

1-1-1996

Deconstructing Myths About Rap Music

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DECONSTRUCTING MYTHS ABOUT RAP MUSIC

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Deconstructing Myths About Rap Music

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BY

Andrea Scott Morgan

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in Speech Communication

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1996

YEAR

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Running head: RAP MUSIC

Deconstructing Myths About Rap Music

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Summer, 1996

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Abstract

Everybody's talking about rap music. But what people say is frequently based on myths. This study traces the development of some of the myths by focusing on the discourses that create them. The goal is to impact the dominant discourse about rap in order to change misconceptions about the genre. But a secondary goal is to show that "every conception about rap can be a misconception." This is achieved through deconstructive criticism. Readers are encouraged to re-examine and re-interpret popular myths about rap through the historical/ideological and semiotic analysis of rap's hip-hop culture.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Foundations

Everybody's talking about rap music. Teenagers describe it as "phat" (cool) and "fresh" (the hippest, the newest, the most together and the most unique) (Holman, 1984; Small, 1992), while rappers describe it as the 'real' voice of Black America (Rose, 1994). However, adults, concerned about its seeming preoccupation with the dark side of life, encourage politicians and scholars to debate its impact on society. The consensus on that front seems to be that rap is "popular" with few - if any - redeeming qualities, and is therefore a menace to society (Dority, 1990). As such, it seems to warrant censorship, according to public interest groups like the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) and the National Parent-Teachers Association (NPTA) (Binder, 1993; Dority, 1990). Dority (1990), Kitwana (1994) and Dyson (1996), on the other hand, accuse critics of using rap artists as scapegoats in a war on popular culture. They think that the American people might be leery of the censorship of rap music if they knew that rap was merely another scapegoat in a war on popular culture.

Toffler (1964) traced the war on popular culture back to colonial times. He noted that Europeans had for generations written that Americans were coarse and cultureless (p. 3). America's culture elitists emerged to dispel that notion. To create an image of cultured

Americans they embraced classical art, because they believe that the finest art has classical origins (A European notion). They also believe that art should be a special province of the elite. Once it spreads beyond the elite its standards of excellence necessarily decline. "Popularity dooms art to mediocrity" (Toffler, 1964, p. 4-5).

The elitists have always attacked popular music that lacked a classical influence. From colonial days on they denounced African-American music because it relied so heavily on variations of the drum beat, which reflected its African influence and not a classical one (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). From 1880 to 1920 the classical influence on popular art disappeared. It was gradually overshadowed by an African influence on popular art (Frith, 1989; Hazzard-Gordon, 1990).

The war on popular culture intensified from 1880-1920. Battles were fought against the popularization of jazz and the blues. Simultaneously the popular culture industry was emerging, due to technological advancements such as the inception of radio and the phonograph. These advancements made popular music accessible to the masses. Gradually, popular music became more of a commodity than expression. At first the music targeted adults only. It appealed most to White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASP). To open other markets and increase sales it began to target the youth. By 1950 the youth market was more profitable than the adult

market. Youth used popular music, e.g. rock music, to distance themselves from their parents' world. Rock music (the progenitor of rap) became the site of battles between the rich and the poor, the old and the young, and black and white Americans.

The general disdain for rock music was reflected in this vicious diatribe against rock and roll. Asa Carter, executive secretary of the North Alabama White Citizens Council claimed that "rock and roll music was smutty, had dirty lyrics, and was 'sexualistic' and 'immoral'. He called rock and roll 'the basic, heavy beat music of the Negroes.' He even said that rock music was a plot by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to pull the white man down to the level of the Negro" (Martin & Segrave, 1988, p. 41).

This encouraged attacks on the most novel aspects of the rock music genre that had become America's most successful export, and the elitists resented this. Their antipathy for popular music intensified, and they seemed to hate most the popular music that originated in the United States. The elitists have encouraged Americans to be ashamed of their popular musical arts.

Chambers (1985) also noticed that Americans suffered from an inferiority complex about their culture, even though by 1939 they dominated the popular arts of dance, music and cinema (p. 4). He even traced the attitudes that encouraged

this inferiority complex to Europe. By the second half of the 1950s, Europeans were criticizing American music for destroying 'culture' and 'values' throughout the civilized world. One criticism of rock music was that "it was a music without point or quality, from a vulgar world whose inhabitants have more money than is good for them" (p. 4). Such strong deprecation of rock music also encouraged the elitists to denounce rock and several other popular music genres that emerged from efforts to silence uncelebrated aspects of rock.

Several genres emerged in the U.S. post-1950 that appealed strongly to American youth. The music was so novel that adults could not relate to it; and it didn't conform to the aesthetic codes of classical music that had always defined fine art. But youth, across the globe, could relate to pop music and it became a source of contention between the old and the young. The pop music genres earned the reputation for being rebellious and negative--rebellious because they were indifferent to the accusations launched against them and negative because they did not conform to the aesthetic codes of classical music (p. 5). However, Toffler (1964) contended that it was the popularity, not the alleged negativity of these genres that attracted the wrath of America's culture elitists. Actually, it was both the popularity and the negativity of these genres that attracted their wrath. It appears that popular music was negative

because it demonstrated more of an African influence than a classical one.

Deer & Deer (1967) also asserted that Americans have a problem with popular music but not because its standards decline once it spreads beyond the province of the elite. They recognized popular music as the immaturity of tastes rather than the degradation of tastes (p. 319), which is similar to what Pattison (1987) later said about the vulgarity or lack of cultivation in rock music.

