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HIP-HOP'S DIVERSITY AND MISPERCEPTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

The misperception that hip-hop is a single entity that glorifies wealth and the selling of drugs, and promotes misogynistic attitudes towards women, as well as advocating gang violence is one that supports a mainstream perspective towards the marginalized.¹ The prevalence of drug dealing and drug use is not a picture of inherent actions of members in the hip-hop community, but a reflection of economic opportunities that those in poverty see as a means towards living well. Some artists may glorify that, but other artists either decry it or offer it as a tragic reality. In hip-hop trends build off of music and music builds off of trends in a cyclical manner. A hip-hop artist often sees an economic incentive to fall within these stereotypes. Following trends is how to stay popular and stay relevant within the realm of popular culture. The content of hip-hop, however, is much broader and more diverse in its ethos and ideologies than what is heard on the radio. The goal of this thesis is to examine the broader spectrum of hip-hop, and to take a look behind the curtain and reveal a vaster and more variable genre that branches from these stereotypes and trends. This thesis will use samples of hip-hop music as its primary data, giving voice back to the marginalized from whom it has been taken. By analyzing these primary sources, a better understanding of artistic intent and context will be derived from mainstream hip-hop culture and its various branches.

¹ Vito, Christopher. *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop's Rebels*. 2018.

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INTRODUCTION

Hip-hop is not a genre you would think would have so much appeal to a white middle-class suburbanite like myself. However, the music struck me as appealing, like it did with so many of my peers with similar backgrounds. For some, it made them feel cool, like a ‘gangsta,’ for listening to music about that lifestyle. For others, including myself, it revealed another world of which we were completely ignorant. The plight of the marginalized is not something that can easily be related to, but by listening to these different perspectives there is a lot to learn. Without the many hours listening to a variety of hip-hop, I never would have known the struggles that marginalized communities face, such as police brutality, institutionalized racism, gang and drug violence, etc. For members of my generation, hip-hop is a tool for cultural awareness and even social transformation, as white hip-hop savvy youth pledge solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement! It reveals, whether intentionally or not, the many issues that exist within the communities of each individual artist. Hip-hop is more than music, it is a language that can spread knowledge and influence, and promote the racial justice movement in the US as well as abroad.

Hip-hop music, commonly referred to as rap, is the most popular genre in commercial music, surpassing pop for the first time in 2019. Most of the hip-hop music that is available through the radio or streaming and what reaches the most ears is often what is considered to be misogynistic, materialistic, and without a socially conscious message. Mainstream media portrays a homogeneous view of hip-hop based on what is often most marketable and appealing to a wide audience. However, hip-hop actually contains deeper and more important messages than these superficial readings suggest.²

The hip-hop “ethos” is accompanied by representations of self-worth (swag/drip) and the worth of the community, clout, intertextuality, and scathing cultural critique that is overshadowed by its homogenous portrayal in mainstream media and record labels. This interference by popular culture was not a factor involved in the genre’s inception.³ While the stereotypes of hip-hop’s materialism, toxic masculinity, and lyrical content are still existing qualities within hip-hop culture, it is only a part of a greater experience that is often ignored by those who are less immersed in the culture. Hip-hop empowers those who are less privileged by creating a social identity that measures success through community goals, like bringing wealth to black neighborhoods, whereas mainstream media depicts success in hip-hop by fame and riches. Hip-hop also empowers the black

² Vito, Christopher. *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop’s Rebels*. 2018.

³ Harrison, Anthony K. and Arthur, Craig E. *Hip-Hop Ethos*. 2019.

community by addressing violence, rather than supporting it. Mainstream media also paints hip-hop as one of its many subgenres, such as Gangsta rap in the 90s, the Bling Era in the 2000s, and Trap in the 10s, whereas hip-hop has a much more varied history and purpose.

Hip-hop's identity has diversified since its inception, and this identity has been misunderstood by audiences who mainly consume mainstream hip-hop. There are many misperceptions of hip-hop that stem from its social and political context. The first misperception is the association of crime and violence with hip-hop. But in fact, hip-hop actually both reflects and critiques such crimes and violence, by addressing socio-economic issues that promote them. The second misperception is that hip-hop is monolithic. But hip-hop is not defined by one sound with one purpose. Instead, it is a genre that is open to different voices that recontextualize the art of other artists within and outside of hip-hop to create a new sound and new purpose. The third misperception of hip-hop is that it promotes wealth and sexism, both topics of toxic masculinity. While these issues do exist within hip-hop, it is important to recognize the ways hip-hop deviates from toxic masculinity and materialism, such as how wealth is portrayed and distributed, and how the diversity of hip-hop welcomes artists outside of a cis-black perspective.

Hip-Hop Origin: DJ Kool Herc and the Bronx

Hip-hop is often defined as a music genre that is colloquially referred to as rap music. However, hip-hop is not just a music genre, but a culture representative of marginalized people. This culture is represented artistically, by what is known as the four pillars of hip-hop. The four are MCing, or what is commonly termed as rapping, DJing, break dancing, and graffiti. The best known aspects of hip-hop are MCing and DJing, which are the focus of this deliberation. What comes of this culture are various lifestyles and worldviews as well as a lens on the experiences of a marginalized culture.⁴

DJ Kool Herc is known as the forerunner of hip-hop music. The story goes that Kool Herc DJd at his sister's party to raise money for school clothes at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the South Bronx. August 11, 1973 is the date of that party, and is known as the day that hip-hop began.⁵ Herc implemented the use of two turntables at the party to create a smooth transition between records. What distinguished Herc's style from other DJs is he focused on repeating the instrumental percussion breaks of each song between reggae and Latin funk. This was known as a 'merry-go-round' where the breakbeats would flow into each other.⁶

Early hip-hop DJs, and by extension the MCs, did not have much knowledge of music theory, but used technical knowledge to entertain an audience. The focus of drum and bass, and in certain cases when accompanied by an MC, language.⁷ Stemming from Herc, the goal was to provide a constant peak of danceability, which was achieved by

⁴ Williams, J. *Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop's Origins and Authenticity*. 2011. Pg. (133).

⁵ Ewoodzie, Joseph C. *Break Beats in the Bronx - Rediscovering Hip-Hops Early Years*. 2017. Pg. (17).

⁶ Williams, J. *Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop's Origins and Authenticity*. 2011. Pg. (137-138).

⁷ Neumann, F. *Hip hop: Origins, Characteristics and Creative Processes*. 2000. Pg. (55).

reading the crowd. When dancehall was not working at the South Bronx party Herc switched to soul and funk records that were better received by the crowd.⁸ Hip-hop distinguished itself from Western Art Music, characterized by linear harmonic progressions to looping repetitive dance music.⁹ DJing in hip-hop is described as “process pleasure,” where enjoyment of the music derives from its process than the end goal of the piece, where cultural information taken from the audience and the records being used are recontextualized to fit into a new context.¹⁰ This is how popular music, which involves ‘user orientation’ differs from that of high art music that involves ‘creator-orientation.’¹¹ An example of this relationship hip-hop has with western music is exemplified by the piece “Rukina - the Seven Drums of the King of the Tutsi” where the repetition of drums was contrary to European musical stylings, but “a drummer uses the repetition in order to reveal the depth of the musical structure.”¹²

In reality, DJ Kool Herc is not the first DJ to implement hip-hop aesthetics in his music, as other DJs in New York have done so prior to him, but Herc’s influence came from his background as a teenager who gained popularity, or “clout”, who through his talents became a popular local name to city wide influence.¹³ The spread of hip-hop and its various musical scenes sprouted from local artists who diversified their sounds. Hip-hop, like any other music genre, began branching out into different soundscapes that better reflect their geographical and local cultural influences.

