rise to rap music. Moreover, Ethnomusicologists doing work in urban environments have
verified that the construction of urban spaces give rise to particular types of music. Some mornings, I would awaken to the sounds of African and Latin American beats. The “multi-cultural” nature of the Washington Metropolitan area gave me a deep appreciation and understanding of culture. Moreover, I saw the ways in which culture manifested itself through artistic (broadly defined) expressions such as music. Traveling back and forth to school, work, and church deepened my concern for impoverished areas and populations. In particular I was concerned about the ways in which the urban environment facilitates music making.

Coupled with my lived experiences and school experiences, I became interested in the ways in which popular forms of music, in particular, “Black” popular musical forms, have become marginalized by institutions like schools, but became ruling forces in the airwaves. Though I was often involved in various (“Black”) Marching Bands, in which we played a lot of radio tunes, we did not study popular music in the same way we studied “classical” (broadly defined) music. Nor did we study the ways in which mediated art forms influence or more so, inform students.

This launched my journey. As I began learning about culture through music in school, most, if not all of the repertoire was Western “art” music. More specifically, in playing the flute, I learned about various European cultures through a variety of musical genres. Although this led to much success, such as entering various state and county festivals and competitions and receiving prizes and superior ratings, my thirst for music and culture was never really quenched. And even though my hard work led to performances in various musical venues, such as my participation in the All-County Honor High School Band, which performed at The Kennedy Center annually under the
leadership of a master music educator/conductor of statewide and national recognition, my desire to learn about culture, more specifically, the “Black” culture, was never satisfied. So when I got to college, I set out to major in music history; this would possibly allow me to understand the void in my educational experience.

Previously, most of the bands I played with were made up mostly of Black students; however, in college, all of the ensembles I played with were predominantly White. Though I was comfortable in this environment, it also furthered my quest to understand why I was not learning to play the music of my respective culture. This question required a great deal of thinking and research on my part and led to my studies in music history. On this track, I would further attempt to understand the void in my educational experience. Though my studies and interests in music (history) and culture allowed me to gain “bi-musicality,” “tri-musicality,” or even “quadri-musicality” (Hood, 1960) in some sense, I was still left wondering about the void in my educational experience as a Black woman. It wasn’t enough that I understood academically the ways in which “Blackness” was constructed, marginalized, and institutionalized by society, in particular, schools and the media, but it was important that I experienced it.

During the summers of my undergraduate coursework, after having worked with children as a high school student in a predominantly Black summer program at my home church, I decided to work as an educator, in particular, a “music educator” at a local camp that was predominantly White. Besides the difference in ethnic populations, I found drastic class and social differences in these two environments. For example, while the predominantly Black environment was in an urban neighborhood, the predominantly White environment was in a suburban neighborhood. This meant that the ways in which
children came to know the world was different in each environment. It further meant that
the ways in which children negotiated their identities based on their own worlds and the
worlds of others looked different.

With all of this in mind, I decided to further explore the ways in which children
understand themselves through music. So after receiving my bachelor’s in music history,
I began to teach full time in a predominantly Black suburban neighborhood in
juxtaposition to my previous teaching experiences in predominantly White environments
as well as my experiences in Black urban neighborhoods. My findings were stunningly
drastic in each environment and in turn narrowed my conclusion down to the one
constant variable, race.

Although I always had a natural fondness for rap music, I did not start “studying”
it until my master’s program, when I had the opportunity to conduct an ethnography
based on my experiences and interests in rap music, hip-hop and youth cultures.
However, as an African American woman conducting research on my respective culture,
more specifically, the “Black” culture, I wondered whether being an insider of a shared
tradition would be detrimental to my findings.

Social scientists have also confirmed that having “insider” status can be
beneficial. In earlier debates, they have argued that investigating a group of people
similar to one’s own background could reduce one’s own objectivity; other evidence
(Loza, 1993; Nketia, 1974, Peña, 1985) shows that it can be done without losing one’s
objectivity. For instance, the Ghanaian Ethnomusicologist J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1962)
is praised for his research among his own people, the Asante. Although Nketia (1962)
contends that his “insider” status as “a speaker of Akan [and] carrier of the tradition and
its culture” has contributed to his success, he maintains that the implementation of “proper field techniques” was essential to his investigation (p. 3). According to Ethnomusicologist Mellonee Burnim (1985), scholars propose that the insider perspective commands “scholarly respect and authority” and has the ability to provide different interpretations than the perspective of those who are outsiders (p. 433). Burnim (1985) further contends that, whether the researcher is an insider or outsider, s/he is challenged with an assortment of personal, political, and social constraints. Bruno Nettl (1983), who had earlier questioned the benefits of the “insider” status, asserts that “it is the insider who provides the perspective that the culture has of itself. The outsider, with an essentially comparative and universalist approach, merely adds something less significant” (p. 262).

I share the sentiments of African American Ethnomusicologist and Folklorist, Keyes (2002) about the research process and the researcher’s status as an African American studying her respective culture. When conducting an ethnography on hip-hop culture, my gender, race, and even my appearance came into question, since hip-hop is considered mainly an urban, male-dominated musical genre. Upon studying rap in its context, I noticed gestures and silent questions, much like the ones Keyes (2002) describes in her experience. Keyes (2002) states that people would ask, “What is this woman all about?” “Who does she represent?” or simply put, “What does she want to know about hip-hop?” As she has said, “It was not long before I realized that my gender, ethnicity, and occupation were primary factors by which I was recognized and, at times, embraced by the hip-hop community while doing research in this context” (Keyes, 2002, p. 6).
Like Keyes, I in turn questioned my position as an African American woman doing research on rap, which is largely known as a predominantly urban male music and culture. Issues of gender, race, and class attempted to interrupt my professionalism. For example, it was very uncomfortable being gawked at by the bystanders as I conducted my interviews. I had to find a way to move beyond my discomfort by taking control of the situation and by asking certain questions to certain people, that is, to those who appeared to be comfortable with my position as a young, attractive, enthusiastic African American lady who was simply excited about her work. I utilized the research techniques I learned, and due to my lived experience as a Black female growing up in the city, near various urban and suburban areas, in a place where I was surrounded by hip-hop culture, I was able to get past issues of class, gender, and race and successfully complete my ethnography on rap music.
Chapter 4: Results

“Confidentially Speakin’ in Codes.”

(Jay Z, 2006, “Can I Live”)

As I reflect on my continuing involvement with rap, that is, the research process and my everyday experiences with hip-hop culture and rap music, it is evident to me that for the most part, both consumers and non-consumers collapse hip-hop culture and rap music into the same category: hip-hop. This erroneous categorical assumption has in part led to a garnering of criticism toward rap music. More specifically, rap has been criticized for excessive violence, sex, and noise (Adler et al., 1990). The truth of the matter, however, is that, as scholars and rappers alike note, hip-hop is the culture, whereas rap is the music. That is, rap is the music of hip-hop culture.

When critics accuse rap for being “violent” and “sexist” (Adler et al., 1990), they are using “systematic” tools to try and decode the meanings in rap. For example, in an “ethnographic” content analysis, Singson (2002-2005) concluded that the lyrics within rap were “misogynous” (p. 3). Kubrin and Weitzer’s (2009) content analysis on rap’s lyrics showed that only 22% of rap songs contained lyrics with misogynistic themes. If

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5 Misogynistic themes were present in 22% of the 403 songs analyzed (N = 90 songs, by 31 rappers).
less than half of rap songs incorporated misogynistic lyrics, why then is rap being accused for “excessive” violence and misogyny?

Though both studies used content analysis, one qualitative, the other quantitative, their conclusions suggest that content analysis does not decode the meanings in rap. This confirms scholar of Political Science Lakeyta Bonnett’s (2009) assertion that the wide ranging approaches of qualitative and quantitative inquiry of rap’s lyrics alone are ineffective in decoding music that is heavily coded with rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, all of which are pertinent to Black life and culture in America on a large scale. In light of all of this and all that I knew of rap, I was directed, like Keyes (1989, 2000, 2002), to carefully construct a framework that precisely located the meanings in rap. This careful construction led to an exploration of the “contradictory” messages between the performer/rapper and historical goals made by the Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, and Women’s Liberation movements.

As mentioned previously, hip-hop culture is a youth arts movement that evolved in the Bronx, New York during the early 1970s. It is comprised of artistic elements such as disc jockeying (DJs/turntables), breakdancing (b-boys and b-girls), emceeing (MCs), and graffiti writing (aerosol artists). Together, all of these components are commonly referred to as hip-hop’s four elements. Hip-hop further encompasses “an attitude rendered in the form of stylized dress, language, and gestures associated with urban street culture” (Keyes, 2002, p. 1). In this manner, hip-hop is more than an arts movement, it is “. . . a culture, and a way of life” (Pough, 2004a, p. 3), whose spirit is manifested in rap music.
Though breakdancing and graffiti writing “received mainstream attention during the early to mid-1980s and were showcased alongside DJs and MCs in various films” (Keyes, 2002, p. 1), rap is the most visible art form in hip-hop culture. Rap’s consolidation of two of the four artistic elements in hip-hop has helped to generate its commercial power. Further, this “power” has assisted in setting rap apart from the other artistic elements in hip-hop culture. As hip-hop scholar Rose (1994) writes, “unlike breakdancing and graffiti, rap music . . . continues to have a much more expansive institutional context within which to operate” (p. 58). Because “music can be consumed away from the performance context” (Rose, 1994, p. 58), rap is the easiest of any of the other artistic elements in hip-hop to commodify.

Rap music being directly situated in the hip-hop culture, also makes it historically a part of other social, cultural, and/or socio-cultural systems. It is a part of various Black, urban, vernacular, popular, and youth cultures. “Given the persistence of racism in this ‘unfriendly world’” (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006), rap like its antecedents use “unorthodox structure, language, and form to make sense of the senseless” (Bell, 1995, p. 910). Rap, particularly the song-speech qualities in rap, facilitated people of color to share their experiences across the African diaspora. As Keyes (2002) writes, “during its early development, many of hip-hop’s innovators were of African Caribbean and Latino (mainly Puerto Rican) descent” (p. 49). DJs like Kool (DJ) Herc, Grandmaster, Charlie Chase, and Bambaataa were African Caribbean and Puerto Rican (Flores, 2000; Hebdige, 1987; Keyes, 2002; Toop, 2000).