Early attacks on rap seem to prove that the elitists resented the popularity of popular music genres as much as their alleged negativity. Historical analysis shows that rap did not start off with the raunchy reputation it has today. Yet, it attracted the wrath of America's culture elitists, which underpinned its development into the music it is today. Rap music gained instant popularity among youth when it was finally given radio-play and the only thing about it early on that might have been construed as negative was its images of blackness. Dyson (1996) argues that the debate about rap belongs in the context of a much older debate about 'negative' and 'positive' black images.

While the censorship of rap seems warranted in some instances, it appears that censorship has been a major problem for rap. It has been censored since its inception. Prior to 1978, rap was denied radio-play because it was perceived as nothing more than "black noise" (Hebdige, 1980;

Nelson & Gonzales, 1991; Rose, 1994). Not until 1989 was it played on Music Television (MTV) - even though it had grown steadily in popularity throughout the 1980s.

Nelson & Gonzales (1991), like Dority (1990) and countless other critics have surmised that rap attracted the wrath of the culture elitists because of its humble beginnings in New York's West and South Bronx. But it's feasible that it was the timing of the origin of rap, as much as the locus of the origin of rap that made it the perfect scapegoat in an ongoing war on popular culture. In fact, the war was waged against rock music according to Small (1992). Rap emerged on the coattails of rock music from efforts to silence rock's most uncelebrated aspects, e.g. its blackness (See Table 1).

Pattison (1987) referred to the war on rock as the war against vulgarity and he defined vulgarity as an absence instead of a presence. It is an absence of cultivation or a lack of refinement. Rock was the quintessence of vulgarity (p. 4), and as such it reconfirmed age-old attitudes about cultureless Americans. When rock music also became America's most successful export in the 1950s, the culture elitists - which included America's classicists and humanists - rebelled. They did not rebel against rock's negativity because it wasn't all that negative; they rebelled against its vulgarity. It simply was not refined music to them, and it certainly wasn't art. It was the

music of the common man masquerading as art throughout the world, all the while reconfirming age-old attitudes about cultureless Americans.

The culture elitists condemned rock and convinced adult Americans that it should be censored. Among the elitists was New York's Cardinal Spellman "who laid the blame of rock on parents, teachers, and clergy who did not constantly and actively work and pray to arrest the avalanche of such obscene music" (Martin & Segrave, 1988, p. 48). But, according to Pattison (1987), rock was impervious to condemnation. The contours of rock gradually changed, reflecting its adaptation to the needs of its young fans and its adult critics. Some adaptation resulted in new genres. Punk rock and heavy metal emerged from the changing contours of rock. However, in the 1950s rock went through many contortions. It was condemned on all sides by its enemies, just as rap is being condemned today. Another by-product of the condemnation and systematic camouflaging of the blackness in rock was rap music. As rock moved into the mainstream rap became more popular (Berry, 1994, p. 183). These two very distinct genres have developed in similar ways because they both faced condemnation and censorship early on as the rebellious musical voice of the young.

Rap grew out of efforts to silence the uncelebrated aspects of rock. It wasn't called rap music because in the 1950s and 60s it was still a genre in the making (Small,

1992; Toop, 1984). But the 1950s music of Slim Galliard (a "piano-playing jive-talking hipster") and the soulful rhythms of James Brown had several of the elements of rap (Stanley & Morley, 1992) (See Table 1). Basically, they lacked the syncopated beat of modern rap.

Some people argue that rap did not emerge until the late 1970s. Regardless of when rap actually emerged it is a distinct genre and it has remained a genre intact. Lull (1992) referred to it as the most important genre of popular music to emerge since the Vietnam War (p. 9). But its roots are even deeper and more diverse than Lull acknowledges.

As possibly the most important genre of popular music to emerge since the Vietnam War, rap deserves the limelight, more than censorship. Pattison (1987) argued that censorship was futile anyway. He chose to describe the changing contours of rock, instead of condemning it - to encourage an understanding of its undying appeal to the young. Likewise, rap is described rather than condemned in this study. Its history is the focal point of the study because it shows what forces drove the emergence of different types of rap, and it justifies - to some extent - the vulgarity and subsequent negativity of rap. But the sole purpose of this study is not to highlight or justify rap's negativity. The purpose is to forge a change in the dominant discourse about rap, in order to modify rap's alleged negative impact on society. The creative power of

the dominant discourse becomes as evident through this study as the futility of the censorship of popular music.

The dominant discourse is the gestalt of dialogues that develop about a phenomenon over time. It reflects prevailing attitudes about that phenomenon. In the case of rap, the dominant discourse is both reflecting and creating negative attitudes about rap. This research shows that these attitudes form the basis of myths that facilitate the construction of a pseudo-reality that people perceive as real.

Levi-Strauss (1979) argued that myths always deal with historical facts. However, they transform them into histories with cultural meaning. It seems that rap mythomania is more of a problem for rap than censorship. Inasmuch as this is a real problem the solution involves identifying myths about rap and dispelling them.

Chapter 2

Compiling Myths About Rap MusicLiterature Review

All in all very little has been written about rap music, compared to other music genres. And most of what has been written is journalistic, revolving around interviews with rappers. These journalistic studies appeared throughout the 1980s in magazines like Billboard (popular music's Bible) and the Village Voice. They revealed very little about this developing genre and its impact on society. Instead they took a starry-eyed look at rappers' rise to stardom, while understating rap's messages (Henry, 1989). Ultimately, this resulted in the dismissal of those messages, which encouraged rappers to underscore them. Their concentrated messages have attracted unflattering attention and concern worldwide. Consequently, concern about rap's messages has become a social concern of the 90s.

Billboard magazine continues in the 90s to publish more articles related to rap than any other publication including Source (a black publication devoted exclusively to rap). In recent years Billboard has even focused the nation's attention on rap's messages in all of their negativity and vulgarity. While journalistic articles like the ones in Billboard and Source are interesting and entertaining, they are rarely of much use to the serious scholar, who looks for more than subjective critiques of rappers, their messages

and their performances. These articles have, however, fueled the fire for a scholarly debate about the significance of rap music.

