

THE SYMBOLIC RAPE OF REPRESENTATION: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK
MUSICAL EXPRESSION ON BILLBOARD'S HOT 100 CHARTS

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to use rhetorical criticism as a means of examining how Blacks are depicted in the lyrics of popular songs, particularly hip-hop music. This study provides a rhetorical analysis of 40 popular songs on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles Charts from 1999 to 2006. The songs were selected from the Billboard charts, which were accessible to me as a paid subscriber of Napster. The rhetorical analysis of these songs will be bolstered through the use of Black feminist/critical theories. This study will extend previous research regarding the rhetoric of song. It also will identify some of the shared themes in music produced by Blacks, particularly the genre commonly referred to as hip-hop music. This analysis builds upon the idea that the majority of hip-hop music produced and performed by Black recording artists reinforces racial stereotypes, and thus, hegemony. The study supports the concept of which bell hooks (1981) frequently refers to as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and what Hill-Collins (2000) refers to as the hegemonic domain. The analysis also provides a framework for analyzing the themes of popular songs across genres. The genres ultimately are viewed through the gaze of race and gender because Black male recording artists perform the majority of hip-hop songs. Gender is central to this issue because much of the lyrical content of their songs reveals misogynist themes. Many of the songs performed by primarily White artists who represent other popular genres including rock, country and pop music, however, contain far fewer misogynist or nihilistic themes. On the contrary, their songs contain more themes considered life-redeeming. Although hip-hop music can be viewed as a site of resistance, the current form of the genre dominating the charts is not likely to lead to the empowerment of the dispossessed in society.

Isn't it to be expected that a national culture that reifies mediocrity, sensation and flashiness over skill and excellence in everything from movies to television to literature and music generally would integrate [forms of black expressions] on less-than-ideal terms?

From Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (2004).

DEDICATIONS

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother for her gift of wisdom; to my son who helped me realize the error of my ways and the selfishness of my behavior through the struggles he encountered. Unfortunately, this realization came at a point in life when it was too late to deter him from making a few of the same mistakes that I once made in life. It is not too late, however, for my son to turn toward the light in his quest for a more empowering definition of manhood. More importantly, this dissertation is dedicated to the countless number of anguished souls of Black people whose lives are shaped daily by what appear to be daunting circumstances that impede our collective struggle for self-love and a positive self-image. Far too many are negatively influenced by the perpetual rhetoric that is cloaked in television sitcoms, buffoonish reality shows, crime news broadcasts, and music that blatantly announces to the world that Black people are a problem. This analysis is dedicated to all people, regardless of race, class, gender or religion who share a common vision to reach for the higher ground by teaching all children about the power of love, compassion, respect and unity. Finally, this is dedicated to all artists who pursue that kind of vision with unparalleled passion. They have given me the strength to write this analysis. They also have given me the power to keep reaching and teaching. In the words of the incomparable Stevie Wonder, “Gonna keep on tryin’ until I reach the higher ground.”

Words from Stevie Wonder’s song “Higher Ground” on *Innervisions* (Motown, 1973).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must acknowledge the many scholars and cultural critics who claim hip-hop music is merely a reflection of the overall decline in morals and values in society. This dissertation was born from the need to more closely examine that belief. If that statement is true today, it also would seem to suggest that such angst, nihilism and despair should be apparent in some of the most popular music performed by White artists and others representing various music genres as well. This work stresses the importance of art to the overall development of human beings in finding meaning in life and seeking truth about the beauty and cultures of all people. I also want to thank the members of my dissertation committee, which included Dr. John J. Makay, Dr. Lynda Dee Dixon, Dr. Radhika Gajjala and Dr. William Coggin. Special thanks go to Dr. Makay and Dr. Dixon for their guidance regarding rhetorical criticism, and more specifically, the rhetoric of song.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The aim of this study is to interpret the rhetoric of 40 songs on Billboard's Hot 100 charts from 1999 to 2006. These songs were accessed through Napster. A significant year in relation to this study is 1979, which was the year The Sugar Hill Gang released "Rapper's Delight" (George, 1998). This song marks the beginning of the commercial rap/hip-hop era. One aim of this study is to document and interpret the lyrics that primarily focus on themes about violence, the threat of violence, disrespect toward women, the promotion of illegal activities (particularly drug dealing, pimping, and violence), and the perpetuation of themes in songs that reinforce age-old stereotypes about Black people (Queeley, 2003). These include stereotypes about Black men as thugs, gangsters, drug dealers, criminals, sex-starved, irresponsible, women-hating buffoons who excessively define themselves and other Blacks as "niggas." This analysis will focus on themes about Black people, in general, as child-like in their behavior toward the pursuit of hyper-materialism and capital. Many songs depict wanton disregard for money and the promotion of hedonistic consumption of cars, rims, lap dances, grills (gold or platinum caps to cover one's teeth), alcohol, drugs, sex and parties. The study analyzes lyrics that depict women as strippers, prostitutes, scam artists and hoochies. It focuses on lyrics that refer to Black women as bitches. Definitions will be provided in this analysis, as will the operational links to theoretical statements in the study. An interdisciplinary analysis that includes communication studies, sociology, psychology, cultural criticism and African American studies is used in the analysis.

Rationale

This study argues that hip-hop music, within the context of what is defined as popular music, reinforces stereotypes and the ideological concept of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” referred to by bell hooks (1981). By interpreting the rhetoric of lyrics through a lens shaped by Black feminist and critical theories, this analysis focuses upon a site (Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles) where popular music produced by recording artists of different races and represented by various genres can be analyzed and compared. This study can be cited to refute the notion that popular music generally is a reflection of the overall decline of morals and values in American society. The key word is “overall” regarding popular music as a reflection of this societal shift. It is glaringly apparent through the use of rhetorical criticism that no other popular music genre is comparatively similar in its oppressive representation of any other group of people than hip-hop music is to African Americans, particularly women. Essentially, the declining morals and values of society are overwhelmingly depicted by popular Black musical expression. As a communication study, the analysis has far-reaching implications for various ways that the rhetoric of music helps define and shape beliefs, values and attitudes about a particular group or race of people. This study is critical to understanding the various ways that such rhetoric is useful in the study of black musical expression and in examining everyday Black life as reflected through art as legitimate academic research (Baker, 1993). It extends the body of research on the rhetoric of song. Songs are communicative tools that function as rhetorical acts (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991).

Research Questions

This study provides a rhetorical criticism of the lyrics of 40 songs that appear on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles charts from 1999 to 2006 with a focus on the discourse (themes and topics) considered nihilistic and/or life-defeating. This analysis is based upon three fundamental research questions:

1. In what ways do hip-hop songs, particularly, and other songs, generally, performed by Black recording artists promote nihilistic themes when compared to songs performed by White recording artists and others who perform various genres on Billboard's Hot 100 charts?
2. In what ways do hip-hop songs and others performed by Black recording artists on Billboard's Hot 100 charts help support arguments by Black feminist/critical theorists regarding the reinforcement of hegemony based upon white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? Hill-Collins (2000) provides a definition for hegemony that best serves the aims of this analysis. Hegemony's "power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies." Organizations appear to include Black women, "reversing historical patterns of exclusion associated with institutional discrimination - while disempowering" them at the same time (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 285).
3. What is the rhetorical potential of songs by Black recording artists that represent more empowering, uplifting, life-redeeming, and/or critically conscious themes to resist hegemony?

Review of Pertinent Literature

While the literature on the rhetoric of music is growing, the need for focusing more on the rhetorical criticism of the genre referred to as hip-hop is needed. My research indicated a minimal level of focus upon the examination of hip-hop music through the use of rhetorical analysis. Although numerous scholars and critics of popular culture also have written about hip-hop music and a few of its most notable recording artists, few of them have approached the subject as rhetorical criticism. There have been various empirical studies, however, that have attempted to analyze violence in rap/hip-hop themes (Armstrong, 2001; Barongan & Hall, 1995; Jones, 1997). There is a paucity of analyses that seek to address the disappearance of love, compassion, unity and other themes in hip-hop music (Bayles, 1994). These lyrics generally are deemed more uplifting among music fans. This rhetorical analysis seeks to help fill the void in that area. This study also could lead to additional research focused on the effects of exposure to specific rap/hip-hop lyrics (Brooks & Dixon, 2002; Kitwana, 2005). Their work identifies the shortfalls in current research regarding hip-hop music and proposes areas worthy of future study “with special attention to the nature and composition of rap music audiences” (Brooks & Dixon, 2002).

There has been a dearth of research focused on the quantification of hip-hop music through the use of content analyses. There is minimal research involving the coding process for specific behavior in various genres of music videos (Allred, DuRant, Emans, Rich, Rome & Woods, 1997). The behaviors that were coded included depictions of drug and alcohol use, tobacco use, and portrayals of sexually explicit behavior. That

study is relevant to the aims of this analysis because it provides a comparison of the results among five music genres, of which hip-hop is one. The study mentioned above also indicated that by genre, rap music videos contained the most alcohol use behavior (49 percent) and smoking behavior (30 percent). Videos with sexual content also were more likely to portray alcohol use than videos with no sexual content. The findings indicate a direct relationship to hip-hop as related to this study. Hyper-sexuality depicted in hip-hop music makes the genre a prime candidate for this rhetorical analysis, particularly in relation to Black feminist and critical theory.

According to Altheide (1997), questioning the nature and frequency of specific themes or topics in texts is a primary concern among media researchers. This particular analysis will broaden the examination by rhetorically assessing specific song lyrics that were not the focus of previous studies. Some of those include pimp/player dialogues, the prevalence of themes focused on strip clubs and dancers/strippers, references to grabbing parts of a woman's anatomy or performing sexual acts, and the obsession with booties (another word for behinds, asses, or buttocks) or other body parts. These lyrics, however, do not include those that refer to booties, asses or butts as they relate to the art or act of dancing. For example, the lyrics "shake that booty on the dance floor" are not considered misogynistic or sexually explicit because the statement is a declaration to further enjoy both the dance and the music. Other lyrics to be further examined include those that refer to drug dealing, thuggin' (living the life of a street criminal, thug, or hoodlum) and the obsession with material goods and hedonistic consumption. This analysis seeks to provide a framework for understanding the discourse of hip-hop music as well as

other Black musical expression when compared to that performed by Whites and others of various genres. As part of this aim, the study provides a perspective about how the thirst for nihilism in popular culture fueled the desire among music industry conglomerates to heavily promote songs produced and written using the familiar formula of mayhem, misogyny and materialism (George, 1998; Neal, 1999). In essence, such depictions represent continuous advertising for specific lifestyles, sex and the mass consumption of non-essential material goods. The promotion of such nihilism led to the near-death of other music genres produced and performed overwhelmingly by African Americans, especially Rhythm and Blues, Soul and Neo-Soul (George, 1988).

There are additional implications with regard to the promotion of songs that reflect themes considered more nihilistic/life-defeating. This study will document the decreasing number of R&B and Soul recording artists and their songs on the current list of Billboard's Hot 100 Singles charts when compared to those of previous years. This rhetorical analysis will document the gradual disappearance of such songs from the musical landscape. The increase of nihilistic themes is directly associated with not only the decrease of songs that include lyrics associated with love, compassion, unity and other more life-affirming concepts, but it also has led to a decrease in both male and female vocal groups, solo artists, and groups that feature members who play a variety of instruments in the production and performance of their music (George, 1998; Kelley, 2002). George (1988) also shed some light on this phenomenon in his book, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. In many ways, this decrease in love songs is a societal reflection of the gradual disintegration of families and the decline in a collective spirit of community.

The Rhetoric of Song

While there have been various empirical studies regarding the influence of hip-hop (rap) music lyrics upon listeners, there has been a paucity of rhetorical analyses that focus upon the themes and/or topics of the genre in general. Songs are considered communicative tools that function as rhetorical acts (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). But more specifically, there have been far fewer rhetorical analyses that concentrate on rap/hip-hop lyrics with a primary goal of distinguishing the differences between themes and topics of songs in the genre from other popular music genres, some of which include modern rock, pop, and country music. In 1998, rap music outsold for the first time ever country music, which had been the nation's best-selling format. With sales of more than 81 million CDs, tapes and albums, compared with 72 million for country, the increasingly popular genre's sales increased 31 percent from 1997 to 1998. The significant increase is attributable to the fact that 70 percent of hip-hop albums were purchased by Whites (Farley, 1999). This fact is directly linked to the ideology of domination or hegemony in that Whites are the primary audience for a genre representing the most demeaning images of Blacks.

Aldridge and Carlin (1993) focused their rhetorical analysis on songs by rapper KRS-One and their potential to help empower listeners to fight against oppressive economic conditions and political structures. KRS-One is regarded as one of the pioneers of hip-hop music and even has been labeled as "the genre's most complex mind" (George, 1998, p. 74). The research of Aldridge and Carlin (1993) is important with

regard to this analysis because of its ability to reveal the rhetorical potential of music considered life-affirming/uplifting. The focus of this study is contrary to aims of Aldridge and Carlin (1993) because it seeks to analyze the rhetorical potential of songs by Black recording artists considered more life-defeating/nihilistic. Both studies, however, focus on the textual messages encoded by various rappers. However, the current study also analyzes Black musical expression within the context of other popular music genres and what they reveal when compared to each other.

The function of metaphor in music often makes the job of analyzing lyrics difficult for the researcher (Leff, 1983). However, the work of Leff also provides some insight for distinguishing between the primary function of topical invention and metaphor: “Metaphor operates by fixing attention within a linguistic space, and it produces its effects in terms of the synchronic associations and images it evokes in the auditor. Topics orient us rhetorically in and through time; metaphors orient us rhetorically in and through space” (Leff, 1983, p. 216). Rappers often employ metaphor within their narratives to broaden the possibilities for listeners to distinguish what the meanings of these lyrics are in reference to their own lives. Herein lies one difficulty with respect to analyzing rhetorically the lyrics of songs: These interpretations always will be guided by one’s own experiences, cognitive abilities, socio-economic conditions, race, class, gender, and a host of other factors that influence the kinds of perceptions one might derive from the lyrics.

Those words are significant as they relate to this rhetorical analysis because this study focuses on music that promotes values counter to the development of unity within the Black community, the promotion of love and respect among Black men and women, and the fostering of racial unity, pride and dignity. These are some of the reasons why the concept of nihilism is vital to this rhetorical analysis. In a society where Blacks disproportionately represent the number of men and women in our nation's prisons, families living in poverty, those headed by single women and teenage mothers, Black women representing the fastest increasing rate of AIDS infections, and a disproportionate number of Black men who murder one another on a daily basis, how does the promotion of nihilistic and degrading themes in hip-hop music help remedy the current ills facing America?

This study concludes that the promotion of such themes helps fuel the cycle of life-defeatism in the minds of not only many Black youths, but youths from various races who face similar life circumstances. Thus, this study is an analysis about the rhetoric of song. It also is significant in the sense that it supports the concept that language is both symbolic and experienced (Burke, 1966). While far too many scholars, politicians and activists repeat the oft-quoted African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," few challenge themselves and others to resist the misogynist, often racist, and degrading depictions that lead to stereotypical assumptions that impede people's willingness to unite for change. Specific remedies hopefully can and will help ignite the kind of efforts necessary to transform the landscape.

Dixon and Washington (1999) conducted a perspectival analysis (Shaver & Shaver, 1992) of the African-American male voices within music videos of 1993. The central focus in their analysis was upon characters who were referred to as outlaws or original gangstas (OG). The study also identified these rappers as organic intellectuals (OI) who represent oppositional culture to an oppressed race, class, or group of people. Essentially, these organic intellectuals represent the heroes among a subculture or oppressed people and “they thus appear to have a certain autonomy from the dominant social group, and taken as a whole, they may seem like an independent social group with its own characteristics” (Gramsci, 1996, p. 100). Instead of being viewed as the antithesis of a brave, dynamic and powerful figure, the organic intellectual represents those qualities and is seen as exciting, daring, and omnipotent. This individual also is viewed as potentially savage, brutal, and as possessing destructive characteristics. These qualities are prevalent in hip-hop music lyrics and performances. Some empirical research has supported this concept regarding the attitudes and perceptions of youth toward this kind of music (Sullivan, 2003). Specifically, Sullivan analyzed the differences in perceptions about the music between Black and White adolescents. The study found that Black youth were more committed in their embrace of the music and were more likely to perceive rap as life-affirming, a term that is a key focus of this study. Other research in the area of rhetorical criticism has indicated that some song lyrics help reinforce hegemony regarding sexism, racism, capitalism and patriarchy (Davies, 1996). The work of Davies, however,

focused on a genre of music that was not nearly as financially lucrative as hip-hop. The focus of Davies' work was punk music.

Cummings and Roy (2002) focused on Afrocentricity as a method of rhetorical analysis to examine rap music. In their analysis, however, the researchers' focus was upon themes and topics within rap music that were considered more empowering and uplifting. Unlike the lyrics of many current hip-hop artists, the words of some of the old-school artists focused on Afrocentricity as a means of achieving harmony, focus, and balance. Some of the artists included X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, KRS-One, and Public Enemy. These artists emphasized the importance of identifying with African-American history and tradition. They also did not fail, however, to focus upon their own present-day experiences when challenging listeners to resist domination and oppression.

With regard to some music perceived as both patriarchal and focused on women's emancipation, Hallstein (1996) examined both of these ideologies expressed in music by Madonna. Stroud (2000) examined death metal music through the use of Fantasy Theme Analysis and rhetorical vision in unveiling the rhetoric in the lyrics of the group Slayer. What Stroud discovered is a unified rhetorical vision in the music of Slayer. Although Fantasy Theme Analysis is not used in this study, it does aim to identify shared themes in the music performed primarily by Black artists, particularly hip-hop music. Critical theory and Black feminist theory also help meet the aims of this study, one of which is to reveal the reinforcement of hegemony in the promotion of songs considered more thematically

nihilistic than any other genre of popular music.

This rhetorical analysis extends the body of research focused on popular songs, which feature lyrics that contain some messages and/or themes that help reinforce the ideologies of capitalistic consumption and patriarchy (Davies, 1996). Bormann (1972) argues that rhetorical visions are not only prevalent in music but in message construction and various group interactions as well. While rhetorical visions represent similar characteristics, themes, roles, and judgments, they essentially are based on Burke's dramaturgic principles (Bormann, 1985; Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 1994). The work of Makay and Gonzales (1983, 1987) is useful as it relates to identifying ascription of specific themes and characteristics of music. Makay and Gonzales (1983) examined rhetorical ascription in the music of Bob Dylan's 1979 gospel album, *Slow Train Coming*. Their rhetorical analysis skillfully examined the potential of Dylan's songs to connect with listeners who were fans of his previous work in the popular music realm. The gospel album was a success among fans because of the "listener's ability to associate their lyrical and musical features with Dylan's pre-conversion songs" (Makay & Gonzales, 1983, p. 2). These scholars argued that the rhetorical potential of Dylan's Christian songs were enhanced by the lyrical capacity to evoke meaningful associations to his previous secular work.

Hip-hop music has faced a barrage of criticism for reiterating a steady stream of misogynistic themes, ghetto imagery, demeaning references, and criminal scenes, which follow a familiar formula that promotes nihilism and disrespect. Ascription is a key

element that appears to be the basis for the success of hip-hop music. This particular analysis refers to ascription in the sense that, historically, many of the most popular images depicted in the mass media, particularly through television and the film industry, have tended to perpetuate the most stereotypical images of African Americans (Berry & Berry, 2001; Bogle, 1973). Apparently, these are the images more White consumers want.

Music, whether publicly performed or recorded, “speaks directly to society as a cultural form” (Lull, 1984, p. 364). It is distinguishable from other forms of communication primarily because of its three components of persuasion. First, it has a repetitive nature. This kind of redundancy is either intrinsic or extrinsic. When the artist borrows from his or her own past works it is considered *intrinsic* redundancy. But the borrowing of traditional themes from a particular genre is referred to as *extrinsic* redundancy (Makay and Gonzales, 1983, p. 5). This is particularly relevant with regard to hip-hop music. Secondly, it also has a significant impact on the physiological aspect of the human body. Music, simply put, makes you want to move. And thirdly, music also is experiential in nature. In other words, it involves an array of “personal experiences” to which others can relate (Chesebro, 1985, p. 118). The lyrical aspects of music, such as in rap/hip-hop music, are explained as “virtual experience,” meaning “they present an illusion of life, amplifying a particular perspective of a situation” (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, p. 399). The interest in the rhetoric of song can be traced to Plato, who claimed that the work of poets that failed to represent what is considered good or beautiful in their words or dramatic plays could lead to grave distortions in society. In Book II (361a) of

The Republic, Plato addresses the behavior of the masses when they begin to consume negative imagery and ideas (Urmson, 1997). In many ways, Plato's argument speaks to much of what hip-hop music currently promotes among youth in American society.

All go on repeating with one voice that justice and moderation are fine things but hard and onerous, while licentiousness and injustice are sweet, and easy to acquire and are shameful only in opinion and law. They add that unjust deeds are for the most part more profitable than just ones, and, whether in public or private, they willingly honor vicious people who have wealth and other types of power and declare them to be happy. But they dishonor the weak and the poor. (361a)

Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory

A close perusal of work by cultural critics has led to the inclusion of primarily three prolific scholars in the areas of Black feminist criticism and critical theory to help anchor this study. These scholars' work will help frame the argument proposed in this study by effectively linking their ideas and theories directly to the lyrical content of the songs that are analyzed. The analysis also is supported by the work of clinical psychologist Naim Akbar (1984). This study, however, primarily will be informed by hooks (1981, 1995, 2003), Hill-Collins (2000, 2006) and Dyson (1996, 2004). The work of Dyson (1996) particularly is useful here. By examining representations reflected in hip-hop music and culture, Dyson is among an elite group of scholars who provides criticism about Black musical expression, culture and social reality for African Americans:

Even rap's largest controversies are about representation. Hip-hop's attitudes toward women and gays continually jolt in the unvarnished malevolence they reveal. The sharp responses to rap's misogyny and homophobia signify its central role in battles over the cultural representation of other beleaguered groups. (p. 178)

Analyses by hooks (2003) place specific rhetorical dimensions of social action in a very thought-provoking, historical context. Her critiques spark questions regarding why African Americans and others refuse to unite and wage an ongoing battle against the pervasive nihilism reflected in popular hip-hop music. Comments by hooks provide valuable insight regarding this collective inaction. In *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self Esteem*, hooks (2003) keenly addresses some of the historical events that helped shape the current state of hip-hop music and its central focus upon materialism and misogyny. What is compelling about her critique is the idea that many African Americans collectively shunned their responsibilities in the battle for racial uplift and solidarity and traded them for the pursuit of pleasures and hyper-materialism, notions that are blatantly evident in the current form of hip-hop music.

As racial integration brought greater job and career opportunities for black people, especially educated black folks, the will to make money began to replace the will to be free, to decolonize one's mind, to be independent thinkers. (p. 101)

Hooks (1981, 1989, 1993), Wallace (1978) and Hill-Collins (2000) also are significant as they relate to the complexities that African-American women face with regard to building alliances with major feminist organizations and other civil rights groups to join

forces in eradicating the negative portrayals of women reflected primarily in hip-hop music. These writers, particularly hooks, reveal that national feminist organizations, which consist primarily of White women, rarely raise their voices to protest such demeaning and degrading depictions of Black women in hip-hop music and videos (hooks, 1994). These scholars realize that battles must be fought collectively, because if they are not, the losses represent a death blow not only to the plight of Black women, but women's rights in general.

Among some of the most significant reasons for the use of critiques by both hooks and Dyson are the multiple ways their work can be used to ground the theoretical framework of this analysis. Both scholars critique ideas regarding race, class, gender, politics, sexuality and culture. The work of these scholars places this analysis within the framework of their critical and Black feminist theories. For example, with regard to the reinforcement of specific stereotypes, Dyson (1996) writes the following in *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*:

The circulation of brutal images of black men as sexual outlaws and black females as “hoes” in many gangsta rap narratives mirrors ancient stereotypes of black sexual identity. Male and female bodies are turned into commodities. Black sexual desire is stripped of redemptive uses in relationships of great affection or love. (p. 178)

In *Ain't I Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), hooks poignantly captures the essence of what hinders relationships between Black men and women. She refers to some

commonly held stereotypes of Black women as the sexual savage, beast, the sapphire, the Amazon, welfare queen, whore, prostitute, and the bitch. She posits these as prevalent images in the current form of popular culture, particularly hip-hop music.

All the myths and stereotypes used to characterize black womanhood have their roots in negative anti-woman mythology. Yet they form the basis of most critical inquiry into the nature of black female experience. Many people have difficulty appreciating black women as we are because of eagerness to impose an identity upon us based on any number of negative stereotypes. Widespread efforts to continue devaluation of black womanhood make it extremely difficult and oftentimes impossible for the black female to develop a positive self-concept. (p. 86)

The lyrics and narratives provided in hip-hop music often reinforce a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, where life reflects art. The work of clinical psychologist Naim Akbar (1984) is useful in this analysis as well. He provides perspectives regarding notions of inferiority and feelings of worthlessness, which have far-reaching implications for understanding how the messages in current hip-hop lyrics help reinforce such ideas.

The slavery that captures the mind and incarcerates the motivation, perception, aspiration, and identity in a web of anti-self images, generating a personal and collective self-destruction, is more cruel than the shackles on the wrists and ankles. (p. 2)

Cornel West (1993) assesses the nihilism that is destroying the fabric of not only African-American communities, but society in general. His critical perspectives also are pivotal to this analysis. For example, his insights regarding increasing societal nihilism are both profound and prophetic. While other scholars have written about this limited landscape in terms of representation reflected by Blacks in film (Bogle, 1973), analyses by West seem to adequately assess the pervasiveness of societal nihilism:

The accumulated effect of the black wounds and scars suffered in a white-dominated society is a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America's will to justice...Sadly, the combination of the market way of life, poverty-ridden conditions, black existential *angst*, and the lessening of fear of white authorities has directed most of the anger, rage, and despair toward fellow black citizens, especially toward black women, who are the most vulnerable in our society and in black communities. (p. 28)

Among some of the most useful resources for providing the historical context for this proposed study is Nelson George's *Hip Hop America*, first published in 1998. George has written more than a half dozen books detailing the transformation of Black music, and specifically, R&B and hip-hop music. He is considered one of the most prolific writers and music critics of the 21st Century. Another compelling work in terms of providing the proper historical context as it relates to the promotion of certain stereotypes in the work

of Patricia Morton (1991). Her analysis provides a comprehensive perspective about the extent to which the history of African-American women was so often falsely chronicled and distorted by members of the White press.