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While rap music is largely a part of various Black cultures, it is heavily associated with the African American culture. Most critics, scholars, and rappers confirm however, that rap is “a confluence of African American and Caribbean cultural expressions, such as the blues, sermons, game songs, and toasts and toasting – all of which are recited in a chanted rhyme or poetic fashion” (Keyes, 2002, p. 17). As Gilroy (1993) observes, “hip-hop grew out of the cross-fertilization of African American vernacular cultures with their Caribbean equivalents rather than springing fully formed from the entrails of the blues” (p. 103).

Even though most critics and scholars acknowledge this cross-fertilization, when working from the vantage point of folklore, Keyes (1996, 2002) established that rappin’ and other African American verbal-artistic and musical practices utilizing narrative are all grounded in the West African bardic tradition of storytelling. As Godfather of hip-hop Bambaataa said, “although [rap] has been in the Bronx, it goes back to Africa because you had chanting style of rappin” (Keyes, 2002, p. 17). Keyes (2002) further interviewed Lumumba “Professor X” Carson who also referred to Africa as rap’s origin. Carson tells us that “once upon a time, ago, every Friday of the month, it was the duty of the grandfather in a tribe to sit down and bring all of the immediate children around to rap” (Keyes, 2002, pp. 17-18). Carson adds, “one of the instruments that was played while grandfather rapped his father’s existence was a guy playing the drum” (Keyes, 2002, pp. 17-18).

As critical race theorists argue, there are a number of similarities between CRT and African American spirituals (Bell, 1995, 1996; Dixson, 2005, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2001). One of these similarities is the use and structure of narrative. In 1981, when
Keyes (2002) began to study rap, scholars of African American sacred music were involved in discussions that supported the assumptions of List (1963), who argued that both speech and song are vocally produced, melodic, and linguistically meaningful. This study further asserts that the connection between CRT and various Black verbal and musical practices is narrative.


Though the pretext of rap is embedded in past oral traditions – from rural southern forms of the blues, game songs, and storytelling, to urban northern styles of street corner jive and radio discjockeying, rap’s development as a discernable musical genre began in the 1970s during the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements. As scholars agree, rap music developed in the United States in intricate relationships to that of diverse factors including geopolitics, shifts between the music industry and “street” music, as well as the changes in federal government policies. In response to all of these
factors, inner-city youths – b-boys and b-girls, DJs, MCs, and graffiti writers – forged the arts movement called “hip-hop.” A closer look at the interdependent relationships among musical change and socio-cultural factors however, sheds more light on the maturation of rap.

As Black feminist Pough (2004) asserts, “hip-hop started out as more than rap music and today is most certainly bigger than rap music” (p. 6). For example, when rap evolved out of the Bronx, it gave people of color a chance to share in their experiences across the Black diaspora through rap’s storytelling component. These experiences were often associated with urban living. As sociologist Wilson (1996) tells us, inner-city conditions affect people of color more than any other population in the United States. The inner-city, a space constructed by high levels of poverty, joblessness, policy reform, and/or the lack thereof, is further constructed by the abandonment of buildings, largely and historically due to a phenomenon called “white flight.” As Keyes (2002) notes, in the 1970s when hip-hop emerged, “. . . most of the federal monies allocated for inner-city housing were transferred to upscale suburbia and funneled into housing construction there” (p. 45). These suburban areas – due to white flight – had now become a refuge for Whites fleeing the poorly neglected inner cities that had an increasing Black and Latino underclass.

In addition, the decline in federal funding began to affect the arts and after-school programming (Rose, 1994). At the National Endowment (NEA) conference in Chicago, author Thulani Davis (1994) stated that the days of music instruction were replaced with “street arts like rap [and] . . . those little instruments we once learned to play in the classroom, those [days] are gone” (quoted in Keyes, 2002, p. 44). This statement ignited
a discussion among audience members on the “demise of black music,” in which the majority of the audience agreed that the lack of funding for the arts in public school music programs, especially the instrumental music curriculum, left inner-city youth to react creatively by relying on their own voices (Keyes, 2002, p. 44). For example, inner-city youth launched the resurgence of street-corner à capella singing and popularized the human beat box (vocal simulation of a drum), all of which began as a part of hip-hop’s artistic elements.

Though it is beyond the scope of this study to make an argument for the other artistic expressions included in the youth arts mass movement led by Bambaataa – the movement known as hip-hop, it is important to make mention of these arts in order to get a clear picture of the evolution of rap music. For example, in addition to educational reform and environmental challenges, rap music took shape during the wake of gang violence. Bambaataa, who was once a member of the gang The Black Spades, formed the Zulu Nation, a rap group dedicated to peace and survival. He inserted his idea of youth solidarity through a rechanneling of violent competition into artistic contests. Given the conditions in urban America, rap became a way for the youth not only to express themselves, but react to the changes in the environment, government, and education. These expressions were later portrayed by the media as unproductive. However, as Keyes (2002) argues, “controversial forms that threaten mainstream sensibilities will always face intense scrutiny from powerful political forces and parent watchdog groups, much in the way that rhythm and blues (R&B) or its euphemism, rock ‘n’ roll, did during its formative years” (p. 5).
Though rap evolved in the 80s, the 70s, which brought on a new era of “‘Black’ popular” music in the United States, was when rap started. Rap is a part of a long tradition; it developed out of the West African bardic practice. The use of narrative in verbal-artistic practices such as sermons, spirituals, game songs, ragtime, blues, jazz, gospel, R &B, disco, soul, rock ‘n roll, funk, and jive are now used in rap and CRT. Drawing from and expanding on musical concepts that were associated with these past styles and verbal-artistic practices helped to carve out an identity for African Americans as a whole.

According to Ethnomusicologists of Black popular music (Keyes, 2002; Maultsby, 1979), funk, disco, and rap were the three most distinctive Black popular styles of the 1970s. Although blues, jazz, gospel, soul, R&B, rock ‘n’ roll, and ragtime are all a part of the “Black” musical continuum and thereby are precursors to rap, funk and disco served as the catalysts by which rap developed as a discernable musical genre. Thus, it was through the creation of new and diverse forms of contemporary (“Black”) popular music that rap developed.

For example, Funk became a part of the musical idiomatic repertoire when a New Orleans jazz cornetist Buddy Bolden wrote a piece called “Funky Butt” approximately in the 1900s. In 1953, the term “funk” was utilized by the hard bop pianist Horace Silver. Silver defined “funk” as “the return to the evocative feeling and expressiveness of traditional blues” which was captured in his piece “Opus de Funk” (Shaw, 1986, p. 257). In his book entitled Black Popular Music in America: From the Spirituals, Minstrels, and Ragtime to Soul, Disco, and Hip-Hop, Arnold Shaw (1986) noted that funk countered the jazz culture of the 1950s; that is, “the coldness, complexity, and intellectualism [was]
introduced into the music by Bop, Cool, West Coast, and Third Stream jazz” (p. 257). By the late 1960s, “funk” was reformulated by soul singer James Brown. For Brown, the term denoted a gritty and earthy sonority most specifically characterized by his “. . . preachy vocal style and his horn and rhythm section’s interlocking rhythmic ‘grooves’” (Keyes, 2002, p. 40).

Brown’s funk style was later utilized in Kool & the Gang and Sly & the Family Stone who produced “Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)” in 1970 and “Funky Stuff” in 1973. Funk was further advanced by George Clinton of Parliament-Funkadelic, the former bass player of Sly and the Family Stone and founder of Graham Central Station, Larry Graham. Keyes (2002) tells us that both Graham’s and Clinton’s songs were party-oriented, but . . . differed in many ways” (p. 41). Clinton coined the term “P-Funk” (pure/uncut funk) and like Clinton, many rappers manipulated various sound effects that were produced on a synthesizer. Like rappers, Clinton recited words over music – words that suggested coolness. When discussing the underlying essence of funk, Clinton asserted that the style of the blues was at the core of the music. As Keyes (2002) and Reid (1993) tell us, Clinton understood funk as a sped up version of the blues. Funk was termed “funk” because the term “blues” had negative connotations.

In contrast, Larry Graham’s “churchy” music employed a Hammond B-3 organ, which is commonly used in “Black” gospel music and gospel-based vocals. Mautlsby (1979) said that Graham’s music accompanied a thumping, pulling, and slapping of the bass guitar strings, “which became the trademark for defining the funk style” (quoted in Keyes, 2002, p. 42). Further, the historical model for 1970s disco was Barry White, who, like Clinton and Graham, had an impact on rap’s development and sound.
In reaction to aesthetic, technological “advancements,” socio-cultural movements and ills, rap was born and it caught like wildfire. Rap evolved out of DJing and MCing. In 1967, Clive Campbell, better known as Herc, immigrated to the Bronx from Kingston, Jamaica when he was twelve years old. In 1972, Herc began DJing throughout the Bronx. Although his DJing technique contrasted that of his U.S. counterparts, he became one of the most innovative of these mobile disc jockeys. Herc’s mixing technique influenced the direction and production of rap.

The rapid “advancements” in technology helped to speed up the development of rap. In mixing, the DJ puts a disc on each of two turntables and tries to match a particular speed with a pitch control device on the turntable system. With an audio-mixer, which sits between the turntables, and its cross-fader lever, a DJ is able to smoothly transition from one turntable to the next. At the same time, Herc added electronic sound effects – “echoing and reverbing back and forth between the vocal and instrument track; [while manipulating] the treble and bass knobs” (Hebdige, 1987, p. 83).

Many artists, some of whom include Wu-Tang Clan and Grandmixer DXT heavily utilize technology as a musical tool.