Research shows that the scholarly debate is snowballing. Several books have been published which deal specifically with rap music. They include: Black Studies, Rap and the Academy (Baker, 1993); The Rap on Gangsta Rap (Kitwana, 1994); and Black Noise (Rose, 1994). These books offer subjective documentation of the rap movement along with ideological analyses of the movement.

Rose is the author of numerous articles on rap music and contemporary popular culture, all footnoted and well documented. Black Noise is a compilation of years of ethnographic research. While many critics were still debating the meaning of a phrase, a line, or an entire song, Rose (1994) was contextualizing rap's hip-hop culture. She introduced the concept of textual participation to the debate about rap. Textual participation is the idea that people are attracted to musical texts that reflect and/or give meaning to their experience(s). Black Noise helps its readers understand that rap prioritizes black culture but does not deny the pleasure and participation of others.

Baker (1993) also explains rap's crossover appeal. His research showed that rap is more than a noisy mode of urban resistance that paradoxically appeals to both middle class white youth and the black underclass (p. 61). It has global

appeal. He cited the New York Times for August 23, 1992, that chronicled the significance of rap in Russia, Japan, England, France, Mexico and the Ivory Coast. The conclusion was that rap is one of the most important shapers of popular styles globally (p. 63).

The Rap on Gangsta Rap is another scholarly treatment of rap music. It reveals the effects of hegemony (ruling class domination of the working class) on rap music. The argument by Kitwana (1994) against commercialization and commodification (the turning of works of artistic and cultural value into commodities or articles of trade) very closely parallels the Frankfurt School critique of the commodity form. Critics, of this mindset, believe that cultural products are contaminated by commercialization (p. 11). Kitwana (1994) argues specifically that rap music has been contaminated by commercialization. He also claimed that the critiques of rap have been one-dimensional, excusing society and making broad sweeping generalizations about rap music. This is certainly true of the journalistic studies, noted in his book.

On the contrary, some researchers have focused on rap's alleged negativity and drawn conclusions about it that depict society as the culprit. Henry (1989) accuses mainstream media exposure of frightening and alienating the general public and affording rappers a sinister notoriety which underscored and amplified their rebellious intentions

(p. viii). Others blame consumerism. Blair (1993) used Gottdiener's model to argue that rap has lost its identity due to commercialization. Rap music is in a stage of trial and error in which it is presented in a variety of ways that are expected to be more appealing to mainstream audiences.

A few critics have chosen not to judge rap music, but to describe its contours (See Tables 1 & 2). Englis, Solomon and Olofsson (1993) described rap as the genre with the prevalence of "darkside" products (drugs, weapons and alcohol). They reached this conclusion from their comparative content analysis of consumption imagery in the music videos of several genres, including rap, heavy metal, and country music.

Berry (1990) had already offered an explanation for the prevalence of "darkside" products in rap music videos, saying they represent power to low-income black youth. These youth use them to feel a sense of control over their environment and to bolster their low self-concepts.

Dyson (1996) also talks about black youth using rap to empower themselves. He says that "rap expresses the desire of young black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair, hopelessness, and genocide that presently besiege the black community." He describes rap as an icon of resentment to the white status quo.

Berry (1994), like Dyson (1996), tries to redeem the

rap music experience. She describes rap as a positive struggle for black signification within popular culture (p. 183). This discussion continues a dialogue begun by Dority (1990).

Dority (1990) enlightened readers about the war on rock and rap music to encourage popular music lovers to be concerned about the attack of both genres. She argued, as does Kitwana (1994), that if there is success in repressing rap and rock other genres will eventually be targeted. Acknowledging that new forms of music have always served as the rebellious voice of youth, she argued that the current campaign goes beyond past efforts and involves many powerful people. A nationwide movement to restrict access to rap lyrics began in 1985 with the founding of the PMRC by Susan Baker and Tipper Gore. In 1990 their efforts resulted in a uniform warning label system to be used on all possibly objectionable materials by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).

The interest of so many powerful people in repressing rap suggested to many people that rap was more negative than other genres. But Binder (1991) found that, contrary to popular opinion, rap lyrics were no worse than heavy metal lyrics. She identified a racial rhetoric that seemed to encourage more negative perceptions of rap music than heavy metal music, when there were actually strong similarities between the two genres.

Armstrong (1993) also analyzed rap lyrics. Through semiotic ethnography, he compared the rhetoric of violence found in both rap and country music. The study illustrated the hidden resemblances between rap and country and highlighted parallels between these essentially incompatible musical forms (p. 64). One resemblance between rap and country is the emphasis on lyrics. The lyrics dominate in both musical forms. Another resemblance is the expressions of violence through those lyrics. Rappers and country music artists say that violent lyrics are prevalent in the music because "violence is a way of life" in the underclass realities they both sing about.

Rap rebels against this underclass reality as well as the world that creates it. It is possible that the rebellious nature of the rap music genre along with its lack of conformity to particular aesthetic codes has insulated it from serious scholarly study in the 1980s. That has changed significantly in the 1990s. Recent studies are bringing the history of rap music into focus, and changing attitudes about rap.

The history of rap stirs controversy because it has been difficult to trace the origin of rap. Few histories of rap have been written, and most of them trace only the African-American influence on the development of rap. But early rap was also influenced by the Hispanic culture. Fernando (1994) and Rose (1994) mention an Hispanic

influence. Holman (1984) described in detail the Hispanic presence in hip-hop, a subculture peculiar to rap music that consists of electronic funk beat music, rapping emcees, break-dancing, graffiti art, special mix D.J.ing, bold fashions and its own slang. Hip hop originated in the Bronx, New York, where young black and Latino families migrated (p. 60). Holman (1984) offers the most comprehensive description of the hip-hop culture (See Table 1). Toop (1984) offers the most complete history of rap through the early 1980s. His work is cited in numerous studies.