⁸ Ewoodzie, Joseph C. *Break Beats in the Bronx - Rediscovering Hip-Hops Early Years*. 2017. Pg. (17).

⁹ Williams, J. *Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop’s Origins and Authenticity*. 2011. Pg. (140).

¹⁰ Williams, J. *Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop’s Origins and Authenticity*. 2011. Pg. (140).

¹¹ Williams, J. *Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop’s Origins and Authenticity*. 2011. Pg. (140).

¹² Neumann, F. *Hip hop: Origins, Characteristics and Creative Processes*. 2000. Pg. (57-58).

¹³ Ewoodzie, Joseph C. *Break Beats in the Bronx - Rediscovering Hip-Hops Early Years*. 2017. Pg. (18-19).

MISPERCEPTION #1: HIP-HOP'S ASSOCIATION WITH CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

Criminal activity and influence is a common association with hip-hop. It is thought to support violence as a solution to problems. Undoubtedly this kind of hip-hop exists, but there are much more that rather than support violence, reflects why such criminal activity exists in impoverished and marginalized areas. Hip-hop also speaks out against violence by revealing their situation, as well as the situation of other marginalized people as a reality, not something to shy away from or pretend doesn't exist.

Criminality and Poverty

Southern Trap Music

Arguably the most successful sub genre within contemporary hip-hop and without contest in the South is Trap. Trap music is recognized by its focus on stuttering kickdrums, hi-hats, 808s, and synthesizers. Artists like Future, Young Thug, Migos, 21 Savage, etc. are all distinct names to come from this genre who all have or have had mainstream success and are often seen charting.¹⁴ The epicenter of trap music comes out of Atlanta, Georgia, although the spread of Trap music's influence on creating and shaping individual artists is not exclusive to Atlanta, where by means of this popular subgenre, hip-hop overtook pop music for the first time in 2019. The term Trap was popularized by influential hip-hop groups like Outkast, UGK (Underground Kingz), etc., which referred to the lifestyle of buying and selling drugs. The latter group influenced this content with their song "Pocket Full of Stones."

¹⁴ Adaso, Henry. The Definitive Guide to Hip-Hop Subgenres. 24 May 2019.

I bought a Cadillac dropped it to the street top
Got me a family and started pushin crack rock
Rock crack sho paid good in the city set'
Had a fucking ho for every letter in the alphabet.¹⁵

Trap reflects that life, whether depicting the lifestyle as a glorified success through illegal practices, or the grim nihilistic nature of their reality. This lyrical content was the predominant signifier of the genre, rather than the 808s and hi-hats that determine a rap song's identity as trap, which was made popular by hip-hop producer Lex Luger.¹⁶

While the content of contemporary mainstream rap is rarely conscious, they still represent a reflection of poverty and crime. In a study comparing two cities with a similar population, Arlington, VA, and Garland, TX, the national averages of household value and crime rate were compared. It is discovered that low income households under the Federal poverty threshold have double the risk to experience violent crime. Arlington, population 229,194, has a median income of \$105,763, which is \$46,731 higher than the national median of \$59,039. 9% are under the poverty line with a national average of 14.7%. Garland has a population of 234,943 with a median income of \$51,997, which is \$7,042 less than the national average, and \$53,766 less than Arlington's median income. Garland has 17.2% of people under the poverty line, greater than Arlington and the national average. "Arlington's crime index falls on 42. Crime rate is 17.58 with violent crimes at 1.37 and property crimes at 16.20." "Garland's crime index falls on 15. Crime rate here is 34.75 with violent crime at 3.01 and property crime at 31.75."¹⁷ This

¹⁵ Mississippi Hip Hop. "UGK - Pocket Full Of Stones." May 24, 2007.

¹⁶ Carbona, Omar. The Origins of Trap Music. 18 Mar. 2020.

¹⁷ Correlation between crime rate and poverty.

represents the background of many popular rappers, who often speak about drugs, crime, or becoming rich. Engrained is this feeling of nihilism that there is no escape from poverty, unless you sell drugs, rap, or play sports, and numbness to violence becomes routine. Even if the issues of poverty and crime are not directly addressed within an artist's music, and even in some cases glorified or mystified, the music still has an important duty of reflecting an existing problem, that should be taken into consideration, rather than seen as an unsolvable reality.

Detroit Battle Rap

Battle rap, while it exists throughout hip-hop, is a staple of Detroit. With artists like Eminem, Royce Da 5'9", Joe Budden, and Danny Brown, or producers like J Dilla¹⁸ who entered national status from an underground art form. Battle rap involves braggadocious rhyming to prove a higher skill level than their competitor. During a battle rap the rappers also insult each other to discredit their opponent.¹⁹ Detroit rappers, like many hip-hop scenes, hardened their image to reflect or be a byproduct of urban gangs. Because of Detroit's economic woes and political corruption. Detroit rappers were known to be some of the most hardcore, with fusing hip-hop with fast electronic beats seen in hip-house, or the fusion of rap and metal music seen by Detroit artist Esham. The 90s, as for the majority of hip-hop, was Detroit's Golden Age, where rap battles were held at the Hip Hop Shop. The battles, MC'd by Proof brought exposure to many budding artists, one's mentioned above and more, with Eminem being the most well-known artist.²⁰

¹⁸ Rubin, Mike. The 411 On The 313: A Brief History of Detroit Hip-Hop. 1 June 2018.

¹⁹ Adaso, Henry. The Definitive Guide to Hip-Hop Subgenres. 24 May 2019.

²⁰ Rubin, Mike. The 411 On The 313: A Brief History of Detroit Hip-Hop. 1 June 2018.

The history of rapping has its roots in linguistic contests. It can be described as two or more rappers performing an expression of linguistic superiority with a backing rhythm, or beat. Roger D. Abrahams, a linguist, describes the African art of speaking as “rapping” and “capping” in 1970.²¹ This relates to some theories of African-American artistic lineages, where connection to the past is placed over original traditions, as inferred by Lois Zamora. Hip-hop is connected to past African (American) expressions, like that of the griots, Jamaican toasting, jazz, blues, and 1970s blaxploitation film, all of which formed the attitude, sound, and culture of early hip-hop. Authenticity to old school hip-hop and the arts that predated it is what keeps, what Justin Williams calls, “historical authenticity.”²² Reference to long lasting social issues like gentrification, police brutality, institutionalization, etc. by current artists persists as an authentic voice in hip-hop.

Detroit’s economic situation, with many houses being abandoned or demolished exemplifies the damaging nature of gentrification that has targeted black people and poverty. This poverty is detailed in Danny Brown’s song *Fields*.

I used to walk through alleys, paths in the field
You know that one house where Kenneth used to live?
Now it’s just another shortcut to the store
The TV in the window drew the line of what was rich and poor.²³

Practices such as redlining that started in the 1930s with large metropolitan hubs like Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Tampa, etc. involved discrimination against large minority groups. Redlining is when “banks and other mortgage lenders commonly rejected loans for creditworthy borrowers based strictly on their race or where they lived.... financial

²¹ Neumann, F. *Hip hop: Origins, Characteristics and Creative Processes*. 2000. Pg. (58).

²² Williams, J. *Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop’s Origins and Authenticity*. 2011. Pg. (134-135).

²³ Fool’s Gold Records. “Danny Brown - Fields.” Aug. 17, 2011.

firms, real estate agents and other parties demarcated geographic areas that were effectively off limits for issuing loans.”²⁴ The racial homeownership gap reached a peak in 2017, where 79.1% of white Americans owned a home, whereas 41.8% of black Americans owned a home. It was also found in 2017 that the median net worth of black American households in Boston was \$8, where for whites it was \$247,500. Between 1983 and 2013 the national wealth of black Americans decreased by 75% to \$1,700, where whites increased 14% to \$116,800.²⁵ Detroit is another black majority city that has been affected by the drop of property value in black neighborhoods.