Herc tailored his style after the dub music jockeys of Jamaica by combining musical fragments known by street jockeys as “breaks” or “break-beats” from a variety of recordings. This created an entirely new soundtrack. Herc said that he knew a lot of

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7 Disco’s twelve-inch disc sensation prolonged and enhanced the pulsating tempo of the percussion and rhythm breaks. In a similar fashion, street jockeys used “breaks” to refer to a percussion vamp section composed of timbales, congas, and bongos (Joe, 1980, p. 63). Keyes (2002) tells us that “one of Herc’s favorite breaks was ‘Apache’ by the Incredible Bongo Band. By the mid-1980s, breaks or break beats were . . . musical motifs from past prerecorded hits used in a rap music mix” (p. 239).
American Blacks were not into reggae. So, he took the same thing the deejays were doing – toasting – and did it with American records. He “would call out the names of people who were at the party, just like the microphone personalities who deejayed back in Jamaica” (quoted in Chang & Chen, 1998, p. 72). Herc used music that consisted of funky percussion breaks like The Incredible Bongo Band, “Apache” to keep the beat going.

Bambaataa recalled that “it might be that certain part of the record that everybody waits for – they just let their inner self go and get wild. The next thing you know the singer comes back in and you’d be mad” (quoted in Toop, 2000, p. 60). The “certain part of the record that everybody waited for consisted of an African Latin percussion soundtrack – congas and timbales – called the ‘break’ section” (quoted in Keyes, 2002, p. 57). Moreover, as Herc went back and forth between breaks and the microphone, his MC, Coke La Rock, gave accolades to various members of Herc’s crew.

Rose (2008) and Keyes (2002) commented on Herc’s parties, saying they “fostered an atmosphere of hip-hop arts . . .” (Keyes, 2002, p. 57). In fact, according to hip-hop guru Rose (2008), Herc was one of the early rappers and he remarked that “kids who wanted to . . . [get] on the microphones at his parties had to find a way to be creative without cursing or promoting violence” (p. 165). Itinerant jockeys like Bambaataa and Joseph Sadler (Grandmaster Flash) were inspired by Herc and eventually perfected his technique. Grandmaster, though he was intimidated by Herc’s booming sound system, found that Herc’s mixing skills were less than perfect. Grandmaster remarks, “with the monstrous power he had [Herc] couldn’t mix too well. He was playing little breaks but it would sound so sloppy” (quoted in Toop, 2000, p. 62). Grandmaster further noticed that
the mixer that Herc used was a GLI 3800 and though it was a popular mixer at that time, it’s a scarcity today. However, he notes that “. . . it’s still one of the best mixers GLI ever made” (quoted in Toop, 2000, p. 62).

Due to his enthusiasm for the art, Grandmaster began exploring discotheques to observe other jockeys’ performances. At a disco club in Manhattan, he met Pete “DJ” Jones. Next to his clean spinning technique, Jones was known for his extended play concept. In an interview with Keyes (1993, 2002), Grandmaster commented on the way Pete connected the records by saying, “some of the DJs I . . . watch[ed] . . . let the record play all the way to the end then play the next one with the gap in between. I found it quite amazing that Pete kept the record going . . . all night long” (p. 58). In fact, that’s “how he acquired the name Pete ‘With the Funky Beat DJ’ Jones” (p. 58). In addition, Jones had a switch on his system which allowed him to hear what was playing on one turntable before he played it aloud (Keyes, 2002).

A student of electronics, Grandmaster later invented an apparatus that allowed him to cue up a record while the other was playing through speakers. He was able to do this with an external amplifier, headphones (which later became a one-ear headphone), a single-pole, and double-throw switch, which was connected to his audio-mixer. By experimenting with this apparatus, Grandmaster pioneered two turntable techniques best known as “backspinning” and “phasing” which are together known as “punch-phrasing.”

Backspinning requires that one has a copy of the same record on two turntables. It is executed through a rotation of one record counterclockwise to the desired beat. This is followed by a rotation of one record counterclockwise to the desired beat, and then a
rotation of the second record counterclockwise to that same musical phrase, creating a
loop-like effect.

In phasing, the DJ accents a short phrase of the recording while the second record
is manipulated by the turntable’s cross-fader. This technique is somewhat similar to a
technique called “riding gain,” which was commonly employed by Black radio disc-
jockeys in the 1950s. The only difference between riding gain and phasing is that
phasing is executed with two turntables, while riding gain is done with one.

Grand Wizard Theodore, a protégé of Grandmaster, is credited with inventing
“scratching,” another mixing technique. “Scratching” was a technique in which a record
was moved back and forth in a rhythmic manner while the tone arm’s needle remained in
the groove of the record. This produced a scratching sound. DJs like Davy DMX and
Grandmixer D.ST perfected the scratching technique. Grandmixer D.ST popularized
scratching as a musical feature in the hit “Rockit” (1983) by Herbie Hancock. Other
noted New York “street” DJs of that time who used various mixing innovations were
Afrika Islam, Charlie Chase, DJ Hollywood, DJ RD Smiley, DJ Tex, Disco King Mario,
Disco Wiz, Jazzy Jay, Junebug, Kurtis Blow, Smokey, Sweet G, and the Whiz Kid.

Even though Herc is heralded as the originator of the hip-hop elements known as
DJing and MCing, and thus known as the originator of rap, Bambaataa tells us that the
term “hip-hop” can be traced back to Lovebug Starski. Notwithstanding this, the artistic
elements within hip-hop have become established as thriving traditions. And though
Sugar Hill Gang is credited for first receiving national exposure with *Rappers Delight*
(1979), the group may owe much of its success to New York’s leading MCs.
Coupled with technological “advancements” and social ills, rap also evolved out of cultural artifacts such as narrative. According to rapper Jay-Z (2010), rap was also “. . . looking for a narrative” (p. 7). In 1981, the Funky Four Plus One More performed “That’s the Joint” on Saturday Night Live. Jay-Z (2010) reports that the Rock Steady crew was featured on ABC Nightly News for battling and in 1983 Bambaataa released “Looking for the Perfect Beat.” According to Jay-Z (2010), the song was true to its title, as it was “obsessed with beats, not lyrical content” (p. 8).

However, once Run-D.M.C. emerged, they gave rap a hard feeling. Jay-Z (2010) explains, Run-D.M.C. “felt . . . harder than . . . Sugar Hill Gang or even Kool Moe Dee and other serious battle rappers of the time” (p. 9). Their “voices were big, like their beats, but naturally slick. . .” (Jay-Z, 2010, p. 9). Further, “the rhymes were crisp and aggressive,” in which the group described the good life (Jay-Z, 2010, p. 9). In the 1983 hit “Sucker M.C.’s,” Run-D.M.C. raps about having “. . . a big long Caddy not like a Seville” (Run-D.M.C., 1983). This line might seem meaningless, “senseless,” pointless, but for many, especially children growing up in the inner-city, it is a reflection of one’s own world, what is there and what is absent (relatively speaking). As a child admittedly growing up in the inner-city, Jay-Z (2010) recalls the meaning of this line as “descriptive and precise” (p. 9). Jay-Z (2010) writes, “Run didn’t just say a car, he said a Caddy. He didn’t just say a Caddy, he said a Seville. In those few words he painted a picture and then gave it emotional life” (p. 9). He further explains that he completely related: “. . . I was the kid from public housing whose whole hood would rubberneck when an expensive car drove down the block” (p. 9). With all of Run-D.M.C.’s showmanship and style however, there was something missing. Jay-Z (2010) explained, there was “a story .
. . unfolding on the streets of New York, and around the country, that still hadn’t made it into rap, except as an absence” (p. 10).

Rapper Melle Mel however, incorporated into his music what was unfolding on the streets. Within the narrative, many MCs use ideas coming out of Black vernacular traditions – ideas such as signifyin’. Signification is the application of allusion, imagery, and metaphor. Signifyin’ is further utilized and exploited by MCs to convey meaning. Drawing on linguist-anthropologist Mitchell-Kernan’s (1971) notion of signifyin’, Gates (1989) agrees that “the Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations” (Mitchell-Kernan, 1981, p. 314). For example, rapper Melle Mel, known for his socio-political messages is also known for the use of metaphorical imagery. In an interview conducted by Keyes (2002), rap producer Larry Smith described Mel Melle as “The Langston Hughes” of rap. Smith says, “I’m saying when he paints [raps] he paints a picture. He describes with words, and you see everything Mel tells you. Everything! Everything!” (quoted in Keyes, 2002, p. 134).

In “The Message” (1982), Melle Mel alludes to the “ghetto” as being “a jungle,” thus creating for the listeners an illusion through metaphor of the inner-city in the refrain: “Don’t push me ‘cause I’m close to the edge. / I’m trying not to lose my head. / Uh huh ha ha ha! / It’s like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” Given the persistence of racism, rappers incorporate “‘cultural’ artifacts” such as the unorthodox structure and language (Bell, 1995) from its predecessors to teach,
preach, and heal (Lawrence, 1995, p. 336) in a manner that sometimes serves as counterstory.

“The Message” (1982) later unfolds with lively imagery about the grim reality of “urban” living. Melle Mel (1982) explains that the “average” inner-city child grows up “livin’ second rate, / [where one’s] eyes . . . sing a song of deep hate.” Keyes (2002) explains, these “. . . lyrics describe cogently the lifestyles – ‘thugs, pimps, [drug] pushers’ – for which many ghetto youth are destined, mourning how [one] lived so fast and died so young” (p. 134). Rapper Jay-Z (2010) further elaborates that the excessive portrayal of money in mainstream rap today is not “. . . just about money [but] it’s about finding a sense of worth in the world – after you’ve been told you’re worthless. Status – and self-esteem – are really what the money buys you” (p. 301).

In his book Decoded, Jay-Z (2010) confirms Melle Mel’s and Keyes’s sentiments of the doomed life kids in the inner-city often face. Jay Z (2010) writes, “kids like me, the new hustlers, were going through something strange and twisted and had a crazy story to tell. And we needed to hear our story told back to us, so maybe we could start to understand ourselves” (p. 16). In a world where children had to work and the only job one could find was a line of work on the streets, rap provided that outlet; it allowed for people of color, in particular, youth of color, to make sense of the imperfect world that they were handed.