Myths About Rap Music

This literature review highlights what scholars have concluded about rap music from their research. But Ellis (1989) argues that every interpretation is a misinterpretation because things are perceived as we are - not as they are. That being the case, the literature review is just a collection of myths about rap - to be re-interpreted and integrated into preferred readings. Fiske (1989) contends that popular music texts do have preferred readings. The preferred reading is a substantiated interpretation based on informed perceptions and conceptions about a phenomenon. It is not based on popular myths. This study shows, however, that a lot of what is known about rap is based on popular myths.

One or more of the following myths can be found at the

core of most arguments about rap music. 1) Rap is a new musical phenomenon (Jones, 1994; Toop, 1984; Holman, 1984). 2) Rap is a black musical form (Jones, 1994; Holman, 1984). 3) Rap reflects the Black/African-American experience (Fernando, 1994). 4) All rap is the same (Jones, 1994; Kitwana, 1994). 5) Rap is more negative than other popular music genres (Binder, 1993; Armstrong, 1993; Dyson, 1996). Historical analysis reveals many discrepancies and inconsistencies in these notions about rap music.

Naturally, other myths emerged as by-products of the research that also affect attitudes about rap. The ambiguity in myths related to "popularity," "success" and "rebelliousness" are revealed through this historical analysis with an ideological slant. The ideological slant comes from having relied so heavily - for historical data - on studies that are more ideological by nature.

Chapter 3

Deconstructing Myths About Rap MusicDeconstruction Through Historical Analysis

Rap music is rhymed story-telling accompanied by highly rhythmic music. It became a musical phenomenon in the 1980s, leading Lull (1992) to describe it as the most important genre of popular music to emerge since the Vietnam War. But rap music is not a new phenomenon. It simply has not received the recognition it deserves because of its humble beginnings in New York's West and South Bronx (Nelson & Gonzales, 1991), or because it emerged during a massive attack on popular music by America's culture elitists.

Rap music has evolved into an art form, while on the sidelines of American popular culture. Early on, critics said it was a fad. It wasn't until 1978 that people across the nation began to take it seriously. Now it has invaded the hearts and souls of people throughout the world. Rap music has become popular culture.

Achieving the status of popular culture indicates broad levels of public acceptance for rap music. Yet many people - both black and white - say they hate rap (Baker, 1993). They resent its harshness and two indispensable aspects of its form, its blackness and its youthful maleness (p. 62). In light of this one might wonder about its crossover appeal and potential success for people from different ethnic groups and social positions. Its crossover appeal is the

easiest to explain. White America has a natural curiosity (white gaze) about black culture because it's the "forbidden fruit" (Nelson & Gonzales, 1991). However, it is more difficult to predict its potential success because being popular culture gives new meaning to rap music.

Rap music was once the voice of young black men at the bottom of society (Rose, 1994). It articulated their trials and tribulations. But because of its crossover appeal, it no longer speaks in its original tongue. More and more it speaks with tongue-in-cheek to reflect a diversity of lifestyles, opinions and feelings. It has become less of a voice and more of a voice over. Chronicling the development of rap has shown how paradoxical its success is for rappers of the first order.

It has been difficult for historical analysts of rap to pinpoint the beginnings of rap because rap has deep and diverse roots. Toop (1984), Stanley & Morley (1992), and Rose (1994) traced its roots back to societies of West Africa, but they maintain that rap is clearly an African-American phenomenon. Toop called rappers latter-day griots. In the 15th and 16th centuries the griots of Africa challenged social transgressors to listen to the will of the people. They used abusive songs as a means of social pressure to enforce the will of public opinion (Toop, 1984).

According to Rose (1994) rap's "human beat box" shares many vocal sounds found in African vocal traditions. The

hums, grunts and glottal attacks of Central African's pygmies; the tongue clicks, throat gurgles and suction stomps of the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert; and the yodeling, whistling vocal effects of Zimbabwe's m'bira players all survive in the mouth percussions of such "human beat box" rappers as the Fat Boys (p. 197).

Rap music is also indebted to Jamaican musical practices. D.J. Cool Herc is probably the most famous of a number of Caribbean immigrants who brought with them the Caribbean practice of sound system wars. The Jamaican sound systems emphasize bass tones. Jeep beats (rap songs with heavy bass and drum sounds that are intended for play in automobiles) and reggae rap are heavily influenced by these Jamaican musical practices.

Despite its African and Caribbean influences, rap is clearly a product of America. It has a technologically sophisticated and complex urban American sound (p. 95), bringing together sound elements from a wide range of sources and styles. Rap musicians have manipulated digital technology to change the sound of black music to a highly rhythmic music. The lyrical and musical texts in rap are a dynamic hybrid of oral traditions, post literate orality and advanced technology (Rose, 1994, p. 95).

Rap's rhythmic talking style has been a part of African-American music culture since the 1950s. Prior to that time, though there were likenesses to rap. Pigmeat

Markham, a singer-comedian, did what would now be regarded as a rap act as early as 1929 in New York City. His rap-like act was entertaining to African-American audiences for decades. But its popular appeal was realized when he performed on "Rowan & Martin's Laugh'in" in the early 1970s. Also, in the 1940s, Slim Galliard became a prominent jive-talking piano player. Emerging in the 1950s were nighttime DJs whose sly rhyming patter was a forerunner of modern rap (Stanley & Morley, 1992, p. xvi).