The critical work of various authors, some of whom are not considered research scholars, also help anchor the argument proposed in this analysis (Cose, 1993; Kafele, 2002; McCall, 1997; Sister Souljah, 1994; Upchurch, 1996; and Wilson, 1990). These authors' perspectives are useful because of their insights regarding the prescriptions to help stem the increasing tide of nihilism. The contribution of Watts (1997) helps frame the wholesale marketing of hip-hop music within the context of a capitalist culture that reinforces hegemony and the ideology of domination. The work of Wilson (1990) was included to connect the prevalence of real crime, violence, and angst to the ideology of hegemony and the nihilism reflected in hip-hop music. Rap poignantly reflects the chasm between the haves and those who have not (Rose, 1994). The references cited above provide the basic foundation for this rhetorical analysis. Narratives, an extensive review of magazine articles, television interviews, and a wide range of books and journal articles addressing culture, politics, race and sex in hip-hop music and culture also are used in this analysis. Some of the additional work to be cited in this study is socio-political in nature and is used to bolster the positions set forth in this rhetorical analysis. The work of various scholars who previously have focused on the violent and misogynistic themes in hip-hop music and other genres also will be cited in this study (Armstrong, 1993; Barongan & Hall, 1995; Dixon & Linz, 1997; Jones, 1997; Rubin, West & Mitchell, 2001).

Poetry is cited by Haki Madhubuti (2002), who was interviewed in September 2005 regarding his perspective about the current state of hip-hop music. Madhubuti expressed his discontent with the direction of hip-hop music and its influence upon children. Adell (1994) provides a critical perspective regarding double consciousness, which this analysis identifies as central to the musical expression of a few hip-hop artists. The concept of double consciousness was expressed by DuBois (1989) in the *Souls of Black Folk*. With regard to the use of rhetoric in addressing the issues outlined in this proposed study, the work of Billig (1987) and Burke (1969) also are cited. Although the works of Rose (1994) and Peterson-Lewis (1991) provide perspectives that some might consider two sides of the same coin, their critiques were useful in framing the ongoing research and dialogue aimed at either defending the agency of hip-hop artists in their quest to define masculinity on their own terms, or to denigrate the whole of the genre as useless in the struggle for helping to empower the dispossessed.

Key Terms and Definitions

The conceptualization of two key concepts is considered crucial in this process. The two concepts are 1.) life-affirming and uplifting topics/themes and 2.) life-defeating or nihilistic topics/themes. The primary purpose of this process is to meticulously define life-defeating and/or nihilistic topics/themes so songs that do not contain any or very few of these references can be described as life-affirming and uplifting.

Hip-hop music - For the purposes of this study, hip-hop music is defined as any music that employs the use of rap or talking (not a singing performance) to a beat to emphasize the message expressed in song. Formerly referred to as rap music, it is an element or part of a larger culture that encompasses rap, the wearing of baggy clothing, particularly pants that are sagging two to three inches below the waistline, break-dancing, graffiti, a particular kind of vocabulary and a general lifestyle.

Nihilism - A doctrine that all values are baseless and that nothing is knowable or can be communicated. West (1993), however, defines it not as a philosophical doctrine, but says “it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (West, 1993, p. 23).

Thug - Hardcore, street-wise, and hardened people, including teenagers and adults who live life by their own rules. They operate with a survival-of-the-fittest mentality. The American Heritage Dictionary defines a thug as a “cutthroat or ruffian; hoodlum.”

Songs with significant life-defeating topics/themes - This concept relates to any and all references to the following behaviors and will be rhetorically analyzed through the focus of these descriptions. The concepts beneath the headings have been defined for the purposes of this rhetorical analysis.

Violence

Assault - Any physical attack or act of beating (with or without a weapon), stabbing,

mugging, battering, pushing, shoving, fighting (unprovoked), spitting, grabbing, shaking, slapping, scratching, thumping or mug pushing (pushing one's hand into another's face).

Murder - Any reference to killing, slaying, executing, assassinating, putting to death, slaughtering, massacring, taking out, knocking off, annihilating, crushing, destroying, or obliterating, by any means, another person or any number of people.

Rape - Any and all forced acts of sexual violence or sodomy by means of threats, physical violence, intimidation, or sexual assault including oral and anal penetration.

Robbery - Any act of demanding money, jewelry, material possessions, and any other item considered valuable by another through the threat of killing that person with a gun, knife, axe, shovel, hammer, or any other object used as a weapon.

Other Criminal Behavior Not Defined Above

This particular category includes all other criminal acts that were not defined above, which include but are not limited to the following:

Arson - Any utterances of burning another's property with the intent to destroy or damage the property.

Drug Dealing - All references to acts that involve the sale of illegal narcotics and drugs. It also refers to the utterance of the words "drug dealer" or "baller."

Gambling - Any references to illegal gaming, taking bets, making bets, or placing odds

on any number of events or activities for the exclusive purpose of collecting bets and/or paying out the winnings.

Hustling - Any sort of behavior (illegal) aimed at working hard, fast, skillfully, sometimes deceitfully, and aggressively regarding the making of money. The more common term, “grindin,” is often used in association with the word hustling or hustlin’. But the term “getting my grind on” also is associated with drug dealing as well. It also is associated with working hard to achieve success through legal means as well. One must determine the context in which the lyrics are spoken to determine the meaning.

Vandalism - Any term that refers to damaging, destruction of, wrecking, sabotaging, or defacing of another’s personal or private property as well as government-, state-, and/or federally owned property.

Misogyny

Bitches - Any reference to women, teenagers, adolescent girls and all other children as bitches are included in this category. All other derogatory terms for women that do not include the words prostitute, ho, bitch, skeezer, and/or skank should be included in a category labeled the following: Terms of Disrespect (Females).

Hoes - This includes any reference to a woman as a ho, skank, skeezer, and any other reference or slang used to describe a woman who sleeps with a variety of different men

and/or women. Any indication or reference that portrays the woman or girl as loose and promiscuous also belongs in this category. Any reference to men as hoes should be included in the category of Terms of Disrespect (Males), which is described further below.

Hypersexual - Any lyrics that exhibit an obsession with the size of women's asses, the slapping or rubbing of the buttocks, breasts, or any other body part, or describing sexual acts with asses, breasts, or any other body part is considered hypersexual. Also, any references to any other sexual acts involving oral, anal, or other body parts must be deemed hypersexual. Any braggadocio from a man or woman that gloats about his or her sexual prowess, unlimited or uninhibited sexuality and sexual appetite, or uncontrollable libido is considered hypersexual. Any reference to women as sexual objects only and/or references to them to cater and serve a man's every wish, pleasure and desire of a sexual nature will be considered hypersexual as well.

Pimps - Any reference to putting women on the block, streets, and/or corner to make money for the pimp. The pimp's role is to exploit women through the selling of sex. Even if used metaphorically, the term is considered nihilistic.

Prostitution - Any and all references to a woman or girl as a prostitute, or demands for money in exchange for sex, making money by selling pussy, coochie, ass, or any other term used to describe a woman's vagina. This also includes any reference for the performance of sex or sexual acts in exchange for money. This definition includes

references to the performance of duties (although sex may not be explicitly stated) in exchange for material goods and other benefits for services rendered. For example, in Nelly's *Tip Drill* (2005), a female is heard on the video proclaiming, "I got you payin' my bills and buyin' automobiles 'cause you is a trick." The reference to such behavior is rhetorically assessed as misogynistic and belonging to the category of prostitution.

Terms of Disrespect (Females and Males) - All references to words or phrases used disrespectfully to describe women or girls that have not been described above. The same holds true for derogatory descriptions of men or boys that have not been described above.

Other Terms of Disrespect or Degradation

Bad Mouthing or Lyrical Lashing - All verbal references from one person to another considered disrespectful, rude, insensitive, cold, callous, demeaning or degrading. As mentioned previously, calling a man a bitch or saying something negative about him, his wife, girlfriend, mother, or other family members to his face or behind his back is indicative of a term of disrespect. For example, for one man to say to another (as indicated in the lyrics of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg's "Dre Day," on the album, *The Chronic*, 1992), "Here's a Jimmy joke about yo mama that you might not like, I heard she was a Frisco Dyke," is disrespect. To call a man a bitch or "soft" is the epitome of disrespect. Any term used to describe a man as a drug user by calling him a "crackhead" or one used to degrade women by calling them "chickenheads," "hoes," or "bitches" is included here as well.

Drug and Alcohol Use

Alcohol Use - Any reference to drinking alcohol or slang that refers to the process of getting drunk such as “getting crunk,” “blind,” “fucked up,” and/or other slang, which often can be detected as phrases for excessive alcohol use. Some of these terms, specifically “blind” and “fucked up” also refer to illicit drug use.

Illicit Drugs - All references to snorting, sniffing, smoking, inhaling, shooting up, or slang for such uses like “slipping a mickey” or “X” or “getting blunted.” Other references include “getting lit”, “getting fired up”, and “chiefin”, for getting high.

Songs with significant life-affirming topics/themes - Any reference to activities that have not been defined as life-defeating, humiliating, disgusting, demeaning or degrading. This represents the lyrics of any song from the genres within the past eight years that promote the pursuit of a life aimed at harmony, love for family and the rest of humanity, the goals of peace, compassion, self-consciousness (yet not self-righteousness), love, responsibility, unity, community uplift and pride, as well as racial pride and solidarity, spiritual and religious enlightenment, and empowerment. For the purposes of this analysis, such songs also promote the concept of having a good time (as in party or celebration) with others by dancing to music or clapping one’s hands to a musical beat. This category also includes songs with references to subtle seduction, eroticism, and mutual sex and pleasure. Most often, these examples will include subtle suggestions or requests rather than blatant demands for sex (which are considered life-defeating or

nihilistic for various reasons explained previously). Such references described above, however, are canceled by any other reference in the same song that involves a life-defeating measure to accomplish the activities described. For example, the following plot will be analyzed as an example of this phenomenon. If deceit, trickery, dishonesty or any other diabolical method is used to obtain sex, then the behavior reflected in the lyrics of such songs will be considered life-defeating and/or nihilistic.

Method and Research Procedures

For this study, rhetorical criticism has been selected as the primary method of examining the increasing nihilism reflected in hip-hop narratives. “Music, whether it is a single song or a long score, is a rhetorical act when it is used to influence opinion and behavior” (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 276). Criticism involves primarily two acts - perception and evaluation, which, “distinguishable as they are in theory, are generally experienced as inseparable phases of the same process” (Black, 1978, p. 5). The critic remains focused on products created by mankind. While one of the critic’s goals is to better understand mankind through the interpretation of his products, acts, and events, another motive is to “enhance the quality of human life” (Black, 1978, p. 9). Rhetorical criticism also is employed in this analysis because themes readily can be compared within various contexts through the use of an interpretive analysis. The study will reveal the shared themes that appear in songs performed overwhelmingly by Black recording artists, particularly hip-hop music. The population from which samples will be drawn is Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles charts since 1999, which marks the 20th anniversary of

commercially successful hip-hop music. Rap entered the American popular music scene in 1979 with the release of “Rapper’s Delight,” which reached the Top 40 Billboard chart and remained one of the biggest selling 12-inch records of the year (George, 2003). It is crucial to rhetorically analyze a few songs from the late 1970s, 1980s, and the 1990s to provide a perspective about how the musical landscape was transformed with the success of hip-hop music. It is not the aim of this study, however, to analyze all of the Top 10 songs that appeared on Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles chart (as the songs appear on Napster) for each year of the study. A rhetorical analysis is used to examine 40 songs, which will include five of the Top 10 songs on Billboard Hot 100 Singles charts from 1999 to 2006. (Random selection will be utilized to choose one specific quarter of each year for the years to be analyzed.) Songs considered hip-hop will be targeted from the Top 10 songs to be analyzed. These charts have been selected because the songs include some of the most frequently played hits of the year. To select each quarter for the given year, the numbers 1 through 4 will be drawn on four pieces of paper and shaken inside a small cup. Each number represents a quarter (1 for fall, 2 for winter, 3 for spring, and 4 for summer). This procedure will be repeated eight times (for the years 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) until one quarter is selected to represent each year of the study. Five of the Top 10 songs from each selected quarter were analyzed for each year under study. This represents a total of 40 songs. The No. 1 song from each selected year automatically was analyzed, as was any hip-hop song. If there were only a few hip-hop songs to be analyzed, then other genres in the Top 10 were analyzed to bolster the argument that songs primarily performed by Black recording artists reinforce hegemony

when compared to songs performed by White artists. This method documented and analyzed the level of nihilistic themes in primarily hip-hop music, then compared them to other popular genres. It also analyzed the role of representation within the context of popular music. Amiri Baraka, a renowned poet, once said that Black people's music reveals the maladies and social conditions that plague their lives in any given period (Jones, 1963).

The next step involved the operationalization of the concepts upon which this rhetorical analysis is based. This involved constructing the definitions for the words and phrases considered sexist, misogynist, violent, criminal, irresponsible, dangerous, promiscuous, sexually explicit, hedonistic, hyper-materialist, derogatory and demeaning. The songs were interpreted by using the definitions that were created to categorize specific words and concepts used in them. For example, a line that contains more references to a woman bending over to touch her toes, or "shake that ass," or the reference of the words bitch, hoe, skank, skeezer, trick, tip or tip drill was not considered more or less misogynistic in nature than others songs, it simply was identified as a song that fell beneath the rubric of those considered nihilistic or life-defeating. The same song may have contained fewer references about drug use, and the rhetorical analysis analyzed the individual themes within one verse and/or chorus of the song. The use of rhetorical criticism to examine these songs was able to provide more detailed explanation about how these terms apply directly to questions posed in the analysis.

Published articles containing interviews of hip-hop artists and their perspectives

about the music, the recording industry, and other related issues were cited as well to help bolster the findings of this analysis. For example, interviews from magazines including *Vibe*, *Source*, *XXL*, *Essence*, and *Time* were included in this analysis. Published comments from hip-hop conferences and magazines, as well as public interviews from scholars gathered at an African-centered education conference in Chicago from September 16-18, 2005 also were included to provide information that was significantly useful in a section of the study designated for prescriptions and/or solutions to help decrease the nihilism in Black music. Some of the scholars included Naim Akbar, Haki Madhubuti, Maulana Karenga, Asa Hilliard, Wade Nobles, and Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam. Their comments speak directly to the future of Black children in America, particularly as they relate to self-image, the perpetuation of negative images and stereotypes, and the nihilism reflected in hip-hop music. Akbar, who spoke about the media's impact upon shaping minds, provided a key perspective regarding solutions.

Until we begin to take control of those forces that shape the images in the media, we're really powerless against a most powerful influence on how we think about ourselves. I think the unfortunate part is that even ownership doesn't necessarily determine control. Probably the most destructive image maker is BET (Black Entertainment Television). If you pursue power without ethics, then in fact, you end up becoming a tool for your own destruction...In fact, the one that we came to own and control was used as the most destructive tool toward images of our young people, and a whole generation has been wiped out by that. (N. Akbar, personal communication, Sept. 17, 2005)

Organization of Study

Chapter One of this analysis is the introduction of the dissertation. It identifies the purpose of the study and the rationale for undertaking it. The first chapter lists the research questions for the analysis, and it defines the procedure for assessing the rhetorical artifacts. This chapter explains the method to be implemented in this approach to rhetorical criticism. This chapter also includes research about the rhetoric of song and perspectives on black feminist criticism and critical theory. An extensive list of definitions is included in the first chapter as well.

Chapter Two answers the first research question: In what ways do hip-hop songs, particularly, and other songs, generally, performed by Black recording artists appearing on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart promote nihilistic themes when compared to songs performed by White artists of other genres? Chapter Three will answer the second research question: In what ways do hip-hop songs and other genres performed by Black recording artists help support arguments by Black feminists/critical theorists regarding the reinforcement of hegemony based upon white supremacist capitalist patriarchy?

Chapter Four will answer the third and final research question: What is the rhetorical potential of songs performed by Black artists that represent more empowering, uplifting, and life-redeeming themes to resist hegemony?

The final chapter will provide a summary and conclusion regarding the study. It also will summarize areas to consider for future research. The concluding chapter also will provide some prescriptions to address the current landscape of Black musical expression by summarizing the literature and comments by other authors and scholars.

Hip-hop can be a very powerful weapon to help expand young people's political and social consciousness. But just as with any weapon, if you don't know how to use it, if you don't know where to point it, or what you're using it for, you can end up shooting yourself in the foot or killing your sisters or brothers.

From an interview with Assata Shakur published at www.talkingdrum.com/bla4.html

CHAPTER TWO

A Rhetoric of Nihilism on Billboard's Hot 100

This chapter will examine 30 of the 40 songs that appear on the Top 10 of Billboard's Hot 100 charts from 1999-2006 through use of a rhetorical analysis. The other 10 songs will be analyzed in Chapter Three in reference to their connection to Black feminist and critical theories. The analysis in Chapter Two, however, examines the ways that songs by Black recording artists promote nihilistic themes when compared to songs performed by Whites and artists of other ethnicities who perform various genres on Billboard's Top 10 charts. It also will provide the answer to the following question: How do hip-hop songs, particularly, and other songs, generally, performed by Black recording artists on Billboard's Hot 100 charts promote nihilistic themes when compared to songs performed by White recording artists and others of various genres?

Interpreting the Rhetoric of the Top 10 on Billboard's Chart for Winter 1999

On Billboard's Hot 100 Singles Chart for the Winter of 1999, six of the Top 10 songs were performed by Black recording artists, including Brandy with the No. 1 song, "Have You Ever," R. Kelly at No. 2 with "I'm Your Angel," featuring Celine Dion, Monica with "Angel of Mine" at No. 4, Deborah Cox at No. 5 with "Nobody's Supposed To Be Here," Whitney Houston at No. 7 with "Heartbreak Hotel," and Lauryn Hill with

“Do Wop (That Thing)” at No. 8. None of the songs fit the category defined in this study as nihilistic or life-defeating. Only one of the Top 10 songs is considered hip-hop, and that is Lauryn Hill’s “Do Wop (That Thing). The following five songs were analyzed rhetorically. They include “Have You Ever” by Brandy, “Angel of Mine” by Monica, “Nobody’s Supposed To Be Here,” by Deborah Cox, “Believe” by Cher, and Sarah McLachlan’s “Angel.” Nine of the Top 10 songs are by female recording artists.

“Do Wop (That Thing)” by Lauryn Hill (Ruffhouse/Columbia, 1998)

What is interesting about Hill’s Grammy-Award-winning solo debut is how the lyrics of the song critically address a plethora of issues. The overriding themes are self-love, dignity, respect and responsibility. For example, Hill warns the girls to “watch out,” because “some guys are only about that thing, that thing, that thing.” Obviously, she is referring to the one-track mind of many guys who remain fixated on sex and women as objects. A lack of self-dignity and respect often will leave the spirits of women not only wounded, but also vulnerable to the next parasite. Hill’s words also resist the Europeanized standard of beauty and encourages black women to love themselves.

Showing off your ass 'cause you're thinking it's a trend
 Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again
 You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine
 Don't be a hardrock when you're really a gem
 Baby girl, respect is just a minimum
 Niggas fucked up and you still defending them
 Now Lauryn is only human
 Don't think I haven't been through the same predicament

Let it sit inside your head like a million women in Philly, Penn.
 It's silly when girls sell their soul because it's in
 Look at where you be in hair weaves like Europeans
 Fake nails done by Koreans (1998).

The lyrics can be considered empowering and life-redeeming. The song is from her critically acclaimed and Grammy Award winning album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), and has the potential to resist the stereotypical image of Black women as objects of desire, and posits them as being in control of their own destinies. Other aspects of this song will be analyzed in a subsequent chapter regarding black musical expression that resists hegemony. Not one to discriminate when giving advice, Hill issues a call for young Black men to get their acts together as well. More analysis is provided in Chap. 4.

The second verse is dedicated to the men
 More concerned with his rims and his timbs than his women
 Him and his men come in the club like hooligans
 Don't care who they offend popping yang like you got yen
 Let's not pretend, they wanna pack pistol by they waist men
 Cristal by the case men, still in they mother's basement
 The pretty face men claiming that they did a bid men
 Need to take care of their three and four kids men
 They facing a court case when the child's support late
 Money taking, heart breaking, now you wonder why women hate men
 The sneaky silent men, the punk domestic violence men

The quick to shoot the semen stop acting like boys and be men
 How you gon' win when you ain't right within?
 How you gon' win when you ain't right within?
 How you gon' win when you ain't right within? (1998)

“Have You Ever” by Brandy (Atlantic Records, 1998)

Although the nihilistic blend of hip-hop music was thriving in 1999, many of the Black recording artists who were winning the day in terms of successful sales, at least according to Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles chart, were considered R&B performers. For example, the No. 1 song on the chart was “Have You Ever,” by Brandy. Most of the

songs that Brandy performs are considered more commercialized versions of R & B.

Some listeners might even perceive her music as a blend of R & B with some pop music elements. Brandy, whose image has remained fairly sanitized when compared to some of hip-hop's most notorious female MCs including Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Remy Ma, and a few others, sang these seemingly innocent lyrics:

Have you ever loved somebody so much
It makes you cry?
Have you ever needed something so bad
You can't sleep at night?
Have you ever tried to find the words
But they don't come out right?
Have you ever, have you ever? (1998)

These words express the love and longing that one woman has for someone. The person she loves, however, does not feel the same way about the relationship. One of the most beautiful aspects of lyrical composition is that such words can be interpreted in similar ways by various individuals, not merely because of the overwhelming theme of the song, but because of the space that is provided for the listener to connect to the lyrics. For example, the lyrics do not reveal why the other person does not feel the same way or is not willing to give the woman the requisite love in return. For example, it is never revealed whether the person is unwilling to be more committed to this woman because of his or her own involvement with another. Neither is it revealed whether the person merely does not feel a love connection worth pursuing beyond the relationship's current level. By not revealing these scenarios, the song remains more open for interpretations by listeners. This provides the chance for the song to have a greater level of ascription (Makay & Gonzales, 1983).

Makay and Gonzales found that many fans of Bob Dylan's previous secular work were able to connect to his gospel album, *Slow Train Coming* (1979), because they recognized certain themes in the lyrics and familiar chord progressions in the music of the songs.

Have you ever found the one
 You've dreamed of all of your life?
 You'd do just anything to look into their eyes

Have you finally found the one you've given your heart to
 Only to find that one won't give their heart to you?
 Have you ever closed your eyes and
 Dreamed that they were there?
 And all you can do is wait for the day when they will care

What do I gotta do to get you in my arms baby?
 What do I gotta say to get to your heart
 To make you understand how I need you next to me?
 Gotta get you into my world
 'Cuz baby I can't sleep (1998)

It is important to note that while it is obvious that a woman is singing this song, and many listeners might assume that she is referring to a man as the one she loves, the lyrics remain gender-neutral. This means the loving relationship to which she refers is not limited to the typical dynamic of woman loving man or visa versa. It also means there is greater potential for this song to reach a wider audience in terms of ascription. One might get the feeling that even when the song concludes, the protagonist's obsessive love will continue. Although she believes she has found the love of her life, her heart continues to ache (One could interpret this to mean the person she loves is either unwilling or unable to quench her longing). Some of the song's lyrics give the listener the impression that this woman has grown to love this person from afar or a distance, and has not even expressed this feeling of love to the individual at all.

While this song speaks of love, it has the potential of sparking some feelings of angst and loneliness that a listener may be experiencing, like depression. However, it is not considered nihilistic by any stretch of the imagination. The song's core values are about loving someone so much that it hurts. Have you ever?

“Nobody’s Supposed To Be Here,” by Deborah Cox (Arista, 1998)

One of the most popular songs of the year was Deborah Cox’s “Nobody’s Supposed To Be Here,” which was in heavy rotation at radio stations across America and abroad. The song simply reveals a woman’s vain attempt to avoid entering yet another relationship where she falls in love, only to be hurt again. Time and time again, these relationships have ended, and she was the one who was hurt and lonely. Despite all of her attempts to focus on self-love and spending quality time learning to cherish herself, she eventually realizes that she must open up her heart to the possibility of true love. When she finds her soul mate, she asks him, “How did you get here?”

This time I swear I'm through
 But if only you knew
 How many times I've said those words?
 Then fall again, when will I ever learn
 Knowing these tears I cry
 This lovely black butterfly
 Must take a chance, and spread my wings
 Love can make you do some crazy things

So I placed my heart under lock and key
 To take some time, and take care of me
 But I turn around and you're standing here (1998)

“Believe” by Cher (Warner Music, 1998)

Considered an international hit that helped briefly rejuvenate the music career of

Cher, “Believe” was No. 6 on the 1999 Winter Hot 100 Singles chart. There are similar sentiments being expressed in Cher’s “Believe” and Brandy’s “Have You Ever.” Both express a love for someone who is either unwilling to return the same kind of love, unable to commit to the person, or ultimately, has decided to move on. Such is the case in “Believe.” She realizes it’s time to reach her potential without the one she loves. A voice inside says she is strong enough to move on, but her lover will find it more difficult to survive. What is particularly compelling is that Brandy’s song, “Have You Ever,” portrays the woman as being in a pitiful and lonely state of anguish and pain. Cher’s “Believe”, on the contrary, depicts the protagonist as being hurt by the ending of the affair, but also confident that her ex-lover will be the one who realizes he has lost the most. Once again, there is a very noticeable difference in the position of the women in these songs. One (Brandy, who is Black) is sad, lonely, and begging by the end of the song, while the other (Cher, who is White) is confident that he needed her more than she needed him. While neither one of these songs is considered nihilistic, a careful interpretation reveals that “Believe” can be considered more empowering.

No matter how hard I try
 You keep pushing me aside
 And I can't break through
 There's no talking to you
 So sad that you're leaving
 Takes time to believe it
 But after all is said and done
 You're going to be the lonely one

Do you believe in life after love
 I can feel something inside me say
 I really don't think you're strong enough (1998)

“Angel” by Sarah McLachlan (Arista, 1997)

One of the most compelling songs that appears on the Top 10 of Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles chart is Sarah McLachlan’s “Angel,” which was released in 1997. The fact that the song still prominently placed on the chart nearly two years after its release is a testament to its rhetorical strength. The song is another example of the power of ascription and the ability of lyrics to capture the imagination of listeners because of the variety of meanings drawn from one’s own experiences. A fundamental theme that should not be missed, however, is the feeling of never being “good enough.” To escape that feeling, many turn to drugs or alcohol for a way out. This particular song poignantly captures an intravenous drug user’s path of destruction. For example, the emphasis upon “release” and “seeps from my veins” conjures visions of being high as drugs fill the veins.

I need some distraction
Oh beautiful release
Memory seeps from my veins
Let me be empty
and weightless and maybe
I'll find some peace tonight (1997)

But the song also may conjure feelings of suicide with references to being in “the arms of an angel.” Minor musical chords are used in the production to help provide a sad, melancholy feeling for the listener. Others may interpret the lyrics as an ode to anyone who dies after long suffering throughout life, and death brings that pain to an end. Whether the suffering is from the effects of drug addiction, poverty, loneliness, pain, and despair, the song seems to indicate that the only way out of such depravity is death. This,

of course, would not be considered life-redeeming or uplifting. The song, however, has the potential to appeal to the sensibilities of a wide range of listeners in a spiritual sense, it essentially is empowering. It also has the transforming power to allow listeners to eulogize family and loved ones who may have been suffering in a variety of ways, but who provided some strength to others before they passed.