In addition to the metaphorical and sociopolitical imagery, Melle Mel, like many MCs, utilize the rhythmic execution of mnemonic syllables or syllabic sound carriers to fill the gaps between words. In a 1986 interview conducted by Keyes, Melle Mel confirms that some rappers describe these syllables as “simply” space fillers. However,
these rhythmic structural devices often prove to be essential to the rhyme and musical idea, much like Melle Mel (1982) uses “Uh huh ha ha ha!,” Das EFX uses “iggedy-diggedy,” Juvenile uses “Ha!,” HOVA uses “izzo,” and Snoop Doggy Dogg uses “fo’ shizzle dizzle,” “izzle” and “kizzle” in the same way.

In Melle Mel’s “The Message (1982),” the “Uh huh ha ha ha!” in the refrain, though couched in a socio-political metaphor, serves as a way to “make sense of the senseless” (Bell, 1995, p. 910) through syllabic repetition. This is set up by Melle Mel (1982) as he first asks, “It makes me wonder how I keep from goin’ under,” which is then followed by a description of his environment. This description is then followed by the repeated question, “It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under” (Melle Mel, 1982). The refrain “Uh huh ha ha ha!” serves as a moment in time in which the performer is able to contemplate and sort through life’s problems. For the audience, although these syllabic executions also serve as a moment in time in which they are given the opportunity to sort through the performer’s message, the syllabic repetition also serves as a means of persuasion. Through syllabic repetition, Melle Mel points to the injustices in society. Injustices as experienced largely by people of color.

Like Melle Mel, many MCs manipulate meaning through syllabic repetition, but also through musical devices such as vocal inflection. “What performers define as melodic qualities in rap, scholars refer to as tonal semantics” (Keyes, 1996, p. 232); the “use of voice rhythm and vocal inflections” is the way meaning is achieved (Smitherman, 1986, p. 134). As Keyes (2002) charts out, the first verse of Melle Mel’s (1982) “The Message,” if visualized in a textual manner, would look something like this: “BRO-ken glass EV-ry where PEO-ple PIS-sin on the stairs you know they just DON’T care I
CAN’T take the SMELL can’t take the NOISE got no MON-ey to move out I guess I got NO choice” (p. 131). Meaning is conveyed by raised vocal inflections as indicated in capital letters. Accenting certain syllables within a word is consistent with the application of syllabic stress (Keyes, 2002). The stress in certain syllables is similar to accent marks over specific musical notes. These accents help to convey meaning, while adding fluidity in a line.

Much like the way that “the unorthodox structure, language, and form” (Bell, 1995, p. 910) help to make “sense of the senseless” in spirituals and CRT (Bell, 1995, p. 910), the unorthodox structure in rap, more specifically the accents and “non-sense” syllables, help to create fluidity in rap. As rapper Jay-Z (2010) notes, “the beat is only one half of a rap song’s rhythm. The other is the flow” (p. 12). Thus, narrative practices utilized in African American spirituals and their verbal and musical predecessors – CRT and rap – help to create fluidity.

The Civil Rights and Black Nationalist Movements being precursors to rap music helped to facilitate a series of socio-political conscious rap songs like the ones exhibited by Melle Mel and Public (P.E.) Enemy. P.E. is a group known for rapping about race relations. While rapping about race in their hit “Fight the Power” (1989) by repeatedly chanting lyrics like, “fight the power . . . you got to fight the powers that be” in the context of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist Movements, the group also allude to several of rap’s saluted artists. By signifying on some of hip-hop’s precursors, P.E. recalls the socio-political hit “Fight the Power” (1975) by the Isley Brothers. Like the Isley Brothers’ message, P.E.’s lyrics call for a defiance of hegemonic forces, “the powers that be” (Public Enemy, 1989). In addition, the piece incorporates musical
samples that signify past traditions – traditions that helped set the stage for rap. These musical samples include, James Brown’s “Funky Drummer” (1970) which underscores the lyrics of “Fight the Power.”

Given rap’s tradition of socio-political awareness, many scholars and innovators of rap began to wonder by the mid-1990s how rap went from a politically charged music to one that showcases and exploits particular identities. Although the content analysis done by Kubrin and Weitzer (2009) shows that only 22% of rap songs contained lyrics with misogynistic themes, rap in general has developed the stigma of being highly violent and misogynistic. As rapper and lyricist Chuck D. (1997) sat in on a meeting that preluded the History of Hip-Hop concert, he began to wonder “. . . how the control of Hip-Hop and Rap music had changed hands and got swallowed up by the corporate pimps of soul” (p. xi). Keyes (2002) notes that the 1990s ushered in “. . . the emergence, commercialization, and sensationalism of a rap subgenre dubbed ‘gangsta rap’” (p. xii). On the whole, this sensationalism and commercialism altered the face of rap.

In 1988 when “gangsta” rappers N.W.A. emerged with “Straight Outta Compton,” they put rap on the map. As rapper Jay-Z (2010) tells us in Decoded, rap was looking for a narrative and “the missing piece was the story of the hustler” (p. 10). Further, the commercialization of “gangsta rap” and its elements of “gangstas, hustlers, street crimes, and vernacular sexual insults . . . became a part of hip-hop’s storytelling” as the industry began to promote them as a part of rap (Rose, 2008, p. 2). Not only does Decoded (2010) show the ways in which “gangstas, hustlers, street crimes, and vernacular sexual insults . . . became a part of hip-hop’s storytelling” (p. 2), but it adds that it is the life that some of these rappers were given that has encouraged the themes in “gangsta rap.”
In tandem with this commercialization, Keyes (2002) saw a proliferation of negative writings on rap music on the whole. Primarily associated with West coast artists, “gangsta rap” encompasses graphic images of the Black underworld. As Keyes (2002) noted, “although gangsta rap artists argue that the tales from the hood range from truthful accounts to exaggerated fantasies, gangsta rap’s graphic lyrics caused moral panic among conservatives” (p. 4). In this way, this study utilizes counterstory to bring forth true portrayals in order to demystify the problems that rappers are rapping about.

Critics claim that the anxiety about the Black presence was aggravated by conservative right-wing politics of the 1980s and media propaganda. Sociologist and popular culture scholar Herman Gray (1995) argues that “the symbolic and political centerpiece of this reenergized conservative formation was Ronald Reagan, who as the embodiment of Reaganism, functioned as the cultural and historical sign, for many whites, of the ‘real’ America” (p. 16). Reaganism can be characterized as a “return to old-fashioned Republicanism – large tax cuts for the rich, less government help for the poor, weaker enforcement of civil rights, fewer controls on industry, less protection for the environment, and emotional rhetoric on the virtues of hard work, family, religion, individualism, and patriotism” (Dallek, 1984, p. vii-viii). In their bestseller, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*, Thomas and Mary Edsall (1992) concluded that with Reaganesism, the “haves” and “have-nots” were divided by race: “to the degree that divisions between blacks and whites overlapped division between the poor and the affluent, between the dependent and the successful, and between city and suburb, race became an ally of conservatism” (p. 158).
The media targeted the young African American and Latino underclass, claiming that they were poor mothers or “welfare queens.” The media plastered stories about drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and crime among people of color as indicative of America’s eroding moral structure. In general, race – though often remaining nameless – has been at the center of conservative Republican political discourse, which in turn affected people’s perception of rappers and their communities. With repeated scenarios of inequity and social injustice, in particular for African Americans in the United States, young people grew pessimistic of the “belief that current economic social configurations with their glass ceilings” would allow them to access “realms of power enjoyed by society’s elite” (Gordon, 1997, p. 231). Rap music emerged as a “new” site from which one – in particular, young people of color – could protest the growing negativity of young Blacks in the inner-city. Further, these young people of color used rap as a means to demystify concerns regarding race, class, and gender – all of which were deemed political issues.

Due to the media’s appetite for “report[ing] even the slightest disorderly conduct incident” (Cleveland, 1997, p. 100), particularly as it pertains to rap concerts, Keyes (2002) even notes that “insurance premiums skyrocketed, precluding the possibility of booking artists in many cases” (p. 3). Owing to the negative press, insurers felt compelled to supply extra security and metal detectors, the cost of which was very expensive. Journalist Lee Copeland (1997) noted that the massive crowds of young Black men, “who, too often in America, are still viewed as a threat to law and order” (p. 106), contributed to an unspoken fear among city officials, insurers, and concert venues. As Chuck D. (1997) explains, in addition to celebrating the history of hip-hop culture, the
performances were utilized to balance the growing stigma of hip-hop concerts being labeled “unsafe” (Chuck D, 1997, p. xi).

Interestingly, since “gangsta rap” is largely associated with urban male culture, rap in general has been associated with male culture, even though women have long been a part of the history of rap. In general, “females were always into rap, had their little crews and were known for rocking parties, schoolyards, whatever it was; and females rocked just as hard as males [but] the males was just first to be put on wax [record]” (Pearlman, 1988, p. 26). Rap music journalist Havelock Nelson (1993) observes, “while women have always been involved artistically with rap throughout the ’80s, artists like [MC] Lyte, [Queen] Latifah, Roxanne Shante, and [Monie] Love have had to struggle to reach a level of success close to that of male rappers” (p. 77).

Although there was a proliferation of successful female rap acts during the 1990s, Keyes (2002) agrees with Black feminist Hazel Carby (1986) when she asserts that women rappers are a part of a continuum established by blues singers, who, like female MCs, construct a distinctive voice reflecting and celebrating an ethos of working-class Black womanhood. Both women’s traditions create “a discourse that articulate[s] a cultural and political struggle over sexual [and gender] relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of [the] female [identity] . . . within a patriarchal order, but also tries to reclaim women’s bodies” (Carby, 1986, p. 12). This assertion led to an analysis of the thorny issues of gender and sexuality in rap.