Is Hip-Hop Damaging?

The violent content that exists within the realm of hip-hop has come under scrutiny, but hip-hop has often been used as a vessel for scapegoating, blaming marginalized classes for larger societal dysfunctions. A relatively recent occurrence of this misrepresentation occurred when Geraldo Rivera criticized Kendrick Lamar’s BET performance in 2015, where the rapper performed the song *Alright*²⁶ while standing on top of a vandalized police car. In reference to the lyrics,

And we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street, fo sho.²⁷

Though this was the lyric cited the surrounding lyrics were omitted.

Wouldn’t you know
We been hurt, been down before
Nigga, when our pride was low

²⁴ Brooks, Khristopher J. *Redlining's Legacy: Maps Are Gone, but the Problem Hasn't Disappeared*. 2020.

²⁵ Clendaniel, Morgan. *Could Collective Ownership of a ‘Black Commons’ Help Advance Economic Justice?* 2020.

²⁶ Kendrick Lamar. “Alright.” June 30, 2015.

²⁷ Kendrick Lamar. “Alright.” June 30, 2015.

Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"
Nigga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho
Nigga, I'm at the preacher's door/ My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might
blow
But we gon' be alright.²⁸

Rivera stated, "This is why I say that hip-hop has done more damage to young African-Americans than racism in recent years. This is exactly the wrong message." Kendrick Lamar countered this claim with the supposition that Rivera is avoiding the truth. "This is reality, this is my world, this is what I talk about in my music. You can't delude that. Me being on a cop car, that's a performance piece after these senseless acts." The senseless acts being police brutality that the song and performance criticizes. "Rather [than] going out here and doing the murders myself, I want to express myself in a positive light the same way other artists are doing... Go in the booth and talking about the situation and hoping these kids can find some type of influence on it in a positive manner."²⁹ These examples show that hip-hop can be seen as the problem or the solution to the marginalized, depending on the perspective of the viewer and the lived experience behind it.

Jazz Musician Wynton Marsalis exclaimed, "I don't think we should have a music talking about niggers and bitches and hoes. It had no impact.... To me, that's more damaging than a statue of Robert E. Lee." It is clear that Marsalis sees hip-hop as a problem in black communities, but he also discredits the messaging behind the artists' works as a means of creating a product for consumption, and that hip-hop is not an

²⁸ Kendrick Lamar. "Alright." June 30, 2015.

²⁹ Stutz, Colin. Kendrick Lamar Responds to Geraldo Rivera: 'Hip-Hop Is Not the Problem, Our Reality Is.' 2 July 2015.

effective vehicle for political and social dissent. When rapper Kanye West made his statement that slavery was a choice, which he later elaborated on, calling it mental slavery, where for 400 years the slaves outnumbered their oppressors and most did not rise up to free themselves,³⁰ Marsalis had this to say, “This guy is making products. He’s making him some money, got probably a product coming out that he’s selling.... It’s not like Martin Luther King said it, a person who knows or is conscious of a certain thing.” Marsalis sees hip-hop as a genre of music that is without meaning that can be derived from it. There is nihilistic hip-hop that is concerned only with the ‘bitches, hoes, and money,’ that would support his argument of hip-hop being damaging. However, he references the Childish Gambino song *This is America*. “From a social standpoint, it’s hard to decry a thing that you depict. That’s difficult.”³¹ *This is America* is a trap song that has relatively limited lyrical content about the state of America and violence against black citizens. Sonically the song is light hearted with an upbeat tempo and features various trap artists who include adlibs throughout the track, along with extra vocals by Young Thug. However, the lyrics provide a darker tone.

This is America (Skrrt, Skrrt, woo)
Don’t catch you slippin’ now (Ayy)
Look how I’m livin’ now/ Police be trippin’ now (Woo)
Yeah, this is America (Woo, ayy)
Guns in my area (Word, my area)
I got the strap (Ayy, ayy)
I gotta carry ‘em.³²

³⁰ Kaur, Harmmeet. Kanye West Just Said 400 Years of Slavery Was a Choice. 4 May 2018.

³¹ Danielle, Britni. Jazz Musician Wynton Marsalis Says Rap Music Is 'More Damaging Than A Statue of Robert E. Lee.'.23 May 2018.

³² Donald Glover. “Childish Gambino - This is America (Official Video).” May 6, 2018.

The music video that caused much controversy involved Childish Gambino and back up dancers dancing to *This is America* in the foreground juxtaposed with acts of violence and chaos in the background. Random and shocking acts of violence occur in the music video to only transition back to the song. The music coupled with the dancing distracts us from the horrible events that take place in the music video, paralleling how when horrible things happen in America to the black community, like church shootings, police brutality, or racial injustices occur we so quickly push such news under the rug and get distracted by the next news story, or even popular music. *This is America* is a strong example of why hip-hop music is a strong political vehicle, that can go so far as to criticize itself.

Within hip-hop there are conflicting narratives by those who indulge in record label practices, like high profile artist Drake, who often makes apolitical rap music. Though the idea of art being apolitical is unlikely, whether it is through artist intention or the context of the art.

Toosie slide, then I hit it double-time
Then I hit a spin' cause we spun their block a couple times
If it's not the right time, there'll always be another time
I'm not even trippin', we'll just see 'em in the summertime, woah, yeah.³³

Drake's *Toosie Slide* is at its core a dance song that was made to be consumed by popular media outlets, like TikTok, where users can make trending videos of themselves lip synching or dancing to popular music. This song was released during the Covid-19 pandemic and while there's admirability to release a popular dance song during a pandemic, it does what Childish Gambino depicts in *This is America*. We may dance and

³³ Drake. "Drake - Toosie Slide (Official Music Video)." April 3, 2020.

sing and enjoy our happiness, but behind that smile there is suffering right behind us. Marsalis's criticisms, while reductive to say hip-hop is more damaging than symbols of racism in the south, has a point about the damage that the narcissism that occurs in mainstream hip-hop can be damaging to its listeners, but with his own he presents an effective way that hip-hop can depict social and political injustices. *This is America* became a widely discussed political topic through its vehicle as a hip-hop song, along with other songs like the previously mentioned Kendrick Lamar song *Alright*, which sparked debate and socio-political discussion.

MISPERCEPTION #2: HIP-HOP IS MONOLITHIC

Hip-hop is portrayed as a monolithic music genre that plays into all the stereotypes associated with it. The genre is portrayed as thug music and falls into one category around what sound is most popular. From Gangsta rap in the 90s to Trap music in the 10s, these sub-genres impact the masses perception of hip-hop, believing it to be all about, “money, clothes, and hoes.” Hip-hop is much more expansive and complex than these surface level assertions, as seen with complex rhyme schemes, and creative themes and artistic directions that are associated with many hip-hop acts.