In the arms of an angel
 fly away from here
 from this dark cold hotel room
 and the endlessness that you fear
 You are pulled from the wreckage
 of your silent reverie
 you're in the arms of the angel
 may you find some comfort there (1997)

The brilliance of “Angel” is displayed in the song’s dexterity for multiple meanings and ascription. Ascription as it relates to this particular song means that it not only has the potential to appeal to individuals who may be experiencing various levels of angst and loneliness, but to others who are addicted to drugs or who have experienced the loss of a loved one either to drugs or some other tragic and untimely event. It also can be perceived as a song that has the potential to appeal to those who have had thoughts of suicide or who can relate to such emotions. This same song might appeal to people who are attempting to battle drug addiction. It also might resonate with those who have faced the reality that they are addicted and would much rather escape the life of angst through the “weightless” feeling that drugs provide. This song certainly can mean that the individual is addicted to heroin because of the reference, “memory seeps through my veins.” However, it also can be perceived as referring to any drug taken intravenously. It has the potential to appeal to those who use any kind of drug as an escape from reality

and/or pain. The lyrics suggest the song can be interpreted as an ode to musicians and recording artists who get burned out from a life on the road and succumb to drug use. The line “dark, cold hotel room” suggests the person is someone who travels frequently. This could be a musician, anyone who travels for business, or people who are considered transients for any number of reasons. Ascription applies to the various ways this song has the potential to appeal to others. Such narratives pose questions instead of promote ideas. As such, these kinds of songs escape being considered nihilistic.

Interpreting the Rhetoric of Billboard’s Top 10 Songs for Spring 2000

Of the Top 10 songs on Billboard’s Hot 100 Spring 2000 chart, five of them are performed by Black recording artists, and Destiny’s Child holds the highest position at No. 2 with “Say My Name.” The other artists include Toni Braxton at No. 6 with “He Wasn’t Man Enough,” Sisqo at No. 7 with “Thong Song,” Mariah Carey (featuring Joe and 98 Degrees) with “Thank God I Found You,” at No. 9, and finally, Macy Gray’s “I Try” at No. 10. Only one song of the Top 10, “Thong Song,” is considered nihilistic (containing misogynist themes). None of the songs performed by White recording artists of the Top 10 contain nihilistic themes. Five of the songs are performed by Black recording artists. Also, five of the Top 10 songs also are performed by female recording artists.

“Thong Song” by Sisqo (Def Soul, 1999)

The fundamental theme of “Thong Song” is one that posits women as objects for the fulfillment of men’s sexual desires and appetites. The overriding theme in the chorus

is “Let me see that thong...I like it when the beat goes...Let me see your booty go...” It specifically refers to the woman as hedonistic, and in essence, looking to draw some attention to her behind. The lyrics specifically refer to the look in her eye as “devilish,” and her motives as “scandalous.” The song also depicts Black men as sex-starved.

That girl so scandalous
And I know another nigga couldn't handle it
And she shakin that thang like who's da ish
With a look in her eye so devilish... (1999)

The woman’s body is compared to other inanimate objects, a clear example of the image of woman as objectified by the man singing the song. A sample of the lyrics are below:

She had dumps like a truck, truck, truck
Thighs like what, what, what
Baby move your butt, butt, butt
I think I’ll sing it again (1999)

What also is worth noting is the use of the word “nigga” in reference to the men who obsess about seeing her ass. The concept reinforces the idea of the Black man as not only disrespectful toward women, but his actions are seen as adolescent. He could be viewed as adolescent because of his perpetual gaze upon the woman’s physical assets only.

“Say My Name” by Destiny’s Child (Columbia, 1999)

This song by Destiny’s Child is one that helps empower women to protect themselves from lying or cheating men. It also suggests ways this can be accomplished. While that particular element of the song is considered life-redeeming or uplifting, it also points to another common theme that is unveiled throughout this rhetorical analysis – the concept of Black women continuously in relationships with Black men who are unfaithful. This theme will be further explored in a subsequent chapter. She interrogates

man she suspects is cheating. When her man refuses to say he loves her on the phone, she suspects he has female company and is cheating or “creeping.” The term “creeping” is considered slang for cheating. The subject of this song proposes showing up at the man’s doorstep with her “clique”. The word “clique” is synonymous with her group of friends. When she applies more pressure by asking the man a few simple questions, he tells her he is about to “bounce,” which is synonymous with leaving the scene.

What's up with this?
 Tell the truth, who you with?
 How would you like it if I came over with my clique?
 Don't try to change it now
 Sayin' you gotta bounce
 When two seconds ago, you said you just got in the house
 It's hard to believe that you
 are at home, by yourself
 When I just heard the voice
 Heard the voice of someone else
 Just this question
 Why do you feel you gotta lie?
 Gettin' caught up in your game
 When you cannot say my name (1999)

“Maria, Maria” by Carlos Santana (Arista, 1999)

The No. 1 song on this chart was Santana’s “Maria, Maria,” which focuses on a street-wise Latin beauty who grew up in the hardened barrios of East L.A. As a way out, she walks the street (on the corner), most likely as a prostitute (nihilistic), or as one who must hustle in various other ways to make ends meet. The song is a critique of ghetto angst and the limited choices offered through living in poverty in inner-city America.

Stop the looting, stop the shooting
 Pick pocketing on the corner
 See as the rich is getting richer
 The poor is getting poorer

See mi y Maria on the corner
 Thinking of ways to make it better
 In my mailbox there's an eviction letter
 Somebody just said see you later (1999)

“Breathe” by Faith Hill (Warner Brothers, 1999)

With one of the most popular songs of the year, Faith Hill focuses on the power of love and the transforming energy of being swept away by the breath of her lover. This certainly is a song with life-redeeming qualities that can uplift the spirit. Hill’s words indicate that she has become consumed with the kind of love she feels for her significant other, and nothing else seems to matter in the time and space she shares with this person.

I can feel the magic floating in the air
 Being with you gets me that way
 I watch the sunlight dance across your face
 And I've never been this swept away
 All my thoughts just seem to settle on the breeze
 When I'm lying wrapped up in your arms
 The whole world just fades away
 The only thing I hear
 Is the beating of your heart (1999)

“I Try” by Macy Gray (Epic, 1999)

It is obvious that some of the most popular songs by female recording artists are those with lyrics indicating that a woman’s world is not complete without the love of her soul mate. In Gray’s “I Try,” she honestly assesses her vulnerability and tells listeners that her cool facade is just that, and she refers to it as “a front.”

I may appear to be free
 But I'm just a prisoner of your love
 And I may seem all right and smile when you leave
 But my smiles are just a front
 Just a front, hey

I play it off, but I'm dreaming of you
 I'll keep my cool, but I'm feigning (1999)

This song, like a few others that already have been described, relies on the concept of longing for love lost or a relationship that is just not quite where it needs to be. The song is considered life-redeeming because of the level of ascription that can be assigned to such lyrics. Ascription as it relates to this song primarily operates in two different ways. The subject in this song can be referring to the intense love she feels for the other person, who as in other examples, may not be experiencing love with the same intensity. This song also could refer to someone's obsession with the sexual nature of the relationship. The reference to love in some songs can be associated with sex. A pattern of these types of songs already has been revealed.

Other songs in the Top 10 included "Amazed" by Lonestar, "I Knew I Loved You" by Savage Garden, "He Wasn't Man Enough" by Toni Braxton, "Bye, Bye, Bye" by NSYNC, and "Thank God I Found You" by Mariah Carey. Five songs from the Top 10 are performed by female recording artists. Four of the artists are White and one is Hispanic (Santana).

Interpreting the Rhetoric of Billboard's Top 10 Songs for Summer 2001

The Top 10 Songs from Billboard's Hot 100 Singles for Summer 2001 include Christina Aguilera's "Lady Marmalade" at No. 1, Destiny's Child's "Bootylicious" at No. 2, Usher's "U Remind Me" at No. 3, Alicia Keys "Fallin'" at No. 4, Blu Cantrell's "Hit Em Up Style" at No. 5, Eve's "Let Me Blow Ya Mind" at No. 6, Lifehouse's "Hanging By A Moment" at No. 7, Janet Jackson's "All For You" at No. 8, Jennifer Lopez's "I'm Real" at No. 9, and Nelly's "Ride Wit Me" at No. 10. Seven of the Top 10

songs are performed by Black recording artists, and seven of the songs are performed by female recording artists as well. The five songs selected for rhetorical analysis are listed below.

“Lady Marmalade” by Christina Aguilera (Interscope, 2001)
featuring Lil’ Kim, Mya, Pink and Missy Elliot

Although the song, “Lady Marmalade,” was recorded and performed in 1975 by the group LaBelle, which featured the legendary Patti Labelle, the producers of the more recent version took some liberties in rewriting a few lyrics. The new version of the song was included on the soundtrack, *Moulin Rouge* (2001). The track features Christina Aguilera, Lil’ Kim, Mya and Pink. The first difference in the new version is that instead of meeting Marmalade “down in old New Orleans,” the 2001 version of the song replaces the words New Orleans with Moulin Rouge. Lady Marmalade in the new version, however, was still “strutting her stuff on the street.” Lil’ Kim, considered the nastiest performer of the bunch, is one of three hip-hop artists featured in the song. The others include Missy Elliot and Mya. Pink is in a category by herself, which some might argue is a cross between rock and pop. The other artists, particularly Missy Elliot and Lil’ Kim, also are in categories by themselves. Missy is considered unique as a performing artist primarily because she is both a producer/writer and entertainer. The combination is rare among female artists in today’s music industry. Lil’ Kim solidified her position as one of the raunchiest, no holds barred rappers with her sexually-explicit *Big Momma Thing* (Urban Atlantic, 1996). In “Lady Marmalade,” Lil’ Kim shouts the question, “Where’s all my soul sistas? Let me hear ya’ll flow sistas.” Generally, Black women are considered “soul sistas,” a term born during the Black Nationalist Movement of the late

1960s and early 1970s. It is interesting how the term, one of empowerment during the movement, is used to subvert the original meaning in the new version of “Lady Marmalade.” The chorus, “Voulez vous coucher avec moi ce soir?” is French and means “Do you want to sleep with me tonight?” Essentially, soul sistas are reduced to prostitutes in this version of “Lady Marmalade.” The new version evokes a critical question. Why are references to “soul sistas” added to the latest version? The song primarily speaks of two issues. One, it dramatizes the life of a prostitute who is so good at what she does that her performance leaves her patrons screaming for “more, more, more.” Two, it explores the complicity of a man (who is possibly married) who engages regularly in sex with the prostitute. Essentially, this businessman and/or professional is living a tainted double life.

Now he's back home doin' 9 to 5
 Living the grey flannel life
 But when he turns off to sleep
 Oh memories creep
 More, more, more (1975)

Lil' Kim's performance is a key factor in determining whether to select the song as one considered life-redeeming or uplifting (because in some ways, the song is empowering, yet demeaning at the same time). It can be perceived as demeaning for many of the reasons that already have been described. It also can be perceived as empowering to some women who view this woman's relationship with her client as one in which she is in control. It is strictly business, and she determines the parameters for this agreement. It also appears that the man is addicted to the arrangement. Lil' Kim even proclaims in one line that “some mistake us for whores” and that she could care less what they think. This

idea of an empowering image, of course, can be debated because it is primarily another matter based upon perceptions, values, morals, beliefs, etc. As the concepts were defined in this study, the lyrics indicate nihilistic themes. The following lyrics by Lil' Kim signify the most egregious examples of nihilism as defined by this analysis.

He come through with the money in the garter belts
 I let him know we bout that cake straight out the gate
 We independent women, some mistake us for whores
 I'm sayin', why spend mine when I can spend yours?
 Disagree? Well that's you and I'm sorry
 I'ma keep playing these cats out like Atari
 wearing high heel shoes, getting love from the dudes
 Four bad ass chicks from the Moulin Rouge (2001)

Indicating that she is in control and that selling sex is all about business, the prostitute stakes her claim as an independent woman, regardless of how others might perceive her as a “hoe” or “whore.” Within the same stanza of lyrics, she also claims she will play the game by her own rules and take each client for every dollar she can. Thus, the lyrics “I'ma keep playing these cats out like Atari.” Atari is considered the dinosaur of today's video games.

“Hanging By A Moment” by Lifehouse (DreamWorks, 2000)

This song and R. Kelly's “Angel,” which features Celine Dion, are two songs that are unique in comparison to all of the others on Billboard's Top 10. They represent two songs out of 80 that can be considered spiritual or theological. The success of a Christian-based song performed by a White rock band on the Top 10 Billboard chart is compelling as it relates to the idea of love also representing God, instead of the romantic type expressed between two people. The brief examination of this song is significant when compared to most songs performed by Black recording artists on the same chart.

Lifehouse reached No. 7 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart in the summer of 2001, yet at least three songs performed by Black recording artists in the Top 10 (along with two White artists in the case of "Lady Marmalade,") for the same period are considered nihilistic, according to this study's definition. They include "Lady Marmalade" at No. 1, Destiny's Child's "Bootylicious" at No. 2, and Nelly's "Ride Wit Me" at No. 10. When the band, Lifehouse, sings of "falling even more in love with you," they can be referring to Jesus Christ or God, and not the physical love between two people that often permeates the lyrics of many popular songs. Even that concept, however, seems to be absent in Black musical expression as reflected in the current Top 10 of Billboard's Hot 100 Singles. Lifehouse's "Hanging By A Moment," however, departs from the standardized theme of love between two people as expressed on Billboard's popular music charts to elevate the theme of Christian love.

Desperate for changing
 Starving for truth
 I'm closer to where I started
 Chasing after you
 I'm falling even more in love with you
 Letting go of all I've held onto
 I'm standing here until you make me move
 I'm hanging by a moment here with you (2000)

"Bootylicious" by Destiny's Child (Columbia, 2001)

The premise of this song is based upon the idea of challenging someone to come to the dance floor not only to work out, but for the thrill of the experience. The woman who makes the request does not believe the one she has challenged is up to the task of surviving the duration of the dance. However, the song ventures into an area considered

nihilistic because of the song's references to performing dance moves that potentially can be likened to having marathon-event-type sex.

I don't think you can handle this
 I'm about to break you off
 H-town goin' hard
 Read my hips
 Slap my thighs
 Swing my hair
 Squint my eyes
 Lookin' hot
 Smellin' good
 Groovin' like
 I'm from the hood
 I don't think you're ready for this jelly
 I don't think you're ready for this
 'cause my body's too bootylicious for ya babe (2001)

The words, “I don’t think you can handle this,” often are used when referring to the possibility of sex. Sometimes, this kind of language also is used as an aspect of foreplay. The term, “break you off” has a sexual connotation, meaning the person will provide some sexual satisfaction to his or her lover. Sexual innuendos are employed as a tool to attract listeners, meaning high ascriptive value is placed upon the concept of sex in the song’s lyrics. The words, “Goin’ hard” are not likely to be mistaken for their reference to dancing, but the context begins to change with the lyrics “Read my hips” “Slap my thighs,” and “I don’t think you’re ready for this jelly.” She is referring to her butt, of course. These lyrics are considered nihilistic as defined by this study as well.

“Let Me Blow Your Mind” by Eve, featuring Gwen Stefani (Interscope, 2001)

Although Eve’s “Let Me Blow Your Mind” features some words that can be considered nihilistic including “bitch” and “nigga,” the context in which the words are

performed is what is critical to this analysis. This song is more about confidence, self-respect and the rap diva's power in the music game. She challenges those who often are referred to as "haters" to move out of the way or get stepped on. Eve warns other hip-hop artists to watch their backs because she will make their fans her own. Her rap prowess is so incredible, she boasts, that it will make competitors wish she wrote their rhymes.

Now while you grittin' your teeth
 Frustration baby you gotta breathe
 Take a lot more than you to get rid of me
 You see I do what they can't do, I just do me
 Ain't no stress when it comes to stage, get what you see
 Meet me in the lab, pen and pad, don't believe
 Huh, sixteen's mine, create my own lines
 Love for my wordplay that's hard to find
 Sophomore, I ain't scared, one of a kind
 All I do is contemplate ways to make your fans mine
 Eyes bloodshot, stressin', chills up your spine
 Huh, sick to your stomach, wishing I wrote your rhymes (2001)

"Ride Wit Me" by Nelly (Universal, 2000)

Nelly has faced controversy in the past regarding the lyrics to some of his songs, which many women consider misogynist and/or nihilistic (Essence, July 2005). In the summer of 2001, "Ride Wit Me" was characteristic of the kind of song that made Nelly one of the hottest recording artists in the music business. Because such misogyny is apparent in the lyrics of his song, "Ride Wit Me" it is considered life-defeating and/or nihilistic. The word "bitch" is used regularly in Nelly's songs, and not as a term of endearment. Other elements of the song focus on some of the ideologies identified previously.

But yo, it's all good, Range Rover all wood
 Do me like you should - fuck me good, suck me good

We be no stud niggas, wishin you was niggas
 Poppin like we drug dealers, sippin Crissy, bubb' mackin'
 Honey in the club, me in the Benz (2000)

Although Nelly and his entourage are not portraying drug dealers, the glamour and glitz of living like they are is expressed in the lyrics of this song. Another prevalent theme is that of hyper-materialism. Mindless consumerism is a major aspect of hip-hop culture. The mass consumption of grills among many youth is just one example of this phenomenon. Although these elaborate, jeweled, golden or platinum caps or covers are not needed to help adjust or straighten one's teeth, they are purchased as a sign of not only solidarity with certain aspects of ghetto culture, but also to impress others regarding an individual's status.

Interpreting the Rhetoric of Billboard's Top 10 Songs for Fall 2002

The Top 10 songs on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles include Kelly Clarkson's "A Moment Like This" at No. 1, Eminem's "Lose Yourself" at No. 2, Avril Lavigne's "Complicated" at No. 3, Nelly's "Hot in Herre" at No. 4, LL Cool J's "Luv U Better" at No. 5, Eminem's "Cleaning Out My Closet" at No. 6, Santana featuring Michelle Branch with "The Game of Love" at No. 7, Creed's "One Last Breath" at No. 8, Mario's "Just A Friend" at No. 9, and Sean Paul's "Gimme The Light" at No. 10. Hip-hop songs represent four of the Top 10 singles on the charts, and Black recording artists make up two of the four hip-hop songs. Eminem, who is White, performs the other two hip-hop singles that appear at No. 2 and No. 6 on the chart. Three of the 10 songs meet the qualifications for being categorized as nihilistic and/or life-defeating. One of Eminem's songs, "Cleaning Out My Closet," is considered nihilistic because of its references to

disdain and ill will toward his mother. A thorough examination, however, reveals a detailed and complex story about the dysfunction and nihilism that were pervasive during his childhood years, manifested primarily by his mother's warped sense of reality. Nelly's "Hot in Herre" is yet another example of nihilism because of its blatant misogyny. And Sean Paul's "Gimme the Light" makes the grade of nihilism for its promotion of drug and alcohol use. Two of the three songs are considered hip-hop (Eminem's "Cleaning Out My Closet," and Nelly's "Hot in Herre"). One (Sean Paul's "Gimme the Light"), is considered dance hall music. The music of one Black recording artist on the chart, Mario, is considered R & B in terms of genre, and does not contain nihilistic themes. There are three female recording artists on this chart. The number represents a significant decline in representation compared to the previous three years.

"A Moment Like This" by Kelly Clarkson (RCA, 2002)

American Idol winner Kelly Clarkson placed No. 1 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart for Fall of 2002. Her chart-topping song continued the pattern of themes focused on uplifting and life-redeeming issues or topics of songs performed by White recording artists on the top-selling charts. The lyrics are fairly self-explanatory and most likely would garner similar responses from listeners regarding the song's rhetorical potential. It details the overwhelming feeling of joy that one experiences when meeting someone whom the person feels he or she has met before, maybe in another lifetime. Lyrically, it evokes the kind of emotion expected of someone who has met the person she believes is the love of her life.

Would you believe me, would you agree?

It's almost that feeling that we've met before
 So tell me that you don't think I'm crazy
 When I tell your love is here and now

A moment like this
 Some people wait a lifetime for a moment like this
 Some people search forever for that one special kiss
 I can't believe it's happening to me
 Some people wait a lifetime for a moment like this (2003)

“Hot In Herre” by Nelly (Universal, 2002)

Nelly's “Hot In Herre” was one of the most popular songs of 2002 and remained No. 1 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart for nearly two months. Although the song was popular, it nonetheless met the criteria for songs performed by Black recording artists that represent nihilism in popular music. Many of Nelly's songs objectify women and include repetitious references to booties and sexual intercourse. In “Hot In Herre,” the first thing the protagonist notices is an “ass” that is “bodacious.” When the opportunity arises, he will make his move on the woman to find out whether she is willing to leave the club for some excitement and/or sexual release. The lyrics also indicate that he is looking for a number of women who are considered “freaks,” although Nelly does not use this term. And when he finds them, he will leave with his “heathens” for a night of sexual pleasure. The lyrics also indicate that the protagonist is evaluating the woman in an effort to determine if she is “a freak,” meaning whether she is willing to dance on a pole he has in his basement. The pole's use is popular among strippers:

Stop pacin', time wastin'
 I gotta friend with a pole in the basement (What?)
 I'm just kiddin like Jason (Oh!)
 Unless you gonna do it (2002)

Other misogynist lyrics appear when Nelly objectifies women with his reference to “ass.”

I was like, good gracious, ass bodacious
 Flirtacious, tryin to show faces
 Lookin’ for the right time to shoot my steelo (you know)
 Lookin’ for the right time to flash them keys
 Then um I’m leavin, please believin’
 Me and the rest of my heathens (2002)

Nelly’s song also reinforces the idea that in order to be considered popular, hot, or worth the accolades of the in-crowd, one must buy rounds of champagne by the cases, and be surrounded by all kinds of pretty women, all of with whom the person has had the pleasure of having sex.

Why you at the bar if you ain’t poppin the bottles?
 What good is all the fame if you ain’t fuckin’ the models? (2002)

“Luv U Better” by LL Cool J (Def Jam, 2002)

LL Cool J is considered one of the pioneers of rap and one who has cornered the music industry market for songs about loving and respecting women. LL Cool J is one of the most successful rap artists in the history of hip-hop, with a career spanning more than two decades. In “Luv U Better,” LL raps about the need to take more time out to focus on quality moments with his love interest. He admits he has taken her for granted, and in some cases, neglected her. However, he has taken notice and is ready to change the current state of affairs.

This is hard to say
 I wanna make sure I go about this in the right way
 Cuz lately I been busy a lot

And I know you don't feel appreciated and what not
 I used to tell you that your hair looked fly
 Kiss you slow and stare in your eyes
 Now I talk real foul and slick
 Every other sentence is, you make me sick (2002)
 Back in the days I was your number one pick
 Now your hearts hair-broken and that's hard to fix
 I had to dig deep inside myself
 Cuz I can't see you bouncin' with somebody else
 It's a long journey back to the place we was
 When I was too embarrassed to admit I was in love
 And you was my good girl that wouldn't give it up
 I can't let us self-destruct (2002)

L. L. reminisces about how much better he treated his significant other during previous times in their relationship. Then, he was quick to give her compliments, one of which is that her “hair looked fly.” This term means her hair was beautiful. Currently, however, he has been too busy to give her compliments, and has even resorted to being disrespectful at times. Thus, his reference to talking “foul and slick” indicate this tension. Finally, he realizes that he has not been treating her with the love and respect she deserves, and he decides to work on becoming a better man.

“Cleaning Out My Closet” by Eminem (Interscope, 2002)

As indicated above, Eminem's story in “Cleaning Out My Closet” is a compelling one that indicates primarily that his mother was egregiously dysfunctional. While the lyrics paint a vivid portrayal of angst and hopelessness with regard to his experiences as a child who was not nurtured by his mother, they also poignantly weave a story about triumph despite the odds being stacked against him. However, for the purposes of this analysis, Eminem's lyrics represent nihilistic themes and topics because of his references to his mother as a “bitch,” and his unwillingness to even allow his own daughter to attend

her grandmother's funeral. The song "Cleaning Out My Closet" can be taken literally by some listeners who can experience the pain in Eminem's words with or without having a similar experience with their own mothers. It appears the process of recording this particular song was indeed an act of "cleaning out" his closet. Although the song has been dubbed nihilistic as it relates to this analysis, it nonetheless is a compelling story, and one that can be perceived as being thoughtfully constructed.

But guess what, you're gettin' older now, and it's cold when you're lonely
 And Nathan's growing up so quick, he's gonna know that you're phony
 And Hailie's getting so big now, you should see her, she's beautiful
 But you'll never see her, she won't even be at your funeral
 See what hurts me the most is you won't admit you was wrong
 Bitch, do your song, keep tellin' yourself that you was a mom
 But how dare you try to take what you didn't help me to get
 You selfish bitch, I hope you fuckin' burn in hell for this shit
 Remember when Ronnie died and you said you wished it was me
 Well guess what, I am dead, dead to you as can be (2002)

This song, in many ways, can be likened to the lyrics of a heavy metal, death metal, punk rock or grunge song. Of all the songs examined in this study, however, none fall beneath the above-listed categories. The group, Nickelback, might be considered a post-grunge band by some, however. Generally, the genre of music that most often places in the Top 10 with these kinds of lyrics is hip-hop. Although the nihilism in this case is represented by Eminem, a White artist, most nihilism on the charts is reflected by Black artists.

"Gimme the Light" by Sean Paul (VP/Atlantic Records, 2002)

Just gimme the light and pass the dro!
 Buss anotha bottle a moe (Huh, huh, huh, huh)
 Gal dem inna mi sight and I got to know (Yeah, yeah)

Which one is gonna catch my flow (Busta Bus now)
 Cause I'm inna di vibe and I got my dough! (Yeah, Sean Paul now)
 Buss anotha bottle a moe (2002)

Although Sean Paul has what is considered a clean version of this song, the explicit version is useful in supporting the argument established in this analysis. In his clean version of the song, the lyrics state, “Just gimme the light and start the show. Girl I need a massage and I gotta know which one is gonna catch my flow.” The explicit version of the song, however, promotes drug and alcohol use. The choice of drugs referred to in his song is marijuana, which he refers to as “dro.” The choice of drink is Moët, which he refers to as “Moe.” When Sean Paul speaks of one of the women possibly catching his flow, he is referring to the one with whom he will likely have sex. It also could mean, however, that one of the women is impressed by his conversation, wit and style. While Sean Paul is considered multi-ethnic in terms of race, his Caribbean roots place his music within the context of popular Black musical expression.

Interpreting the Rhetoric of Billboard’s Top 10 Songs for Summer 2003

This particular quarter included the second most Black recording artists (8) who appeared on the Top 10 of Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles of all the years under study. The same period, however, also represented a sparse number of female recording artists as well. Four of the Top 10 songs on the chart are represented by nihilistic themes performed by Black recording artists. Three of the songs are considered hip-hop, while one is dancehall music. Songs by hip-hop (rap) artists include “21 Questions” and “P.I.M.P”, both by 50 Cent, “Right Thurr” by Chingy, and “Magic Stick” by Lil’ Kim, featuring 50 Cent.

The complete Top 10 list includes Beyonce with “Crazy in Love” at No. 1, 50 Cent with “21 Questions” at No. 2, Clay Aiken’s “This Is The Night” at No. 3, Ashanti’s “Rock Wit You” at No. 4, Chingy’s “Right Thurr” at No. 5, Lil’ Kim’s “Magic Stick” at No. 6, Sean Paul’s “Get Busy” at No. 7, Ruben Studdard’s “Flying Without Wings” at No. 8, 50 Cent’s “P.I.M.P.” at No. 9, and Lumidee’s “Never Leave You” at No. 10. Four of the 10 songs are considered nihilistic, with all four of them performed by Black recording artists.