According to Keyes (2000, 2002), “when rapper MC Lyte was asked . . . if she felt that there . . . [was] a distinct female rap category, she separated women rappers into three groups, referred to as ‘crews,’ reigning in three periods – the early 1980’s, the mid
– 1980’s through the early 1990’s, and the late 1990’s . . .” (p. 256). Each category mirrors particular images, voices, and lifestyles in African American women in contemporary (urban) society. This led Keyes (2000, 2002) to de-cipher four types of women rappers: queen mother, fly girl, sista’ with attitude, and lesbian. This study only addresses two of those identities: queen mother and fly girl.

The queen mother category encompasses female rappers who view themselves as African-centered icons, an image often suggested by their clothing. The queen mother is someone who views herself as an “African-centered icon.” In their lyrics queen mothers refer to themselves as “Asiatic Black women,” “Nubian queens,” “intelligent black women,” or “sistas droppin’ science to the people” – all of which are suggestive of their self-constructed identities as leading females (Keyes, 2000, 2002). The “queen mother” is associated with African traditional court culture – in the 16th-century Benin Kingdom of southeastern Nigeria – she was the mother of the reigning King Esigie (Keyes, 2000, 2002; Seiber and Walker, 1987). Because of her maternal connection to the king, the queen mother acquired control over districts and a voice in the national affairs of state (Keyes, 2000, 2002; Seiber and Walker, 1987). During King Esigie’s reign, a commemorative brass was sculpted in his mother’s honor; in the image, she was adorned with a beaded choker, crown, headdress, and a facial expression capturing her reposed manner (Keyes, 2000, 2002; Sieber and Walker, 1987).

This rap category of women who adorn themselves with royal or Kente cloth strips, African headdresses, ankh-stylized jewelry, and goddess braid styles suggests that there is an understanding among these female rappers of the historical significance of African queens. Female rappers who exude this demeanor do so not only in their choice
of clothing but in their rhymes by embracing Black female empowerment and spirituality. They make clear their identities as African, woman, warriors, queens, and priestesses. Angela Y. Davis (1998) observes that women in this category demand respect for Black women who are “to be accorded respect by . . . men” (p. 122). Here, Davis (1998) is making reference to intra-cultural dynamics between Black men and Black women. A queen mother further demands respect not only for Black women, but for her people in general. In this way, queen mothers demonstrate inter-cultural communication so that their people are able to gain a certain level of respect without the results of interest-convergence.

Among the women rappers distinguished by their communities as queen mothers are Isis, Nefertiti, Queen Kenya, Queen Latifah, Queen Mother Rage, Sister Souljah, and Yo-Yo. This study discusses Queen Latifah and Yo-Yo as queen mothers. The term “Queen” was first utilized as a stage name by the female MC Queen Kenya who is a member of hip-hop’s Zulu Nation. However, Dana “Queen Latifah” Owens was the first solo female MC to commercially record under the term “Queen.” Queen Latifah’s first singles, “Princess of the Posse” and “Queen of Royal Badness” (1988) which followed her debut album All Hail the Queen (1989) established her regal and reposed identity. Some of her lyrics include “you try to be down/you can’t take my crown from me” and “I’m on the scene/I’m the Queen of Royal Badness.” According to Keyes (2002), the name Latifah was given to her by her cousin who was Muslim; it is an Arabic name meaning “feminine, delicate, and kind” (p. 190).

Latifah’s maternal demeanor and posture contribute to the perception of her as a queen mother. For example, in a 1993 interview with Keyes (2000, 2002), Latifah
expressed her adamant refusal of the labels “bitch” and “ho.” In response to these labels, Latifah wrote the rap song, “U.N.I.T.Y.” (1993), in which she rejects these terms. Although Latifah never directly states that she refers “specifically to . . . men who call black women . . . [these terms] she uses ‘U.N.I.T.Y.’ as a statement to remind them of Black [our] women’s limitless and unconquerable spirits ‘from infinity to infinity’” (Keyes, 2002, p. 136). The song is reclamation of our spirits in a society where the “nature” of our being is made up of an interlocking system of oppression (Hill-Collins, 2000).

Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.” (1993) makes use of signifyin’ – which as Gates (1981) confirms – in the Black tradition, is an ongoing conversation in which no one has the last word; this process is commonly referred to as “a dialogic process.” “U.N.I.T.Y.” (1993) can further be seen as an ongoing conversation between Latifah and those using the terms. Considering that the song came out during the time “gangsta rap” emerged, it is assumed that the song speaks back to “gangsta rap” and its performers. Latifah (1993) noted in the interview with Keyes (2000, 2002), they’re “gettin’ a little carried away with that” (p. 136). Latifah’s prideful – that is, her upright, regal, and reposed posture – allows her to preach to men about how women really want to be treated, in particular Black women. U.N.I.T.Y (1993) served to disrupt the interlocking matrix of oppression as experienced by Black women – a group relegated to the “subordinate other” (Crenshaw, 1988). Though some vernacular speakers assert that the words “bitch” and “ho” function as humor, Crenshaw (1991) explains that these terms reinforce patterns of social power, in particular, these terms give men “privileges to perpetuate misogynistic humor against Black women” (p. 32).
In an article entitled “The Naked Truth” however, Kim Green (1991) reported that Latifah would rather not be perceived in this way. As she has said, “just because I take a mature stance on certain things, it gives me a motherly feel . . . I am mature, but I’m twenty-one” (p. 33). This ambiguity in identity follows a concept – identified as a form of coding – by feminist scholars Joan Radner and Susan Lanser (1993) called “distraction,” a device used to “drown out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message” (p. 15). The use of distraction, according to Keyes (2002), “allows for artists to deliver strong pro-woman, pro-black messages and have a better chance of being heard” (p. 190). Latifah finds that her grounded perspective and stature causes fans to either revere or fear her. However, as noted by Keyes (2000, 2002), she “attempts to mute her motherly image offstage, indicating to fans that she remains modest, down-to-earth, and an ordinary person in spite of her onstage, ‘Queen of Royal Badness’ persona” (p. 190).

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) asserts in Black Feminist Thought that in the African American community, some women are seen as “other mothers.” “Other mothers” are Black women who believe that “fostering African-American community . . . forms the basis [of] . . . community-based power” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 132). This ‘strong Black woman’ is typically seen in the traditional African American community. Further, “community other mothers work on behalf of the Black community” through an expression of an ethics of caring and personal accountability – all of which embrace conceptions of mutuality and transformation (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 132). As they foster the community’s well-being, community other mothers are identified as power figures (Hill Collins, 1990).
Though Latifah is seen as a queen mother, her lyrics also suggest that she is an other mother. In her lyrics, she often addresses economic and political issues surrounding not only Black women, but the Black community as a whole. In her song, “The Evil that Men Do” (1989), Latifah discusses intracultural and intercultural dynamics by isolating “... the difficulties commonly experienced by young black women [on welfare]” (Forman, 1994, p. 44). Though one could interpret the title as a ploy to exploit the male species, the song really is a depiction of the higher powers – these powers being a divine and spiritual power – which, in the song is portrayed as being apathetic to the experiences of these women. In this song, the higher powers are depicted as being aware of the evil that goes on between people. Latifah says:

Here is a message for my sisters and brothers
here are some things I wanna cover.
A woman strives for a better life
but who the hell cares because she’s living on welfare?
The government can’t come up with a decent housing plan
so she’s in no-man’s-land.
It’s a sucker who tells you you’re equal. . .
Someone’s livin’ the good life tax-free
’cause some poor girl can’t be livin’ crack free
and that’s just part of the message
I thought I had to send you about the evil that men do.

Latifah’s role etched in stone allowed her to create “Ladies First.” A song that defies the stereotypes of female MCs.
I break into a lyrical freestyle
Grab the mike, look at the crowd and see smiles
’Cause they see a woman standing up on her own two [feet]
Sloppy slouching is something I won’t do.
Some think that we [women] can’t flow
Stereotypes they got to go.
I’m gonna mess around and flip the scene into reverse,
with a little touch of ladies first.

The video which accompanies this song is more explicit than the song in conveying a political message. It uses live footage of South Africa’s anti-apartheid movements underscored with photographic stills of heroines such as Angela Davis, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Winnie Mandela, Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, and last but not least, Harriet Tubman. The video conveys a reverence and recognition of these historical greats. Further, the song and video put ladies first – as the title suggests – in a world that generally does not privilege women’s voices, in particular, the Black female voice.

Latifah opened the door for many female MCs, in particular, those most self-identifying with African-centered icons. Sista Souljah, Isis, Nefertiti, and Queen Mother Rage all earn the title of Queen Mother via their names and dress. Lauryn Hill earns the title through her lyrics and community outreach programs (i.e., Refugee Project). Yo-Yo, who is also regarded as a queen mother, uses her lyrics to encourage Black feminism and respect. Although Yo-Yo is considered a queen mother via her lyrics and community activism, her attire also earns her the title of a fly girl.
The fly girl image emerged as a female rapper category in the 1980s. It is a style that grew out of Black action films pejoratively known as blaxploitation films. These films would include *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), *The Mack* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974). According to Keyes (2002), these films inspired “. . . a wave of Black contemporary youth [to resurrect] flyness and its continuum in hip-hop culture” (p. 195).

A fly girl describes someone in fashionable clothing, hairstyle, cosmetics, and jewelry. Fly girls wore (leather) miniskirts or tight jeans, sequined fabric, high-heeled shoes, and outstanding make-up. During the 1980s, rappers like Sha Rock of Funky Four Plus One, the group Sequence, and Lady B, dressed in ways that audiences considered to be “fly.” The commercial recording, “A Fly Girl” (1985) by the male rap group Boogie Boys describes a fly girl as a lady who wants people to recognize her. This image was later canonized by the female rap group Salt-N-Pepa in the 1990s at the same time that “gangsta rap” emerged.