Artistic Expressions

East Coast Boom Bap

There are multiple subgenres within hip-hop/rap music that are often relative to the geography of the artists. What is known as East Coast hip-hop stems from New York City and New Jersey. Artists/groups like Redman, the Wu-tang Clan, Mobb Deep, Nas, etc., who were more prevalent in the 90s are part of East Coast hip-hop. These artists covered the street rap and conscious rap of New York City.³⁴ While many of the artists had their own style, they were under the umbrella of boom bap music. Boom bap refers to the instrumental that East Coast artists would rap over, and it was characterized by kick (boom) and snare (bap) drums. The drums are accompanied by acoustic bass and

³⁴ Adaso, Henry. The Definitive Guide to Hip-Hop Subgenres. 24 May 2019.

sampling. Boom bap often had a tempo of 90 beats per minute, sometimes without singing vocals with rapping being the primary focus.³⁵

Ayo, crash through, break the glass, Tony with the goalie mask
That's the past, heavy ice Roley laying on the dash
Love the grass, cauliflower hurting when I dump the trash
Sour mash served in every glass up at the Wally Bash
Sunsplash, autograph blessing with your name slashed
Backdraft, four-pounders screaming with the pearly ash.³⁶

One by Ghostface Killah, a member of New York hip-hop outfit the Wu-Tang Clan, presents a stream of consciousness lyrical flex. *One* does not have any specific concept, message, or story, but is a display of high energy flow and complex rhyme schemes. *One* is one example of Boom-Bap, and other songs within Ghostface's catalogue alone exhibit a concept or story, but he shows off the lyrical complexity that is prevalent in hip-hop as a form of street poetry. Famed underground hip-hop artist MF DOOM also fits under this umbrella, while introducing creative concepts like the album *MM... FOOD* that is riddled with food based metaphors throughout.

Beef rap, could lead to getting teeth capped
Or even a wreath for mom dukes on some grief crap
I suggest you change your diet
It can lead to high blood pressure if you fry it
Or even a stroke, heart attack, heart disease
It ain't no starting back once arteries start to squeeze.³⁷

MF DOOM uses a metaphor for the overconsumption of beef to other rappers looking to outtrap him or start 'beef', another word for rivalry or personal or public contest. *Beef Rap* shows the importance of metaphors within rap music, where the

³⁵ What Is Boom Bap? All Information about Rap Music. 10 Apr. 2019.

³⁶ pepxxx. "Ghostface Killah - One." Dec 24, 2008.

³⁷ Robert L. "MF DOOM : Beef Rapp." Sep. 11, 2009.

contents of the rapper's lyrics can be derived in multiple ways. In some ways artist intention can be misrepresented by metaphorical writings.

The boom bap style, although a popular style of the 90s and early 2000s, is still a relevant style in contemporary hip-hop, where artists either take influence from the rapping styles and drum patterns of East Coast hip-hop or derive their style from that sound, as seen from the Pro-era movement headed by rappers such as Capital Steez and Joey Bada\$\$.

Jazz Rap

The popularity of Jazz Rap, that predominantly resided in New York also sprung onto the scene in the early 90s, with influential projects like, "The Low End Theory" by A Tribe Called Quest, with songs like *Jazz (We've Got)*,³⁸ *Excursions*,³⁹ *Check the Rhime*,⁴⁰ etc.

Back in the days when I was a teenager
Before I had status and before I had a pager
You could find the Abstract listenin' to hip-hop
My pops used to say, it reminded him of Bebop
I said, "Well, Daddy, don't you know that things go in cycles?
Way that Bobby Brown is just amping like Michael"
It's all expected, things are for the lookin'
If you got the money, Quest is for the bookin'.⁴¹

Beatmakers in hip-hop got a lot of their influence by sampling or flipping beats from old records that they would hear their parents listening to. Recontextualizing these older records to fit a newer demographic and sound, as rapper Q-Tip mentions above.

³⁸ muuzeeka. "A Tribe Called Quest - Jazz (We've Got) (1991)." May 8, 2012.

³⁹ A Tribe Called Quest. "Excursions." Nov. 8, 2014.

⁴⁰ A Tribe Called Quest. "A Tribe Called Quest - Check The Rhime." May 15, 2014.

⁴¹ A Tribe Called Quest. "Excursions." Nov. 8, 2014.

Jazz instrumentals in hip-hop are not regionally locked to any location, as Jazz rap has been implemented by artists spanning across the country. A popular modern Jazz rap album with a West Coast flavor would be Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp A Butterfly," which also fuses elements of funk and soul. Using sounds from past predominantly black music genres into hip-hop reincorporates and recontextualizes such sounds to deliver a different message or create a unifying experience to "To Pimp a Butterfly" with its themes of institutionalized racism and dangers of greed.

What you want you? A house or a car?
Forty acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?
Anythin', see, my name is Uncle Sam, I'm your dog
Motherfucker, you can live at the mall
I know your kind (That's why I'm kind)
Don't have receipts (Oh, man, that's fine)
Pay me later, wear those gators
Cliche? Then say, "Fuck your haters".⁴²

In *Wesley's Theory* Kendrick plays a new up and coming rapper that recently signed to a record label. He is influenced to take advantage of his recent wealth by spending on all the things he could only dream of previously, while ignoring the criticisms of his actions or musical quality by the "haters." This would ultimately lead to the rapper's downfall as his excessive spending digs him deeper into debt. The title refers to actor Wesley Snipes who did jail time for tax evasion. The song, as well as the album, starts with a sample of the Boris Gardiner song *Every Nigger is a Star* (1974),⁴³ displaying sentiments of black power and unity, to set up a positive message in an otherwise harrowing study on systematic racism and its dangers.

⁴² Kendrick Lamar. "Wesley's Theory." *Youtube*, Dec. 12, 2018,

⁴³ Data, Mehta, et al. "Kendrick Lamar (Ft. George Clinton & Thundercat) – Wesley's Theory." 2015.

Texas Screwed and Chopped

Screwed and chopped, originating from Houston, Texas, was founded by DJ Screw. Coordinator for Digital Products and Instruction for the University of Houston Libraries, Julie Grob, who curates the works of DJ Screw, remarks how a lot of the history in marginalized areas are often lost, or they are not documented well. She says, “The Screw Tapes really captured that. It didn’t come out of how record executives wanted to portray a sound. They were making the tapes for each other, about each other.”⁴⁴ DJ Screw produced many tracks off of his Screw Tape series, one being the slowed and reverbed *My Mind Went Blank*.⁴⁵ This applies to the creation of many hip-hop scenes, and is deeply rooted in hip-hop history. When referring to the efforts of DJ Kool Herc and the origins of hip-hop, much of the history is not recorded, but through word of mouth, making much of its history legend.

Much of hip-hop’s beginnings is unrecorded, which is why many refer to the DJ Kool Herc party as a legend. Information is known about when, where, and why the party took place. It occurred on 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in Morris Heights in the Bronx on 11 August, 1973, as a school drive for Kool Herc’s sister.⁴⁶ The techniques and the music used are remembered and talked about, but this party, and other parties that predated hip-hop sounds were not publicized news or covered as they occurred. The parties themselves were known by word of mouth, and the ongoing of said party could have only spread

⁴⁴ Serrano, Shea. History, Screwed and Chopped. 2 Apr. 2016.

⁴⁵ Ree Oh. “DJ Screw My Mind Went Blank.” Feb. 24, 2009.

⁴⁶ Williams, J. Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop’s Origins and Authenticity. 2011. Pg. (137).

from those who arrived to the scene. Hip-hop and its many sounds are usually consumed and disseminated as a domestic product before reaching the realm of popular culture.

Hip-Hop Resourcefulness

Intertextuality

Another striking quality of hip-hop is the rampant intertextuality. French semiotician Julia Kristeva, who coined the term “intertextuality” argues in her essay *Word, Dialogue, and Novel*, “[A]ny text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”⁴⁷ She means that cultural systems like language always have terms that refer to each other, and that meanings emerge from this cross reference. It is common for hip-hop producers or rappers to take information from other artists, whether it is sampling another song, using the same lyrics in different contexts, or continuing a theme or idea. The DJ’s mix can include one or a number of different samples from other songs or sounds, or the rapper may derive their style from an artist that has influenced them. This intertextuality between hip-hop songs spreads cultural and ideological memes among the community.⁴⁸

While Intertextuality is common among rappers, it also has its critics. Relying too much on the art of another may discredit a rapper’s creativity and originality. Because of this, it is often looked down upon within the rap community to “bite” someone’s own style.

