

Hip Hop Studies: COVID Edition

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Foreword

Travis Harris

The world is still fighting the deadly and devastating COVID-19 virus. While the virus's disproportionate harm to Black lives is clear, I contend that we have yet to fully measure its damage. The world paused in 2020 and effectively put the majority of the academic world on hold. COVID has tremendously impacted our operation. *JHHS* was affected in a variety of ways by the virus. It should be noted that all our editors and reviewers are volunteers. At the beginning of the Fall 2021 academic year, there was great uncertainty about whether or not we were returning full time or staying online. In the midst of this uncertainty, many professors were trying to figure out their pedagogical approaches and whether sessions would be in person or online. Additionally, tenure track professors continued to be responsible for meeting their requirements for tenure. This narrow academic view does not in the least take into account the wave of death and sickness that hit many Black communities. In addition to the journal's editors and reviewers being affected by COVID, the authors were also hit by this vicious virus. From those who were on the editorial board, to reviewers and authors, some experienced death in the family, others took on additional responsibilities; we all felt the weight of COVID.

As a result, COVID affected our publishing schedule and delayed the publication of this issue. The fact that we even have an issue to put out is a testament to all those who were involved. But before discussing this issue, what COVID has made explicitly clear is that we need to appreciate people and give them their flowers while we still can. First, I would like to appreciate our former Managing Editor, Shanté Paradigm Smalls. They made immeasurable contributions to the journal. *JHHS* would not be where it is today if it had not been for their leadership, guidance, direction, and work. They drastically changed the ways in which the journal functions, made clear guidelines and directions for all members of the team and the authors. Peep their new book *Hip Hop Heresies* (NYU Press, June 2022). Next, I want to show love to our former editors: Lakeyta Bonnette-Bailey, Ashley Payne, Marcus Smalls, and Sameena Eidoo. All these editors greatly contributed to the overall functioning and success of the journal. They shared their talents, academic wisdom, and insights into publishing top-notch Hip Hop scholarship. Bonnette-Bailey also served as the General Editor. Be on the lookout for her

forthcoming book cowritten with Adolphus G. Belk, Jr and being published by University of Michigan Press, *For the Culture: Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice*. Ashley Payne was one of the coeditors of the Hip Hop Feminism Special Issue *Twenty-First Century B.I.T.C.H. Frameworks: Hip Hop Feminism Comes of Age*. Without her and Aria S. Halliday's work, we would not have published an issue during the pandemic. Both Marcus Smalls and Sameena Eidoo provided Hip Hop perspectives that were not confined to the academy and the United States. Eidoo also worked on strengthening *JHHS's* relationships with other Hip Hop educators and institutions. This issue will highlight the work of Marcus Smalls.

Smalls' review of *An American Saga* sets the standard for Hip Hop scholarship. It is not a coincidence that a Hip Hop scholar outside of academia offers keen insight into Hip Hop in general and Wu-Tang in particular. His review seamlessly weaves together additional primary sources, such as the *Of Mics & Men* documentary, songs, music videos and his own personal knowledge of the culture. This is coupled with a vivid writing style that brings his article to life. "Clan in Da Front" offers a rare combination of Hip Hop knowledge and excellent writing. This will be our opening article for this issue.

I highlight Smalls' article because this is the future direction of *JHHS*. The journal will move past simply analyzing lyrics and offering arguments that Hip Hoppas cannot even reach. Hip Hop studies have been analyzing lyrics for thirty years now. We are no longer going to focus solely on one element, emceeing. Submissions that examine all the other elements of Hip Hop will have a high acceptance rate. Hip Hop deserves more. As COVID and living through the most recent historic events, from police killings to worldwide uprisings in the middle of a pandemic have shown, academia must step it up another level. It is *JHHS's* responsibility as a Hip Hop journal to provide scholarship that provides hope in the middle of despair. In the same way Hip Hop rose from the ashes of burning buildings and benign neglect, Hip Hop studies can rise from the devastation of COVID and provide knowledge, resources, and information to strengthen our Hip Hop communities.