Like the queen mother, the fly girl was a reclamation of [Black women’s] beauty. The fly girl image challenges historical notions of beauty particularly as it pertains to the African American female identity. In her ethnography, Keyes (2002) notes that Salt-N-Pepa describe themselves as “‘women [who have] worked hard to keep our bodies in shape; we’re proud [and] . . . we’re not ashamed . . .’” of them (quoted in Rogers, 1994, p. 31). In this way, the young women turn the tables on dominant constructions of beauty that went from “beauty” markers drawn from minstrelsy, particularly the “Mammy” figure which was normalized and canonized as the “Aunt Jemima” figure, the fly girl image sought to “break” these stereotypes.
Another characteristic of the fly girl is independence. Salt-N-Pepa notes, “the image we project reflects the real independent woman of the ’90s” (quoted in Chyll, 1994, p. 20). For many women in the rap industry however, reaching a sense of independence in an entrepreneurial way has not been easy. For example, in the rap community it is commonly understood that during the early years of Salt-N-Pepa’s career, their lyrics and hit songs (“I’ll Take Your Man,” “Push It,” “Shake Your Thang,” and “Tramp”) were written primarily by their producer/manager Hurby “Luv Bug” Azor. Keyes (2002) tells us that for their album Black Magic (1990) Salt (Cheryl James) “. . . ventured into writing and producing . . . the single ‘Expression,’ which went platinum” (p. 196). Black Magic (1990) also contained “Let’s Talk About Sex,” which Salt rewrote – originally written by Azor – for a public service announcement video and song in 1992 called “Let’s Talk about AIDS.”

Like Salt-N-Pepa, rap-singers TLC also made delivering the “safe sex” message an important precedent. While both groups deliver the “safe sex” message through their lyrics, TLC underscores this message visually. In many of their performances for example, Left Eye wore a condom in place of an eyeglass lens, while the other group members attached colored condom packages to their clothes. TLC’s warning about unprotected sex is further emphasized in their award-winning video “Waterfalls” from their second LP, CrazySexyCool (1994). The message in the video is magnified when a man’s decision to follow his partner’s desire not to use a condom leads to deadly consequences. Following his encounter, the man in the video notices a lesion on his face – this lesion suggests that he has contracted HIV. TLC’s notion of a fly girl is one who is firmly espoused in their message of sexual responsibility (Keyes, 2000, 2002).
Many of the female rappers are a part of the blues continuum in which they came to represent the voices of working-class Black womanhood. Then who was left to represent the experiences of those most affected by joblessness and poverty, that is, Black females living in the inner-city or for that matter, Black youth? “Although gangsta rap artists argue that the tales from the hood range from truthful accounts to exaggerated fantasies” (Keyes, 2002, p. 4), the researcher asserts that “gangsta rap” grew out of other forms of Black popular musics, such as other subgenres of rap which were intended to convey sociopolitical messages of poverty, police repression, current social policies, class, and gender relations. However, with the commercialization and sensationalism of “gangsta rap,” elements heavily associated with “gangsta rap” like sex and violence have dominated rap’s messages as a whole.

“Gangsta rap” emerged and was commercialized around the time that Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt (2006) was looking for a dissertation topic. It was in 1994, that Coolio’s “Fantastic Voyage” (1994), N.W.A.’s “Straight Outta Compton” (1988), Snoop Doggy Dogg’s “Gin and Juice” (1995), and Warren G and Nate Dogg’s “Regulate” (1994) exploded unto mainstream pop charts. Gaunt (2006) explains in her book, The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop, that popular culture and music, in this case, hip-hop culture and “gangsta rap,” are often informed by the games little Black girls play. Gaunt (2006) concludes this after asking the question, “what if black girls’ musical play was a training ground for learning not only how to embody specific approaches to black musical expression, but also learning to be socially black” (p. 19)? This research further asserts that the practices described by Gaunt (2006) are often influenced by iconic and authoritative figures that often play
significant roles in children’s lives. As social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1974, 1980) asserts, through habitués,\(^8\) that our habits are often informed by a set of patterns, manners, and behaviors which are adapted over time.

The rapid advancements in technology did not only affect the aesthetics of rap, but also the transmission of the cultures embodied in it; as a result, “gangsta” rappers came to represent the African American culture. Rap was also associated with the radio culture, as well as spilling onto the big screen. Portrayals of “Black” life became more graphic and to some extent exaggerated. For example, many of the videos in the realm of “gangsta rap,” Gaunt (2006) explains, “. . . were dominated by images of late-night parties with dozens of women captured with their ‘bootys’ bobbing in the air by the down-low gaze of a male cameraman’s eye, while Snoop delivered his dope-ass rhymes” (p. 19). However, there was not a great deal of room around these sights and sounds to privilege women’s musical contributions to rap or Black popular music except where their bodies might be concerned.

As rap scholar Christina Zanfagna (2006) notes, “one does not have to listen to many male MCs to note the scarcity of verses flowered with uplifting narratives of . . . love and spiritual intimacy” (p. 6). Instead, many of the songs that receive mainstream attention are “cloaked in grim tales of [pornography] the offensive sizing-up of female bodies, the eye for an eye ‘kiss me and I’ll kiss you back’ sexual bartering, [and] lustful deceit” (p. 6). Though many argue that these accounts of “the hood range from truthful

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accounts to exaggerated fantasies” (Keyes, 2002, p. 4), these portrayals have historically worked to portray (urban) Black men and women as hyper-sexed fiends.

Several female rappers however, have worked to become the exceptions – among them, Sista Souljah, Isis, Nefertiti, Queen Mother Rage, Lauryn Hill, Yo-Yo, TLC, Queen Latifah, and Salt-N-Pepa just to name a few. Salt-N-Pepa became the exception when they put out *Very Necessary* (1993); in their hit songs and videos “Shoop” and “Whatta Man” they flipped the script and instead of the offensive sizing up of women in a rap video, Salt-N-Pepa present male dancers as the “video ‘hos.”’ In both videos the three women stare down attractive men. In the video “Shoop” (1993), featuring the female vocal quartet, En Vogue, the ladies scrutinize men that they desire, from business types to “lay” men and in the video “Whatta Man,” (1993), the ladies praise their men when it comes to friendship, romance, and parenthood. However based on the data, especially the content analysis done by Kubrin and Weitzer (2009) and the study done by Singson (2002-2005), the researcher asserts that the commercialization and sensationalism of “gangsta rap” has come to stand in for all of rap, in particular because it plays into the racial imagination. This stand in has changed the face of rap on the whole.

Aside from the advancement of “gangsta rap” by West Coast’s artists, one cannot ignore “gangsta rap’s” connection to the Jamaican dancehall tradition. When Jamaica gained its independence, two political parties surfaced, the Jamaica Labour Party headed by Edward Seaga and the People’s National Party led by Michael Manley. As a response to the political dissension between these two parties and a fallen economy, the rude boy youth culture came to represent the voices of disillusioned youth.
Alongside socio-cultural ills that caused violence among gangs, “rudies” further escalated this by carrying knives and handguns. Further, they were identified by wearing certain clothes and adopting aggressive poses. They used dancehall and DJ sound system culture to subvert the government. For example, the nursery rhyme lyrics in Run D.M.C.’s “Peter Piper” (1986) were not only utilized to display the rapper’s ability to transform “simple” lyrics into ones that were meaningful, but they were also utilized – much like the codes utilized for the Underground Railroad – as a means by which subversion was achieved. The interlocking text and accompaniment help to facilitate this through a Western musical idea called a “hocket,” a concept whereby all of the parts fit to form a whole rhythmic idea. Later, this study addresses how this interlocking text might contribute to forms of oppression within the rap subgenre “gangsta rap,” in particular as it pertains to (Black) women.

Further, rudies’ resistance was displayed through an attitude called “slackness.” Cultural critic Carolyn Cooper (1995) perceived this “slackness . . . [as] a metaphorical revolt against law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency” (p. 143). As Keyes (2002) explains, this slackness was accompanied by a hypermasculine posture suggestive of sexually explicit language and misogynistic references, and in some instances, it “. . . extend[ed] to the use of violent lyrics or ‘gun lyrics’” (p. 90). Jamaican dancehall artists who started to wear (dread)locks – which were reminiscent of Rastafarianism and Bob Marley – incorporated reggae-inspired rhythms in their music. The rudies’ resistance is depicted in the musical performances of Yellowman, Shabba Ranks, Mad Cobra, Bounty Killer, Buju Banton, Ninja Man, Beenie Man, and the “rude girls” Lady Saw and Rihanna. Note the use of certain stage names like Bounty Killer and
Mad Cobra, both of which make powerful statements about law and order (Keyes, 2002). With this “new” ruling order, the “rudies,” in particular those who were rapping, subverted the mainstream ideology of civility because they understood that the law did not work in their favor.

The “rudies” are but one example of the ways in which musicians found ways to speak out on issues of much concern. From spirituals, the blues, jazz, gospel, soul, R&B, rock ‘n’ roll, funk, disco, and finally to rap, the “spirit” of race has found crafty inlets into daily rituals that involve music. In addition to the influence of aesthetic, socio-cultural movements and ills, rap formed under the guise of technological “advancements.” And despite all of the criticism, the in-your-face contradictions, and the conditions from which it evolved, such as imprisonment and the “urban” housing “projects,” rap thrived under the Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, and Women’s Liberation movements, and flourished into a cultural art form that deserves serious study.
5.1 Falling on De(a)f Ears

Chapter 4 ended by showing the ways in which the rudies’ “new” ruling order has subverted the law. Chapter 5 further explores this through an Ethnomusicological analysis, more specifically, a lyrical analysis of “gangsta” and New Millennium rap. In particular, the researcher conducts an ethnographic analysis and a transcription of lyrics by icons like Coolio, Kanye West, and Jay-Z. This research shows that iconic figures in both “gangsta” and New Millennium rap are a part of the Black continuum. In so doing, this research builds on critical race theorists Thandeka Chapman, Adrienne Dixson and teacher educator Djanna Hill’s (2005) notion to extend the metaphor of CRT to the arts.