“21 Questions” by 50 Cent (Shady Records, 2003)

Interestingly, the one recording artist that epitomizes nihilism in music has the No. 2 song on the Billboard chart, “21 Questions.” The song by 50 Cent, however, is not considered more life-defeating based upon the standards for this analysis than most of the other songs that were labeled as such. In fact, the song raises a critical question about the authenticity of true love. It is titled “21 Questions” because it probes the mind of a lover to determine whether she would still love and support the protagonist if a variety of situations and circumstances were different in his life. For example, the lyrics explore these various hypothetical situations:

If I fell off tomorrow would you still love me?
 If I didn't smell so good would you still hug me?
 If I got locked up and sentenced to a quarter century,
 Could I count on you to be there to support me mentally?
 If I went back to a hoopty from a Benz, would you poof and disappear like
 some of my friends?
 If I was hit and I was hurt would you be by my side?
 If it was time to put in work would you be down to ride? (2003)

The themes projected in at least four words, however, cross into the nihilistic realm when 50 Cent refers to killing another with his use of the words, “peel a nigga cap”. When used

metaphorically, or exactly as it is used, hypothetically, the lyric should be considered non-threatening. This is primarily the case because the lyrics do not promote the action, and merely state the question in a hypothetical manner. He even indicates the question is merely hypothetical and designed to assess how she really feels about him. 50 Cent even indicates that is the purpose of his inquiry in the following passage:

I'd get out and peel a nigga cap and chill and drive
I'm asking questions to find out how you feel inside (2003)

“P.I.M.P.” by 50 Cent (Shady Records, 2003)

Unlike the lyrics of the No. 2 song by 50 Cent, it is obvious his song, “P.I.M.P.” belongs in the category beneath the heading “Nihilism.” Despite the majority of his songs belonging to this category, the overwhelming favorite recording artist among hip-hop fans in 2003 was 50 Cent. The nearly overnight sensation eventually starred in a Hollywood-produced movie about his life, *Get Rich or Die Trying* (2005). There is little need for a meticulous examination of these lyrics to determine a deeper or more profound meaning. Simply put in black and white, the lyrics refer to pimping. This is one of the most nihilistic-laden songs of all 80 interpreted. 50 Cent refers to the woman in this song as a “bitch.” Another demeaning aspect of the song is his reference to her “dancing for dollars,” referring to her role as a stripper. He also has labeled her as a “sapphire,” a term used by both Hill-Collins (2000) and hooks (1995) in their Black feminist critiques.

I don't know what you heard about me
But a bitch can't get a dollar out of me
No Cadillac, no perms, you can't see
That I'm a mutherfuckin' P-I-M-P

Now shorty, she in the club, she dancing for dollars
 She got a thing for that Gucci, that Fendi, that Prada
 That BCBG, Burberry, Dolce and Gabana
 She feed them foolish fantasies, they pay her cause they wanna

I spit a little G man, and my game got her
 A hour later, have that ass up in the Ramada
 Them trick niggas in her ear saying they think about her
 I got the bitch by the bar trying to get a drink up out her (2003)

“Crazy In Love” by Beyonce featuring Jay-Z (Columbia, 2003)

Beyonce’s No. 1 “Crazy in Love” does not fit the description for songs considered nihilistic. The lyrics, however, seem to indicate that the protagonist might be obsessed with the physical pleasure or sexual relationship with the love interest described. The song escapes the nihilistic categorization, however, because of the use of the word “love.” (The use of the word “love” in this way leaves it more broadly open to interpretation). This song is consistent with themes that position women as obsessive about loving or being with a particular man. The same theme also was evident in Brandy’s “Have You Ever,” Macy Gray’s “I Try,” Alicia Keys’ “Fallin,” and Mary J. Blige’s “Be Without You.”

The song by Mary J. Blige, however, can be perceived as more empowering than the others because it reveals a relationship that has been built over the years from love, commitment and trust. So the song’s line, “and I can’t be without you baby,” is really a proclamation that she would rather not be without him because of the strength of their love for each other. Beyonce’s song, “Crazy in Love,” however, can be perceived as somewhat obsessive in terms of her longing for a particular man as indicated below:

I look and stare so deep in your eyes
 I touch on you more and more every time
 When you leave I'm beggin' you not to go
 Call your name two, three times in a row
 Such a funny thing for me to try to explain
 How I'm feeling and my pride is the one to blame
 Yeah, cause I know I don't understand
 Just how your love can do what no one else can (2003)

There also is some concern by the protagonist that she may be acting out of character.

Thus, the use of the lyric, "got me lookin' so crazy right now."

Got me lookin' so crazy right now
 Your love's got me lookin' so crazy right now
 (Your love) got me lookin' so crazy right now
 Your touch's got me lookin' so crazy right now
 (Your touch) got me hoping you page me right now
 Your kiss's got me hoping you save me right now
 Lookin so crazy, your love's got me lookin'
 Got me lookin' so crazy your love (2003)

"Never Leave You" by Lumidee (Universal, 2003)

This song by Lumidee is yet another example of White recording artists whose songs remain focused on values that are considered empowering, life-redeeming, or uplifting. Considered a dance song, the beat and the chords used in the music also provide an uplifting backdrop for the spirit which is represented in the lyrics.

Honestly
 If I tell, tell you what,
 What you want to know love
 There ain't another,
 Don't want no other lover
 I put nothing above ya.
 I kick them to the gutter.
 You try to shake me but wound up loving me crazy now

Look at us lately and tell them who's your lady
 I'd never thought you'd be the one,
 Make me shine brighter than the sun
 There ain't no ups and downs,
 No in and out to here right now. (2003)

“Right Thurr” by Chingy (Capitol, 2003)

The sexual imagery in Chingy’s No. 5 song on the Billboard chart qualifies as belonging to the category of songs considered nihilistic. Once again, this kind of song evokes an attitude of indifference toward a woman as a sexual object. It also describes the protagonist as a predator who is “swoopin’ down on its prey.”

I like the way you do that right thurr (right thurr)
 Lick your lips when you're talkin', that make me stare...
 Look at her hips, (what?) look at her legs, ain't she stacked? (stacked)
 I sure wouldn't mind hittin' that from the back (back)
 I like it when I touch it cuz she moan a l'il bit
 Jeans saggin' so I can see her thong a l'il bit...
 I know you grown a little bit, twenty years old, you legal
 Don't trip off my people, just hop in the regal
 I swooped on her like an eagle swoopin' down on its prey
 I know you popular, but you gon' be famous today... (2003)

“Magic Stick” by Lil’ Kim (Queen Bee/Undeas/Atlantic, 2003)

On Lil’ Kim’s “Magic Stick,” 50 Cent is featured and leads a call and answer with a line that refers to his sexual prowess and insatiable libido. Of course, the magic stick is the metaphor for his penis. The main theme of 50 Cent’s banter is braggadocio about his sexual performance. He proudly proclaims that if he sexed the woman once, he can again.

I got the magic stick
 I know if I can hit once, I can hit twice
 I hit the baddest chicks
 Shorty don't believe me, then come with me tonight
 And I'll show you magic
 (What? What?) Magic (uh huh uh huh)

I got the magic stick (2003)

Lil' Kim's response, as expected, is nastier and more raunchy than that of 50 Cent. No words wasted, she gets straight to the point about making a man want to perform oral sex on her. In an interesting twist with regard to most hip-hop songs, Lil' Kim provides a rebuttal to the man's braggadocio.

I got the magic clit
 I know if I get licked once, I get licked twice
 I am the baddest chick
 Shorty you don't believe me, then come with me tonight
 And I'll show you magic
 (What? What?) Magic, uh huh uh huh
 I got the magic clit (2003)

The dialogue in verses by 50 Cent indicate a thug's mentality about sex. His reference, "straight beat it up," refers to rough sex with no holds barred. What should be considered when examining the lyrics of songs such as these is whether there is any redeeming value whatsoever in allowing children of any age to listen to them. Or would mothers, fathers, and grandparents be offended as well? For example, try to determine what the value might be for the following lyrics by 50 Cent, then attempt to analyze the aesthetic value of Lil' Kim's reply.

50 Cent:

Get the position down pat, then it's time to switch
 I'll rock the boat, I'll work the middle
 I speed it up, straight beat it up. (2003)

Lil' Kim:

But I sex a nigga so good, he gotta tell his boys
 When it come to sex, don't test my skills
 Cause my head game have you HEAD over heels

Give a nigga the chills, have him pay my bills...
 And I ain't out shoppin' spendin' dudes C-notes
 I'm in the crib givin' niggas deep throat
 Tonight Lil' Kim gon' have you in the zone
 Girls, call ya crib, I'm answerin' the phone
 Guys wanna wife me 'n' give me the ring
 I'll do it anywhere, anyhow, down for anything (2003)

Interpreting the Rhetoric of Billboard's Top 10 Songs for Spring 2004

The Top 10 Billboard Singles for this particular period were represented by seven Black recording artists. However, only one female recording artist, Beyonce, appeared on the best-selling chart. The Top 10 include Usher at No. 1 with "Burn," Chingy at No. 2 with "One Call Away," J-Kwon at No. 3 with "Topsy," Outkast at No. 4 with "The Way You Move," Cassidy featuring R. Kelly with "Hotel," Beyonce's "Naughty Girl" at No. 6, Clay Aiken's "Solitaire" at No. 7, Jay-Z's "Dirt Off Your Shoulder" at No. 8, Maroon 5's "This Love" at No. 9, and Hoobastank's "The Reason" at No. 10. Five of the Top 10 are hip-hop songs, but only one female artist, Beyonce, appears on the chart. Seven of the songs are performed by Black recording artists, and five of them are considered nihilistic in terms of their overriding themes or topics. All five of the Top 10 that are considered nihilistic are represented by Black recording artists. The three songs by White recording artists, however, all contain life-affirming or uplifting themes or messages.

"Let It Burn" by Usher (Arista, 2004)

At No. 1 on the chart was Usher's "Burn," which captures the essence of what it might be like to finally give up on a relationship before it becomes too costly emotionally and physically. In the chorus of the song, Usher repeats the following:

When your feeling ain't the same and your body don't want to

But you gotta let it go cuz the party ain't jumpin' like it used to
 Even though this might bruise you
 Let it burn
 Let it burn
 Gotta let it burn (2004)

In the second verse of the song, Usher delves deeper into the psyche of one who is experiencing this kind of dilemma. Although he has started a relationship with another woman, he is sending pages to his ex-lover. It also is obvious that the woman whom he is thinking about decided to break off the relationship because of a transgression by the man. This is the only song performed by a Black man of the 80 songs interpreted that echo the theme of the songs performed by Black women that portray Black men as problematic, unfaithful, and lacking control of their sexual appetites. Although listeners are never made aware of what the “mistake” is in this song, this can be perceived by some fans as “he cheated.”

Sendin' pages I ain't supposed to
 Got somebody here but I want you
 Cause the feelin' ain't the same
 Find myself callin' her your name
 Ladies tell me do you understand?
 Now all my fellas do you feel my pain?
 It's the way I feel
 I know I made a mistake
 Now it's too late
 I know she ain't comin' back
 What I gotta do now? (2004)

“Naughty Girl” by Beyonce (Columbia, 2004)

Beyonce’s “Naughty Girl” poignantly exhibits one of the aims of this particular study, which is to show how American popular music reflects the hegemony based upon

white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. It provides yet another example that Black women are defined within the gaze of race and gender through the lens of blatant stereotypes and racist ideology. The only other song at this point of the analysis that indicates that White women sometimes are objectified as part of this kind of gaze is “Lady Marmalade,” which features Christina Aguilera and Pink, both White female recording artists. But Black women, Lil’ Kim, Mya and Missy Elliott, also perform on this song. In the introduction of “Naughty Girl,” Beyonce sings the lyrics of a song made popular by former disco diva, Donna Summers: “I love to love you baby.” The song’s reference to being “nasty,” however, is one of the most compelling factors for determining the category for this song. The song’s reference to possibly taking the suitor to the woman’s home is yet another concept related to the pursuit of hedonistic values at any cost.

I'm feelin' sexy
 I wanna hear you say my name, boy
 If you can reach me
 You can feel my burnin' flame

Feelin' kinda NASTY
 I just might take you home wit me (2004)

“One Call Away” by Chingy (Capitol, 2003)

This song explores alcohol abuse, treating a woman with disrespect because of her own lack of self-esteem, and being patient in the pursuit of sex or carnal pleasure because of the belief that sex is inevitable. In so many ways, the lyrics reinforce the idea that sex is not a sacred or precious act of expressive love or even spiritual bonding. There

is also the reference to illegal drug use, “puff on a blunt.” The themes are exhibited in the lyrics:

Girl recognize game, before game recognize you
 You're dealin' wit a player, true
 Now whatchu wanna do?
 We can kick it and go puff on a blunt
 Oh you don't smoke? Grab a pint of Hen' then we can get drunk
 It's up to you, I'm the man, but baby just let me know
 Cuz if you got an attitude, I could treat you just like a hoe
 Get to rollin wit me baby, hop in there's enough room
 We can gaze at the stars that shine like the moon
 Gimme a chance to show ya, and a chance to know ya
 Just be true, and there's nothing I won't do, for ya
 Some women like to play it foul (foul)
 But them the kind I put in the place of a child (child)
 Don't worry be happy and smile (2004)

“Tipsy” by J-Kwon featuring R. Kelly (So So Def Records/Arista, 2004)

J-Kwon’s “Tipsy” reached No. 3 on the Spring Billboard Hot 100 Singles Chart.

This song is an anthem about “everybody in da club gettin’ tipsy,” meaning getting drunk or “crunk” in modern lingo. This song promotes alcohol, sex, materialism, and violence.

1, here comes the 2 to the 3 to the 4,
 Everybody drunk out on the dance floor,
 Baby girl ass jiggle like she want more,
 Like she a groupie and I ain’t even on tour,
 Maybe cause she heard that I rhyme hardcore,
 Or maybe cause she heard that I buy out the stores,
 Bottom of the 9th and a nigga gotta score,
 If not, I gotta move on to the next floor
 Here comes the 3 to the 2 to the 1,
 Homeboy trippin' he don't know I got a gun,
 When it come to pop man we do shit for fun,
 You ain’t got one nigga you betta run (2004)

“Dirt Off Your Shoulder” by Jay-Z (Roc-A-Fella, 2003)

At No. 8, Jay-Z's "Dirt Off Your Shoulder" focuses on moving on when life gets rougher than usual. While that is one message for a listener to take away from this song, the other terms used might lead to many more derogatory or life-defeating meanings. Some of the same themes are reiterated in Jay-Z's rhetoric including drug dealing, pimping and materialism. Cooking crack (cocaine) is apparent with "in the kitchen with soda."

If you feelin like a pimp nigga
Go and brush your shoulders off
Ladies is pimps too
Go and brush your shoulders off
Niggas is crazy baby
Don't forget that boy told you
Get that dirt off your shoulder

Your homey Hov' in position, in the kitchen with soda
I just whipped up a watch, tryin to get me a Rover
Tryin to stretch out the coca, like a wrestler, yessir
Keep the Heckler close, you know them smokers'll test ya
At the 40/40 club, ESPN on the screen
I paid a grip for the jeans, plus the slippers is clean
No chrome on the wheels, I'm a grown-up for real (2004)

"Hotel" by Cassidy featuring R. Kelly (J Records, 2003)

Cassidy's "Hotel," which features R. Kelly was No. 5 on the chart. The focus of the song is the pursuit of pleasure and sexual fulfillment of the carnal appetite. "Girl, if your man start acting up, ask for him or ask for me."

I'm staying in the hotel, not the motel or the Holi-day Inn.
If that girl don't participate, well then I'ma take her friend.
Well if Mommy is with it then, Mommy can get it then,
Mommy a rider, Im'a slide up inside her.
I got a suite, you can creep on through,
I know you tryin' to get your freak on too (2003)

Interpreting the Rhetoric of Billboard's Top 10 Songs for Winter 2005

Nine of the Top 10 songs are performed by Black recording artists on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles Chart, the most for any year in which songs were analyzed. Only two songs by female artists appear on this chart. Both are performed by the Black artists. The two songs include Destiny's Child featuring T. I. with "Soldier," and another song by Destiny's Child entitled "Lose My Breath." At this point of the analysis regarding nihilism, a pattern is noticeable. As the number of Black male recording artists increases, so too does the level of nihilistic themes represented by most of them. Also, the more nihilistic the themes, the fewer songs by female recording artists that appear on Billboard's Top 10 chart. There were seven songs considered nihilistic on this chart, two by women. The songs by Black women that appear on the Top 10 of the chart are those that position women as sexually aggressive, or those that reinforce the concept of Black men as thugs, as in the case with "Soldier" by Destiny's Child. The Top 10 songs include "Drop It Like It's Hot" by Snoop Dogg at No. 1, "Let Me Love You" by Mario at No. 2, Usher featuring Alicia Keys with "My Boo" at No. 3, Nelly's "Over and Over" at No. 4, Green Day's "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" at No. 5, Destiny's Child featuring T.I. with "Soldier" at No. 6, Destiny's Child with "Lose My Breath" at No. 7, "How We Do," by The Game and Lil' Wayne at No. 8, "Disco Inferno" by 50 Cent at No. 9, Ja Rule with "Wonderful" at No. 10. Green Day was the only white artist on Top 10 of this chart. The songs for Winter 2005 have been categorized as either nihilistic or life-redeeming for the purposes of this study, but they will be more thoroughly analyzed in relation to Black feminist and critical theories in Chapter Three. This particular approach is used to focus

more attention on the current state of popular music.

Interpreting the Rhetoric of Billboard's Top 10 Songs for Winter 2006

The Top 10 songs from Billboard's Hot 100 for Winter 2006 include Nelly's "Grillz" at No. 1, Beyonce's "Check On It," featuring Slim Thug at No. 2, Chris Brown's "Run It" at No. 3, Mariah Carey's "Don't Forget About Us" at No. 4, Kanye West's "Gold Digger" at No. 5, James Blunt with "You're Beautiful" at No. 6, D4L's "Laffy Taffy" at No. 7, Mary J. Blige's "Be Without You" at No. 8, the Black Eyed Peas' "My Humps" at No. 9, and Nickelback's "Photograph" at No. 10. Four of the Top 10 songs on this chart represent those categorized as nihilistic, and all of them are performed by Black recording artists including Nelly's "Grillz," Beyonce's "Check On It," featuring Slim Thug, D4L's "Laffy Taffy," and the Black Eyed Peas' "My Humps". One of the highlights of the year was Kanye West, whose song, "Gold Digger," placed No. 5 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. An in-depth analysis of the impact of Kanye West's entrance into the musical landscape will be explored further in Chapter Four. The work of a few other recording artists whose songs can be interpreted as resisting hegemony also will be explored in Chapter Four as well. Further evidence supporting the argument of this study is revealed in two songs performed by White recording artists James Blunt and the group Nickelback. Neither of their songs, "You're Beautiful," by Blunt, or "Photograph," by Nickelback, contain themes that are considered nihilistic or life-defeating. The study also will examine various ways that themes from Destiny Child's "Soldier," D4L's "Laffy Taffy", "My Humps" by the Black Eyed Peas, and other songs on Billboard's Hot 100 charts help support black feminist and critical theories by hooks, Hill-Collins and Dyson.

Black men walkin' with white girls on they arms.
 I be mad at 'em as if I know they moms.
 Told to go beyond the surface. A person's a person.
 When we lessen our women, our condition seems to worsen.

From the song, "Real People" on Common's *BE* (2005)

CHAPTER THREE

Investigating the Rape of Representation with Black Feminist/Critical Theories

There are numerous examples of songs from various genres that illuminate the level of nihilism and angst that is pervasive in American society. This is especially true of hip-hop music as it relates to the oppression of Black people, particularly women. The examples in this chapter pertain to songs performed by Black recording artists that appear on the Top 10 of Billboard's Hot 100 Singles charts. This chapter will explore some of the themes in these songs and their connection to Black feminist criticism and critical theories, particularly those of hooks (1995), Hill-Collins (2000) and Dyson (2004). This chapter will answer the following question: In what ways do hip-hop songs and others performed by Black recording artists support arguments by Black feminist/critical theorists regarding the reinforcement of hegemony based upon white supremacist capitalist patriarchy? Before examining the songs, however, two examples outside of music, but related to this question, are explored. The examples are from two popular television talk shows, Oprah and The Tyra Banks Show. Both examples help support Black feminist theories regarding hegemony. They reveal the double standard for women versus that of men regarding hyper-sexualized behavior. In other words, women are labeled as sluts, whores, bitches and hoes for this type of behavior, while similar terms and attitudes do not apply to men with the same sexual norms. In many ways, men are

idolized for their promiscuity and sexual appetites. The examples provided also reveal the complicity of women of all races in the continued devaluation of Black women. These examples speak volumes about men's and women's acceptance and reinforcement of the many existing stereotypes and demeaning images that are prevalent throughout society. It also is important to note that Karrine Steffans, author of *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (2005), is the focus of both anecdotes for a couple of reasons. One, her voice provides an insider's perspective about the complicity of Black women in their own devaluation as this relates to women who willingly allow themselves to be paraded onto music video sets and treated like property. This complicity also is apparent in how women treat one another. And two, she speaks specifically about the level of misogyny exhibited in hip-hop music, which is the primary focus of this particular study.

Confessions of a Video Vixen

On April 10, 2006, Oprah Winfrey stated the following on her show focused on the various ways women are marginalized in popular culture. "It has become so common. We see it so many places. You can't ride into work without the images being on the back of every bus or every billboard. You cannot turn on the television without somebody shakin' their behind in somebody else's face or shakin' behinds together."

One of Oprah's guests was Karrine Steffans, author of *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (2005), the tell-all memoir of one of hip-hop music's most sought after former video models. As I listened to Karrine Steffans' story, one of emotional and physical abuse, neglect and violence, it became increasingly apparent that society was indeed reaching the boiling point with regard to the level of nihilism reflected not only in hip-

hop music, but popular culture in general. Her interview spoke volumes about the possible impact of such depictions upon the minds of children. When explaining her reasons for so aggressively pursuing often demeaning roles in music videos, Steffans answered, “I wanted to be sought after, and I wanted the attention. That comes from my personal background. A lot of us women and girls have the same background - of feeling neglected through your whole life. You’re looking for anyone to validate you because you don’t have the tools to validate yourself.”

Oprah, who was sympathetic yet candid in her interviewing style, asked Steffans the following question: “The idea that women now accept the fact that they’re being called hoes and bitches, and that that is common, I find that to be degrading, but did you?” Steffans, who seemed comfortable in revealing the truth about this challenging time of her life, responded, “At the time, no, because I was young and I wasn’t as informed as I am now. I didn’t see anything wrong with it...But I didn’t know enough to fight it. I just said OK. Obviously, someone made that up to make women feel the way they wanted us to feel, and then you begin to believe it, and therefore, start acting like it, and that’s just what they wanted you to do. So if they kept calling you stupid, you might start saying ‘maybe I am stupid,’ and then you start acting like you are.”

Ms. Steffans’ assessment of a media-driven culture that perpetually promotes a rhetoric that devalues women is compelling. More importantly, once some women see these images often enough, she added, “then you begin to believe it, and therefore, start acting like it.” Her analysis is directly related to a fundamental question raised in this study, which could be addressed in future research. When specific demeaning and

degrading images saturate the television and radio airwaves, how does it affect what many people, particularly children, come to believe about themselves? Ms. Steffans' comments also address the willingness of women to capitalize on their own devaluation, just as many Black recording artists do with hip-hop music at the expense of primarily Black children, and essentially, children of various races.

Although Ms. Steffans made the choice to be involved in the music video industry, she was not delusional about who was really in control. "Let me tell you who is in control. It's those men. They're in control of you and your body. When you step onto that set, you sign over your rights as a human," she added. "You sign over your body to them, and they grease you up, they strip you down, then sling you against a car, and you are rented just like the car, just like everything else that's there."

Oprah's comments throughout the show seemed to place the onus of responsibility for such behavior on the shoulders of women. There was very little critique of men's misogynist attitudes and behavior, or even the acknowledgment that they were complicit in the continuous devaluation of women. "For all of these millions of girls around the world...the world sees this, and the world thinks this is who we are, particularly as Black women," Oprah said. "If nothing else happens, and I'm not thinking we're going to change the video industry, I just want people to start paying attention to it." Ms. Winfrey's statement is probably the most telling of all. Why would a woman of Oprah Winfrey's status and power reinforce the idea there is very little that she or anyone else can do to help change the music and video industry? She is not only one of the most influential and powerful people in America, but one of the most powerful and influential

people in the world. If Oprah cannot challenge it, or is unwilling to challenge the current level of nihilism present in popular culture, maybe it is hopeless.

Another problem is the inability of women and men to hold each other to the same standards regarding the struggle to resist sexist and misogynist portrayals and behavior. This lack of accountability was never more apparent than on November 28, 2005 during the Tyra Banks Show. The special guests on this particular episode were Karrine Steffans, Dennis Rodman, and Chingy, a popular rapper who released two songs that are part of the focus of this analysis. While interviewing Ms. Steffans about the reason why she decided to name so many of the celebrities she had sex with, Ms. Banks verbally attacked the former video vixen's motives for writing the book. But a short time later when interviewing Dennis Rodman about his sexual escapades, some of which he discussed on her show and in his most recent book, *I Should Be Dead By Now* (2005), Tyra Banks joked about his confessions. The point seemed to be lost upon Ms. Banks that she not only acted hypocritically with regard to not critiquing Dennis Rodman's actions, but she also was complicit in the perpetuation of misogynist and demeaning behavior exhibited by men. Of course, Tyra Banks is an entertainment talk show host in an industry that is more concerned with Nielson ratings than journalistic integrity. She seemed particularly agitated by the thought that Ms. Steffans deliberately set out to hurt some of the men she wrote about in her book. Tyra Banks seemed much less concerned, however, about children who might be hurt by Dennis Rodman's sordid details of his sexual exploits. She also did not seem concerned at all with the level of misogyny apparent in some of Chingy's hit songs. Although she is a celebrity talk show host and

not a journalist, she owes fans much more in terms of her own professionalism. Banks apparently decided to promote the sensationalism of popular television talk shows by attacking her guest. More importantly, she missed an opportunity to help empower her mostly female audience to challenge misogynist behavior.

Dr. Robin Smith, a clinical psychologist who appeared on Oprah's show, summed up this oppressive banter among Black women. "What people don't often know is that when you have been oppressed, which is when you talk about women now oppressing other women, it's because we have been so influenced by the power of men exploiting us that we now become the oppressor ourselves," Smith said. "It's like slavery. If you have someone long enough, the slave master can leave and the slaves themselves start to abuse other slaves....Women now are exploiting and abusing other women."