I don’t want niggas sounding like me...on no album!
You know what I’m saying?
For real cause I’mma approach a nigga man

⁴⁷ Keep, Christopher, et al. Intertextuality. 2000.

⁴⁸ Harrison, Anthony K. and Arthur, Craig E. Hip-Hop Ethos. 2008. Pg. (6-7).

For real man, I don't want nobody sounding like me man
For real son, you know
No doubt
Bad enough nigga, I don't want nobody sound like nobody from my Clan, man
Keep it real, get your own shit man, and be original.⁴⁹

In this example, rapper Ghostface Killah denounces anyone who copies or derives their style from anyone else in their Clan (Wu-tang Clan). In the video, GHOSTFACE KILLAH AIR OUT ACTION BRONSON, Ghostface backed up his feelings on biting when he criticized rapper Action Bronson for sounding like him and putting Bronson in his place by threatening not mention his name in disrespect and stating that his talents will never reach his own.⁵⁰

Still, while there is hostility towards this behavior, new school artists are more permissible when it comes to deriving styles from one another. Rappers Gunna and Lil Baby, members of Young Thug's record label YSL (Young Stoner/Slime Life), for example, derive their styles directly from the label's patriarch. This is seen with two examples, Lil Baby and Gunna's song *Drip Too Hard*, released in 2018, followed by Young Thug's *Liger*, released in 2017.

Yeah, every other night, another dollar gettin made
Every other night started with a good day
I feel like a child, I got boogers in the face
Diamonds dancin' in the dial like this shit is a parade.⁵¹

I bought a Rollie', but I coulda bought a Viper, ayy
Everybody got tigers, so I wan' go get a liger, ayy
I'm so different from these niggas, I won't be like 'em
(Fuck 'em all, ayy, swear to God, nigga)
Thugger.⁵²

⁴⁹ Raekwon. "Shark Niggas (Biters)." Nov. 6, 2014.

⁵⁰ Distrolord. GHOSTFACE KILLAH AIR OUT ACTION BRONSON. July 20, 2015.

⁵¹ Lil Baby Official 4PF. "Lil Baby x Gunna - Drip Too Hard (Official Audio)." Sep. 14, 2018.

⁵² Young Thug. "Young Thug & Carnage: Young Martha "Liger" [Official Audio]." Sep. 21, 2017.

Young Thug, Lil Baby, and Gunna all display rudimentary rhyme schemes, but the styles of Lil Baby and Gunna are very derivative of Young Thug. The focus of their performances are on the flow and inflections that they use. Young Thug puts charisma and voice inflection to create an entertaining rapping and singing style. Young Thug may be more erratic and unpredictable with his flows, while Lil Baby and Gunna may be more monotone, but prioritizing inflections in your voice with a mixed rapping and singing performance is a style that Young Thug popularized, which is also derived from the stylings of Lil Wayne.

Ahem, excuse my charisma, vodka with a spritzer
Swagger down pat; call my shit Patricia
Young Money militia and I am the commissioner
You no wan' start Weezy 'cause the 'F' is for finisher.⁵³

Although Lil Wayne did not produce a singing and rapping cadence, he did heavily involve strong vocal inflections within his rapping delivery.

Rappers would also pay homage to other old school rappers, like Snoop Dogg's song *Lodi Dodi* that parrots Slick Rick's famous verse on Doug E. Fresh & The Get Fresh Crew's song *Ladi Dadi*. Both versions are compared starting with Snoop Dogg's verse, followed by Slick Rick's.

Lodi Dodi, we likes to party
We don't cause trouble, we don't bother nobody
We're just some niggas who're on the mic
And when we rock up on the mic, we rock the mic (right).⁵⁴

La-di-da-di, we like to party
We don't cause trouble, we don't bother nobody, we're
Just some men that's on the mic

⁵³ Lil Wayne. "Lil Wayne - 6 Foot 7 Foot ft. Cory Gunz (Explicit) (Official Music Video)." March 10, 2011.

⁵⁴ SnoopDoggTV. "Lodi Dodi (feat. Nancy Fletcher)." Nov. 7, 2014.

And when we rock up on the mic we rock the mic (Right).⁵⁵

Each rapper's following verses differ after this opening, but Snoop Dogg's reference is used as a tribute to an influential song that may or may not have had influence on Snoop Dogg's own style.

The beat from *The Message*⁵⁶ by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five has been reincorporated in a number of songs, like Ice Cube's *Check Yo Self*⁵⁷ and The Game's *Fuck Orange Juice*.⁵⁸ The latter song appeared in The Game's album "1992," which referenced and reincorporated many old school beats and sounds. This intertextuality brings out nostalgic sentiments from generations that pay tribute to formative sounds from previous generations. DEHH (Dead End Hip Hop), an online hip-hop roundtable discussion and review channel reviewed the album "1992", and roundtable member Myke C-Town said, "...I like this more than [the last album reviewed,] "The Documentary 2". I don't know if it's because it's kind of cheating because it's, a lot of this is kind of tugging at the heartstrings 'cause it's music that I grew up on."⁵⁹ While deriving one's entire sound around the style of another can be seen as heretical in the hip-hop community, or as a form of plagiarism, most artists have some gesture of homage in their own creative work, some kind of tribute to their forebears, or a marker of continuity. The same is true in hip-hop. The use of intertextuality can be a way to pay homage to older works, and in some cases, has a nostalgic value.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Justin Andrews. "La DI Da Di - Doug E. Fresh & Slick Rick." April 13, 2009.

⁵⁶ Sugarhill Records. "Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five - The Message (Official Video)." Aug. 24, 2015.

⁵⁷ Ice Cube / Cubevision. "Check Yo Self." March 16, 2017.

⁵⁸ The Game. "F**k Orange Juice." April 15, 2017.

⁵⁹ Dead End Hip Hop. "The Game - 1992 Album Review | DEHH." Nov. 17, 2016.

⁶⁰ Williams, J. *Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop's Origins and Authenticity*. 2011. Pg. (136).

Everyday Sounds

Composer John Cage pushed the boundaries of what Western music could be with his famed composition *4'33''*⁶¹. What sets this piece apart is the fact that no instrument is actually played. Small movements from musicians, like shuffling body parts or turning the pages of sheet music accompany a virtually silent performance--at least as far as musical instruments go. However the auxiliary sound of coughing, shuffling feet, shifting in seats, sneezes, etc. now come into the foreground as the “new music” of everyday life. While hip-hop is already far removed from classical western music conventions, it too stretches the genre to its limits in terms of everyday subject matter and the foregrounding of everyday sounds. For example, bands like clipping., or JPEGMAFIA exhibit experimental genre pushing sounds within hip-hop by deriving influences from industrial music, noise, and metal.

Hip-hop has prioritized using the resources around you, whether it was dusting up your parents old records and flipping an old beat, throwing in some live instruments, or using a production program to layer in drum patterns if instruments aren't accessible. There are rappers like JPEGMafia, who could not afford the royalties to sample the likes of James Brown, so he does his best James Brown impression (JPEGMafia, *Germ*s), shown below, or records the clicking of a pen (JPEGMafia, *Thug Tears*).⁶²

You know I give it, I serve it, you know that I'm grand prize (Hahaha, yeah, wow)
It's no shade (No)
You can't take (No, yeah)
You know I give it (Yeah), I serve it, you know that I'm grand prize (Yeah, Yeah).⁶³

⁶¹ MIMphx. “4'33” by John Cage.” Oct. 22 2012.