Getting back to the question of why some rappers persist in subverting the law: from their point of view, they subvert the law because they understand that from a historical context, the law, which is intended to protect and help all of its citizens, only works in favor of those in power. Echoing these sentiments is “gangsta” rapper Coolio. In the song, “Gangsta’s Paradise” (1995), Coolio alludes to the failures of the school system when he writes: “They say I got ta (to) learn, but nobody’s here to teach me/If they can’t understand it, how can they reach me?” Here, Coolio shows the disconnection between the educational system and life experiences. By manipulating language, more specifically, through signification, he shows the ways in which the system has failed.
Though students go to school, the knowledge they acquire is not always applicable to their daily lives.

Coupled with the excessive violence and sexism associated with “gangsta rap,” many rappers are beginning to move away from “gangsta rap’s” defining elements, now forming a new movement in rap. Scholars of English Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois (2010) identify these rappers as “New Millennium rappers” and include people like Kanye, Cee-Lo, Dead Prez, Mos Def, T.I., Lil Wayne, Ludacris, 50 Cent, Eve, and Young Jeezy to name a few. Many of them – being a part of the rap continuum – for the most part, depict real accounts of their former lives, while infusing historical elements common to rap’s tradition, in particular, the gangsta rap aesthetic. For example, though many of Kanye’s pieces recall and signify on rap’s dancehall tradition, his messages serve as socio-cultural commentary. The overall message in his album *College Drop Out* (2004) emphasizes the failures of the educational system. His mother, the late Donda West (2007), is noted for saying, “after years of . . . pounding the education mantra into his head, Kanye proved me wrong. I still believe in education [. . .] the more degrees the merrier. But only if you’re going to use them. ‘Use school, don’t let school use you’” is one of Kanye’s favorite mantras (p. 104). West (2007) further tells us that she never expected that “. . . the keyboard would be his ticket” out (p. 103).

### 5.2 On Kanye West

Kanye was fourteen when he bought a keyboard with the money that he saved. This led to countless years of rap playing in the house and sometimes his mother offering solicited opinions of the tracks Kanye created. Once Kanye graduated high school, he went onto college. However, when he was twenty years old he “. . . announced that he
wanted to drop out of college” (West, 2007, p. 106). Kanye leaving school to pursue a career in the music industry suggests that he knew what his aspirations were at an early age. His dropping out further suggests his understanding at an early age, that the educational system – no matter how much we advocate for it – does not solve all of life’s problems, in particular, the educational system has not addressed the needs of people of color.

After *College Drop Out* (2004), Kanye came out with *Late Registration* (2005) and *Graduation* (2007), both of which include songs that, like *College Drop Out*, infer the failures of the (educational) system. Further, though some of the songs on *Late Registration* (2005) are reminiscent of rap’s dancehall tradition, for example, “Touch the Sky” (2005) featuring Lupe Fiasco, uses an eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes to create a party feel, he uses the dancehall rhythm as a means by which social commentary can be achieved. Over this rhythm is a repeated “testify” which redirects the audience to “Black” church culture as a means to teach, preach, and heal.

Later in 2010, Kanye came out with an album entitled, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010). Though many of the songs on this album are also reminiscent of rap’s dancehall concepts and rhythms, many of them still serve as social commentary about socio-cultural systems. In this album, it is my inkling that the party-feel serves as a distraction. For example, “Dark Fantasy” (2010), featuring Nicki Minaj, like many rap songs, makes reference to nursery rhyme lyrics and child’s play. Though both rap songs serve their purpose, RUN D.M.C.’s “Peter Piper” (1986) makes explicit reference to the exact lyrics in a nursery rhyme, whereas Kanye’s (2010) references to nursery rhymes and child’s play are more subtle.
Historically, MCs have been evaluated on their facility on the microphone. Rap artists often demonstrate their skills by incorporating rhymes that capture the essence of their flow. Though Run D.M.C. and Kanye both make reference to “simple” nursery rhymes and/or child’s play, their pieces are highly coded and meaningful. For example, Run D.M.C.’s “Peter Piper” (1986) reads: “Now Pe-ter Pi-per pick’d pep-pers but Run rocks rhymes/Hump-ty Dum-pty fell down cuz his hard times.” Further, as Queen Latifah’s “Ladies First” (1989) indicates, just because one incorporates “simplicity” doesn’t mean that it isn’t highly meaningful. Latifah (1989) raps, “some think that we can’t flow, / stereotypes they got to go.”

Kanye’s “Dark Fantasy” (2010) implicitly makes reference to a nursery rhyme by reading as follows:

You might think you’ve peeked the scene/You haven’t, the real one’s far too mean/The watered down one, the one you know/was made up centuries ago/It may just sound all whack and corny/Yes, it’s awful blasted boring/Twisted fiction, sick addiction/Well, gather ‘round, children zip it, listen.”

As Gaunt (2006) tells us, pop songs are often informed by the games we play as children. In this piece, Kanye guides the listener to the games we play by painting the scene with lyrics such as “Well, gather ‘round, children zip it, listen.” He wants listeners to know that all of the stories we were told (to recite) as children are either fabricated, fictive, or watered down versions of the truth. For example, the nursery rhymes “London Bridges” and “Ring around the Rosie,” though are melodic and “tuneful,” have grim historical contexts. With tuneful and melodic melodies such as the ones exuded in “London
Bridges” and “Ring around the Rosie,” listeners are distracted from the historical contexts from which these rhymes, songs, and tunes originate.

Kanye tells us that these are “Dark Fantas[ies].” By utilizing nursery rhyme lyrics, the songwriter questions the normative structuring built into society, more specifically education. Further, due to the historical context of rap, that is, it being a heavily coded phenomenon, “Dark Fantasy” (2010) guides us away from its meaning with the first sentence, “You might think you’ve peeked the scene/You haven’t...” Though meaning is further extrapolated by subsequent sentences, the structure of this sentence helps to facilitate a double meaning.

The songs following this continue to break down the normative structuring by calling into question the values of American society. The song “Power” (2010) does this when it opens with the following lyrics: “the system broke, the schools closed, the prisons open/ we ain’t got nothin’ to lose, motherfucker, we rollin.” This description follows the assertion made by educators and critical theorists Michael Apple (1993 [2000]), Henry Giroux (1996), and Cameron McCarthy (1998 [2007]) who have argued that schools today do not speak to the interests or needs of young people.

5.3 Education, the “Unofficial,” and Hidden Curriculum

The imperatives implemented by the government and schools (i.e., No Child Left Behind) have left no room for educators to engage in the complex lives of young people; as a result of these policies, a schism between “in-school” and “out-of-school” culture has grown with “unofficial curricula” (i.e., rap music, film) and learning settings (i.e., community centers, churches) which have become increasingly significant. The media has served as the hidden curriculum in which children learn to negotiate their identities
based on iconic figures. Until the school system gains the appropriate mechanisms that will allow for an understanding of out-of-school culture, in which rap is included, this research does not recommend “gangsta rap” to be heard or – since it has spilled onto the big screen – seen in the homes because all children will see is the vulgarity in “gangsta rap” without understanding the socio-cultural system that created it.

Kanye’s description further echoes longtime civil rights advocate and litigator Michelle Alexanders (2010) who asserts that “The New Jim Crow” is the prison system. Though many of Kanye’s songs are couched in beats reminiscent of the dancehall tradition his songs still serve as social commentary. Further, his systematic analyses of socio-cultural phenomena help to facilitate meaning. In light of all this, this thesis argues for the significance of studying concepts such as rap and youth culture, particularly as they pertain to race – all of which have historically gone undertheorized and unanalyzed.

5.4 On Jay-Z

When Jay-Z first appeared on the rap scene, it was during the 1990 craze of “gangsta rap;” however, the researcher asserts that Jay-Z reigns in the New Millennium era with songs that utilize the gangsta rap aesthetic as a means by which to comment on social norms and ills in his lyrics. In the album entitled *Blueprint* (2001), Jay-Z exudes this by laying out the artist’s life and his start to fame. For example, in “So Ambitious” (2001) Jay-Z tells us that his motivation to beat the odds that life threw him was the discouragement he received from people, especially from those in the educational system. For example, he indicates in his lyrics that his teacher told him that he’d “either be dead or be a reefer head” (Jay-Z, 2001). However, as a child he wasn’t “sure if that’s how adults should speak to kids/especially when the only thing [he] did was speak in class.”
In response to this, Jay-Z says, “I’ll teach his ass / Even better what my uncle did / . . . popped my demo tape in . . . / [. . .] / He might as well said . . . / He’s on the list kid” (Jay-Z, 2001). So, after all of the discouragement he received from authority figures, what motivated Jay-Z to keep striving? He writes, the “motivation for me, is them telling me what I could not be” (Jay-Z, 2001).

In 2010, Jay-Z wrote a book called Decoded. In it, he describes how his life and his living conditions encouraged him to overcome the odds. For example, Jay-Z lived in the Marcy housing projects. Marcy, he explains are “housing projects. . .” in Brooklyn, New York (Jay-Z, 2010, p. 3). As he describes The Projects,

I was nine years old, the summer of 1978, and Marcy was my world. The shadowy bench-lined inner pathways that connected the twenty-seven six-story buildings of Marcy Houses were like tunnels we kids burrowed through. Housing projects can seem like labyrinths to outsiders, as complicated and intimidating as a Moroccan bazaar. (Jay-Z, 2010, p. 3)

In the song “Do You Wanna Ride” (2001), Jay-Z further explains that “. . . The Projects [are called] a project, because it’s a project! / An experiment, where in it, only it’s objects / And the object for us to explore out prospects / And sidestep cops on the way to the top – yes!” These conditions facilitated the narratives in his raps. In addition, the rise of “gangsta rap’s” elements such as a heavy bass-line allowed for him to tell his story in a “catchy” manner.