I conclude this foreword by acknowledging and thanking our Senior Advisor, Daniel White Hodge and current editors, Cassandra Chaney, Jeffrey Coleman, Javon Johnson, and Elliot H. Powell. Hodge, the original Editor in Chief, has been instrumental in providing his expertise on running the journal. His wisdom has been valuable to me as I navigate all that comes with being Editor in Chief. Chaney and Coleman are OGs. They have been with the journal since the beginning. I cannot honestly explain how much they have contributed to the journal over their seven-year tenure. It is quite remarkable to think about their work with the journal over that long period while also maintaining all their full-time tenure responsibilities. For those outside of the academy, the biggest

job that carries the most weight and stress for these two is being Black in academia. In fact, what I am about to explain about Chaney and Coleman applied to all our editors who have ever worked with the journal. In addition to being Black in academia, they sit on search committees, chair Master theses and dissertations, attend faculty meetings, research and publish their own work, teach and mentor Black students. Chaney and Coleman have done all this for close to a decade while also serving on *JHHS*'s editorial team. Johnson and Powell are two of our newest editors. They too have fulfilled the responsibilities of being tenure-track professors and volunteering on the editorial team. Johnson jumped right in and worked with Coleman on this COVID issue. Powell is working on the next issues that will be coming out in Volume 9. The *JHHS* would not be able to move forward and meet its goal of setting and raising the standard of Hip Hop scholarship without this editorial team. Another important group I want to shout are our reviewers. We have more than fifty reviewers, so it would be difficult to name them all. Their work is important to ensuring that all work being published meet the standards of Hip Hop scholarship. Last but not least, I need to show a tremendous amount of gratitude to our copy editor Sabine Kim. She volunteers an incalculable amount of time grammar checking, fact-checking, going through footnotes and bibliography entries, and reading every scholarly article that we publish. To put her work in context, professional copyediting services can charge hundreds to thousands of dollars for this work, and Kim volunteers.

We are hyped to finally get this issue out and looking forward to the future of Hip Hop Studies.

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Clan in Da Front - Wu-Tang: An American Saga Review

Marcus Smalls

@MarcusSmalls is a Teaching Artist and writer who uses his lifelong love of Hip Hop to moderate creative environments around spirituality and identity. He has been a writer in residence at *Teachers & Writers Collaborative* and a WritersCorps fellow at *Bronx Council on the Arts* and is the recipient of the 2021 St. Luke's Alumni Artistic Achievement Award. Marcus has workshopped with award winning authors, M. Evelina Galang at *VONA/Voices* in 2015 and A. Naomi Jackson in *Catapult's* Master Class in 2017. Marcus is currently featured on The MixTape Museum website. Marcus is a Teaching Artist for the *Brooklyn Academy of Music* (BAM) and is currently querying Literary Agents for his debut novel, *The Divine Sinner Chronicles*.

"Protect Ya Neck"- RZA

May '93: My initial introduction to a Wu Tang chamber. I was a twenty-one-year-old "student," locked away in rural Pennsylvania at the Teen Challenge Training Center. I was frustrated and shuttled far from home because of my poor lifestyle choices and listening to a small contraband radio while folding shirts. The Wu Tang Clan, much like the young men I was locked away with, were so entrenched in their real lives that public perception mattered little. They only wanted to climb out of their abyss of the Shaolin Slums.¹ What the outside world thought was cool did not exist inside Wu-Tang's slang rap democracy, but their combined experiences would dictate the styles and trends for most of the '90s decade and beyond.

Hip Hop, like all other cultural production, is experiential. And also like every other culture, Hip Hop has foundational elements that guide this experience. Knowledge of Self, which is the ability to understand and articulate your experience, is paramount. One should be able to interact with the culture like a mirror or timestamp of personal development. Not so much as a gauge of what we used to listen to in the '90s compared to what we listen to now. But more like, I remember when. Through lyrics and music videos, I can trace almost all of my most memorable experiences via these cultural timelines. I remember exactly where I was and who I was with when I first saw the "Method Man" video on *Video Music Box*. Hip Hop Culture is an outward signifier that cannot be taken off for convenience. It is the very image of who I am and how I experience and express myself.

¹ Shaolin Slums is another Wu Tang name for Staten Island.