⁶² JPEGMAFIA. “Thug Tears.” Aug. 16, 2018.

⁶³ JPEGMAFIA. “Germ

The art of making music from what is available to you is an engrained aspect of hip-hop, from DJs spinning old records on a record table to using recording and beat making software from your laptop. While sound quality differs, there are artists who have become successful without high quality sound or a label backing them.

The hip-hop group clipping., has also sampled alarm clocks as the beat for the song *Get Up*.

Hustlin' is a habit, so they say
This is for the G's who wasn't trippin' and never knew any other way
Other ways of gettin' money, not many do not require
A degree of separation from the streets you gettin' paid in.⁶⁴

With this experimental risk on the song, the instrumental challenges the audience with a familiar sound that could be coupled with the anxiety and routine of waking up to an alarm. The alarm relates to the theme of the song where the unnamed character wakes up for another day of hustling to make ends meet, not knowing if the day's monetary gains would be enough to support him, or if he would even make it through the day. Such themes are also detailed in the music video, where rapper Daveed Diggs is lying on the floor and is woken up by the alarm clocks. The flashing lights of an alarm clock alternates with a blinding overexposed light, shifting from the character waking up to seeing the light after being shot on the street from an unknown deal or gang violence. By combining the instrumental to the theme of the lyrics in such an overt way, along with visuals, it can relay the perspective of those going through such anxieties in a more creative and effective way.

⁶⁴ Sub Pop. "clipping. - Get Up [OFFICIAL VIDEO]." Dec. 5, 2014.

MISPERCEPTION #3: SEXISM AND MATERIALISM

Toxic masculinity is a tough subject in the history of hip-hop. There is oversexualization of women and priority over personal wealth, rather than communal wealth. This want by a rapper and their audience to appear hardcore and hyper-masculine promotes this behavior. However, despite this conservative ideology within hip-hop, its progressive nature simultaneously contrasts with this toxic masculinity. There is a rise of LGBTQ+ artists within hip-hop, artists who in the early years of hip-hop would not be welcome into the community. There are many rappers who give back their earnings to the community as well, by donating or investing in black-owned businesses.

Hip-Hop and Toxic Masculinity

West Coast Hip-Hop and Gangsta Rap

West Coast Hip-Hop, much like East Coast Hip-Hop, mainly resides in one city, Los Angeles. While outliers do exist, much like East Coast hip-hop, California Rapper's are referred to as West Coast. LA has birthed artists like Tupac Shakur (2pac), Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, The Game, Kendrick Lamar, and so on. Though many sounds derive from the West, none have had more impact than Gangsta Rap, which is not exclusive to LA, and G-Funk. Gangsta Rap, a blanket term that includes G-Funk, involves aggressive lyrics and heavy beats. This aggressive rap style has received the most criticism for its misogyny and violence.⁶⁵ G-Funk, coined by Dr. Dre with his debut album "The

⁶⁵ Adaso, Henry. The Definitive Guide to Hip-Hop Subgenres. 24 May 2019.

Chronic” involves slow grooves, deep bass, cheap synthesizers and backing female vocals.⁶⁶

West Coast Hip-Hop, much like hip-hop as a whole, either reflects social norms by displaying common values found in Los Angeles, or by telling stories from a disconnected perspective, speaking about such topics as a reality with or without critiquing the values as harmful. Two examples from two Long Beach, LA artists, with one that displays the social reality of LA life, Vince Staples’s song *Norf Norf*, and one that reflects the common values of LA, Snoop Dogg’s *Ain’t No Fun (If the Homies Cant Have None)* feat. Nate Dogg, Warren G & Kurupt.

Cut class ‘cause it wasn’t ‘bout cash
School wasn’t no fun, couldn’t bring my gun
Know a change gon’ come like Obama ‘nem say
But they shooting everyday ‘round my mama ‘nem way
So we put an AK where Kiana and them stay
And that’s for any nigga say he got a problem with me.⁶⁷

Vince Staples, while rapping from the first person, is stating the social and economic realities of living in Long Beach, California. He is stating his goals of making money to support himself, how acquiring wealth through illegal means is a more appealing alternative to public education and a steady job, as well as the ultra-masculine boasting of violence as a solution to more violence. Vince is not rapping saying he would do these things, and despite speaking in the first person it is most likely that the song follows a fictional character. He is reflecting what it means to live where he lives.

⁶⁶ G-Funk Music Genre Overview.

⁶⁷ Vince Staples. “Vince Staples - Norf Norf (Explicit) (Official Video).” July 17, 2015.

In another Vince Staples song, more so the music video of *Senorita* feat. Future, shows a low income neighborhood with giant watchtowers, resembling that of a prison. At the end of the video, the camera zooms out to reveal a white family comfortably watching this marginalized community from the other side of a tv screen. Showing that the only exposure most privileged people get of what these rapper's environment looks like is either on television or by listening to the music. The experience is however lost on such an audience, as simply consuming a product that emulates the marginalized experience, does not necessitate an understanding.⁶⁸

Silly of me to fall in love with a bitch
Knowing damn well I'm too caught up with my grip
Now as the sun rotates and my game grows bigger
How many bitches wanna fuck this nigga named Snoop
Doggy, I'm all the above
I'm too swift on my toes to get caught up with you hoes.⁶⁹

Snoop Dogg's music, and much of G-Funk and late 80s-early 90s Gangsta rap was littered with misogynistic and sexualized content, often exhibiting women as an object of desire and a vessel for male pleasure. These lyrics are displaying Snoop Dogg as a person that women would actively pine for, and that he has status above the "hoes" he is surrounded by. These lyrics show the place that is imposed on women within these marginalized communities by men who see women as a "bitch," someone lesser than them. Snoop Dogg shows that he holds that same purview, where he criticizes the promiscuity of women while also bragging about his own track record with women. He is

⁶⁸ Vince Staples. "Vince Staples - Senorita (Explicit)." May 13, 2015.

⁶⁹ SnoopDoggTV. "Ain't No Fun (If the Homies Cant Have None) (feat. Nate Dogg, Warren G & Kurupt)." Nov. 8, 2014.

perpetuating the hypocrisy that being a promiscuous woman is something to be looked down on, while being a promiscuous man is something to laud.

Whether or not a rap artist has an intent when creating their work it is repackaged when entering the mainstream as “administered culture,” where record labels instill challenge towards the status quo to challenge viewers, or possibly shock.⁷⁰ While challenging the audience, artists are forced into corporatization supporting the record label’s status quo.⁷¹ Rap consumption is most likely to be consumed by the youth subculture, as they are more in tune to current music and trends, rather than older fans, and this association with the youth is used to criticize the attitude that hip-hop represents.⁷² Hip-hop, and its shocking image in the late 80s and 90s, the peak of Gangsta rap, was often blamed for the rise of gang activity in the United States, by the likes of Vice President Dan Quayle, President G.H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, along with African-American critics and activists, like Deloris Tucker and Reverend Calvin Butts.⁷³ But many of these critiques failed to understand the descriptive nature of hip-hop as a voice of inner city social conditions, rather than a driving force on those conditions. However, it is agreeable that hip-hop has the potential for negative effects on its community when it conforms to its negative stereotypes. “Although more overtly political rap lost popularity in the mid-1990s, some critical discourse is still embedded in the lyrics of many recent rap songs.... Some say that corporate control and marketing have deadened hip-hop’s

⁷⁰ Vito, Christopher. *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop’s Rebels*. 2018. Pg. (17).