Though Jay-Z makes use of the gangsta rap aesthetic, he uses them as a way to display his message. For example, as indicated by several scholars (Gaunt, 2006; Keyes,
2000, 2002; Rose, 1994, 2008), some of the defining elements of “gangsta rap” are its misogynistic and violent themes. Along with sonic elements, these themes together are called the gangsta rap aesthetic. However, the inflections used by Jay-Z (2001) in his piece “Ignorant Shit” show that he is not in favor of using these themes. He asks: “This is that ignorant shit you like / . . . fuck, shit, ass, bitch, trick, plus ice / C’mon . . .”? The inflections at the end of his phrases indicate that he is questioning his listeners’ values. Though subsequent phrases add more meaning, that is, the structure of rap helps to facilitate various meanings in one phrase, the above phrase suggests that Jay-Z is asking listeners that in order for him to get air time he must use language that is considered by American English standards vulgar? We know this because if inverted, one of the phrases in “Ignorant Shit” (2001) would read: “What do my lyrics got to do with this shit?” “Believe only half of what you see . . . (Jay-Z, 2001). Jay-Z utilizes the gangsta rap aesthetic as a means to guide, direct, and educate listeners on the life of the rich and the famous, while at the same time showing the grim realities of life in the inner-city. One could apply W.E.B. DuBois’ idea of double-consciousness working here.

Jay-Z’s “Say Hello” (2001) reveals, “we ain’t thugs for the sake of just being thugs/Nobody . . . did that where we grew . . . [up] Duh.” Though Jay-Z follows some of the common themes in “gangsta rap,” that is, he incorporates the gangsta rap aesthetic in his music, he utilizes the aesthetic to guide the listener to his story as a child growing up in the inner-city which often is a story of injustices like poverty, police repression, current social policies, class, and gender relations. This follows Hazel Carby’s (1992) assertion that hustling became an undesirable line of work. Not something one does by choice. Even further, this follows Rose’s (2008) assertion that the narratives in rap often
“featured stories . . . about why street crime had become a ‘line of work’ in the context of chronic black joblessness” (p. 2). Though Jay-Z and Kanye are a part of rap’s continuum, they help to displace themes promoted in “gangsta rap.” In so doing, they help to disrupt the interlocking matrix of oppression as it was promoted in “gangsta rap.”

5.5 Rap Sales

From a sales point of view, scholars will be left wondering why the elements in “gangsta rap” are easiest to sell. As Bradley and DuBois (2010) report, in the 2000s, when “gangsta rap” left the scene, rap on the whole faced a decline in sales. According to the Nielson Soundscan in 2006, rap saw a 21% drop in sales from 2008’s $33.4 million. This decline, from the sensationalism of “gangsta rap” to New Millennium rap, may suggest that various forms of “new” technology has aided in this decline or it may suggest that audience members favor the negative portrayals in “gangsta rap” to that of more positive portrayals in other rap subgenres, in particular the subgenre dubbed New Millennium rap. This research asserts, through CRT, particularly through Crenshaw’s (1988, 1989, 1991) intersectionality, that the constructions of race, gender, class, and age play into the musical imagination and hence, rap. Further, the research asserts that “new” forms of technology (i.e., music videos, the Internet, iPods, iPhones, iPads) have aided in the decline of rap sales.

As much of the 1980s was spent establishing rap as a thriving tradition, that is, by the late 1980s rap’s popularity – in concert sales, films, recordings, and commercials established it as a billion-dollar enterprise – some studies show that those most supporting rap music are young White children. Rose (2008) reports that “the bulk of the kind of hip hop that promotes the worst of what we find in the music and imagery is
commercially promoted, produced, and distributed . . . for a predominately white audience” (p. 85). Although some White fans are highly informed and appreciate Black culture and history, many still do not understand that their racial identity affords privileges that others based on their racial identity do not receive.

Hip-hop scholar Bakari Kitwana (2005) and Ethnomusicologist Timothy D. Taylor (2007) further assert, White people “are racist not because they hate . . . Blacks but because they don’t know who they are without . . . Blacks” (p. 72). This research asserts that though culturally relevant pedagogy in schools have increased, the lack of it historically has escalated an engagement with “new” forms of (mediated) “education.”

As Apple (1993), Giroux (1996), and McCarthy (1998 [2007]) have pointed out, the imperatives implemented by the government and schools leave little room for educators to engage in the lives of young people. Since policy does not allow for this engagement and popular music does, the record industry has the responsibility to educate – the “right” way9 – the public about various musical art forms and the cultures from which they are derived.

However, due to the loss of information on African American history – such as poverty, police repression, social policy, class, and gender issues most of which are rooted in racism – this research argues for a theoretical framework that effectively deconstructs the images heavily associated with rap. For example, due to the commercialization of “gangsta rap” – if used in the classroom without a theoretical framework that effectively deconstructs the imagery in “gangsta rap” – students will

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understand all subgenres of rap as music that spews out crude lyrics. Further, students may not understand that the imagery in “gangsta rap” is a product of various socio-cultural systems.

Scholars in the field of Education use rap as a literacy practice, however this research argues that this methodology has become ineffective in helping students deconstruct the violence and misogyny portrayed most heavily in “gangsta rap.” Further, these educational scholars have analyzed rap as text and as we learn from this study, rap is not only text, poetry, etc., but it is music that is a part of various cultural fabrics in which rhyme, poetry, and wordplay are involved. Though Queen Latifah is not a “gangsta rapper,” she highlights the ineffectiveness of analyzing music as just “text” in the song “No Work” (1993). In it Latifah asserts that listeners are only “memorizing every damn lyric that [she] write[s]/ [their] all up in [her] mouth every time [she] grab[s] the mic/ [instead listeners] need to learn a lesson. . .” from her messages rather than just repeat her lyrics. The song is an expression of the failures of the workforce. We learn this from the chanted lines, “You ain’t got no work for me/ No work, you ain’t got no work for the queen?”

Though, much of African American history has been left out of what young Americans are taught in school, students are informed about African American history through various performance venues. At the same time, as many scholars in historical fields have reported, Blacks in America are depicted vulgarly throughout various forms of performance mediums. Historian Kevern Verney (2003) tells, “modern representations of African Americans in U.S. popular culture begin with the emergence of blackface minstrelsy in 1830” (p. 1). This initially was the “practice of white actors
appearing in burnt-cork make-up” (p. 1). However, in later years, Blacks also were employed to portray “Blackness” in these performance venues. Thus, portraying “Blackness” – particularly as it pertains to American history – through various performative mediums and genres has gone on since colonization.

So when I argue in defense of rap music, I would like to be very clear. As a young hard-working Black woman, the researcher does not support the portrayals – misogynistic portrayals that historically have referenced Black women – in “gangsta rap.” However, like Keyes’s (2002) study, this research asserts that “rap is not an aberration of black culture but rather a part of a continuum” (p. 5). As rap is a part of the “Black” musical continuum, so is “gangsta rap.” Even so, “gangsta rap” is a magnified version of previous subgenres which were initially about poverty, police repression, social policy, class, and gender issues. By fusing together the gangsta rap aesthetic with socio-political conscious rap, New Millennium rap also becomes a part of rap’s continuum.

As I say this, I am not defending “gangsta rap.” On the contrary. Rap growing out of hip-hop culture, it is an expression of issues in hip-hop culture. Hip-hop largely growing out of urban environments, rappers often expressed concerns within that environment that spilled over into public life through movements such as the Civil Rights, Black Nationalist, and Women’s Liberation. This research asserts, through CRT, that rap was not only an expression of these “urban” issues, but an expression of race relations. The media and the record industry, through “gangsta rap,” have turned rap on the whole into something seedy that it originally was not.

Further, even though “gangsta rappers” like Bone Thugs-N-Harmony often reflect themes prevalent in “gangsta rap” – drug culture for example – their raps also serve as
social commentary. For instance, in 1995 the group put out “Tha Crossroads” and “1st of the Month” on their CD entitled *E. 1999 Eternal*. In 2005, though it was pretty much the end of “gangsta rap’s” sensationalism, the group released “I Tried” featuring Akon. The graphic lyrics of all three songs address the ways in which society have failed them. For example, “I Tried” (2005) reads: “I tried so hard, can't seem to get away from misery,/ Man I tried so hard, but [will] always be a victim of these streets,/ It ain't my fault cause I, try to get away but trouble follows me,/ And still I try so hard, hoping one day they'll come and rescue me.” Here, the researcher argues that it is difficult for those unfamiliar with the various kinds of cultures from which the music evolves to sort through its messages. Through CRT, more specifically, Crenshaw’s (1988, 1989, 1991) intersectionality, the researcher is allotted the space to sort through the violent and misogynistic representations of “gangsta rap.” This study aims to get to the heart of some messages in “gangsta rap” – that implicitly or explicitly point to the ways in which the youth in (“Black”) urban environments have, for the most part, been handed a doomed life because of the power structures in American society.

The research further asserts that race has largely been the reason many do not recognize the artistry in rap. For example, though my findings do not defend “gangsta rap,” let me point out that critics never show the ways in which many rap songs utilize musical elements passed down from its Western ancestors. For example, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony are noted for not only their (metronomic) lyrical speed, but harmony: “We got so used to saying each other’s ad-libs to the point that when we did it . . . we were harmonizing . . . and . . . it [became] ‘. . . our style’” (quoted in Bradley & DuBois, 2010). However, critics never credit the group for this ingenious talent.
In “look[ing] to the bottom” (Matsuda et al., 1995), that is, at the source of the problem, and identifying a group of people that have been systematically oppressed not only “. . . on the basis of sex, colour and class” (Weiner, 1994), but by age, inter- and intra-cultural differences, my study not only gives voice to Black females, but it works to eradicate oppression on all levels as experienced by all peoples through rap. In so doing, the researcher sees CRT and rap as “a call for freedom and justice in an unjust world,” as was “the ‘new’ song of the spirituals” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 8). Similar to the new spirituals, CRT and rap have the ability to “not only [put] in front of us the image of ‘heaven’ in which all God’s children are able to sing their song, [but they] also [demand] that we find a way to get there” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 8). This study shows that rap has more to offer than the limited qualities promoted by the record industry; it has the ability to engage and impact its audience with its rich cultural elements.
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Selected Discography