By 1960 African-American music was either strongly lyrical with subdued music or highly musical with subdued lyrics. However, in the 1960s that all changed. Black music became strongly lyrical and musical, and the music was full of harmony. The advent of technology resulted in a change from harmony to rhythm (the repetition of musical beats) (Rose, 1994, p. 91).

Characteristics of rap, i.e., rhyming lyrics, highly rhythmic music and the hip-hop culture, grew in popularity throughout the 1960s. However, rap remained nameless through the 1970s, even as James Brown's "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" soared to the top of soul music charts. Other 60s hits like Brown's "The Big Payback" and Joe Tex's "I Gotcha" were also evidence of the rap genre in the making. These songs had many of the characteristics of contemporary rap music. They popularized the rap music form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic music

(Rose, 1994).

Still, rap remained virtually unnoticed by mainstream music and popular culture industries until "Rapper's Delight" was released in 1978 (Rose, 1994). "Rapper's Delight" was the first rap song to receive expansive air play on America's radio stations. At first it was dismissed as a novelty. But eventually it became to rap what "Round the Clock" was to rock and roll in 1954 (Rose, 1994, p. xvi). It marked the beginning of the rap music era.

Throughout the next decade rap music became one of the most popular musical styles in the world. It was an uphill battle for recognition because America was ambivalent to the musical style from the very beginning - even though, as stated earlier, it did not start off with the bad reputation it has today. Early on, it was ignored and suppressed for a variety of reasons. Nelson & Gonzales (1991) and Rose (1994) agree that it was ignored because it was considered black "noise," with low-income followers that couldn't even afford to buy records. It was also considered a fad because so many of its elements were either borrowed or novel, like its rhythm, lyrics, and a distinct hip-hop culture that distinguished rap performances from other music performances. After a while, people in the music industry, the print media, the fashion industry and the film industry acknowledged its potential and hurried to cash in on what was still assumed to be a passing fad. This was the

beginning of its success in the early 1980s. But the electronic media still did not support rap until 1989 when it was first allowed on MTV.

Some critics believe that the success of rap music has also been its downfall. They say it's a dying art form because it no longer speaks exclusively in African-American idioms (Fernando, 1994). An analysis of the rise and fall of rappers like M.C. Hammer seems to support this claim. But it's the only evidence that supports such a claim.

Fernando (1994) equated rap music to the music of M.C. Hammer, Tone Loc, The Beastie Boys, and Vanilla Ice. M.C. Hammer and Tone Loc are African-American rap musicians who have not had any significant hits since the early 1990s. Their decline in popularity led many people to predict a decline of interest in rap music because the consensus was that they were the epitome of rap musicians. The earliest rap musicians were African-Americans who rapped exclusively about the Black experience, and were not the creators of their own music. They blended other people's sounds and lyrics. "Signifying" (also known as teasing, jiving and "playing the dozens") among rap musicians was also very much a part of rap music. Rap did not become preoccupied with the negativity of the black experience until the success of Grand Master Flash's "The Message" in 1982. It was perceived to be more socially responsible to rap about something meaningful, which turned out to be the desperation

of the black experience.

The negativity of rap emerged partly in response to the success of rap musicians like M.C. Hammer (Kitwana, 1994). M.C. Hammer was black and well known for his "signifying" and creative blends of other people's music. But at the height of his success he did not say a lot about the desperation of the black experience. Critics who were concerned about the commercialization of rap say he was the "chosen one" because his music contained all of the elements of rap but the outcries of desperation and rage that manifest themselves in lyrics about sex, violence, drugs and oppression (Kitwana, 1994).

M.C. Hammer reached the pinnacle of his success with the release of "Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em" and "U Can't Touch This" in the early 1990s. Again, these songs were forms of "signifying." Through them he boasted about his success as a rapper (Fernando, 1994). But regarding that success one Spin Magazine writer said, "Hammer can't rap to save his life, and his productions are messy as hell, but ya gotta respect the brother... 'cause we're all hummin his shit" (Nelson & Gonzales, 1991, p. 151). This comment summarizes attitudes about M.C. Hammer. Even though he had a few musical hits, his success was happenstance, and should not be used to predict the success of rap music. Rap music, i.e., the ghost of rap, is a thriving art form.

Tone Loc, another musician that Fernando (1994) equated

to rap music, popularized rap of a different sort. He thought that rap should be responsible to its original audience of young black male teenagers. His music addressed their concerns (Nelson & Gonzales, 1991). It depicted an exciting life of sex and drugs as a form of escape from the desperation of the black experience (p. 249).

In response to this type of music, female rappers, like Queen Latifah and Sister Souljah, emerged with altogether different concerns. They objected to the representation of women in rap music. By 1992, battle lines had been drawn throughout rap music. Black men bashed black women, black women bashed black men, and they all bashed society, especially the white society. Rap music became the voice of discontent. The lyrics tended to be protest lyrics, unless they served a more commercial function. This is its reputation today. Rappers rap about anything they think will sell, i.e., sex and violence. But many of them frequently devote at least one song in their collection to protest one or more negative aspects of others' rap.

The Beastie Boys and Vanilla Ice also changed the face of rap music. These white, middle class, teenagers rapped about their displeasures with life in white America. They described an alternative to their parents' mainstream existence (Nelson & Gonzales, 1991). Their emergence on the rap music scene made people reevaluate the significance of rap music, because they changed the face and image of

rappers.

Fewer critics question the viability of rap music today. They are preoccupied with concern about its effects on society. Critics like Englis, Solomon and Olofsson (1993) have analyzed its significant impact on television and advertising. Others like Kitwana (1994) have compared rap's development to the development of rock and roll. They all appear to be interested in explaining its success and/or the implications of that success.