Smith's argument is directly related to the ideas of Naim Akbar (1984) regarding the pervasive nihilism and self-hate that is reflected among many Blacks toward each other. The fundamental difference is that Smith is referring to the oppression of all women, while Akbar addresses the continued devaluation of African Americans, which means Black women are adversely oppressed. Akbar (1984) theorized that many Black people are conditioned to perpetuate a white supremacist ideology intended to oppress, degrade, humiliate, and ultimately, render Blacks passive in their own dehumanization. Akbar refers to this phenomenon in his book, *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery* (1984). His analysis examines the pervasive effect of the institution of slavery and its impact upon shaping the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and values of far too many people. Specifically, Akbar provides a theoretical framework for assessing these attitudes

among Blacks related to personal inferiority, the family, leadership, color consciousness, community division, the clown (in terms of behavior), and property. With regard to personal inferiority, for example, Akbar wrote that “slave makers” understood the power of dehumanization. As part of this process, slaves were beaten and humiliated in front of their own family members, even their children. They were stripped naked and paraded in public for inspection as if they were livestock. “These things, combined with the insults, the loss of cultural traditions, rituals, family life, religion, and even names, served to cement the loss of self-respect” (Akbar, 1984, p. 21). These issues also are central to Black feminist criticism and critical theories of renowned scholars such as bell hooks (1995), Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) and Michael Eric Dyson (2004). At this point of the analysis, some of the critical analyses by these scholars and others will be examined in relation to the level of nihilism that currently exists in hip-hop music.

Ways that Songs on Billboard’s Charts Support Black Feminist/Critical Theories

In various ways, the lyrics of songs by many Black hip-hop artists reveal a rhetoric of nihilism. For example, Chapter Two of this analysis revealed the following about the Billboard Hot 100 charts: As the number of Black male recording artists increased, so too did the level of nihilism reflected on Billboard’s Top 10 charts. The more nihilistic the representation of songs in the Top 10, the fewer songs by female recording artists appeared on the charts as well. Songs by Black women that appear on the Top 10 of the chart in the most recent years, 2004 and 2005, position them as sexually aggressive, or they are among those that reinforce the concept of Black men as thugs, as is the case with “Soldier” by Destiny’s Child. This song appeared on the Winter 2005

Billboard Top 10 chart. Six songs from that chart have been categorized as those containing nihilistic themes. They are “Drop It Like It’s Hot” by Snoop Dogg, which was No. 1 on the chart, Destiny’s Child featuring T. I. with “Soldier” at No. 6, “Lose My Breath” by Destiny’s Child at No. 7, “How We Do,” by The Game and Lil’ Wayne at No. 8, “Disco Inferno” by 50 Cent at No. 9, and Ja Rule’s “Wonderful” at No. 10. Snoop Dogg’s “Drop It Like It’s Hot” is one of the best examples of a song that reinforces many of the nihilistic values challenged by Black feminist/critical theorists such as Hill-Collins and hooks.

The work of hooks (1981, 1989, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2003), is central to this analysis. She has been defined as a critical scholar whose work is “at the intersection of rhetorical theory and cultural studies” (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 2002, p. 265). The fundamental reason why hooks’ work is particularly useful in this analysis in terms of rhetorical theory is her focus upon race, class, and gender, and how they inform the production and reception of cultural products, many of which can be viewed as rhetorical. She has a keen interest in revealing how such rhetorical/cultural products reinforce domination, which is another primary aim of this study as well. One of hooks’ aims in challenging domination, or what she refers to as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, is also a fundamental goal of this study - to challenge binary ways of thinking about race, gender, class, and sexuality. By applying rhetorical criticism through the lens of hooks’ theory, such binary thinking can be revealed. The use of hooks’ work will guide the analysis of songs on Billboard’s Winter Hot 100 charts for 2005 and 2006.

The Rhetorical Potential of Songs in Winter 2005 to Reinforce Hegemony

“Drop It Like It’s Hot” by Snoop Dogg (2004, Geffen)

When the pimp's in the crib ma
 Drop it like it's hot, drop it like it's hot
 When the pigs try to get at ya
 Park it like it's hot, park it like it's hot
 And if a nigga get a attitude
 Pop it like it's hot, pop it like it's hot
 I got the Roley on my arm, and I'm pouring Charndon
 And I roll the best weed, cause I got it going on (2004)

There are various levels of meaning applied to the lyrics above, depending upon the listener’s perceptions and personal experiences. However, when dissecting each section of a song, one can at least capture some fundamental meanings in the discourse. For example, Snoop Dogg’s reference, “When the pimp’s in the crib ma, drop it like it’s hot,” could refer to a woman dancing provocatively for her man by moving her booty in a way similar to that of a stripper. His reference to when “pigs try to get at ya, park it like” is one that may have special meaning to many young Black men. For anyone who has been targeted by police for driving while Black, the lyrics outline a strategy for Black men to subvert efforts by police to pull over their cars, and to just “park it like it’s hot.” Those lines are not necessarily considered nihilistic. However, Snoop Dogg’s reference to when “a nigga get a attitude, pop it like it’s hot” is one that is reflective of the lack of love, respect and compassion that far too many Black men have for one another. The words “pop it like it’s hot” refer to shooting the man with the attitude. The phrase is similar to the term, “pop a cap on a nigga,” which also means to shoot a Black man.

And finally, Snoop Dogg concludes one line of the song with his celebration of drug use and materialism: “I got the Roley on my arm, and I’m pourin’ Charndon, and I roll the best weed ‘cause I got it goin’ on.” The Roley, which refers to a Rolex watch (one of the most expensive watches made), indicates that the protagonist is a wealthy and important figure in the community. He is pouring Chardonnay, and this indicates he is celebrating life and has few cares in the world. His lyrics about rolling the best weed, which is another name for marijuana, are also framed within a binary context of Blacks as “weed smokers” (bad) and Whites as non-participants (good) in the same practice. Far too many popular songs performed by Black artists contain references to smoking “weed.”

Of all of the popular songs examined in this analysis, not one of them performed by White recording artists refers to any of the scenarios described above. There is no reference to a man demanding that the women at any party “drop it like it’s hot,” at least not on Billboard’s Top 10 charts. There is very little need for White popular artists to write about “parking it like it’s hot,” considering they are not frequently the target of random police stops or harassment. The lyrics, however, have significant ascriptive value (Makay & Gonzales, 1983) for listeners of all races who may encounter the police under various circumstances. This means that some Whites may be facing a similar situation when they are under the gaze of police officers, for whatever reason. The song encourages them as well to “park it like it’s hot,” instead of waiting for police to pull them over.

There are no references or comparatively similar lyrics among White recording artists, however, on the popular music charts implying that they shoot anyone in an attempt to wound or kill them. There is very little that indicates because someone is Black, poor, and drowning in a sea of nihilism that someone of another race cannot relate to the situation or be facing similar circumstances themselves. The same also should be true of White artists and the messages in their songs. This analysis does not indicate that. The point is that nihilistic themes are overwhelmingly represented by Black recording artists. When similar themes are performed by White recording artists it appears the songs are far less popular among listeners. This might indicate that far fewer people (who think in binary terms such as superior vs. inferior) are willing to accept nihilistic themes in the songs' lyrics when they are performed or represented by White artists. Some might liken this syndrome to the idea of "keeping it real." In other words, some people may be offended by the idea of White thugs, hoodlums, criminals, hoes, prostitutes, bitches, and other characters of ill repute, because for them, these images do not represent reality.

"Soldier" by Destiny's Child (2004, Sony Urban Music/Columbia) featuring T.I. and Lil' Wayne

This song reinforces the concept that the best kind of Black man for a woman is a thug, which is referred to as a "soldier" in this hit recording. It implies that any other kind of man, like one who has a legitimate job or one who is pursuing higher education, is not worthy of this Black woman's attention. In fact, the words, "If your status ain't hood, I ain't checkin' for him," proclaims in resounding fashion that this woman will not even consider sharing time with anyone or dating anyone unless he is a "thug" or "soldier."

We like them boys that be in them Lac's leanin'
 Open their mouth, their grill gleamin'
 Candy paint, keep that whip clean and
 They always be talkin' that country slang we like
 They keep that beat that be in the back beatin'
 Eyes be so low from that chief and
 I love how he keep my body screamin'
 A rude boy that's good to me, wit street credibility (2004)

The prevalence of themes that focus on drug use also is evident in the following line of "Soldier": "Eyes be so low from that chief and..." Chief refers to weed or marijuana as well. And as predicted, there is yet another reference to the Black woman's insatiable appetite for sexual pleasure with "I love how he keep my body screamin'." This analysis did not reveal any similar references on Billboard's Top 10 chart among White recording artists regarding such sexual desire. The concept of superior vs. inferior, which hooks attempts to challenge with her theory of domination, is apparent in the lyrics above and others that follow in this analysis.

Work by other scholars is useful in illuminating the effectiveness of hooks' rhetorical theory. For example, in *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* (1985), Jawanza Kunjufu meticulously explored various ways to help develop healthy self-esteem in Black male children. In the chapter titled "Male Seasoning," he cites a process for Black male children that ultimately leads to a gradual dehumanization of them as valued human beings. Kunjufu also cites the work of Michael Brown, author of *Image of a Man* (1976). Although this work was published three decades ago, the criteria he identifies as being among the fundamental aspirations of many Black male children can be applied to a current examination of Black musical expression:

- 1.) How much pain or violence you can inflict on another person;
- 2.) How many girls you can impregnate and not get married;
- 3.) How much reefer (weed) you can smoke, pills you can pop, and wine you can drink;
- 4.) How many times you can go to jail and come out 'unrehabilitated';
- 5.) What kind of clothes you wear;
- 6.) How much money you have;
- 7.) What kind of car you drive. (p. 6)

For example, when examining the lyrics of "Soldier," one is reminded of the criteria for Black male children regarding the social seasoning process. One criterion on the list included "what kind of car you drive." The lyrics of "Soldier" refer to "them Lac's" meaning the "boys'" obsession with Cadillac convertibles. When these "boys" open their mouths, "their grill gleamin'" referring to the grills that Nelly raps about in his song, "Grillz." Of course, this reference to the grills "gleamin'" is directly related to Item No. 6 on the list above, how much money you have. The reference to the young men as "boys" in the song is interesting as well. When one thinks about the descriptions of what these "boys" like, the reference is understood. It means the maturity process for this particular group of young men will be a long one. As for the real artists who sport the grills that are "gleamin,'" Lil' Wayne, one of the artists performing on the song along with T. I. and Destiny's Child, personifies this image. He and T. I. often sport grills in their mouths and exhibit the thug's or soldier's swagger. It is understandable why both rappers perform along with Destiny's Child on "Soldier." Lil' Wayne's fourth album, *The Carter II* (2005/Cash Money), was released in 2005 and was a huge success. What was particularly interesting about the *Vibe* (Meadows-Ingram, April 2006) interview with

Lil' Wayne was the "hating" that existed between him and his former label mates. Hating is a term that is synonymous with insulting or making disparaging remarks about another person. This is reminiscent of ideas that Naim Akbar (1984) explores regarding disunity, contempt and jealousy among Black people. Lil' Wayne assessed this phenomenon in his own straight-forward, street vernacular in his interview with *Vibe*:

Baby and Slim hate for me to say this, they hate for me to talk about them. You know, I don't wish no hate on nobody. How much a nigga make and how much success he gets ain't got nothing to do with me. I'm the hottest out of all them fake-ass niggas, first of all. Ain't none of them could rap no more. They old; they got drug problems. I'm in school. I'm 23. I'm the president of the company they was rapping for, and I own my own company with my own artists who sound better than them. (p. 113)

The rapper known as T. I., who is the self-proclaimed King of the South and hails from Atlanta, also represents the hardened thug image. He too performs on the hit "Soldier" with Destiny's Child. In the April 2006 issue of *XXL*, the article "Drive Slow" features an interview with T.I., whose real name is Clifford "T. I." Harris Jr. He shares his thoughts about the difficulty he had from being lured back into a life of criminality.

For one, a mistake I made was still being in the streets at such a critical point in my career, back when I had to go away. I was still real - I had kinda like one foot in, one foot out, so to speak. And, I mean, shit - my association with certain people in life, certain moves I made that really didn't have to be made, you know what I'm sayin?" (Ex, p. 113).

According to the article, the writer interviewed T. I. at the offices of Grand Hustle, his record label. The same label also released the soundtrack for *Hustle and Flow* (2005). The Memphis group, Three 6 Mafia, won an Oscar for their song, “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp.” An Oscar? One must wonder what the criteria are for best song. T. I. starred in the movie, *ATL*, which debuted March of 2006. His most recent album was dubbed *The King* (2006). He cautions rappers to remain focused on maintaining legitimate and legal business enterprises, and to stay away from the streets.

You go to rappin’ about niggas on records and shit, man, ain’t no way for you to do nothing if you really do got a problem with them. You might have to handle some business. You rappin’ about it on records, then you going to jail. Period” (Ex, p. 116).

Many of the previous statements by these rappers help support the concept of “keeping it real.” But some of the most common themes depicted by Black female and Black male recording artists is the stereotype of the Black woman as the “sexual sapphire,” a devious, conniving trickster who uses sex as a tool to manipulate men into giving her the material comfort she craves. Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) warns women to be careful about demanding that their partners “Show me the money” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 156). Hill-Collins also claims this kind of behavior will “reduce Black men to a measure of their financial worth” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 156). Such behavior also re-inscribes a common stereotype of Black women as materialistic “bitches,” and calls for resistance that attempts to change prevailing sexual politics. The task of resistance often is very difficult for Black women collectively, Hill-Collins added:

While some women reject all of the stereotypes they see, they see no way of avoiding them. Some feel they must choose between being seen as asexual mothers or hypersexual whores. Others recognize the power that being seen as “sensuous sapphires” has in how others see them, and try to exempt themselves from the category. By claiming that it’s the other Black women who are “sapphires,” not them, they may receive individual relief, but they leave the images themselves intact. (p. 156)

The complicity of many Black women in the process of perpetuating misogynist attitudes is evident in many ways. For example, during the National Association of Black Journalists Convention in Dallas in 2003, which is generally attended by an overwhelming majority of Black women journalists, among the best draws for all attendees were the parties that were held to close the day’s events. Unfortunately, the Black women who represented some of the most intelligent and articulate professionals in America did not find any problems with dancing to one of the most derogatory and misogynist songs released that year. The song, “Get Low,” (2002/TVT Records) by Lil’ Jon and the East Side Boyz, contains the following lyrics:

3,6,9 damn you’re fine
 Move it so you can sock it to me one mo time
 Get low, Get low
 To the window, to the wall,
 To the sweat drop down my balls
 To all these bitches crawl
 To all skeet, skeet, muthafucka! All skeet, skeet, God Damn!
 To all skeet, skeet, muthafucka! All skeet, skeet God damn!(2002)

The use of the word “bitch” is prevalent in current hip-hop songs, especially those included on the CDs that are not necessarily in rotation on radio stations. Hill-Collins

(2000), bell hooks (2003) and Michael Eric Dyson (1996) most likely would agree that Black women, especially those who represent poor and low-income single parents and the children they attempt to raise, are hurt most by the perpetuation of such controlling images and stereotypes in hip-hop music. Dyson writes the following in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (1996):

There's no doubt that gangsta rap is often sexist and that it reflects a vicious misogyny that has seized our nation with frightening intensity. It is doubly wounding for black women who are already beset by attacks from outside their communities to feel the thrust of musical daggers to their dignity from within. How painful it is for black women, many of whom have fought valiantly for black pride, to hear the dissonant chord of disdain carried in the angry epithet "bitch."
(p. 178)

The need for critical Black feminist theories of hooks and Hill-Collins in challenging the misogynist nature of the current form of hip-hop music and other forms of popular Black musical expression is apparent when analyzing Billboard's Hot 100 Singles. The "show me the money" narratives appear in the lyrics of numerous songs. For example, on the bridge of "Soldier," members of Destiny's Child echo the following sentiment:

I know some soldiers in here (Where they at, where they at?)
They wanna take care of me (Where they at?)
I know some soldiers in here (Where they at, where they at?)
Wouldn't mind takin' one for me (Where they at?)
I know some soldiers in here (Where they at, where they at?)
They wanna spend that on me (Where they at?)
I know some soldiers in here (Where they at, where they at?)
Wouldn't mind puttin that on me (Where they at?) (2004)

The lyrics, “They wanna take care of me...They wanna spend that on me,” posits women as objects to be bought or rented, as former video model Karrine Steffans indicated previously. Black female recording artists also are complicit as it relates to perpetuating the stereotype of Black women as sexually licentious and lascivious. For example, Destiny Child’s “Lose My Breath” portrays Black women as having uncontrollable sexual libidos.

Can you keep up? Baby boy, make me lose my breath
 Bring the noise, make me lose my breath
 Hit me hard, make me lose my huh, huh
 Can you keep up? Baby boy, make me lose my breath
 Bring the noise, make me lose my breath
 Hit me hard, make me lose my breath (2004)

The lyrics seem to describe the woman’s hope that her man can engage in a sexual marathon, one in which he can also make her lose her breath. In order to accomplish this, he must “bring the noise” and “hit me hard.” The protagonist in the song’s narrative, however, is disappointed when she is not fully satisfied.

I'm startin' to believe that I'm way too much for you
 All that talk but it seems like you can't come through
 All them lines like you could satisfy me
 Now I see where believing you got me
 Gave you the wheel but you can't drive me (2004)

It is important to note that these lyrics can be considered empowering for women who seemingly are in control of their bodies, their sexuality, and, who also want to be pleased when they do engage in sex. This idea is directly related to hooks’ theory about the domination of patriarchy and how it is reinforced through such lyrics, while at the same time, it is subverted, because in a sense the lyrics represent a resistance to the traditional

norm of a man being in control sexually. If these woman's lovers cannot get the job done, as Destiny's Child indicate in this song, they must "get ta steppin," which means the lovers have to leave. More importantly, these women do not want these men to return. However, the lyrics may promote sexually aggressive behavior among teens developing their own self-concepts of dignity, love, passion and sexuality. The other issue is that these same kinds of themes are not prevalent among White artists on the Top 10 of the Hot 100 Singles chart. This means the continuous images of Blacks as the actors reflecting these themes can come to represent the real-life scenarios in the public's gaze. That also means these images tend to reinforce prevailing stereotypes about Black men as thugs and criminals, and Black women as sexually promiscuous and devious. Black women are portrayed as having uncontrollable sexual desires and hedonistic passions. These are the kinds of images that fuel debates about women's reproductive rights and welfare reform (Roberts, 1997). For hooks, this also can be viewed as a site of resistance. But her theory as it relates to this phenomenon will be explored in Chapter Four.

"Laffy Taffy" by D4L (Asylum, 2005)

Although this was one of the most degrading and misogynistic songs of 2005, it also was popular among partygoers. The song was No. 7 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart for Winter 2006. This particular song also reinforces the stereotype of black women as objects and as sexually uncontrollable and lascivious. The song also focuses on strip club imagery. It supports the binary concept of inferior (Black artists), meaning those whose lyrics promote strip club imagery, versus the superior (White artists), meaning

those who do not. There was not one song on the Billboard charts in this analysis performed by any of the White recording artists that even refers to strip clubs.

I'm lookin' fo Mrs. Bubble Gum
 I'm Mr. Chik-O-Stick
 I wanna (dun dun dunt) (Oh)
 Cuz you so thick
 Girls call me Jolly Rancher (Oh)
 Cuz I stay so hard
 You can suck me for a long time
 (Oh my God!)
 Girl dis ain't no dance flo'
 Dis a candy sto' (2005)

In yet another example, the rhetorical theory of hooks regarding marginalization and domination is central to the analysis of the song's lyrics. "Girls call me Jolly Rancher (Oh) cuz I stay so hard. You can suck me for a long time (Oh my God!).

"My Humps" by the Black Eyed Peas (A&M, 2005)

The song "My Humps" by the Black Eyed Peas is one that fits within the category of nihilism. But what is unique about this group is its multi-racial membership. One of the lead singers, Will.i.am, (whose real name is William Adams) is considered the group's leading hip-hop performer and producer. He also is Black. The female vocalist, Fergie, is the only White member of the group and performs the lead vocals on the song. The familiar theme of women as objects and up for sale to the highest bidders is prevalent in this song as well. However, the protagonist claims that she is not asking her suitors to pay for her time. She also adds later in the song that her ass is off limits in terms of touching or squeezing, except for the right price, of course. She also makes it clear that she is available for dating anyone she chooses. Some might argue the song has the dual quality of being empowering, yet objectifying as well. A listener may get the impression

that the guys who are gawking at this woman's behind and willing to pay for her time are Black men. One of the basic reasons why this might be the case is the singer's reference, "I drive these brothers crazy." The term, brothers, most often is synonymous with Black men. Sexuality is interrogated as illicit and licit in this frame (Foucault, 1978).

What you gon' do with all that junk?
 All that junk inside your trunk?
 I'ma get, get, get, get, you drunk,
 Get you love drunk off my hump.
 I drive these brothers crazy,
 I do it on the daily,
 They treat me really nicely,
 They buy me all these ices.
 Dolce & Gabbana,
 Fendi and NaDonna
 Karan, they be sharin'
 All their money got me wearin' fly
 Brother I ain't askin',
 They say they love my ass 'n,
 Seven Jeans, True Religion's (2005)

"How We Do" by the Game (Aftermath, 2005)

For the songs that portray Black men as obsessed with thug life, sex and violence, Billboard's Winter 2005 chart provides some of the best examples of this phenomenon. In fact, the Game, featuring 50 Cent, recited the verses over a beat that is considered infectious among partygoers. Often, this is the addiction of many hip-hop songs. They contain a hard-edged beat, sometimes a catchy sample, and the kind of break in the music that helps emphasize the song's hook or chorus. In "How We Do," the Game's first verse contains blatant references to materialism, the love for cars, violence, perseverance in escaping a life of crime, while at the same time still holding on to some of its elements,

alcohol, drug use, references to his former drug dealing lifestyle, and sex as incidental under the circumstances. For example, the Game's first verse contains the following references:

Fresh like, unhh; Impala, unnh
 Crome hyrdolics, 808 drums
 You don't want, none
 Nigga betta, run
 When beef is on, I'll pop that, drum
 Come get, some
 Pistol grip, pump
 If a nigga step on my white Air Ones
 Since red, rum
 Ready here I, come
 Compton, unh

The Game's next set of lyrics provide some details about his rise to the top from living the life of a drug boy to one of hip-hop music's hottest commodities. Imagine his lyrics, however, continuously saturating the minds of teenage Black males who may have little guidance in terms of navigating the road to manhood. The Game has a few references to selling cocaine ("I was sellin' rocks when...), alcohol use (Coke and rum), drug use (Got weed on the ton), and the anticipation of violence (Whole gang in the front...case a nigga wanna stunt). When analyzing the following lyrics, it is best to assess their potential for reinforcing colonization: "Colonization is the conquering of the minds and habits of oppressed people so that they internalize and accept inferiority as an inherent trait" (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 2002, p. 275). Images depicted in the lyrics that follow might reinforce the concept of the colonized. The song's rhetoric can be viewed as re-inscribing the idea that the Black man's notion of success is selling drugs (that skunk), carrying pistols (hand on my gun), smoking weed (pass the blunt), drinking alcohol (Coke and rum), disrespecting

women (hand up her dress), and wreaking havoc on other Black men (case a nigga wanna stunt) through violence. Although the type of violence expected is not thoroughly explained, the line is one that suggests harmful intentions.

Dre found me in the slums
 Sellin that skunk, one hand on my gun
 I was sellin' rocks when Master P was sayin "Unnnh"
 Buck pass the blunt
 These G-Unit girls just wanna have fun
 Coke and rum
 Got weed on the ton
 I'm bangin with my hand up her dress like, unh
 I'll make her cum, purple haze in my lungs
 Whole gang in the front in case a nigga wanna, stunt (2005)

Many of the themes promoted through the lyrics of hip-hop artists are theoretically aligned with some of the theories of Naim Akbar (1984). In *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery*, Akbar provides a framework for understanding this mentality. In Sister Souljah's *No Disrespect* (1994), she poignantly captures the level of angst and despair that are direct results of slavery's remnants.

Racism has turned our communities into war zones where we are dying every day. It is black-on-black hate, created by racism and white supremacy, that is killing us. Black people killing black people. Can African male-female relationships survive in America? Not if black-on-black love is dead. Not if we are still too scared to admit there is a problem while our families fall apart. Not if our young men continue to refer to young women as "bitches," or our young women refer to young men as "motherfuckers," or all of us refer to each other as "niggas." It is a sad measure of our profound contempt for each other and of our thoroughgoing

self-loathing that we continue to persist in this ugly practice. (p. 350)

Amos Wilson's *Black on Black Violence* (1990) reveals the hypocrisy of a society that promotes nihilism while simultaneously punishing those whose lives are tightly woven within the thread of its fabric. Yet, these are the kinds of images depicted in the lyrics primarily of hip-hop music performed primarily by Blacks, and not Whites or others.

Criminal personalities, like all personalities, are to a significant degree socially created and defined. Their behavioral characters can only be manifested within a social context. They therefore cannot stand outside social time, place, and circumstance. When a society collectively looks into the faces of its criminals it looks in a mirror and sees a reflection of its own likeness. (p. 2)

What is particularly important to note, however, is that mechanisms of capitalism that are currently in place generally lead to an increasing divide between the upwardly mobile and the poor and working class of society. Essentially, this is a deliberate attempt by wealthy global enterprises and corporate conglomerates to gain greater control over the masses, which includes primarily poor and working class people of all races, but particularly, Black and Brown people (Wilson, 1990).

In the United States of America, the central societal ego complex is represented by the White American ruling and middle classes and related White groups. These classes and groups generally seek to determine and govern the character and behavior of the societal whole in such ways as to maintain and enhance their wealth, power, and dominance. The activities, resources, powers, and perceptions

of the subordinate group complex and less influential social groups, are regulated and exploited by the White American community in ways that legitimize and strengthen that ruling complex's dominant position. (p. 5)

“Disco Inferno” by 50 Cent (Aftermath/Shady, 2005)

This song by 50 Cent placed at No. 9 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles Winter 2005 chart. It continues the perpetuation of themes that posit Black men as criminal-minded, materialistic, misogynistic thugs. Notice, the possibility for violence almost always looms. The idea that violence or the threat of violence can be so casually referred to in many hip-hop songs poses a problem because it seems to indicate this is standard procedure among those who claim to be thugs. In the lines below, however, most of the lyrics reinforce the idea of the Black woman as object: “I'm like bounce that ass girl.” The use of alcohol again is promoted: “I get crunk in here.” Materialism also is prevalent as expected: “Outside the Benz on Doves” refers to the shining, new rims for his car.

Shorty hips is hypnotic, she moves so erotic,
But watch - I'm like bounce that ass girl.
I get it crunk in here, I make it jump in here,
Front in here, we'll thump in here.
Oooohh.
I'm so gutta, so ghetto, so hood.
So gully, so grimey, what's good?
Outside the Benz on Dubs,
I'm in the club wit the snubs
don't start nuthin', it won't be nuthin'. (2005)

“Wonderful” by Ja Rule featuring R. Kelly (I.G. Records Inc./2005)

In yet another song that refers to the protagonist as a pimp, mack, player and a

gangsta, all before the final verse, the vivid and thematic imagery is apparent through these nihilistic lyrics that follow. Ja Rule teams his rap skills with the production genius of R. Kelly, who provides his blend of woman-hating lyrics to the mix as well. Ja Rule begins the song by focusing his lyrical gaze on the woman as object through his spelling out the letters of his primary addiction - P.U.S.S.Y.