The aspirational elements of Hip Hop Culture are often dismissed by those who've already gained certain levels of success or status. But for most within the Culture,² this aspirational aesthetic is of the utmost importance in the representation of self. 'I am here but one day I will be someplace else' is fundamental to the Culture and all its expressions. The journey of who we are, where we come from and where we are going are continually woven through every Hip Hop Cultural narrative, from our style of dress to our speech and worldview, each is an expression of our hope, dreams, and aspirations. Hip Hop lyrics are extremely important to us as listeners. They're the equivalent of a preacher's sermon to a faithful congregation. To paraphrase rapper and producer Talib Kweli, "We relate to rap N*ggas because they writing what we felt." Wu Tang lyrics are vividly mapped out in their origin story, *Wu-Tang: An American Saga*. Mirroring the opening panels of a comic book, these introductory scenes provide thought-bubble like insight and reasoning into the word choice and worldview of each Dennis David Coles, professionally known as Clan MC. Ghost, and Corey Woods, professionally known as Rae, lyrically speak in what almost seems like a different language. Their words are seasoned with the broth of coded language. They each described death merchant activities so extreme they required an intricate method of lyrical expression.

"Peace to Power and my whole unit"- Raekwon

In the premier episode, "Can It Be All So Simple," we are given the visual foundations of the Wu origin story. We are introduced to RZA working on the beginning stages of the song, "Clan in da Front," his present practice to change an unpredictable future. The viewers are welcomed by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)³ signage to Park Hill projects which is scratched out to reread "Killer Hill" and we are quickly ushered to the block with scenes of crack dealing. We are introduced to the Clan's main obstacle as a music group, Power, as he is overseeing the corner work. The Wu Tang documentary, *Of Mics & Men* goes a long way to explaining the nature of the power struggle between Power, Ghost, Raekwon, Divine, and RZA. It's important to watch this Showtime documentary, to better understand Power and Divine and the foundational reality of pain and dysfunction this fictional narrative is built around.

² Editorial note: Due to the author's identity as Hip Hop, a part of the Hip Hop culture and an emcee, the *Journal* decided to maintain the author's integrity and leave Culture capitalized.

³ The New York City Housing Authority is a New York State public development corporation which provides public housing in New York City. It was the first agency in the United States to provide housing for low- and moderate-income residents throughout the five boroughs of New York City.

Wu-Tang: An American Saga was created by RZA and Alex Tse, and premiered on September 4, 2019, on Hulu. It patiently orchestrates the environment for us, constructing the circumstances that created the urgency within their creativity. We meet Raekwon, referred to as Sha, throughout the show, as a nod to his full Five Percent Nation name, Shallah Raekwon, as he is passing RZA's house on the way to Stapleton Houses to kill Ghostface. We meet Ghostface as he is feeding his two younger brothers he referenced on "All That I Got is You" from his own classic debut, *Ironman*. That song includes the same Papa Wu shown throughout the show speaking Five Percent Nation wisdom that forces Ghostface to begrudgingly consider his place in this world while he (Ghost) is selling weed in Battery Park to Wall Street white boys. When Raekwon stashes the gun he just attempted to murder Ghostface with, we are given the complicated underpinnings needed to introduce the Wu Tang origin story. Even the opening credits wash you with visuals from every corner of Wu's creative influences. *Wu-Tang: An American Saga* is filled with easter eggs for all the true Wu believers.

Episode two is named after one of my all-time favorite Wu songs, "Winter Warz," another classic from Ghostface's *Ironman* (1996) debut. It opens with an overhead shot of Staten Island into the back of the Stapleton Houses housing project, which looked almost like an actual jungle, then quickly shifts to the Park Hill side with a thriving African community which is controlled by the underworld. Power's conversation with Raekwon reveals Power as a cut-throat opportunist who is an extremely wise and knowledgeable hustler. He is one who is willing to share enough of what he knows but never enough to liberate in the moment. An origin story about a ten-member group will already come with a large cast, so storytelling concessions must be made to stay on task. The Shurrie character is a composite of RZA's three sisters. The story arc shows in detail how important his sisters were to his family and a later episode is dedicated to showing us this same world through Shurrie's eyes. I'm not sure if Haze is a composite character but he is one of the most interesting. His character has the presence of story. A portrayal that carries the weight of responsibility survivors carry in order to tell the story of those that didn't make it out. Though Haze has a connection to most of the main characters, his deepest is with Meth. They share a deep brotherly bond.