There is ambiguity in the success of rap music because "Rapper's Delight," released in 1978, marks the beginning of the rap music era. But the significance of this white rap song is exaggerated. African-American rap musicians are the first to look this gift horse in the mouth. They deny it as a symbol of their art form, because they say it did not represent the rap music of its time (Nelson & Gonzales, 1994). They don't deny the effects of its success on rap music. But to allow "Rapper's Delight" to symbolize the birth of rap music actually postdates the significance of rap and downplays its black influence. It denies an important part of its history. Baker (1993) said Americans need to study or at least acknowledge the sites and history of rap's black male productivity or the brilliance of its resonant inner-city inventiveness and strategies of resistance to appreciate rap (p. 62).

Kitwana (1994) said Americans appreciate rap music by

consuming it. They've made it a multi-million dollar industry. His major concern was the popularization, commercialization and commodification of rap.

Rap's popularization should be a major concern for anyone that has an aesthetic appreciation for it. The definition of "popularization" is the act of making popular, in a way that is understandable to most people. Therefore to be popular, by definition, rap music has to make sense to white people. People make sense of their world by viewing it in familiar ways, e.g., stereotypes and misconceptions. While this isn't always a problem, it is a problem for rap music because white people have shown little regard for the black culture behind other art forms, namely rock music (p. 13). Popularization lead to the commercialization of rock music, to the point that today it is considered a white art form (Kitwana, 1994). Its early black influence is systematically ignored.

Popularization leads to commercialization because music capitalists are not interested in developing folk art forms. They are only interested in developing music sales, even if that means distancing the art form from its cultural roots (Kitwana, 1994). The commercialization of rap music is often compared to the commercialization of rock music. Critics like Kitwana fear that one day the black influence on rap will be totally camouflaged, and rap will be considered a white art form like rock music is today.

"Commercialized rap" is the work of rap artists whose styles have been altered or constructed around being rewarded financially - not for being true to themselves, the art form, or rap origins, but to the white corporate elite interests (Kitwana, 1994, p. 69). M.C. Hammer is a commercialized rap artist. As a "rappin homeboy" in Oakland, California, his rap was somewhat anti establishment. He had a reputation for being a song revivalist. He revived several of the anti establishment songs of Gil-Scott Herron (a music revolutionary of the 60s) and James Brown (the "Godfather of Soul").

M.C. Hammer's revival of James Brown's "Turn This Mutha Out" is an excellent example of how commercialization works. When James Brown performed "Turn This Mutha Out" in the 1960s, it was a call to violence. But Hammer changed the context of his presentation of it to boast about his dancing and rapping abilities (commodities of the rap music form). His presentation of the song attracted a culturally diverse audience. It attracted those blacks who could identify with the song's attachment to the past. It also attracted a new, mixed audience that appreciated Hammer's performance of it.

Commercialization has affected other rap artists in similar ways. Rappers like Queen Latifah and Sister Souljah started their careers on rebellious notes, but now their music is much more harmonious, and acceptable to mixed audiences. Early on, Queen Latifah thrived on black male

bashing. Lately, her music is more diversified. She raps about gender inequities and the evil that men do. She raps about black on black crime. She has become a more socially responsible rapper. Her lyrics become more and more color-blind. They speak less and less about the black experience, and more and more about her experiences as a woman.

Commercialization ultimately leads to commodification , and commodification results in the cultural dilution of an art form (Kitwana, 1994). In commodification the profitable elements of an art form are celebrated, while other elements of the art form are ignored or camouflaged. The celebrated elements of rap music are its creative word usage, rhythmic poetics, body language and mode of dress (p. 12). Its most uncelebrated element is its message. Rap music messages have thrived on the negativity of sex, drug and alcohol consumption, violence and crime. So, the celebrated elements of rap are allowed to influence other modes of communication, i.e., television and advertising, while the uncelebrated elements are systematically silenced.

Contrary to what some people think, the negative rhetoric of rap is being suppressed. Many subversive raps do reach the airwaves, but only because they function within the confines of hegemony. In the long run they reinforce dominant ideologies (the systems of belief about the world supported by the ruling class). Rappers may not even be

aware of the extent to which their art serves hegemonic purposes. For example, Ice Cube uses lyrics to incite violence against the establishment. But these same lyrics reinforce the stereotype that African-Americans are violent people. His raps end up perpetuating the situations in life they denounce.

The effects of hegemony are hard to define because hegemony functions creatively and consistently. It is always adjusting to the emergent meanings of culture through the process of incorporation and it encourages people to participate in their own subordination. For example, Ice Cube perpetuates negative stereotypes about himself with his own music.

Commercialized rap also functions within the confines of hegemony. It sends the message to rappers that conforming pays off in popularity. Deer and Deer (1967) said that popular art, with all of its novelty, recreates the same old world (p. 325). Rap music also re-creates the same old world, in spite of its rebelliousness. This is the ambiguity and price of its success.

Many discussions about the success of rap music result in discussions about the future of rap music. Some critics say that rap is a dying art form, and black rap may be a dying art form. Others say it's a thriving art form. If one disregards the ambiguity in the success of rap music, i.e., its popularity and the varied effects of

commercialization and commodification, rap is a thriving art form. It is a thriving art form for as long as people think it speaks for or to them. Kitwana's (1994) and Blair's (1993) concerns about popularization, commercialization, and commodification are valid. But rap does not have to fall prey to the same forces that erased what was distinctly black about rock music 25 years ago - because of the differences in the times. African Americans are no longer "just artists" as they were 25 years ago. They are financiers at every level of the music industry which gives them some control over their own destinies.