⁷¹ Vito, Christopher. *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop’s Rebels*. 2018. Pg. (17).

⁷² Spence, Lester K. *Stare in the darkness: The limits of hip-hop and Black politics*. 2011. Pg. (57-58).

⁷³ Vito, Christopher. *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop’s Rebels*. 2018. Pg. (27).

political edge.”⁷⁴ Such comparisons can be seen with early 90s Tupac Shakur (2pac) music, compared to that found on his mid-90s records. While the two song comparison of *Brenda’s Got a Baby* (1991) followed by *What’s ya Phone #* (1996) are not entirely representative of his career at those times, they do show a change in an artist’s voice when signing to a major label, like 2pac did with Death Row Records in 1996.

She tried to hide her pregnancy, from her family
Who really didn’t care to see, or give a damn if she
Went out and had a church of kids
As long as when the check came they got first dibs.⁷⁵

Oh, shit, baby is a dime piece, more than just fine
She’s personally blessed form the gods
If I seen her right now, she could get me hard
Didn’t wanna talk to me just to see my car
Never had sex with a rich rap star
‘Til I got her in the back of my homeboy’s car.⁷⁶

Shown in the examples above is *Brenda’s Got a Baby*, which is a socially conscious rap song that discusses neglect, poverty, teen pregnancy, etc. It is a commentary on the struggles of people in marginalized urban environments where the family unit and education system is not as stable in more privileged neighborhoods. In sharp contrast *What’s Ya Phone #*, while a reflection of attitudes towards sex and women, does not provide commentary to any social or economic issues that are relevant within hip-hop’s scope.

⁷⁴ Sullivan, Rachel E. *Rap and Race*. 2003. Pg. (607).

⁷⁵ 2Pac. “2Pac - Brenda’s Got A Baby (Official Music Video).” July 5, 2011.

⁷⁶ 2Pac. “Whatz Ya Phone # (ft. Danny Boy).” Oct. 5, 2014.

Crunk

Smaller subgenres have arisen from this Southern hip-hop sound, such as Crunk and Screwed and Chopped. Crunk music, characterized by “chaotic interpolations of club beats and high energy chants,” has influenced the current sound of Trap with the use of ad-libs within most Trap songs.⁷⁷ During the peak of Crunk in the 2000s, popular acts like Lil Jon & The East Side Boyz with hits like *Get Low* have become club bangers that are still played today.

Let me see you get low (you scared!)
Drop that ass to the floor (You scared!)
Drop that ass ey, shake it fast ey
Pop that ass to the left and the right ey.⁷⁸

What is apparent is that wordplay or lyrical substance is not the focus of the song, but instead, the beat and the bombastic energy of the performances. Loudly singing the lyrics and charisma play a bigger part in the artists style than how they string their rhymes together. There is little to be gained from Crunk music in regards to social issues, but may sometimes represent stereotypes of hip-hop, as shown in the above example, the objectification of women and toxic masculinity.

Contemporary Acceptance

While misogynistic and toxically masculine content has come out of hip-hop and its community there have been modern spotlights put on artists that do not reflect the mold. Rapper Kevin Abstract of rap/boy-band group Brockhampton, and high-profile

⁷⁷ Adaso, Henry. The Definitive Guide to Hip-Hop Subgenres. 24 May 2019.

⁷⁸ Radial by The Orchard. “Lil Jon & The East Side Boyz - Get Low (Official Music Video).” Apr. 18, 2009.

Grammy winning artist Tyler, The Creator are both gay hip-hop artists who are open about their sexuality. Kevin Abstract pushes his sexuality against the norm within his community in the first example (*Junky*), and Tyler, The Creator displays his gay sexuality as a norm in the second example (*A Boy is a Gun**).

Where I come from, niggas get called “faggot” and killed
So I’ma get head from a nigga right here
And they can come and cut my hand off, and
And my legs off, and
And I’ma still be a boss ‘til my head gone, yeah.⁷⁹

In *Junky*, Kevin Abstract boasts about his sexuality, detailing the environment he grew up in and how it was not a safe space for someone who was gay. He uses his sexuality as a sign of power, claiming that he is open about his sexuality and if anyone has a problem with it they can come after him.

How come you’re the best to me? I know you’re the worst for me
Boy, you’re sweet as sugar, diabetic to the first degree.⁸⁰

Tyler details a struggling relationship that he knows is unhealthy for him. While the subject matter is nothing new, a song by a popular hip-hop artist among other songs within his catalogue, presents a homosexual relationship. Such relationships are a minority within hip-hop music, as hip-hop has a history of derogatory statements to non-hetero people, or insulting someone by questioning their sexual orientation.

Last I heard, y’all niggas was havin’ sex with the same sex
I show no love to homo thugs
Empty out, reload and throw mo’ slugs
How you gonna explain fuckin’ a man?
Even if we squash the beef, I ain’t touchin’ your hand.⁸¹

⁷⁹ BROCKHAMPTON. “JUNKY - BROCKHAMPTON.” Aug. 15, 2017.

⁸⁰ Tyler, The Creator. “A BOY IS A GUN*.” Sep. 16, 2019.

⁸¹ Unearthed Sound. “DMX - Where The Hood At? (Dirty) (Music Video) HQ.” June 2, 2010.

Here, DMX insults and attempts to delegitimize those he dislikes by using homophobic slurs and sexuality as an insult. If the sexuality of the men did not conform to the heteropatriarchal expectations within DMX's community then they are not welcomed. Whether, the target of this verbal abuse is gay or not is irrelevant to the matter that someone's sexuality be vehemently attacked or put into question as a means for insult.

With LGBTQ+ artists in the hip-hop community, steps in acknowledging that the younger generations, who fit the identities that have been categorized and scrutinized by the previous generations of rap music, can use hip-hop culture as a means for communal strength. As cis-straight artists have done before, LGBTQ+ artists use hip-hop as a social tool for undoing the heteropatriarchal and sexist conservative space of hip-hop, by making it a space for liberation from social restrictions.⁸²

Hip-Hop Consumption

In the past 40 years hip-hop has seen many local variations, and artistic directions, and yet it still retains a recognizable core. Hip-hop has assimilated different environmental influences, other music genres, and the political realm that the artists are subject to. "From the beginning there were show-off raps, insulting raps, gossip raps, party raps, sex raps, and political raps."⁸³ These raps have remained consistent within hip-hop, but messages of gang violence and drugs began to supersede anti-racism in the public forefront. This public depiction of "black culture" as a place of crime, violence,

⁸² Love, B. L. A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination. 2017. Pg. (539-540).

⁸³ Neumann, F. Hip hop: Origins, Characteristics and Creative Processes. 2000. Pg. (57).

drugs, and gangs, assigned hip-hop to these terms.⁸⁴ This hip-hop that makes up the majority of record label output creates another negative racist stereotype for many mainstream listeners. Violent rap gives the idea that resolving a conflict through violence is more effective than through hard work and community and cultural effort, and the hyper-sexualization of women from male and female artists lowers the self-esteem of its female audience.⁸⁵ It is difficult to come to a conclusion if music has a large influence in these cases, or if these ideologies are a product of social standards. While hip-hop does have influence in social standards, it mainly spreads social ideologies into popular culture as a tool that reflects the social realities of marginalized peoples. Furthermore, it helps explain how the marginalization leads to some dysfunctional behaviors.