Cuz this is how I'm livin' and ya'll women know the secrets
 Of how to get it and keep it
 How to prey on my weakness
 It's the power of the p-u-s-s-y
 Got a lotta niggaz wonderin', it ain't just I
 Gotta keep ya cash comin', and that's on my life
 If it wasn't for the money and the things I got
 Shit, she probably wouldn't like me (2004)

R. Kelly follows in Ja Rule's footsteps by declaring that he is M. I. A., which means missing in action. The song may also indicate that he needs a break because of the abundance of sexual favors that he receives regularly. While R. Kelly's line referring to life as "a pussy buffet" is metaphorical, it also indicates that sexual pleasure from women is abundant. The song also is asking a very pertinent question with regard to his lover's commitment to him, and the love she claims to have for him. The question is this: "If it wasn't for the money, cars, and movie stars, and jewels and all these things I got, I wonder...would you still want me? Would you still be calling me? You be loving me?"

I came from the dirt, what you want me to say?
 I'm at the top of the world, and life's a pussy buffet (2004)
 And that's why I get M. I. A. (2004)

Both performers leave no doubt that being on top means conquering women through control and sexual exploitation: "Y'all bitches don't know. Money ain't a thang."

In *That's the Joint! : The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (2004) by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, the article, "Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile" by Tricia Rose, provides a critique of such sexist thinking in hip-hop music:

In rap music, as in other popular genres, women are divided into at least two categories - the "kind to take home to mother" and the "kind you meet at three o'clock in the morning." In Hip Hop discourse, the former is honest and loyal - but extremely rare (decidedly not the girl next door). The latter is not simply an unpaid prostitute, but a woman who only wants you for your money, cars and cash, will trap you (via pregnancy or other forms of manipulation), and move on to another man (probably your best friend). It would be an understatement to suggest that there is little in the way of traditional notions of romance in rap. Sexist raps articulate the profound fear of female sexuality felt by these young rappers and by many young men. (p.295)

Another one of the prevailing themes throughout some of the songs by Black female recording artists on the Billboard chart was one which indicates there is always a problem or tension between Black men and women. The most prevalent one in the music, although this theme was not categorized as nihilistic, was one which focused on the Black man as problematic and unfaithful. Some of the songs that contained this theme, but were not considered nihilistic, included "Heartbreak Hotel" by Whitney Houston on the Billboard Winter 1999 chart, "Say My Name" by Destiny's Child, "He Wasn't Man Enough" by Toni Braxton, both from the Spring 2000 chart, and "Hit 'Em Up Style" by Blu Cantrell from the Summer 2001 chart. Cantrell's song also encourages women to

spend as much of the cheating man's money as possible before breaking the relationship off with him. This is what is meant by "hit 'em up." This phenomenon is critiqued by both bell hooks (2003) and Patricia Hill-Collins (2000). Hill-Collins, for example, presents the following challenge for further investigation.

The sexual politics that constrains Black womanhood constitutes an effective system of domination because it intrudes on people's daily lives at the point of consciousness. Exactly how do the sexual politics of Black womanhood influence Black women's interpersonal love relationships? More important, how might an increased understanding of these relationships enable African-American women to tap sources of power as energy and thus become more empowered? (p.151)

These are all questions that demand an answer in the struggle to resist the constraining images perpetuated through mass media in the form of popular entertainment. Although the songs cited above contain the Black-man-has-a-problem dynamic, some of them also can be viewed as empowering by offering women various ways to interrogate the issues. The problem becomes, however, the prevalence of any number of themes that perpetually depict Black people as problematic. In gaining widespread acceptance as the truth or what is considered "real," the strength of demeaning images and stereotypes is rooted not only in what is frequently portrayed, but also by what is seldom depicted. This chapter has highlighted primarily the nihilism reflected in the Billboard charts for Winter 2005 and Winter 2006 because these are the most recent years of the study. Also, songs on the Billboard charts for those years were not analyzed in the previous chapter. Themes that are seldom depicted will be the focus of the Chapter Four.

Nature will give you a nice puppy, and nature will give you a pit bull. So we just have to be able to squeeze out the positive. That goes for the Black press, that goes for Black radio, that goes for Black television, and that goes for Black music, and all of the surrounding elements of the interpretation of our lifestyle, culture, art, and religion.

Words by Chuck D, formerly of Public Enemy, from the book, *Fight the Power* (1997)

CHAPTER FOUR

Examining Songs That Resist Hegemony

With the increasing underground hip-hop movement referred to as gangsta rap that gained popularity in the late 1980s, various scholars, cultural critics, right-wing ideologues, and even recording artists aimed sharp criticism at the ever-increasing rise in violent and misogynist rap lyrics. Some music fans might consider some of these same critics as visionaries when considering what this particular analysis reveals. It has determined that half (50 percent) of all of the songs (27 of 54) by Black artists that appear on the Top 10 of Billboard's Hot 100 charts include themes considered nihilistic or life-defeating, while only 11 percent of songs by White artists were categorized as such. This chapter, however, focuses on songs that resisted that fate. It aims to interpret the rhetorical potential of songs that can be considered more empowering and uplifting. Chapter Four aims to answer the following question: What is the rhetorical potential of songs by Black recording artists that represent more empowering, uplifting, life-redeeming, and/or critically conscious themes to resist hegemony? Before making the case by examining and interpreting the lyrics of such songs, however, this study first will include poetry that can be considered as a form of Black artistic expression that resists hegemony. For example, the following words by Haki Madhubuti (2002) bode well in

terms of constructing an argument against the frequent perpetuation of images in hip-hop music that portray the worst representations of Black life and Black people. Madhubuti partially makes the case for constructing empowering images of Black people, an idea that hooks (1996) addresses regarding rhetorical criticism. This method will “enable colonized folks to decolonize their minds and actions, thereby promoting the insurrection of subjugated knowledge” (p. 8). The following represents Madhubuti’s attempt at developing an oppositional way of being:

Art allows and encourages the love of self and others. The best artists are not mass murderers, criminals or child molesters, they are in the beauty and creation business. Art is elemental to intelligent intelligence, working democracy, freedom, equality and justice. Art, if used wisely and widely, early and often is an answer and a question. It is the cultural lake that the indigenous rivers of dance, music, local images and voices flow. Art is the waterfall of life, reflecting the untimely and unique soul of a people. Art is the drumbeat of good and great hearts forever seeking peace and a grand future for all enlightened peoples. For these are the people the world over who lovingly proclaim, “give the drummer some,” kind words, financial support, yeses from your heart, knowing intuitively that there will be creative reciprocity in all that they give us. Why? Because fundamentally, art inspires, informs, directs, generates hope and challenges the receiver to respond. And finally, and this is consequential, the quality of the art determines the quality of the responses. (p. 130-131)

Although her music provided an alternative to the nihilism that was increasingly becoming the choice among many hip-hop fans, Lauryn Hill's rise to stardom was not without controversy. Shortly after earning accolades for her groundbreaking album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, four well-known producers in the industry sued Ms. Hill for production and songwriting credits on the project (p. 156, *They Call Me Ms. Hill*, *Essence*, February 2006). Some sources indicated that the producers settled for an undisclosed amount, which was estimated at about \$5 million. Before her legal woes and her lengthy hiatus from the music business, however, Ms. Hill was considered a gem in a music industry that seemed devoid of any responsibility to uplift the spirits of people. Ms. Hill's song, "Do Wop (That Thing)," was one of the first singles analyzed in this study. The song was No. 8 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart for Winter 1999. As indicated in Chapter Two, the song's rhetorical appeal includes the call to elevate the human spirit to a place where love matters more than lust, where character is more valuable than cash and cars, and where integrity trumps ignorance every single time. It also critiques mindless consumerism, the behavior of people who allow themselves to be manipulated by media conglomerates who sell the idea that to be considered somebody in America, you must adorn yourself with name-brand clothing and expensive jewelry, frequent the trendiest nightclubs, and drive the car that is considered the hottest at the moment.

There are some artists who resist hegemony at every turn. Lauryn Hill, among others, is one such artist. Although Ms. Hill took a lengthy hiatus from the music scene, other hip-hop artists including Kanye West, Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Little Brother, dead prez and others continued in a similar tradition. Within the popular music

realm, many of these artists, with the exceptions of Kanye West, Common, and Mos Def, may seem obscure to most music fans. They all, however, continue to make music that requires the listener to think critically about the problems engulfing society in general, and the Black community, specifically.

Lauryn Hill, whose words in interviews often suggest that she is a Black feminist, although she may not be self-defined as such, spoke about the need to subvert the prevalent images in popular music and culture that posits Black women as sexually out of control and unworthy of respect. In her interview, which was published in *Essence* in February 2006, Ms. Hill spoke about the pressures of the music industry to uphold the image that marketing and promotions executives create for the artist. This was a dilemma she continuously faced in the music business. Along with Lauryn Hill's song, "Do Wop (That Thing)," other songs that reflect a type of resistance to the hegemonic domain will be explored as well. Songs by artists who include Kanye West, Common, Little Brother and dead prez will be examined. With the exception of Kanye West and Common, none of the other artists' songs appeared on Billboard's Top 10 of the Hot 100 charts for the years under study. Including some of the songs by artists that did not appear on the Hot 100 Singles charts, however, helps bolster the argument posed in this analysis. Far more songs considered nihilistic by Black recording artists are on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles charts than those by Blacks that resist hegemony. The opposite appears to be true, however, of songs performed by White recording artists. The majority of songs (23 of 26) by Whites contained themes considered life-affirming and uplifting on Billboard's Top 10 charts. Songs analyzed from the chart for the first year of this study, Winter 1999,

included six by Black recording artists. Although none of the songs in this year were considered nihilistic, four of the six have been identified as having strong rhetorical potential to resist hegemony. Those songs include R. Kelly's "I'm Your Angel," Monica's "Angel of Mine," Deborah Cox's "Nobody's Supposed to Be Here," and Lauryn Hill's "Do Wop: That Thing." All of these songs were interpreted in some detail in Chapter Two, as were others considered life-affirming. For the purposes of this analysis, however, songs that resist hegemony but did not appear on Billboard's Hot 100 will be analyzed in Chapter Four. These songs will be analyzed using bell hooks' theory of developing rhetorical/cultural products that resist the hegemonic domain. Of all the songs from Billboard's Hot 100 Winter 1999 chart, Lauryn Hill's song, "Do Wop (That Thing)," represents strong rhetorical potential to resist hegemony. In Lauryn Hill's interview in the February 2006 issue of *Essence*, she spoke about where she believes this focus of creating such cultural products of resistance needs to be:

It's really about the Black woman falling in love with her own image of beauty. I know that I've been in a fight to love myself and experience reciprocity in a relationship...You have to do something with the insecurity, ghosts and demons that have been programmed in us for centuries. You have to master the voices, all the insecure and inadequate men who put garbage in a woman's mind, soul, spirit and psyche just so they can use her. You've got to break free of that crap. I didn't see many of the women who came before me fight that war successfully. And when you don't see it, you don't know if it can be done. (p. 160)

This never-ending struggle to maintain her integrity by remaining in control of her own self-definition as an artist may have been a significant reason for Ms. Hill's decision to take a lengthy hiatus away from the glitz and glamour of superstardom. During the process, she learned a valuable lesson about the promotion and marketing aspects of the music industry, and how often it is at odds with projecting the individual artist's truest self. This phenomenon can be likened to the music industry's lack of interest in "keeping it real." The term, "keeping it real," often refers to an artist's failure to reflect reality in either life or through musical expression. This term also has been associated with reflecting the most degrading and dehumanizing images of Black people through popular culture, especially music, despite the fact that these representations are not the norm among the majority of African Americans. In the case of Ms. Hill, she continued to approach her art with a level of integrity that some people may have attempted to stifle at various levels. Ms. Hill longed for much of what has been defined in the pages of this analysis as life-affirming, uplifting, and empowering. Simply put, she longed for true love:

I'm realizing now that you have to get love, period. Love is my food. Truth is my oxygen. I need those things. I'm sure there have been times I tried to deny myself love by staying in something safe or convenient. By the time I realized that that was not going to work, I was literally starving for oxygen. Now I realize that satisfaction, and the ability to affirm it, is my birthright. Happiness, joy, love, peace are all things I'm entitled to so long as I don't compromise or settle for something less. (p. 160)

It is obvious that Ms. Hill's aim in "Do Wop (That Thing)" is to help empower listeners to reach for the higher ground with regard to self-dignity and respect. As indicated previously in this analysis, her song addresses a wide range of issues within the span of less than five minutes. In the very first line of the song, Ms. Hill addresses the dilemma a woman faces when determining whether to begin a relationship with an apparent drug dealer. In this case, he admits his involvement in the drug game. She pretends to either not hear this or decides the fact is insignificant, and eventually has sex with him anyway. Ms. Hill's reference to "let hit it" is synonymous for having sex. The reference "gave him a little trim" also means to engage in sex. The song's reference "You act like you ain't hear him" refers to the woman's reaction to the man telling her "he was 'bout the Benjamins," meaning he was either drug dealing or involved in some other type of "hustle" or illegal activity. Being about the Benjamins, however, does not always indicate illegal activity. Like other terms, it must be placed within its proper context. People who work legitimate jobs might use the same term in reference to their plight to become rich and successful as well. For example, someone may ask another person why he works so many overtime hours. The person might answer, "I'm about them Benjamins." But in reference to Ms. Hill's song, the context provides the answer for how this particular term is to be interpreted:

It's been three weeks since you've been looking for your friend
 The one you let hit it and never called you again
 Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins
 You act like you ain't hear him then gave him a little trim (1998)

The song also interrogates the woman's motives for becoming involved with the man,

despite the fact she knew he was dealing drugs. To further indict her actions, she initially led him to believe she was not interested in his advances. A short time, later, however, she has sex with him. Ms. Hill's challenge to the woman in this scenario is the following:

Plus when you give it up so easy you ain't even fooling him
If you did it then, then you probably fuck again (1998)

Throughout the narrative provided, Ms. Hill ultimately is addressing various issues among women in general. Another compelling critique is one she provides regarding the claims one makes about his or her faith in God, while exhibiting behavior that is counter to their spiritual principles.

Talking out your neck sayin' you're a Christian
A Muslim sleeping with the gin
Now that was the sin that did Jezebel in (1998)

It would be almost another five years after the smashing success of Lauryn Hill before another hip-hop artist who represented hegemonic resistance would make his mark by reaching No. 1 on the Billboard charts. Kanye West, a consummate producer and rapper, released *The College Dropout* in 2004 on Roc-A-Fella Records. At least five of the singles off of his album reached Billboard's Hot 100 charts and received tremendous radio airplay. For the purposes of this analysis, two songs by Kanye West (Roc-A-Fella, 2004) - which represent the kind of oppositional cultural products of which bell hooks writes - will be analyzed in this chapter. West, who won three Grammys for *The College Dropout*, and three more for *The Late Registration*, which was released in 2005, critically challenges the many contradictions in the lives of Black people in America. The first song, "All Falls Down," expresses various insecurities of being Black in America, and

being bombarded with a slew of media images that are counterproductive to healthy development, especially among children. West reveals the angst of teen and young Black mothers who, in the face of their insecurities about their own self-worth, name their children after expensive cars they cannot afford. The song also critiques a Black woman's continuing battle with the look of her natural hair and her attempts to replace it with the hegemonic domain's standard of beauty. West refers to "weave," or the artificial hair that some Black women wear in order to feel better about themselves. Everywhere they turn, however, they are reminded that their own natural hair is somehow not good enough.

Oh when it all, it all falls down
 I'm telling you Ohh, it all falls down
 She's so precious with the peer pressure
 Couldn't afford a car so she named her daughter Lexus (a Lexus)
 She had hair so long that it looked like weave
 Then she cut it all off now she look like Eve
 And she be dealing with some issues that you can't believe
 Single black female addicted to retail and well (2004)

In many ways, "All Falls Down" is reminiscent of Lauryn Hill's "Do Wop (That Thing)" because both songs present challenges to teens and adults, and also men and women. The song interrogates the obsession with non-essential material goods, another focus of this study. The song, however, does not place the artist in the position of a self-righteous demagogue. West even admits in one line of the song that he falls prey to the same rhetoric that bombards everyone else on a daily basis. He admits going on a shopping spree to purchase clothes and other niceties with an advance from his record company.

But I ain't even gonna act holier than thou
 Cause fuck it, I went to Jacob with 25 thou

Before I had a house and I'd do it again
 Cause I wanna be on 106 and Park pushing a Benz
 I wanna act ballerific like it's all terrific
 I got a couple past due bills, I won't get specific
 I got a problem with spending before I get it
 We all self conscious I'm just the first to admit it

One of the most phenomenal successes of 2004 was a song that music executives told Kanye West would receive no radio airplay. The song was “Jesus Walks,” and it won for Best Rap Song of the Year, and for Best Song of the Year at the 47th Grammy Awards. West poignantly captures the spirit of not only America, but what is occurring globally with “Jesus Walks.”

Yo, we at war
 We at war with terrorism, racism, and most of all we at war with ourselves
 (Jesus Walks)
 God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down
 (Jesus Walks with me) with me with me with me (2004)

This song represents one of the best examples of a cultural product that resists hegemony and other constraining images. West even criticizes rappers in the industry who remain fixated on money, materialism, misogyny and misery. “We rappers are role models, we rap, we don’t think.” He also reiterates a point about being told that he could rap about anything on record, but discourse about Jesus in popular culture would not be successful. He produced and performed the song anyway, almost in defiance of the record companies that refused to sign him to their labels: “They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus. That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes. But if I talk about God, my record won’t get played, huh? Well let this take away from my spins, which will probably take away from my ends. Then I hope this take away from my sins,

and bring the day that I'm dreamin' bout. Next time I'm in the club, everybody screamin' out (Jesus walks)."

To the hustlas, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even the strippers
 (Jesus walks with them)
 To the victims of welfare, for we living in hell here, hell yeah
 (Jesus walks with them)
 Now hear ye, hear ye, want to see Thee more clearly
 I know he hear me when my feet get weary
 Cuz we're the almost nearly extinct
 We rappers are role models, we rap, we don't think (2004)

I ain't here to argue about his facial features
 Or here to convert atheists into believers
 I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers
 The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way yaw'll need Jesus (2004)

Common, once known as an underground rapper, earned phenomenal success with the release of *BE* in 2005. Always referred to by hip-hop enthusiasts as a conscious rapper, Common remained true to his roots as a critical thinker with his most recent release. One of his songs, "Faithful," is a call for men to consider the possibilities of an alternative view of God that elevates women to the most divine status. The song challenges listeners to envision God as a woman, and then to contemplate what life might be like if that were the fundamental belief among Christians. Common believes, based upon the lyrics, that this new vision would mean the current attitudes that guide men's thoughts about women would not prevail.

I was rolling around, in my mind it occurred
 What if God was a Her?
 Would I treat her the same?
 Would I still be runnin' game on Her?
 In what type of ways would I want Her?
 Would I want her for her mind?

Or her heavenly body?
 Couldn't be out here bogus (2005)
 With someone so godly
 If I was wit her, would I still be wantin' my ex?
 The lies, the greed, the weed, the sex?
 Wouldn't be ashamed to give Her part of my check
 Wearing a cross, I mean Her heart on my neck
 Her I would reflect
 On the streets of the Chi
 Ride with her, cause I know for me, she'd die
 Through good and bad
 Call on her like I'm chirpin' Her
 Couldn't be jealous
 Cause other brothers worship Her (2005)

Of course, there are multiple meanings to be deciphered by some fans regarding many songs. The reality, however, is that one cannot escape the fundamental meaning of any term before attempting to assess that word's alternate meaning/meanings within various contexts. The primary audience for many hip-hop songs, for example, consists of teenagers and children in their pre-teens. Many of them are in the embryonic stages of learning to think critically. For example, I was once driving home from a basketball tournament with some of the teenage boys whom I have had the opportunity to coach. Most of them ranged in ages from 15 to 17. One of them asked me to play some of the songs from my *BE* CD by Common. After playing a few of the songs, I decided to stop the CD player in my car to receive some feedback from some of the boys regarding what was being said in one song in particular. The song, "Real People" (2005), contains the following line:

Black men walkin' with white girls on they arms
 I be mad at 'em as if I know they moms
 Told to go beyond the surface. A person's a person
 When we lessen our women, our condition seems to worsen (2005)

After playing that particular line, I asked each of them what the words meant to them. Not one of them spoke immediately. So I played the lines again, just to ensure they had heard them fully. Finally, one of the boys said, "It means to leave them white girls alone." The other boys laughed, but I tried to remain objective, while at the same time prodding the others to provide their own critiques. I also praised the other boy for offering his insight. Still, none of the others attempted to provide a more detailed explanation or analysis of the lyrics. Finally, I offered a brief critique of my own. I asked them had they thought about the fact that the words could have many different meanings depending upon one's own perceptions and experiences? In reference to the line, "Black men walkin' with white girls on they arms, I be mad at 'em as if I know they moms," I asked them could Common be referring to the fact that he's mad at these men, but his anger might not be justified because he does not know who their mothers are, meaning some of them possibly could be White women themselves? This, of course, means these men could have been the children of biracial unions. Or could Common be referring to the fact that some of these Black men could have been so consistently abandoned, emotionally wounded, physically abused, and psychologically scarred by their own biological mothers that through this process of degradation, they learned to reject and even hate all Black women? And finally, maybe Common is referring to the fact that he has valid reasons to be mad at these men, and his anger is symbolic of the kind of resentment these men's own mothers might feel because, in essence, they rejected their own mothers in exchange for the love of White women? The previous analysis of those

themes provided three different scenarios for the same set of lyrics. However, when the boys were asked to provide their own analysis, they seemed to be at a loss for words. The point is that many of them may not be accustomed to being interrogated in this manner, or to challenging themselves to examine the lyrics of songs in such a way. They may not be encouraged to think critically about other issues that affect their own lives in similar ways as well. Yes, there is much to learn from the lyrics of songs, but when this kind of pedagogy does not exist to engage children, what lessons are they learning from the songs? Are we to trust that the messages they receive will not be detrimental to their development in becoming productive and responsible young men and women? There possibly are a multitude of ways for children to learn to think critically by thoughtfully examining the words of songs in a more empowering way (Dimitriadis, 2001). However, when one evaluates the social environment, the increasing nihilism and the angst that exist in society due to a variety of factors, it becomes painfully obvious that far too many children, especially Blacks, may be interpreting the lyrics literally, and not metaphorically.

In the July 2005 issue of *Vibe*, Kanye West, John Legend and Common are the featured artists on the cover. Common and Legend are on Kanye's label, Getting Out Our Dreams (G.O.O.D.) Riding high with the success of two multi-platinum albums and six Grammys, West is optimistic about what the future holds in terms of raising the consciousness of hip-hop fans. West and Common, both from Chicago, have known each other for more than 10 years. Common's album preceding *BE* (2005) was the eclectic *Electric Circus* (2002). Common, who had not reached commercial success in a 12-year

period, finally achieved notoriety when he collaborated with Kanye West on his celebrated album, *BE* (2005).

“It’s funny now ’cause people come up to me and talk about how classic Resurrection was. But at the time, it was getting average reviews and nobody was really telling me it was special.” (Callahan-Bever, p. 93)

Common released subsequent albums that fell short of the praise that *Resurrection* (1994) received. Despite the lukewarm response from a significant number of fans, Common continued to focus his gaze upon the art of uplifting the spirit. Common’s “Come Close,” “I Used to Love Her,” “Faithful,” and “The Light” are all prime examples of songs with the rhetorical potential to help elevate the human spirit and resist hegemony.

I watched other artists get mass appeal, and I felt that creatively I was on their level, but I didn’t get that recognition. So I wanted that. But at the same time, I put pressure on myself to say things that matter. (p. 94)

Eventually, Common’s “The Light,” which was released in 2000 from the *Like Water for Chocolate* (2000) album, reached Gold status. Common, whose real name is Rashid Lynn, writes songs that challenge listeners to first reach within themselves for self-defining love and passion, then use it to change the world around them. His own life is a benchmark for appealing to this sensibility.

“I work with a lot of passion and heart toward being a good person. But I still go through the struggles of being a man. You want to know one of the biggest lessons; You gotta love you. I’ve used alcohol to feel comfortable. I’ve used relationships to feel comfortable. But ultimately, you gotta love you to feel

comfortable.” (p. 96)

Double Consciousness as a Theory of Hegemonic Resistance

There are Black recording artists who exhibit what this analysis refers to as double consciousness, a term often attributed to W. E. B. Du Bois. He was a renowned scholar, author, and social activist who wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903 (1989). He died in Accra, Ghana on August 27, 1963. Du Bois may have been best remembered for writing “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” In various ways, his prophetic visions are explored in this analysis. Du Bois wrote that American society is one that yields the African American “no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Du Bois, 1989, p. 3). Du Bois also partially described the double-consciousness paradigm in the following way:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

For the purpose of this study, double consciousness refers to an artist’s ability to explore the landscape of inner-city angst through the use of discourse that navigates the options for survival in an environment that often breeds hopelessness and despair. These options, however, are not limited to those that are considered legal or legitimate by the norms, values, morals or standards set forth by the dominant ideology. Such standards, according

to these artists, are not applicable in a society where all factors that bear upon any one individual's life are not considered equal when compared to that of another. This is especially true in situations when systems of justice, equality, and fairness fail to provide the adequate remedies and protections required by the same laws, which also were developed by those who represent the dominant ideology's way of being. It is during such times that this sense of double consciousness is ever apparent.

Tupac Shakur was one of the most prolific hip-hop artists in terms of expressing double consciousness. He could as passionately detail the struggles of coping with the life of a thug and the ghetto glamour and glory it brings in "2 of Amerikkka's Most Wanted" (1996), as he could when weaving a compelling story about respecting Black women who raise children by themselves in "Keep Ya Head Up" (1993), to writing an ode to his drug-addicted mother's struggle to provide for her son despite the daunting challenges in "Dear Mama" (1995). Many of those who have been described previously in this chapter represent that dual reality to a certain extent as well. But no hip-hop artist currently epitomizes the idea of double consciousness more than Nas does in his music. Much of what Nas represents is the good, the bad, and the ugly aspects of ghetto life. For example, he received high praises for his songs, "If I Ruled the World" (1996) and "I Can" (2001). Nas has the uncanny ability to weave some of the most grimy and morbid narratives about survival into the lyrics of his songs. But he has the courage and integrity to include lyrics in his songs about the daily grind of hustling on ghetto streets that may be used by youth in various positive ways to help elevate their collective consciousness. Nas sometimes will write specific lyrics also to teach children to think critically about

life. The song “I Can” (2001) is one such example of discourse that interrogates the Black child’s position in the gaze of hegemonic ideology. These kinds of songs, essentially, are seeking to help empower youth. The message challenges young people to think beyond their current conditions or circumstances by cultivating the mind, body and spirit by first loving self, and then, by extending this love and compassion to others.