To protect the future of black rap, critics must help people to see where the power of the music lies, which is not entirely in what it says but what it does (Grossberg, 1986). One thing that it does is give young, black teenagers the impression that they have a voice even if that voice doublespeaks when it crosses cultures. But the power of the music also lies in its ability to do different things for different audiences. An audience makes a musical text fit into its experiences which are nothing more than already defined structures of meaning, interpretive practices or social-psychological functions (Grossberg, 1992, p. 173).

Chapter 4

MethodologyDeconstructive Criticism

According to Ellis (1989), all interpretation is misinterpretation. "To deconstruct a musical text is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts." Deconstruction is achieved through various modes of criticism. This study relies on historical analysis/ideological analysis, and semiotic analysis. Historical analysis involves piecemealing a record of the development of rap from a variety of sources. Since all stories, as well as their evidence, characters and values are sources of ideological judgements, ideological analysis goes hand-in-hand with historical analysis (Sillars, 1991). Semiotic analysis is also useful because the controversy over popular music frequently revolves around the meanings in pop music.

Thus far this study has deconstructed the history of rap music, the "popular" in rap music the success of rap music, and the rebellious nature of music. It deconstructs the "popular" by revealing the ambiguity in rap's popularity. Popularity usually indicates broad levels of public acceptance. Yet, people say they hate rap. It has become the music people love to hate. This suggests that rap fans experience the music differently. It means different things to different fans. Rap looks very "dirty"

(a term coined by Hartley [1985] which means polysemic) when one tries to pinpoint its meaning(s).

The success of rap music is also deconstructed. Success has been happenstance for many rappers. It has not brought them the financial rewards that people might think. And they have been unable to duplicate their success with additional releases because it's hard to identify and mix the aspects of rap that fans will appreciate consistently, which is part of rap's appeal. Also, some critics believe that the success of crossover rappers will eventually destroy rap - not make it more popular.

Identifying discrepancies in the history of rap music has been a significant part of this deconstructive project. Some historical analysts have traced rap to its African origins, conveniently overlooking the Hispanic influence on rap. Many of them deny that "Rappers Delight" signifies the beginning of rap, but there is no agreement on what song(s) might better symbolize the birth of rap music. The consensus among rap historians is that placing rap into the right historical perspective can positively affect dialogues about the genre - because resentments persist when the history is misrepresented. It can modify the rebellious nature of the music.

There is a lot of talk about the rebellious nature of rap music; but deconstructing "rebelliousness" through ideological analysis shows that rap recreates the same old

world, and is not rebellious at all. It ends up perpetuating in life what it denounces. So rappers ultimately participate in their own subordination.

Deconstructing the myths about rap music that become the basis for discourse(s) about rap seemed like the only way to begin to affect people's attitudes about rap. Past discourses about rap--based oftentimes on the myths identified in this study--have created today's world of rap music. To change that world we must change the discourse that constructs that reality, all the while remembering that every interpretation can be a misinterpretation. Looking for every interpretation to be a misinterpretation will help both critics and fans see how "dirty" rap really is; and seeing its "dirtiness" will help them understand and appreciate it, for what it does for its fans globally.

One might think that deconstructive criticism offers no meaningful answers or conclusions. But this is not true. If musical texts do have preferred readings, as Fiske (1989) contends, deconstruction is the best way to discover them.

Deconstruction Through Semiotic Analysis

Semiotic analysis examines the signs and codes from which people extract meaning for their lives and experiences. It is the most useful mode of criticism when there are questions about the meaning(s) in and round musical texts because it helps people understand the process of "meaning" development.

Dyson (1996) traces the development of meaning in rap, for both its fans and its critics, to "positive" and "negative" black images. He argues that the way people perceive the music is related to their attitudes about specific signifiers in black culture (See Table 2). Semiotic analysis reveals critics of rap have negative perceptions of the primary characteristics of rap, i.e., the lyrics, the music and the hip-hop culture.

The lyrics are rhymed using the hip-hop slang that comes from the urban street culture that gave birth to rap. Slang, like black English, has never been truly acceptable to most people (Dyson, 1996). Welsing (1991) traces the meaning in hip-hop words to sexual situations of the slave culture. The frequent use of "man," "boy," "baby," "momma" and "mother f--ker" carries resentments across centuries of the sexual practices within the slave culture.

The electronic funk beat music has been accused of appealing to the baser instincts of man, which is only considered a good thing to rap fans and advertisers (Martin & Segrave, 1989; Englis, Solomon & Oloffson, 1993).

Finally, the hip-hop culture highlights fashions in hair, clothing and lifestyle that have never been acceptable to most Americans (Roach & Eicher, 1965; Welsing, 1991), because they reflect struggles between the races. An example is the boldness of hip-hop clothing that to most is considered an act of rebellion. Harrington (1965) says that

Negroes have always had an affinity for bold colored clothes, shoes and hats, which has never carried over into the mainstream society until rap began to define clothing styles globally.

Levi-Strauss (1979) argues that myths are thought by man unbeknownst to man. Dyson (1996) argues that "positive" and "negative" images of blackness are also perpetuated by man unbeknownst to man. If people were made aware of this tendency to view popular culture in this familiar way they might understand the love/hate relationship they have with rap. It gets easier to see how people manage the meanings in their lives, both consciously and subconsciously.

Gottdiener's semiotic approach to the study of mass culture demonstrates the way society manages subcultural meanings. Gottdiener (1985) offered a semiotic approach to the study of mass culture that Blair (1993) used to show how rap became integrated into the mainstream. He traced the music from its origins in the Bronx to the mainstream of popular culture.

Blair (1993), like Kitwana (1994) and Wiley (1992), is concerned about rap's move into the mainstream. The concern is that rap artists will never be given appropriate credit and compensation for their creativity; yet their creativity is such a priceless commodity. But historically blacks have been unable to reap the financial rewards from the musical

forms that were uniquely theirs, i.e., the blues, jazz, gospel, soul, funk and now rap (p. 21).