Contemporary Trap as a mainstream staple in hip-hop represents the entrepreneurial side of hip-hop over that of communal wealth seen in more socially conscious artists: glorifying the hustle, becoming famous from selling drugs or working hard to push your rap career, coming up from nothing. This is a popular appeal of hip-hop music from most consumers, much of which became the focus of what is known as the bling-era in the 2000s. This view on success through illegal means is a life that many Americans do not see, and this becomes economically beneficial as rappers flex their wealth through dropping brand names or frivolously spending. As hip-hop artists are gaining wealth through their music they both mimic and ironically critique the capitalist ethos by immediately spending their money, whether earned or spending expected future

⁸⁴ Vito, Christopher. *The Values of Independent Hip-Hop in the Post-Golden Era: Hip-Hop's Rebels*. 2018. Pg. (27).

⁸⁵ Spence, Lester K. *Stare in the darkness: The limits of hip-hop and Black politics*. 2011. Pg. (56-57).

earnings to provide for themselves with expensive goods, rather than disseminating that wealth to others.⁸⁶ This is a common subject within hip-hop, however there are some examples that criticize this ethos, like Jay-Z's song *The Story of O.J.*, which details the importance of investing to produce generational wealth.

Financial freedom my only hope
Fuck livin' rich and dyin' broke
I bought some artwork for one million
Two years later, that shit worth two million
Few years later, that shit worth eight million
I can't wait to give this shit to my children.⁸⁷

Jay-Z explains how investing in artwork, rather than spending money on watches, chains, cars, etc., would increase generational wealth, allowing his children, and children's children to experience his garnered wealth. While such intentions are more familial in its dissemination of wealth, such practices could apply to property or into a business that may also spread communal wealth through donations or the building of social establishments. These actions are seen by rappers like the late Nipsey Hussle and Chance the Rapper. Nipsey Hussle was shot and killed in front of his business Marathon Clothing in LA, California, a redeveloped strip mall that was turned into a mixed-use property that sells goods for locals from low-income households. His death was at the height of the rappers career, being nominated for multiple Grammys the same year, he "was disinterested in flaunting his income from the music industry, preferring charity work and investments over materialism."⁸⁸ Chance the Rapper's non-profit charity

⁸⁶ Harrison, Anthony K. and Arthur, Craig E. *Hip-Hop Ethos*. 2008. Pg. (8-10).

⁸⁷ JAY-Z. "JAY-Z - The Story of O.J." July 5, 2017.

⁸⁸ Ahlgrim, Callie. "Nipsey Hussle Used the Money He Made from Rapping to Give Back and Invest in His Hometown: 'Growing up as a Kid, I Was Looking for Somebody That Cared'." 1 Apr. 2019,

SocialWorks distributed 30,000 backpacks along with school supplies during Chicago's back-to-school-parade, where free tickets were handed out to teachers.⁸⁹

This communal wealth, such as what is displayed by Nipsey Hussle, is a response to the discrimination levied on black business ownership. Economic injustice and black Americans have throughout US History supported whites, while blacks have been treated as lesser among the economic hierarchy. Ownership of land and business for blacks have decreased by 98% over the past 100 years, with black farmers holding 14% of farms in 1910, to 1.6% in 2012. A comparative study shows a 98% decline of black farmers from 1920-1997.⁹⁰ White farmers over this period have held a greater proportion of farm land, "According to the AELOS (Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey), only one-third of Black-owned acres are operated by the owner, with most Blacks renting their land to others (mainly Whites), in fact 61 percent of Black owners in 1999 were landlords, leasing 4.7 million acres for over \$216 million in rent."⁹¹

As hip-hop enters mainstream culture we can see artistic degradation for the pursuit of clout and profit. There is a criticism levied against commercial artists and their loyalty to hip-hop's history, as artists shift from resisting corporate themes, such as violence, sex, and consumerism, to embracing said themes to reach a wider audience. Hip-hop's efforts were to previously challenge class and race inequalities, as shown in the previous 2pac example.⁹² For example, take lyrics from *The Message*, a famous hip-

⁸⁹ Kreps, Daniel. Chance the Rapper Announces Surprise Free Chicago Concert. 25 June 2018.

⁹⁰ Clendaniel, Morgan. Could Collective Ownership of a 'Black Commons' Help Advance Economic Justice? 2020.

⁹¹ Gilbert, Jess, Wood, Spencer D., and Sharp, Gwen. Who Owns the Land? Agricultural Land Ownership by Race/Ethnicity. 2002. Pg. (56-57).

⁹² Harrison, Anthony K. and Arthur, Craig E. Hip-Hop Ethos. 2008. Pg. (10).

hop song that is often remixed as mentioned earlier. The lyrics describe the trap of poverty in some of the rappers' communities:

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice.⁹³

These social effects are most salient with younger hip-hop consumers. However, the positive messages that hip-hop relays are also being soaked in. As seen in a NBPS telephone survey on African-American in the United States in the mid-90s, the amount of rap's listeners that were part of the post-civil rights generation doubled that of the pre-civil rights generation, where 66% who never consumed rap, and 15% of those who consumed rap believed it was destructive, whereas 70% of rap consumers believed rap was a source of information. The pre-civil rights generation had a less positive opinion on rap music as 77% of non-rap consumers believed it to be destructive.⁹⁴ Destructive aspects of hip-hop that are often interpreted from the music and culture is toxic masculinity and all that fall underneath that umbrella, such as gang culture, misogyny, drugs, sexualization, and the flaunting of wealth.

⁹³ Sugarhill Records. "Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five - The Message (Official Video)." Aug. 24, 2015.

⁹⁴ Spence, Lester K. Stare in the darkness: The limits of hip-hop and Black politics. 2011. Pg. (61-63).

CONCLUSION

Hip-hop has perpetuated a broad ethos that encompasses stylings; like flow, lyrical content, beat selection, etc., individual and communal entrepreneurship; like clothing, cars, materialistic goods, making profit for oneself or the community, donating or giving back, etc., and concept of loyalty; intertextualization of past artists, genres, thought, etc.⁹⁵ Through these cultural and stylistic interventions, hip-hop brings power to the marginalized by spreading their sound, their messages, and their experiences to mainstream audiences. Informed listeners who really pay attention to the music and to its cultural context can avoid re-inscribing racial stereotypes and instead begin to understand the complexity of the hip-hop ethos. The background behind a certain sound plays a huge importance in its full meaning. Whether it is rap, Gangsta rap, or jazz rap, without knowledge of black cultural history, appreciation of the artists who make such works, or awareness of the social and economic states that marginalized communities are in, it is easy for listeners to misinterpret and then misrepresent hip-hop as a cause of dysfunction rather than a means to address it.

Hip-hop music at many points decries violence, or reflects violence as a reality that exists and must be learned from. Without experiencing, or being exposed to such violence, action can never take place to resolve the violence. If artists like Childish Gambino did not highlight so many issues plaguing America with *This is America*,⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Harrison, Anthony K. and Arthur, Craig E. *Hip-Hop Ethos*. 2019.

⁹⁶ Donald Glover. "Childish Gambino - This is America (Official Video)." May 6, 2018.

there wouldn't have been a catalyst to spur political discourse.. There lies hip-hop's utility. As hip-hop expands its messages become more variable, and its approaches towards social, economic, and political issues become more nuanced. This reach that hip-hop has far extends the perceived monolith that the mainstream media believe it to be. Lastly, the negative impacts within hip-hop communities, such as toxic masculinity and the importance of individual wealth are contrasted by the progressive nature of hip-hop. A nature that follows social norms with opinions on the LGBTQ+ community, which has become more common within hip-hop, with big artists like Kevin Abstract and Tyler, the Creator. Artists, like Nipsey Hussle and Chance the Rapper, who have accumulated their own wealth use it to better the wealth of their communities through donations and business ownership. By recognizing these misperceptions, and how the misperceptions can be countered will ultimately strengthen discourse regarding hip-hop music and culture.

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