Be, B-Boys and girls, listen again
 This is for grown looking girls who's only ten
 The ones who watch videos and do what they see
 As cute as can be, up in the club with fake ID
 Careful, 'fore you meet a man with HIV
 You can host the TV like Oprah Winfrey
 Whatever you decide, be careful, some men be
 Rapists, so act your age, don't pretend to be
 Older than you are, give yourself time to grow
 You thinking he can give you wealth, but so
 Young boys, you can use a lot of help, you know
 You thinking life's all about smoking weed and ice
 You don't want a be my age and can't read and write
 Begging different women for a place to sleep at night
 Smart boys turn to men and do whatever they wish
 If you believe you can achieve, then say it like this
 I know I can, be what I wanna be, If I work hard at it, I'll be where I wanna be

Another song by Nas, “Black Zombie” (2002), also challenges Black children and teens to think critically about their existence and how they should prepare themselves for the future. He challenges them to seize the moment now by gaining knowledge of self.

Yo, you believe when they say we aint shit, we cant grow?
 All we are is dope dealers, and gangstas and hoes?
 And you believe when they be tellin you lie, all on the media?
 They make the world look crazy to keep you inside?
 Why you listen when the teachers at school
 Know you a young single parent out strugglin, they think you a fool?
 Give your kids bad grades and put em in dumber classes
 Killin shorty future, I wonder how do we last it
 Underground in they casket, ancestors turnin’

I'm learnin' somethin' every day, there is no Lazarus
 Words like God is Greek or Latin
 So if you study Egypt, you'll see the truth written by the masters
 My niggaz is chillin', gettin' high, relaxin'
 Envisionin', ownin' shit, yo it can happen
 What do we own? Not enough land, not enough homes
 Not enough banks, to give my brother a loan
 What do we own? The skin on our backs, we rent and we ask
 For reparations, then they hit us with tax
 And insurance if we live to be old, what about now?
 So stop bein' controlled, we black zombies
 Walkin' talkin' dead
 Though we think we livin'
 We just copycat
 Followin' the system

But just as Nas can enlighten and inspire a rap audience with lyrics that are considered empowering, uplifting, and life-affirming, he also can provide listeners with what can be referred to as “a ghetto glimpse” into what life might be like in one minute, hour, or day in the lives of drug dealers, hustlers, prostitutes, tricks, robbers, thugs, criminals and murderers. For example, his song, “Rest of My Life” (2004), gives listeners a vivid depiction of the darkness associated with the choice to sell drugs.

My man gave his mommy coke
 So she wouldn't hit the block all crazy for the smoke
 Damn, nigga! Could you picture, you supplyin' your own moms
 So she don't have to bone for dimes?
 Or give dome for nicks' in the roofs of the projects
 Where dogs shit and piss?
 Yeah, we all plan to get rich but it's all about how it's executed
 Lexus coup-ed, bridgettes from cubics
 Mighta been stupid, but I got far from twenty-six bars
 To ten LP's, what can him tell me? Or them? Or y'all?
 I'M Nas, on a track that's unorthodox
 Like my life coulda been offed by the cops
 Told y'all, Nas will prevail, by the book when it's up for sale
 About the rest...the rest of my life

Nas poignantly provides an insider's perspective about the level of despair that exists in a ghetto environment where a young man chose to deal drugs as a method of survival. But he finds himself faced with the dilemma of supplying his own mother's crack habit to keep her from leaving her home to sell her body for drugs. He asks the listener, "Could you picture, you supplying your own moms so she don't have to bone for dimes?" (reference to crack), "or give dome for nicks in the roof of the projects where dogs shit and piss?" This line is in reference to the young man's mother performing oral sex in exchange for the drugs she wants.

Ultimately, Nas is providing a perspective about a vicious cycle of nihilism and despair, but one which provides financial benefits for the protagonist of the narrative, while at the same time rendering some devastating costs to his own family. He is asking listeners to not only envision what this kind of life might be like, but to imagine the kinds of choices that one might face in such circumstances. "Yea, we all plan to get rich, but it's all about how it's executed, Lexus-coup-ted, brigettes from cubics. Mighta been stupid, but I got far from 26 bars, to 10 LPs." He details a path that led him out of poverty and into fame and riches. But he also reminds listeners about the costs associated with a life of crime. Nas often reveals that he watched his best friend die before his eyes. It is his friend's story he unveils regarding the drug dealer supplying his own mother with drugs to keep her from selling sex in exchange for drugs.

Another underground hip-hop group that challenges what hooks (1995) refers to as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, but generally goes unnoticed on the popular music scene, is dead prez. This group can be likened to a modern-day version of the

Black Panther Party, which gained popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Oakland, California for their revolutionary stance against capitalism and imperialism. The music of dead prez, however, although explicit in its expression for revolution and taking up arms against racism, oppression, and inequality, can be perceived metaphorically as simply the call for a paradigm shift in the collective mindset of Black folks. It also represents a challenge to mobilize oppressed people to take a solid stand. A primary target of this revolutionary group is the current state of hip-hop music. The song, “It’s Bigger Than Hip-Hop” (2000), expresses the sentiment that most “rappers” are “slaves” with no conscience or sense of responsibility to teach and prepare Black children to resist ignorance and domination by every means available to them.

One thing 'bout music when it's real they get scared
 Got us slavin' for the welfare
 Ain't no food, or clothes, or health care
 I'm down for guerilla warfare
 All my niggas put your guns in the air if you really don't care
 It's skunk in the air, make a nigga wanna buck in the air
 for my brother locked up in the jump for a year
 Shit is real out here, don't believe these videos
 This fake ass industry gotta pay to get ya song on the radio
 Really though, DP'z gon' let you know
 It's just a game of pimps and hoes
 And it's all 'bout who you know
 Not who we are, or how we grow (2000)

The group Little Brother includes three friends who attended college together at North Carolina Central University, an Historically Black College. Their debut album, *The Listening*, was released in 2003. Phonte, one of the rappers of the group, interrogates the dilemma of trying to be the best father he can possibly be, despite the problems he faces when attempting to communicate with his son’s mother. He also faces the dread of not

having a meaningful relationship with his son, similar to the one that he has with his own father. In “All For You,” off of the 2005 album, *The Minstrel Show*, Phonte initiates a conversation with his father, and reveals that he understands what may have kept them from having a better relationship, now that he has his own son. Phonte articulates the following message:

Our memories can be so misleading
 It's misery
 I hate to see history repeating
 Thought you were the bad guy
 But I guess that's why
 me and my girl split
 And my son is leaving
 I did chores, did bills, and did dirt
 But I swear to God I tried to make that shit work
 'Til I came off tour to an empty house
 With all the dressers and the cabinets emptied out
 I think I must've went insane
 Thinking I was in love, but really in chains
 Trapped to this girl through the 2-year old who carried my name
 I tried to stop tripping
 But yo, I couldn't, and the plot thickened
 That shit affected me, largely
 Because I know a lot of people want me
 To fail as a father
 And the thought of that haunts me
 Especially when I check my rear-view mirror
 And don't see him in his car seat
 So the next time it's late at night
 and I'm laid up with the woman I'ma make my wife
 talkin' 'bout how we 'gon make a life
 I'm thinking about child support, alimony, visitation rights
 Cause that's the only outcome if you can't make it right
 Pissed off with your children feeling the same pain
 So, Pop, how could I blame cause you couldn't maintain
 I did the same thing (2005)

Phonte concludes that he is much like his father, who apparently faced some trials with his mother in getting past their volatile relationship. Now with a child of his own, Phonte realizes what it is like to try meeting the demands of fatherhood by setting your own standards, while at the same time quelling any misunderstanding with the “baby’s mama.”

Little Brother, which features Phonte, Rapper Big Pooh, and 9th Wonder, explore a variety of empowering themes on their sophomore release, *The Minstrel Show* (2005). Their critical work raises eyebrows from those who yearn for hip-hop that is more reminiscent of the Golden Age of the genre. While keeping the listening audience focused on their lyrics through the use of street prose, sprinkled with some profanity, the liner notes of the album will lead some listeners on a journey through history’s archives. The inside jacket, for example, explains what minstrel shows are and how they developed throughout the course of history. The following comments, however, are central to this analysis in terms of how they interrogate the current landscape of popular hip-hop music.

Even as the music has become the dominant force in contemporary American popular culture, we need to ask ourselves now, do we really control this medium? Do we, the creators and consumers of this culture, determine what’s hot? What acts blow up? Who gets run on the radio? Or are our tastes determined for us along a very narrow spectrum, or our culture repackaged and re-presented to us every bit as codified and restricted as the Minstrel Shows? To what degree are our tastes our own? Do we just luv chitlins? Or have we been eatin’ pig guts for so

long it's all that we have a taste for now? (p. 1, liner notes of CD, *The Minstrel Show*, 2005).

The discourse formulated by the themes in the songs by the artists above help support hooks (1996) and her theories about cultural products that resist the hegemonic domain. De-colonization, according to hooks, is the act of critically interrogating the cultural products that reinforce white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Her ideas about invention with regard to creating non-dominating ways of resisting hegemony is evident when used to analyze the themes in songs by such artists as Lauryn Hill, Kanye West, Common, Nas, Little Brother, dead prez, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and many others. This means the rhetors must “practice speaking in a loving and caring manner” and replace exploitive rhetoric with a caring, compassionate voice (hooks, 2003). This does not mean, however, that some of the same artists included in this analysis do not produce and perform songs occasionally that must be monitored for content, depending upon what is being said, and for whom the particular song is intended to reach. There are some songs by every one of the artists included above that are not appropriate for children to listen to without the benefit of an adult who is willing to talk to the child about what the song's message might mean in their own lives or the lives of others. This is a crucial point with regard to what is required of parents in terms of their responsibility to teach their children to think critically. This point will be further explored in Chapter 5.

It is essential for people to trust - even through long periods when dreams may appear to have been deferred, delayed, and overshadowed - that there comes a time when an unwavering will, a strong belief, and endless prayers bring great visions to realization.

Attallah Shabazz from the Forward of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1999)

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This particular study focused on the use of rhetorical criticism, which was framed by Black feminist/ critical theories and analyses. Specifically, the rhetorical analysis was guided by bell hooks (1981, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2003) and her rhetorical theory about how race, gender, and class inform the production and reception of cultural artifacts/products that reinforce domination. Hooks refers to the system that promotes domination as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. This study is supported by the critical analyses of other scholars including Patricia Hill-Collins (2000, 2006), Michael Eric Dyson (1996, 2004), and Naim Akbar (1984). This analysis aimed to reveal the binary way of conceptualizing the value of human beings, particularly Blacks and Whites, which hooks characterizes as a “belief in a notion of superior and inferior” (hooks, 1989, p.19). This kind of system essentially fosters individualism and not collective struggle or cooperation. The use of the term “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” tends to express the idea of domination as it relates to the perpetuation of racism, capitalism, and sexism. The term also expresses binary perspectives regarding heterosexism and class elitism. Thus, domination might foster racial hatred, misogynist attitudes, sexist behavior, fierce competition, and alienation among various groups of people. This system of domination is based upon

groups of people within a socially constructed hierarchy (hooks, 2003). This study reveals the ways in which the lyrics of songs by Black recording artists, particularly hip-hop music, help reinforce hegemony, or a system of domination. This phenomenon also is more apparent when analyzing the rhetoric of songs produced and performed by White recording artists on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles charts and comparing them to those performed by Blacks. This particular phenomenon was thoroughly explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Marginality as a site of resistance is another fundamental aspect of hooks' theorizing position. This means those who are perceived as the oppressed and marginalized in society must resist domination through creative means such as artistic expression aimed at not only empowering the dispossessed, but by also seeking to change the collective gaze of those who are considered part of the group perceived to be superior in the hierarchy of binary thinking. Through this process, those who are marginalized can begin to de-colonize their way of thinking, which means "breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality, of our own experience" (hooks, 1993, pp. 1-2). Resisting hegemony through the songs of Black recording artists was explored in Chapter Four of this dissertation. The study reveals that research regarding the rhetoric of song is vitally important to not only the collective well being of African Americans, but to the overall strength of America. The following pages will summarize the results of the analysis, provide details, statistics and support for the findings. This section also offers solutions to help stem the increasing tide of nihilism that is reflected in Black musical expression.

Results of Analysis

Marginalization Based Upon Race

Definitions for what constitutes nihilism in the lyrics of songs were developed for this analysis. It also was necessary to define what was indicative of lyrics that represent life-affirming, uplifting, and empowering themes. A total of 80 songs were analyzed for the purposes of this study. There were other songs that also were analyzed, but they represent those that resist hegemony. Quarters for each of the eight years of the study were randomly selected. Songs from the following quarters and years of Billboard's Hot 100 Singles charts included Winter 1999, Spring 2000, Summer 2001, Fall 2002, Summer 2003, Spring 2004, Winter 2005, and Winter 2006. These years were selected to represent music of the new millennium. Of the 80 songs analyzed, 54 were by Black recording artists, which means 67.5 percent of all songs on the Top 10 of Billboard's Hot 100 charts (as listed by the paid service of Napster) were performed by Black recording artists. Also, 32.5 percent (26) of all songs on the charts were performed by White or other recording artists. Of the 54 songs performed by Black recording artists, 50 percent of them (27) were categorized as containing nihilistic themes. Of the 26 songs performed by White recording artists, only three (11 percent) of them were categorized as songs containing nihilistic themes. Of the 80 songs analyzed in this study, 3.7 percent of songs by White recording artists were categorized as songs with nihilistic themes. However, 33 percent of all songs (one third) analyzed on the Billboard charts that were performed by Black recording artists were categorized as nihilistic. The year with the most songs categorized as nihilistic was reflected on the Winter 2005 chart with nine songs. This

particular chart also represented the most Black male recording artists (7). Two of the songs categorized as nihilistic were “Soldier” and “Lose My Breath” performed by Destiny’s Child. They were the only songs by Black female recording artists to appear on that chart. There were no songs by White female recording artists in the Top 10 for that particular chart. The year representing the second greatest number of songs categorized as nihilistic was Spring 2004 with five. Only one song was performed by a Black female recording artist, which was Beyonce’s “Naughty Girl.” It appears that 2004 and 2005 represent the years containing the most songs considered nihilistic. Also, the majority of songs by Black women on these two charts contained lyrics or themes categorized as nihilistic. On neither of these charts, however, are there songs by White recording artists that contain themes or lyrics categorized as nihilistic. These findings tend to support theories by hooks regarding the reinforcement of a binary perspective based upon the notion of superior vs. inferior. Some might argue this phenomenon could lead to more negative opinions among White youth regarding Black people. More importantly, it may reinforce what many Black youth come to believe about themselves over time. A close examination of the texts reveals that half (27) of all songs by Black recording artists (54) tend to reinforce a binary conception of inferior (themes reflected by Black artists) and superior (themes reflected by Whites and other artists), thus reinforcing hegemony. In many of her critical analyses, hooks refers to this as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. This aspect of the study addressed the significance of race as it pertains to the marginalization of Black people within the hegemonic domain (Hill Collins, 2000, 2006).

Marginalization Based Upon Race and Gender

Before the start of the new millennium, the Billboard Winter 1999 chart indicated that Black women were predominantly represented in the Top 10 with five songs. These songs included Brandy's "Have You Ever" at No. 1, Monica's "Angel of Mine" at No. 4, Deborah Cox's "Nobody's Supposed to Be Here" at No. 5, Whitney Houston's "Heartbreak Hotel" at No. 7, and Lauryn Hill's "Do Wop (That Thing)" at No. 8. This also represented the only year of the study when not one song was categorized as containing nihilistic themes. A gradual increase in nihilistic themes is noticeable as the number of Black male recording artists on the Top 10 chart increases. As the number of Black male recording artists increased on the chart, so too did the number of songs containing nihilistic themes. Songs by Black women that appeared on the charts most often contained lyrics or themes categorized as nihilistic as well. On the Summer 2001 chart, there were five Black female recording artists represented, more than any other artists. Four songs were categorized as nihilistic, with three of them performed by Black female artists including Destiny's Child's "Bootylicious", Blue Cantrell's "Hit 'Em Up Style", featuring Foxy Brown, and Janet Jackson's "All For You," though Ms. Jackson's song does not represent a significant level of nihilism.

Nihilistic Themes Shared by Black Artists

This study revealed a significant number of shared nihilistic themes among Black recording artists. The analysis also revealed how the songs' depictions helped support hooks' primary theory of domination in relation to ideas that tend to reinforce binary ways of thinking about race, gender, and class. For example, the rhetorical analysis

revealed a variety of themes in songs by Black artists that are categorized as nihilistic. It also revealed the prevalence of such songs on the Top 10 of Billboard's Hot 100 charts. For example, many of the songs were categorized as nihilistic in terms of their representation of Black men as thugs, criminals, prone to violence, sexually menacing, and disrespectful, especially to Black women. None of the songs on the Billboard charts performed by White recording artists were identified as containing similar themes. The Game's "How We Do," Snoop Dogg's "Drop It Like It's Hot," 50 Cent's "Disco Inferno" and Ja Rule's "Wonderful" are indicative of the kinds of thematic nihilism present in such songs. Each of the songs above can be perceived as revealing a certain level of disrespect exhibited by some Blacks toward one another (Akbar, 1984).

Misogyny also is revealed in the lyrics of songs by many Black recording artists. But very few songs by White artists in the Top 10 depict women in similarly demeaning ways. Sisqo's "Thong Song" on the Spring 2000 chart is one such example of nihilism reflected in the songs of Black artists. It was the first song in this particular analysis categorized as nihilistic. Others, however, soon followed in the path of "Thong Song," with some increasingly containing more misogynist references to Black women. On the Summer 2001 chart, for example, Nelly's "Ride Wit Me" and Destiny's Child's "Bootylicious" provided two more songs that are considered misogynistic. This level of misogyny appears to be non-existent among White recording artists on the same chart. Nelly gained popularity because of the kind of misogynistic rhetoric that his songs perpetuate. One of his most successful songs is "Hot in Herre." Other songs, which were identified as nihilistic in terms of their degrading representations of women, included

“P.I.M.P.” by 50 Cent, “Right Thurr” and “One Call Away” both by Chingy, “Naughty Girl” by Beyonce, “Hotel” by Cassidy featuring R. Kelly, “Drop It Like It’s Hot” by Snoop Dogg, “Make Me Lose My Breath” by Destiny’s Child, “Laffy Taffy” by D4L, “Disco Inferno” by 50 Cent, and “Wonderful” by Ja Rule. About 33 percent of the 80 songs, of which are represented by Black artists, include nihilistic themes and lyrics.

Resisting the Perpetuation of Racist Ideology in the Media

Although there has been much debate about the increasing level of violence, misogyny, disrespect, individualism, materialism, and angst in hip-hop music, many critics have lauded the benefits of such Black musical expression. Imani Perry in *Prophets of the Hood* (2004) echoes the sentiment of such critics. She interrogated those who wrongfully attack hip-hop music without understanding the complexity of some of the songs’ lyrics.

Dominant stereotypes of black masculinity are present in hip hop, and yet a critical reading of the texts demands both an understanding of the stereotypes and of their subversion, as well as of the range of narrative and artistic argumentation taking place within the music as it depicts black manhood. (p. 154)

One should be careful to not consider such statements as a defense of hip-hop music that beyond any reasonable doubt is considered nihilistic. Perry merely expresses the need for critics to be more diligent in their analysis of some of the lyrics when determining the critical or aesthetic value of such music. The primary focus of this analysis is aimed at revealing the possible impact that such music might have upon the minds of the children who listen to it. In many ways, some of the lyrics of hip-hop songs express violent and

pornographic depictions and imagery. Some might argue that while children are less likely to be able to walk into a store and purchase a pornographic DVD without identification that proves they are at least 18 years of age, these same children have easier access to the descriptions of such behavior contained in the CDs of popular recording artists. This is especially true when one considers the popularity of i-pods, the portable digital music players that have become the rave among many teens. These mini-players, many of which can fit in the palm of one's hand, also include headsets. This means that parents often do not know what their children are listening to, or whether they would approve of the music if they did know. Parker (2006) spoke about this widespread use of i-pods in her book *White Ghetto: How Middle Class America Reflects Inner City Decay*. She also interrogated the role of parents in limiting their children's media intake. "Unfortunately, it can transport a constant stream of audio pollution into young ears and minds" (Parker, p. 10).

In reality these songs don't just reflect the moral poverty in the projects; they encourage it. Lyrics from Snoop Doggy Dogg's innocently titled "Puppy Love," describe a man celebrating his sexual conquests and explaining why he is enthralled that he lost his virginity at such a young age. In the final verse, Snoop shows his appreciation to a certain girl that "converted" him to a life of "pimpin'" (p. 10).

Most children who listen to i-pods can download their music from the Internet. They also are able to download pornography to mini DVD players and other portable devices as well. They might be less likely to take the chance of being discovered by parents

watching such movies. In other words, children might be more likely to believe their parents will become upset when finding out their son or daughter is watching such pornographic images. They most likely may not be as upset about hearing similarly demeaning depictions in songs. It appears the visual aspect of such nihilism tends to carry greater weight in terms of its detrimental impact upon consumers . In other words, a teen can continue to listen to the lyrics of violent or misogynist lyrics without likely having to worry about parents asking to hear the songs. But that is exactly one of the things that parents must do in order to keep their children from succumbing to the numbing nihilism that exists in popular culture today. It is difficult to argue with the following assessment by Parker (2006).

What mindset are we developing in our children, the future generation of adult Americans, by allowing them to purchase music and view images that would have been considered X-rated prior to 1980? But that's just it: what we as Americans allow or don't allow makes the difference in the moral climate of today and tomorrow. While it is easy to blame the Snoop Doggs and the Jessica Simpsons of the world, their popularity hinges on the free market - on our decision to purchase or not purchase their material. (p. 14)

While it is difficult to disagree with Parker's assessment, it begs the following question: Whose responsibility is it to address such nihilism? Why aren't conservatives, liberals, Christians, and all other races of Americans who are concerned about our nation's children not dealing with it? When one considers the lesser extent to which images of Whites or any other racial group is represented in similarly demeaning ways, it leaves

many pondering the question whether such collective inaction has anything to do with the idea that as long as primarily Blacks are being depicted negatively, and with such increasing intensity, this practice is condoned. In fact, it is even rewarded. Such logic helps reinforce many of the stereotypes of Black people that already exist?

Daniel Acuff and Robert Reihel describe a social “crisis point” regarding the marketing practices that expose children to messages that are detrimental to their physical and emotional development in their prescriptive book, *Kidnapped: How Irresponsible Marketers are Stealing the Minds of Your Children* (2005). The authors wrote that the impact of such nihilism gradually leads to a malfunctioning of society’s moral compass.

The deterioration of culture doesn’t happen overnight, so it’s difficult to pinpoint a real crisis point. Instead, cultures decay through a slow meltdown of values and behavior that undermines the societal fabric. When we define with certainty what we believe to be good and bad influences on our young people and resolve firmly to surround our children with healthy alternatives and limit the exposure and impact of unhealthy and dangerous products and marketing influences, we can declare that now is the crisis point. Now is the time for parents and all who care for and about children to make meaningful change to protect their future. (p. xvii)

I agree with the authors of *Kidnapped* (2005) in that a national movement aimed at protecting the nation’s children from such degradation is long overdue. Acuff and Reihel issued a challenge to those among us who are able to recognize the pervasive effects of the perpetual rhetoric of nihilism that exists in popular music, particularly hip-hop:

The authors issue the following challenge:

It's time to stand firm and make decisions to protect our children from those who continue to disregard their safety and well being. It's time to speak out against manufacturers, producers, marketers, and retailers who are populating our stores and our airways with harmful products and programs. It's time to stand up for those who commit to the development of positive, healthy, nurturing products and programs. By our choices and actions, we can promote the development of healthy products for our children, and we can effectively manage our children's media consumption. (xvii)

Children between the ages of 3 and 7 are the most impressionable with regard to the media's influence, according to Acuff and Reiher. In making the case to more closely monitor our children's intake of such media messages, the authors describe the concept of "blind spots." These are described as "biological and psychological gaps or limiting conditions that children cannot recognize or understand." The term is used by the authors because children often "automatically respond to advertising and marketing messages designed to take advantage of these limitations in developmental capabilities" (p. 55).

These marketers are stealing the minds of your children by exposing them to physically and emotionally damaging products and programs. They are manipulating your children and exploiting their inability to discriminate between good and bad, fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. (p. 2)

The process of monitoring children's play, entertainment, or ways of self-pleasure are crucial to their development. To this day, I wish my parents had understood the

magnitude of their decision to allow me to see the movie, “The Exorcist,” at the age of 13. For years after viewing this exceedingly violent and disturbing film about a White, teenage girl possessed by demons, I was emotionally traumatized. Not in the sense that I could not function, but as soon as darkness fell upon my room, it was very difficult to not think about the images I had seen in that film. It was frightening to hear the voices coming out of the demon-possessed girl’s body being replayed over and over again in my mind. The recurring visions and sounds from this dreadful movie eventually faded, but the memory of how it traumatized me still lingers. I wonder about the ways that children might become desensitized by the violent, women-hating, criminal-prone, materialistic behavior that is prevalent in hip-hop music. Of course, there are a variety of factors that determine the answers to that question. It is obvious, however, that parents of today are busier than they have ever been, particularly single mothers who often must work considerably more hours to make ends meet. What might the monitoring process be in their homes? Also, what are the values of some of these parents? Some find nothing wrong with the music. Does anyone care? This study provides evidence it is time to care.

When growing up in the 1960s’ and 1970s’, the media influence was not nearly as effective in terms of its impact upon the minds of Black youth as it is today. There was a counter-hegemonic move at work, partly because of the fact that most Blacks were more isolated from Whites during that era. Segregation was still the law of the land in most southern states, so this also meant that most Blacks had access to upwardly mobile and professional Blacks who lived in the same communities across America. These folks in turn were able to reach out and teach poor and working-class Blacks. They also were

committed to the service of Blacks in their community as well. Another significant aspect of this particular era was the birth of the Black Nationalist Movement during the late 1960s' and early 1970s'. This movement posed a serious challenge to the status quo and the ideology of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The Black Nationalist Movement focused on the work of serious Black critical thinkers, activists, writers, sociologists, psychologists, and others who were committed to the quest for freedom. Many who became involved in this movement began to engross themselves in Black literature for the first time. The work of these authors focused on self-love, self-determination, and the need for solidarity. Once the exuberance of this movement faded, so too did the hopes and aspirations of a significant number of Black people (hooks, 2003).