Blair (1993) encourages readers to understand the effects of commercialization on rap music. He argues that it has been good for some, but not all rappers. He uses Gottdiener's model to comment on the future of rap. According to Gottdiener (1985), meaning of cultural objects is exchanged at three separate stages. At stage one, producers produce objects for their exchange value, and consumers purchase them for their use value. At stage two, a cultural object has both use value and cultural value. Its primary value/function may even be attenuated. At stage three, mass culture producers reduce the meaning of cultural objects to less radical meanings. "Subcultural signifiers are divorced from their everyday codes and transfunctionalized by culture industries into more marketable, less radical meanings" (p. 996). According to Gottdiener (1985), an example of what happens at stage three was the neutralization of punk rock into new wave. Even the signifier "punk rock" was sanitized by the Top 40 radio industry and changed to "New Wave." Blair (1993) fears that rap is sanitized in similar ways. Because it's being "laundered" to appeal to more mainstream audiences he says that rap is at stage three of the Gottdiener model. But there appears to be forms of rap at every stage of the Gottdiener model, which shows that rap is a thriving genre

that steadily reproduces forms of itself that move through the stages of the model until they have some sort of massive appeal.

The Gottdiener model is a semiotic model that views meaning as it is exchanged in three separate and qualitatively different stages. It is based on the conception that cultural objects mean different things to different social groups. According to Gottdiener (1984) only semiotic analysis fully specifies the multiplicity of meanings involved in mass culture (p. 979). The semiotic approach is contrasted with hegemony theory in the belief that users of mass culture are more active than hegemonists presume.

"Rapper's Delight" clearly fits stage one of the Gottdiener Model. It's a song that was produced and consumed for its entertainment value. However, by the mid 1980s most rap songs clearly fit stage two. They were produced and consumed for their entertainment value. But the lyrics had cultural significance. Rappers like D.J. Quik rapped about the "black experience" in songs like "Born and Raised in Compton." They also rapped about each other - which has cultural significance - in songs like Doug E. Fresh's "The Greatest Entertainer" and M.C. Hammer's "U Can't Touch This." These songs have entertainment value and cultural value. The cultural value is in the "signifyin" (a form of communication peculiar to African-Americans that

either boast about one's own abilities or criticizes another person's inabilities).

At stage two there were several forms of rap, i.e., hate rap, Christian rap, feminist rap, etc. The form is defined by the message. But, at stage three rap has been sanitized into three categories: 1) commercial rap, 2) urban rap and 3) reggae rap. Each category of rap has distinct characteristics; and all of the aforementioned types of rap fit into these three new categories of rap. Commercial rap utilizes only the celebrated aspects of rap. Urban rap utilizes all aspects of rap--celebrated and uncelebrated--to prioritize black culture. Reggae rap prioritizes the music, i.e., the electronic funk beat over the lyrics.

Blair (1993) fears that the uncelebrated aspects of the early forms of rap will gradually be silenced or camouflaged to overcome the intense competition in fewer categories of rap. At each stage of the development of rap music, according to Gottdiener's model, different characteristics of the genre were prioritized. At stage one the novel aspects of the genre made it entertaining and exciting. The most novel aspects of the genre were the electronic funk beat music, and its rhymed lyrics, using the hip-hop slant.

At stage two the most novel aspect was the message. Rap was typified by its negative messages. The most popular types of rap included hate rap, gangsta rap, and feminist

rap. And in response to these types, Christian rap emerged as well as more socially responsible rap.

Rap music has always been about "call and response" amongst rappers as well as between rappers and the larger society. However, at stage three the dominant discourse, according to Gottdiener, silences the secondary discourses. Rap is presented in a variety of ways that are expected to be more appealing to mainstream audiences. It is a stage of trial and error. Blair (1993) argued that rap has already entered this stage.

The celebrated as well as the uncelebrated aspects of rap become more obvious at this stage. The uncelebrated aspects will gradually be silenced, according to Kitwana (1994) and Wiley (1992). They even argue that the uncelebrated aspects reflect the genre's blackness. The celebrated aspects, according to Wiley (1992), will go on loan to whites. In fact, he tries to dispel the myth that African-Americans have no culture, saying it's always on loan to whites (p. 71). He also says that the negative about black culture is highlighted, while the positive is de-emphasized. This occurs at stage two of the Gottdiener model as it steadily pollinate white culture. At stage three the positive aspects of black culture steadily pollinates white culture (Wiley, 1992).

EpilogueImplications of Research

Historical analysis reveals discrepancies in interpretations of the history of rap music that cause controversy. Semiotic analysis unveils negative, but popular interpretations of signifiers in the rap music/African-American culture that also cause controversy. Both modes of criticism facilitate the deconstruction of myths about rap music, thereby eliminating some of the controversy about rap. This may have a positive effect on attitudes about rap music. But deconstruction is an ongoing process because every conception can be a misconception.

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York: Penguin Books USA, Inc.

Appendix

Table 1

Original Essence of Rap

Community-centeredness and responsiveness

A heavy, syncopated electronic beat

Originality in rap style

Rhymed lyrics: Creative manipulation of words

The rapper's voice becomes a rhythmic instrument beating out a rhythm in words.

Aspects of the hip-hop culture

Table 2

Characteristics of the hip-hop culture.

A subculture that originated in the Bronx, New York, among Black and Latino families. It consists of:

electronic funk beat music*

rapping emcees*

break dancing

graffiti art

special mix D.J.ing

hip-hop fashions

its own dialect (slang)*

*Indispensable aspects of the rap music form.