Haze never attempts to recruit Meth into the game. Instead, he is more of a mentor and a well-respected voice of reason. Reminding Meth of his gifts and the ability of that gift to change the trajectory of Meth's life. Everyone knows or knew some like Haze while growing up. That person who had the leadership ability to encourage others to be the best version of themselves. Even while doing something so destructive to the community as selling drugs. Haze's military training gave him the ability to navigate the dangers of the drug industry. But not the respect needed from local law enforcement to see his life as valuable. This episode also continues the arc of Rae and

Ghost's attempted murder beef, which finds new and inventive ways to keep RZA caught in-between Raekwon his childhood friend and Ghostface, a dude who is literally like a brother. The situation boils over when Raekwon finds out that Ghostface found his gun and now intends to murder Raekwon with it. The writers use another clever Wu easter egg with a reference quote from the *Cuban Linx* album skit about the "Killa Tape" during the argument over the gun.

*"Call an ambulance, Jamie been shot, word to Kimmy
 Don't go, son, nigga, you my motherfucking heart
 Stay still, son, don't move, just think about Keeba
 She'll be three in January, your young God needs ya
 The ambulance is takin' too long
 Everybody get the fuck back, excuse me, bitch, gimme your jack
 1-7-1-8, 9-1-1, low battery, damn
 Blood comin' out his mouth, he bleedin' badly
 Nahhh, Jamie, don't start that shit
 Keep your head up, if you escape hell, we gettin' fucked up" – Ghostface*

As a group, Wu-Tang has always musically represented the struggle. Their music is filled with pain and loss and the allure of the streets as pure necessity. The quest for material possessions while understanding that only the outer shell will upgrade. Never grasping the peace that possessions advertised. Jah Son embodies the magnetism of the hunt and the consequences of being one-of-a-kind-fly. Jah Son lives the life within the life. The stick-up kid with the throbbing sweet tooth: Jah Son is a cat who takes it simply to rock it. The Omar and Michael characters from the critically acclaimed and universally loved show, *The Wire*, are probably our most celebrated stick-up kids, but Jah Son's comedic timing make him just as memorable. This episode also employs animation whenever drug dealing is happening to show Ghostface and Bobby Digital as their larger-than-life alter egos from wax. This seems like not only a wise use of budget, but it also highlights Wu's love of comic book mythology while passing on glorifying the age-old act of street corner drug dealing. When Divine gets locked up, we're given another Wu easter egg when Cappadonna aggressively reintroduces himself to Divine by spitting bars that become part of his verse from "Winter Warz." I love that RZA added the story of Easy Moe Bee copping the last SP1200, which left him with the floor model and no manual. This scene highlights his self-determination and drive to recreate his reality. The responsibility to self-teach took away from his time in the streets and reminds the viewer that even though Ghostface and Raekwon come across as street dudes who don't want to be MC's, RZA and Method Man are MC's who definitely don't want to be street dudes.

RZA's dedication to the craft and not the street game comes with disastrous results which once again put Raekwon in the middle of some serious life and death choices. Many of us who came of age during the same decades as the Wu understand the clash of living under the roof of Bible-believing parents and how those lifestyle clashes can have disastrous results during our most vulnerable time of human development. These clashes inevitably hit when we feel we're stable enough to guide our own ships but lack the vision for proper navigation. This same clash leaves Raekwon sleeping in vulnerable spaces.