In terms of what is considered street culture, there were many similarities in the 1960s' and 1970s' with regard to some of the prevalent images that exist today. For example, the idea of the pimp persona is reminiscent of an era in which being considered "cool" was the norm among many Black men in the '60s and '70s. This basically meant carrying oneself as a lady's man, player, or pimp. According to the authors of *Cool Pose* (1992), Richard Mason and Janet Mancini Billson, there are two crucial questions related to the socialization process for children: How does this particular demeanor or set of behaviors described as "cool pose" help bring a sense of confidence, stability, masculinity and balance to the Black men who adopt it? And the second and probably more significant question is the following: How does the adoption of the behavior associated with the "cool pose" work in destructive or self-defeating ways against Black

men? Those questions must be asked, and an answer must be attempted by anyone who is serious about addressing the challenges facing Black youth in today's society. The shaping and reshaping of the idea that Black people are inferior has an evident and protracted history in America. Earl Ofari Hutchinson in the *Assassination of the Black Male Image* (1997) writes about this phenomenon as it relates to Black men.

The image of the malevolent black male is based on a durable and time-resistant bedrock of myths, half-truths, and lies. The image was created during the European conquest of Africa, nurtured during slavery, artfully refined during the nadir of segregation, and revived during the Ronald Reagan-George Bush-Newt Gingrich years...Many have profited handsomely from lucrative growth industry America has fashioned out of black-male bashing. (p. 15)

This analysis poses the following question: In what way is the current "lucrative growth industry" known as hip-hop music any different in terms of its Black-male bashing? The analysis of Hutchinson seems to be aligned with hooks' rhetorical theory regarding the production of cultural/rhetorical products that reinforce hegemony. The question that many critics seem to ask is how rap music, which is currently referred to as hip-hop, went from songs that focused on party or dance music, to rap that attempted to uplift and empower Black people, to that which attempted to critique social conditions and political structures, to primarily songs about money, pimps, hoes, thugs, chickenheads, rims, grills, and cars? The fact remains that there is not one Black man or woman who owns or heads any of the major media conglomerates in this country. This means waging an ongoing war against the symbolic rape of representation becomes more difficult in the

new millennium. The same is no less true of the music industry and network television. Consider the media-controlled images of African Americans that have been prevalent throughout the history of movie making in this nation. In 1915, D.W. Griffith's racist movie, *Birth of a Nation*, focused on the disruption of society following the period known as Reconstruction, which occurred after the Civil War. Griffith, the son of a cavalry officer in the Confederate Army, adapted the film from a propaganda publication about the Ku Klux Klan titled *The Klansman* by Thomas Dixon (Bogle, 1973). Blacks in the movie were depicted as murderers, rapists, deceitful, conniving thieves and savages who were inferior in character and respectability. The NAACP protested the showing of the film and called for it to be banned from theaters. After viewing the film, however, President Woodrow Wilson claimed it was both historically accurate and important to the American public. This declaration along with the widespread showing of the film resulted in a resurgence of Klan membership and violence and murder committed against African-Americans throughout America.

In 1929, Stepin Fetchit popularized the ignorant, lazy, shiftless, and sometimes childlike demeanor that he portrayed in movies. These forms of behavior were updated versions of earlier minstrel shows. He starred in dozens of films in which he portrayed these kinds of mealy-mouthed characters. Originally, White actors wore black-face makeup to portray this kind of behavior (Bogle, 1973). Fetchit's film career spanned nearly five decades. It appears that Hollywood and the music industry have combined forces to continue the work of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the minstrel shows, and the buffoonish antics made popular by Stepin Fetchit. Although in the new millennium, the

stereotypical roles of Black folks, particularly men, still represent the norm in American society. Kevin Powell (2003) poignantly assesses the current dilemma in *Who's Gonna Take the Weight? Manhood, Race, and Power in America*:

This is how the Hollywood factory manufactured us, and this is how we were projected out to the world. Today we bug and roll our eyes, poke out our lips, shuffle and jive with expensive bottles of champagne in our hands, dance and prance as if we are making a porno film, and enunciate our words in a way that makes it clear we are some obsequious, boot-licking coons obsessed with eating, sleeping, drinking, sexing, and having a good time. This is how the five major record companies that control much of the world's music manufacture us, and again, this is how we are projected out to the world and back to ourselves. (p. 149)

One of the most significant reasons for this analysis is the concern for the kinds of images that are, as Powell indicated, “projected out to the world and back to ourselves.” The question is how, after almost a century, have Black people managed to digress to portray characters that are in many ways as demeaning as those depicted in *Birth of a Nation* or Stepin Fetchit movies? In many ways, the current depictions are worse, particularly with regard to hip-hop music. I often wonder how this music is used by young folks to help transform their own lives, or whether it can be used at all in fulfilling such goals. A personal narrative to be provided later in the analysis will address this question. On the flip side of this dilemma, there was a time in hip-hop history when there was a “general ignorance about the range and depth of hip-hop culture” (Dyson, 1996). In

reference to why the “Golden Age” of rap was overthrown by the more nihilistic blend,

Dyson in *Race Rules* (1996) wrote:

The moral of the story is that had more support been given to so-called positive hip-hoppers and to revolutionary rappers who detested body bags and beer bottles; who encouraged black men to “be a father to your child”; who advocated love and respect for black women; who sought to build black communities; and who encouraged youth to study black history, the gangsta rap tide might have been stemmed. (p. 114)

To an extent, Dyson is correct. However, his analysis does not provide the kind of depth needed to address the current tide of nihilism that is prevalent in society, or for that matter, hip-hop music. This analysis challenges people to begin the work that is necessary to help structure a new paradigm for a national Black freedom struggle. A significant aspect of this struggle must include a serious and detailed plan to reach poor and working class Blacks, particularly women and their children, in the environments where they currently reside. Robin D. G. Kelley’s essay, “Looking to Get Paid: How Some Black Youth Put Culture to Work,” probably sums this up best when he said we need to “change the streets themselves, the built environment, the economy, and the racist discourse that dominates popular perceptions of Black youth” (Kelly, 1998, p. 76).

Such perspectives are central to the focus of this analysis. Like hooks (1995), I grew up in a low-income, working-class home. This analysis is shaped by my experiences with other Blacks who either were privileged by the level of education and wealth they were able to attain, or those who considered themselves of a different ilk than

the majority of Blacks because of the significant amounts of money they had acquired, regardless of their education. This group includes those who amassed considerable amounts of money from illegal activities, and those who acquired it from legitimate work in auto factories or other high-paying jobs that did not require a college education. In the vernacular of the streets, the former group, which is the elite, would be considered “the Bourgie,” (slang for bourgeois) while the latter are considered misguided, or worse, ignorant. There is a saying that “to those whom much is given, much is required.” This is my belief as a scholar, and it is similar to that of hooks (1995), who said the following:

Coming from a working-class background into the academy, and other arenas of cultural production, I am always conscious of a dearth of perspectives from individuals who do not have a bourgeois mindset. It grieves me to observe the contempt and utter disinterest black individuals from privileged classes often show in their interactions with disadvantaged black folks, or their allies in the struggle, particularly those of us whose backgrounds are poor and working class, even if they have built their careers focusing on “blackness,” mining the lives of the poor and disadvantaged for resources. It angers me when that group uses its class power and its concomitant conservative politics to silence, censor, and/or de-legitimize counter hegemonic perspectives on blackness. (p. 182)

This analysis is grounded in the spirit of such words. It also aims to re-spark the debate about the impact that popular culture, particularly hip-hop music has upon the minds of youth. The rhetorical theory of hooks and the black feminist and critical perspectives of various scholars have helped support the argument presented throughout this analysis.

Perspectives from Scholars/Prescriptions for Change

The following comments were obtained by interviews and taped portions of public presentations at the Hilton Garden Inn in Chicago during the conference, “Challenging the Genius: Excellent Foundation for Children” in September of 2005. The conference featured various scholars and leaders in education including Dr. Naim’ Akbar, Dr. Maulana Karenga, and Dr. Haki Madhubuti, among others. These individuals spoke about the current state of Black musical expression, specifically hip-hop music.

Dr. Naim Akbar has been recognized as a pioneer in the development of an African-centered approach to modern psychology. He also has served as an associate professor at Norfolk State University, chairman of the Morehouse College Psychology Department, and is currently on the faculty in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Akbar is the author of numerous books and articles including *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery* (1984) and *The Akbar Papers in African Psychology* (2003), among others. He has been interviewed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Tony Brown’s Journal* and by other national and local television programs. At the conference, Akbar spoke about the need for education that addresses the impact of the media upon the minds of consumers, particularly Black children.

We have to understand that education is not just simply information out of a book, but increasingly, the primary educator is the media and the images that are created in the media. Many of the destructive ideas that we internalize have been internalized by virtue of exposure to the media even before we get into formal educational institutions. So I think it’s absolutely critical that people who

understand communications and media interact with those who are talking about the high concepts of education because that is becoming increasingly a source of education that we have no control over...So I think that it isn't just a matter of ownership. It's a matter of re-education. It's a matter of conscious use of resources, and the fact that this whole process of trying to re-teach our people and our communities becomes a very critical part of what needs to be going on. (N. Akbar, personal communication, September 17, 2005)

Akbar believes that high-profile Blacks in the media, and like-minded Whites and others who represent the media elite have the greatest potential for reaching masses of people. They must, however, combine forces in order to spark the kind of counter-hegemonic movement needed to address the current landscape of nihilism in Black representation. This also is necessary to begin the process of educating Black children for critical consciousness.

The paradox is that you can't re-teach until you control some of the mechanisms of the institutions to re-teach them. And you don't control any of those things until you've re-taught the people how to use them. How do you get out of that? I really don't know. I know what needs to be done. I think that the hope becomes that if we can get one or two effectively conscious people to do what they can do with what they do, then that begins to give us a beginning. (N. Akbar, personal communication, September 17, 2005)

Dr. Maulena Karenga is a professor in the Department of Black Studies at California State University in Long Beach. Karenga holds two Ph.D.s. The first is in political

science from the United States International University. He focused on theory and the practice of nationalism. The second Ph.D. is in social ethics with a focus on the classical African ethics of ancient Egypt from the University of Southern California. Karenga is widely known as the creator of Kwanzaa, an African-American and Pan-African holiday celebrated throughout the world African community. He is the author of an authoritative book on the subject titled, “Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture” (2002). Karenga talked about the role of art in the struggle to empower Black people.

I argue that art must be functional, collective and committed, so it has a very important role to play. But it must make itself a servant of the movement itself. If it does not do that, then the artist will have an unrealistic portrait of themselves.

They will pretend they’re making revolution by singing. (M. Karenga, personal communication, September 17, 2005)

Karenga added that hip-hop music can be an effective means of mobilizing Black youth for change, noting that the genre has been used for such purposes in the past. Karenga cited a few examples: “I miss Public Enemy. I miss self-conscious, righteous rap. The gangsta rap, violent rap, vulgar rap...that needs to be condemned and people need to stop buying that. That’s trash,” Karenga said. “All of the black hating and women hating, and all of the other things they do through rap, that’s the White man paying them for self-mutilation on a world stage. They need to quit that shameless self-mutilation and self-exposure. But the people need to stop buying it. If the people demand more, and if the movement demands more, the artists will give more.” (M. Karenga, personal communication, September 17, 2005)

Haki Madhubuti, a renowned author of numerous books and owner of Third World Publishing, also provided his own perspective about the current state of hip-hop music.

Just like anything in this country, the commercialization of art is run by money. Like 50 Cent, he started late. He saw that's where the money was, so he learned how to rap. He had this thug background, had been shot a few times...so he put that in his songs, and of course, now he's a millionaire. But that's the commercialization of it. It has nothing to do with Black culture or developing people. (H. Madhubuti, personal communication, September 17, 2005)

Madhubuti (1990), who became heavily involved in building schools in Chicago to educate Black children through an African-centered approach, compared some of the work of a few of the more conscious rappers to the spirit of the Black Nationalist Movement of the late 1960s to the mid-1970s..

From the other side, Kanye West has been able to do the same thing, but he comes off very positive. When you look at Kanye West, Common and Talib (Kweli), all of their mothers are Ph.D.s., so therefore, you see their rap is different. For the most part, it is very positive, very uplifting, and it moves in a different kind of way. So one cannot deny the power of hip-hop or deny the power of the whole culture of hip hop. In many cases, it's like what we were doing back in the '60s, except ours was more political and nobody was paying us. Now what you have essentially is a whole industry built upon hip hop and where White kids are deeply into it, and that's where the money is coming from. (H. Madhubuti, personal communication, September 17, 2005)

Some supportive critics of hip-hop music, in general, say there is little need for a scathing indictment of the genre because its production cannot be divorced from the social and political structures of the environment in which it exists. This means that if very little opportunity exists for youth in inner cities to become empowered because of the limited resources in their communities, it is obvious that many of them will choose a legitimate path to success that even allows them to talk about their dire circumstances. Madhubuti, however, believes that most rappers have more than one frame of reference in terms of describing what has occurred in their lives, but many of them opt to reveal the most demeaning image because that is what sells.

What happens is once these guys get caught up in the commercial culture where they may have been a little political when they first started out, then they begin to see where the money is so deep they keep trying to build on where they first started making money. What happens is that they cease being creative. They become, in many ways, much more negative, obviously, misogynist. They have no respect for women, not even their mothers as far as I'm concerned. And so, there are only a few of them out who are trying to do some serious work. (H.

Madhubuti, personal communication, September 17, 2005)

Madhubuti (2005) particularly is concerned with the plight of young Black males, but he also sees the need for programs that help Black girls develop healthy self-esteem:

Good looks in girls and women in a world of ugly, hungry and angry men have a way of determining their destiny before they understand the power of their own magic. (p. 250)

The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan addressed the audience at the education conference in Chicago, and many of his comments were directly related to developing solutions for the level of nihilism prevalent in society, thus in hip-hop music. But what is probably most relevant to this analysis, are his words about racism's impact upon the lives of Black people. The following comments are linked to hooks' rhetorical theory regarding cultural/rhetorical products that reinforce white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

So here we are in 2005. Our people are dying as we meet here. Our scholars are in pain, no matter where they are because the ugly face of racism is present in academia. The ugly face of racism is present in politics, in jurisprudence, in religion. We see nothing that racism has not poisoned. So Christianity is poisoned by racism. Islam is poisoned by racism. Judaism is poisoned by racism. Socialism, communism is poisoned by racism. And always in these areas, the Blacks are always subservient to those who lead in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, socialism, communism, education, jurisprudence. Wherever it is, that's the reality. (L. Farrakhan, public communication, September 17, 2005)

Farrakhan spoke of the need to spark a movement aimed at eradicating many of the social ills that are devouring the lives of many African Americans, particularly youth. Unlike a process of osmosis, this particular movement will take action on the part of other Blacks. Many in the inner cities, ghettos and projects of our nation are so consumed with just surviving that they have very little time for trying to gain a critical consciousness. In

other words, many of them either do not know how to break the shackles of mental slavery, or they believe the work will take more energy than they have to give.

When people are steeped in ignorance, you can blame them for their behavior, but the wise man knows that they are acting out of their ignorance. We can really blame them if they have been given knowledge and refuse to act on the principles of what they know, then they are really guilty...Our people are not guilty. They have never been given the requisite knowledge to make us a free and independent people. (L. Farrakhan, public communication, September 17, 2005)

Finally, Farrakhan comes to the conclusion that work which must be done to eradicate racism will come from the souls of Black folks who are willing to roll up their sleeves and reach out through a collective effort to begin changing the landscape of the dire conditions and circumstances facing African Americans.

Racism cannot exist in the field of excellence. No man can say I am better than you if you are manifesting excellence, especially if they're saying it because of color, or because of class, or because of some privilege that one may have. The manifestation of excellence is the destruction of white supremacy and black inferiority. (L. Farrakhan, public communication, September 17, 2005)

It is important to note here that Farrakhan makes an excellent point, and that is the "manifestation of excellence is the destruction of white supremacy and black inferiority." He did not say the acquisition of money is the destruction of white supremacy and black inferiority. Neither did he say that the kind of car one drives is the destruction of white supremacy and black inferiority. Far too often, there are images of African-American

men and women, demeaning imagery, that reaps mega-millions for the few, while at the same time, condones and promotes the most destructive images and behavior of Black people as the beauty of the American dream. It is easier for these images to prevail when real-life examples of people showing love and compassion for each other do not manifest within the neighborhoods where real work is needed, and ultimately, can make a difference.

The following represents a list of my own prescriptions for stemming the current tide of nihilism that exists in society. When children witness collective action, which can be perceived as love, they may be more likely to allow that same kind of commitment to manifest in their own lives. It reminds me of something once said by Dr. Asa Grant Hilliard, III, the Fuller E. Callaway Professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University: “Children are learning all of the time from what they see. So the focus shouldn’t be on what they do, but rather, on what it is they see.” (A. Hilliard, public communication, September 17, 2005)

- We must be committed to never allow those who control the media to bombard our citizenry with degrading and demeaning depictions of any group of people, but in this case, women and African Americans.
- We must be particularly mindful of how women are portrayed, and we must develop healthy ways of teaching our children to love and respect themselves enough to know when and how to speak out against such disrespect or injustice when they experience it.

- We must teach all of our children, especially Black boys, to resist emulating the thug, pimp, drug dealer, abuser or womanizer in our communities. As a part of teaching them to resist the thug's or pimp's posture, we must teach our children to resolve conflicts and disputes without violence.
- The adult men and women in our communities must, collectively, begin to have regular conversations with our children in both formal and informal settings to examine the ideas, themes, depictions and portrayals of our people that are continuously perpetuated throughout the media and popular music, especially hip-hop. Through this kind of effort, adults can help spark the development of critical thinking skills needed by all children to effectively manage, control and harness anger in a more constructive way that will lead to their own productive development.
- We must teach our children the importance of treating all women with compassion and respect. It is imperative that they understand as adolescents the significance of women to the evolution of mankind.
- We must teach our boys and girls to stand against any violence and mistreatment of any human being, and to not believe in the concept of "If you're not asked, don't tell." It is far past the time to abandon the notion that refers to anyone who witnesses wrong or crimes being committed and reports it to the police as "snitches." Imagine the hallow interior, the emptiness of spirit, or the lack of love and

compassion that must exist in the soul of anyone who can stand by idly or merely walk away when witnessing a brutal attack by a man upon a woman. The least one can do is to call the police immediately. Too many of our children are being taught to not even do that.

- The use of the words “bitch” and “nigga” must forever be cast into the waste bins of human degradation. All of our boys and girls should be taught to respect themselves, and the elimination of the word “nigga” for describing each other should be one of the first steps in this process. As part of teaching them to respect themselves, a crucial aspect of this process is teaching these boys to respect women. In fact, these boys cannot attain a healthy respect of self without respect for women, starting with their own mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, nieces, cousins, etc.
- The adults in our community have a responsibility to show all of our children as much love as possible, and at as early an age as possible, to help ensure that they feel good enough about themselves to never, ever tolerate mistreatment at the hands of anyone. This is particularly important for Black girls. Too often as women they will remain in dead-end or violent relationships because of a variety of factors. Like so many Black folks in America, our girls often lack the self-love and self-esteem needed to thrive in society. They also remain forever

embroiled in bitter competition with other Black women, most often, for Black men. This is a sad state of affairs.

- Instead of talking about faith, let our lives reflect our faiths and our love for each other. Instead of just talking about the changes that need to occur in communities, let us commit to bringing about those kinds of changes in our towns, cities, states and nation. We should volunteer what time we can to a community-based organization, a local school, or social service or advocacy organization. And more importantly, let our spiritual faith and/or our faith in God shine in not only the work we do to make a living for ourselves and our families, but also let it shine through the work we do for others in the community to make this world a better place for all people.

Conclusion

In an effort to rhetorically analyze the lyrics of songs by Black recording artists and to unveil the production of discourse that reinforces hegemony, more commonly referred to as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1981, 1985, 2003), this study utilized rhetorical criticism as a means of interrogating the cultural/rhetorical artifacts (songs) on Billboard's Hot 100 charts. The study was guided by the use of bell hooks' rhetorical theory regarding the reinforcement of domination through cultural/rhetorical production and reception. Her work is placed at the intersection of rhetorical theory and cultural studies. She often critiques the cultural artifacts and/or products that are prevalent among mass media, particularly representations in television, film, performance and music. Among hooks' primary scholarly aims is revealing how hegemony and the White gaze upon race, gender, and class often inform the production and reception of rhetorical/cultural products. To support hooks' theory, this study analyzed 40 songs on Billboard's Hot 100 charts. It also categorized 80 songs as either nihilistic/life-defeating or life-affirming/empowering. Five of the Top 10 songs on the charts for each year from 1999 to 2006 were analyzed for this study. The quarters for each year of the study were randomly selected. This analysis discovered that 33 percent of all of the songs on the charts that were categorized as nihilistic were performed by Black recording artists, while only 11 percent of the songs on the charts that were categorized as nihilistic were performed by White recording artists. Of all of the songs performed by Black recording artists on the charts (54), half of them (27) contained nihilistic themes. The study found that songs performed by Black artists on the charts

increasingly contain more nihilistic themes than in previous years. It also discovered that as the number of Black male recording artists on the charts increases, so too do the nihilistic themes in songs. This rhetorical analysis supports hooks' rhetorical theory regarding cultural/rhetorical products and/or artifacts that reinforce domination. It also reveals a binary conceptualization that posits Blacks as inferior and Whites as superior through an examination of the various themes in songs by Black recording artists. The study indicates that songs performed by White recording artists contain far less themes categorized as nihilistic. None of the songs by White artists portrayed violence, criminality, or hyper-materialism. With the exception of one song, "Lady Marmalade," by Christina Aguilera, none of the songs by White artists used derogatory terms to describe White women. While at least four of the songs by Black artists reinforce the idea of either the Black man as unfaithful and untrustworthy, or the relationship between Black men and Black women as problematic, there were no such representations in the songs of White artists on the charts. This finding supports hooks' rhetorical theory regarding the reinforcement of domination as well. While there were a few songs by White artists that reflected misogyny or hyper-sexuality, none of them contained lyrics that promoted assault, robbery, murder or the threat of bodily harm. Another significant aspect of this study was the discovery of common themes in some of the songs by Black female artists that were categorized as nihilistic. When compared to songs by White female artists, Black women overwhelmingly represented the hyper-sexualized or Sapphire image, of which hooks and Hill-Collins refer to in many of their analyses. They also were positioned as "show-me-the-money" or "gold digger" types, while no such

representations appeared in the songs of White female artists. All of the images depicted through the lyrics of songs by Black artists have been critiqued by hooks in previous analyses. The findings of this analysis support her rhetorical theory through a careful examination and interpretation of the lyrics of songs performed by Black recording artists. The lyrics and themes of these songs were then compared to those performed by White artists to further support the binary concept of inferior vs. superior.

Implications for Future Research

This approach to rhetorical criticism could be undertaken to further explore the transformation of hip-hop music and various themes and topics in the genre at various times during the development of the musical form. Through this process, the prevalent themes can be revealed and compared to those of other eras during the genre's rise. Other researchers might consider quantitative studies that determine the differences/similarities in ways the music is interrogated and interpreted by listeners across race, class and gender. Such research might reveal some compelling information regarding why Whites overwhelmingly purchase hip-hop music. Additional research to determine how and why Black women and teens interrogate specific hip-hop songs with nihilistic and/or misogynistic themes also would be useful to the field of communication studies. This method of rhetorical criticism could be applied to Black musical expression over a longer period of time to determine the possible impact of hip-hop music upon the performance and sale of other genres performed by primarily Black artists.

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Appendix of Songs in the Study

1. “Do Wop (That Thing)” by Lauryn Hill (Ruffhouse/Columbia, 1998)
2. “Have You Ever” by Brandy (Atlantic Records, 1998)
3. “Nobody’s Supposed to Be Here” by Debra Cox (Arista, 1998)
4. “Believe” by Cher (Warner Music, 1998)
5. “Angel” by Sarah McLachlan (Arista, 1997)
6. “Thong Song” by Sisco (Def Soul, 1999)
7. “Say My Name” by Destiny’s Child (Columbia, 1999)
8. “Maria, Maria” by Carlos Santana (Arista, 1999)
9. “Breathe” by Faith Hill (Warner Brothers, 1999)
10. “I Try” by Macy Gray (Epic, 1999)
11. “Lady Marmalade” by Christina Aguilera (Interscope, 2001)
12. “Hanging By A Moment” by Lifehouse (DreamWorks, 2000)
13. “Bootylicious” by Destiny’s Child (Columbia, 2001)
14. “Let Me Blow Your Mind” by Eve, feat. Gwen Stefani (Interscope, 2001)
15. “Ride Wit Me” by Nelly (Universal, 2000)
16. “A Moment Like This” by Kelly Clarkson (RCA, 2002)
17. “Hot In Herre” by Nelly (Universal, 2002)
18. “Luv U Better” by LL Cool J (Def Jam, 2002)
19. “Cleaning Out My Closet” by Eminem (Interscope, 2002)
20. “Gimme the Light” by Sean Paul (VP/Atlantic Records, 2002)
21. “21 Questions” by 50 Cent (Shady Records, 2003)

22. "P.I.M.P." by 50 Cent (Shady Records, 2003)
23. "Crazy In Love" by Beyonce featuring Jay-Z (Columbia, 2003)
24. "Never Leave You" by Lumidee (Universal, 2003)
25. "Right Thurr" by Chingy (Capitol, 2003)
26. "Magic Stick" by Lil' Kim (Queen Bee/Undeas/Atlantic, 2003)
27. "Let It Burn" by Usher (Arista, 2004)
28. "Naughty Girl" by Beyonce (Columbia, 2004)
29. "One Call Away" by Chingy (Capitol, 2003)
30. "Tipsy" by J-Kwon featuring R. Kelly (So So Def Records/Arista, 2004)
31. "Dirt Off Your Shoulder" by Jay-Z (Roc-A-Fella, 2003)
32. "Hotel" by Cassidy featuring R. Kelly (J Records, 2003)
33. "Drop It Like It's Hot" by Snoop Dogg (2004, Geffen)
34. "Soldier" by Destiny's Child (2004, Sony Urban Music/Columbia)
35. "Get Low," by Lil' Jon & the East Side Boyz (2002/TVT Records)
36. "Lose My Breath" by Destiny's Child (2004, Sony Urban Music/Columbia)
37. "Laffy Taffy" by D4L (Asylum, 2005)
38. "My Humps" by the Black Eyed Peas (A&M, 2005)
39. "How We Do" by the Game (Aftermath, 2005)
40. "Disco Inferno" by 50 Cent (Aftermath/Shady, 2005)
41. "Wonderful" by Ja Rule featuring R. Kelly (I.G. Records Inc./2005)
42. "All Falls Down" by Kanye West (Roc-A-Fella/2004)
43. "Jesus Walks" by Kanye West (Roc-A-Fella/2004)

44. "Faithful" by Common (Geffen/2005)
45. "Real People" by Common (Geffen/2005)
46. "I Can" by Nas (Columbia/2003)
47. "Black Zombies" by Nas (Columbia/2002)
48. "Rest of My Life" by Nas (Sony Urban Music/Columbia/2004)
49. "It's Bigger Than Hip Hop," by dead prez (Relativity/2000)
50. "All For You" by Little Brother (Atlantic/2005)
51. "Keep Ya Head Up" by Tupac Shakur (Interscope/1993)
52. "Dear Mama" by Tupac Shakur (Jive/1995)
53. "2 of Amerikkka's Most Wanted" by Tupac Shakur (Death Row/1996)