"All That I Got is You" is probably the most difficult episode to watch because it reminds us with sharp detail of the debilitating grip and power the racist Italian mafia had over the lives of the characters on Staten Island. Combined with the "Cold World" episode it gives the Jerome character an opportunity to become very important in sustaining the narrative. Jerome's reappearance rescues the family from a fate at the willing hands of the sadistically cruel and racist mafia. It's not only important to see a Black father figure care deeply about the welfare of his family, but it was equally refreshing to see actor Bokeem Woodbine play a well-adjusted man with some regular people's baggage. The combination of characters he's played in the past and the unreliable Black father storyline arc leaves the viewer with the feeling he might do something crazy and damaging each time he is on the screen. These episodes explain how the Ghostface and Shurrie love affair blossoms, as well as revealing the catalytic actions by Ghostface that started the beef with Power and Raekwon. When Power hits Raekwon off with a Benz, the first person he wants to chill with is RZA, but RZA instead attempts to recruit him again to spit over the sample that becomes "Criminology" on *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*. Once again allowing the story to show the aspirational determination of Hip Hop to transform one's circumstances through creative forces. This scene is reinforced by the introduction of oratory from Papa Wu, which brings balance to the equation. The power of his message and what it meant to the life of young Black men lost in the scramble cannot be overstated. This sentiment is again layered and shows in great detail the tangled trajectory of the lives in the hood. The episode "Impossible" deals with the killing of Haze from a choke hold by the NYPD officer who grew up with them. As the son of the lady who called the police in the first place, it shows the inverse relationships our communities have always had with justice. That Haze as a known drug dealer had a better relationship with the hood than the NYPD officer and his mother is a familiar reality. Most true Wu believers had no idea how deep Method Man's love is for lacrosse. The next episode, "Box in Hand," gives insight into how Meth was raised and shines a light on why he was such a reluctant breakout super star during the Clan's early years. We are shown the outcome from the constant theme of "tough love" given to Black kids because of respectability politics and how young Black life is consistently compromised because of such views

and misguided pursuit of standard. Meth's rocky relationship with family members who didn't appreciate his need to live in their space predictably creates subsequent anger issues, which jam up his quest for self-betterment. These scenes remind us why we love Wu so much. We understand the emotional wounds caused by hubris and false piety and we also understand the poor decision-making process that follows. Even while life-altering opportunities were brewing Meth was still couch surfing, bringing further uncertainty to his living situation, mental stability, and professional opportunities. The thought that RZA might move to Ohio with his family as everything seems to be in motion brings on once again the potential of lost connectivity. Even before his journey to find Knowledge of Self, RZA showed an understanding about the importance of community and the power of unity.

Even as we watch RZA's solo career begin as Prince Rakeem, complete with the music video as an outro for the episode, he is constantly reminding management and the label that he not only produces but has a stable of hungry MC's. Crew is a prerequisite for the Hip Hop journey, it reinforces our views on success and our understanding of the need for connectivity. Though independent thought is needed, total disconnect is not. Disconnect only breeds resentment and resentment is fertile soil for danger. But we do not choose connectivity out of fear but from a sense of wanting to see true and prosperous development from our community. This is illustrated as the three cousins, RZA, GZA, and ODB begin their journey into the music business together. A collective journey for independence. But the joyous freedom touring provided as a break from the dismal reality of Staten Island and Brooklyn is quickly canceled by the business side of music. Frustrated by the second-class treatment from management, RZA gives more attention to his path towards righteousness. As he begins to attain more knowledge of self, his creative windows become a mosaic of inspiration. At every turn, RZA hears sounds and beats and lyrics.

In the episode "I Declare War," we are introduced to Atilla. His story arc contains several other real-life situations, which gives him the feeling of a composite. What is crystal clear is the level of danger and destruction Atilla brings on screen. He is the embodiment of the dangers that come with any level of success to those living in the hood. Even if the success is only a rumor. Just the hint of upward mobility instantly puts RZA's life in danger. Atilla also represents the lure of extortion that always follows rap artists. Simply combine the industry-mandated menace-to-society image with neighborhood history and let the contempt ensue. Atilla also represents the extreme situations we can find ourselves in during our quest for betterment. The options to resolve the situation often seem as dire as RZA's did. While the Atilla situation is at its height, Divine is beginning to spend his down time at work self-educating in the world of business. It is this self-investment in the midst of chaos that becomes the foundation for the Wu Tang business model. The evidence of positive self-investment. It seems

however as if Raekwon, Ghostface, and Method Man are drifting further away from making Wu Tang a reality. Raekwon's near miss when Cressy gets raided only gave Power more of a stronghold. That Cressy was preparing contracts to sign Raekwon only provides more evidence for Power to remind him this rapping thing is only a dream. One of my favorite portions of the show is when Ghostface is watching and reimagining the *Wu Tang vs. Shaolin* fight scenes from the movie. These scenes are a wonderful homage to the way stories are retold in the Culture of Hip Hop. There is never a straight telling of the story but a recreation and reenactment to bring the salient points the narrator deems important. Cipher storytelling is always animated and exaggerated, filled with ad-libs and add-ons. The art of competent storytelling is required if you decide to step up and tell it. If not, you will be quickly informed of what your story is lacking. Ghostface has his come-to-Jesus moment while watching these movies and is ready to follow through with the inspiration of the Wu Tang and the Shaolin becoming dangerous by combining their talents. "Assassination Day" is a musical treat for the true Wu Believer. It features the recording of *Wu-Tang: 7th Chamber* and positions it in the story as the first track created. Wu history teaches us that *Tearz* was really the first song recorded. But the visual of each MC spitting his verse attempting to best the prior MC in friendly competition is absolutely amazing. With the highlight being Raekwon spitting the lyrics he wrote on the back of a cereal box, a symbol of the hunger. Each verse is given enough light for you to rap along in total Wu Tang delight.

The other equally important theme is the character of Tonya as the bridge between the music industry and what the streets really want to hear. She instantly understands what is important about this new sound. Tonya's quest for pure boom bap is a head nod to the magnitude of contributions by women in Hip Hop. Nobody knew what it was until Tonya told them what it was.

We live in a time when most of our lived history is now depicted in memes, GIFs, and Twitter posts, so the reality of what the world was really like in the '90s for young Black teenagers is lost on many. The show gives us the visual foundations of the Wu origin story. The creative energy of the '90s is woven through the visual texture of the show and pushes back against the continual reshaping of lived history by people who didn't actually live it. The second season will reportedly focus on the recording of *36 Chambers* album, which will provide an amazing opportunity for the story telling of the Wu Tang artistic process. History hasn't been kind to the record executives that missed on Wu Tang. But the show decides to take a different route. By simply allowing history to guide the viewer, we can see how easy it was for the industry to have absolutely no idea how to package The Wu. But thankfully, Wu Tang Clan ain't nothin to fuck wit...

Give Me Body! Race, Gender, and Corpulence Identity in the Artistry and Activism of Queen Latifah

Shannon M. Cochran

Celebrity Queen Latifah's body is one of the most observable Black female bodies in contemporary United States culture. Using Black feminist theory, textual analysis, and Hip Hop theory, I examine Queen Latifah's Hip Hop corpulence bodily and narrative performativity. That is, I identify her usage of her body in different and varied spaces. Even though Queen Latifah's weight has fluctuated throughout her career, she has centered her body in spaces that have previously been hostile to corpulent, defined here as simply meaning larger and nonconforming, bodies; particularly, corpulent Black female bodies. I build on the work of Black feminist scholars, such as Leola A. Johnson (2003), who identify the black "queen" as an identity of some celebrity Black women, in suggesting that Queen Latifah has possessed a corpulent Africentric Queendom that has interrupted dominant and oppressive spaces in visual and narrative cultures. In doing so, she has performed a "mothering" subjectivity that is racialized and based in specific Black traditions that are contrary to the mythical construction of "mammy" that white supremacy is built on. It challenges the external Eurocentric constructions of the corpulent Black female body. Moreover, an examination of corpulence, or body size, demonstrates how Queen Latifah has claimed it as an intricate facet of her identity. Queen Latifah's body, artistry, and activism are what Andrea Shaw (2006) would call "disobedient" and "unruly" according to societal standards. Consequently, Queen Latifah has redressed the corpulent Black female body in multiple visual and narrative spaces. In doing so, Queen Latifah is an architect of Hip Hop culture and a matriarch of Hip Hop feminism.

"For people who may be thicker, for people who may be darker and for people who may be female it is good to see someone like me in one of those magazines under 'beautiful' so that a girl out there can say, 'you know what? I'm beautiful! She's beautiful!'"

– Queen Latifah, qtd. in Rachel Raimist, "Lensing the Culture," 2010.

Hip Hop artist, actress, and businesswoman Dana Elaine Owens, better known as Queen Latifah, is one of the most visible Black entertainers to date. Her rise to superstardom has been characterized by her ability to appeal to multiple audiences. In doing so, Queen Latifah's is one of the most observable Black female bodies in contemporary United States culture. Using Black feminist (intersectional) theory and textual analysis, I examine Queen Latifah's corpulence and narrative performativity, focusing on her usage of her body in different and varied spaces. A tall woman whose weight fluctuates, Queen Latifah centers her body in spaces that have previously been hostile to corpulent, defined here as meaning larger and nonconforming, bodies that I call corpulent Black female bodies. Thus, building on the work of scholars such as Leola A. Johnson (2003), who identify the black "queen" as an identity of some celebrity women, I propose that Queen Latifah possesses a corpulent Africentric Queendom that

has disrupted dominant and oppressive spaces in visual and narrative cultures. Therefore, she has performed a “mothering” subjectivity that goes against the demeaning Eurocentric mammy construction. I use the term “mothering” in a way that reflects metaphorical matriarchy and nurturing. Queen Latifah’s mothering is racialized and based in specific Black traditions that are contrary to the mythical construction of “mammy” that white supremacy is built on. For Queen Latifah’s Hip Hop persona, this corpulent Africentric Queendom challenges the external Eurocentric constructions of the corpulent Black female body. Moreover, an examination of corpulence, or body size, is important to any assessment of Queen Latifah because she has claimed it as an intricate facet of her identity. Queen Latifah’s body, artistry, and activism are what Andrea Shaw (2006) would call “disobedient” and “unruly” vis-à-vis societal standards. Consequently, Queen Latifah has redressed the corpulent Black female body in multiple visual and narrative spaces. In doing so, she has incorporated body positivity in her role as an architect of Hip Hop culture and a matriarch of Hip Hop feminism. I further borrow from Travis Harris’ and other scholars’ suggestion that Hip Hop is an African Diasporic Phenomenon,¹ by arguing that Queen Latifah brings Hip Hop to any text because of her strong roots in the culture. I argue that, in this case, Hip Hop is boundless, endless, and ever evolving because it is written on the bodies of some. Further, Queen Latifah’s body size is part of her Hip Hop identity and being. Narratives inscribed on her body remain in any project that she is a part of. Therefore, a corpulent Black woman Hip Hopper comprises her identity.

Queen Latifah grew up as the only daughter of Lance and Rita Owens in Newark, New Jersey. Her parents divorced when she was young and she would later go on to say, “Before my parents separated, they complemented each other when it came to raising us kids Together my parents laid a solid foundation for both my brother and me.”² Throughout her career, Queen Latifah has persistently paid homage to her parents and attributes her success and strength to them. Queen Latifah’s mother especially serves as the foundation of her strength as a Black woman. Rita Owens observes, “As I look back, I realize that subconsciously I was building Dana’s self-esteem from the day she was born.”³

Queen Latifah’s mother felt that it was vital to parent her daughter with the intention of building character and raising her to have confidence as a Black woman in a world that would continually produce adversity. Rita Owens’s gender-specific outlook on raising her daughter is evident in Queen Latifah’s view that women play a crucial

¹ Travis Harris, “Can it Be Bigger Than Hip Hop? From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop.” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*. v 6. Issue 2, Winter (2019): 4-6, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1110&context=jhhs>.

² Queen Latifah with Karen Hunter, *Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 40.

³ Latifah, xii-xxi.

role in strengthening the family, as Queen Latifah has said herself: “My mother, Rita Owens, laid the foundation for me to become a self-proclaimed queen. She made the ground fertile for me to persevere, no matter what obstacles, and to keep my head up.”⁴ Moreover, Queen Latifah learned early in her life that the Black woman is a fundament in the collective identity of African American people and should be revered as such.

From Princess to Queen

Dana Owens’s choice of name for her public persona, Queen Latifah, which was first articulated in an award-winning rap career, reflects her interest in, and commitment to, a specific racialized gendered identity. Her decision to refer to herself as “Queen Latifah” reflects the way that she challenges Eurocentric standards and ideals. An analysis of the name “Queen Latifah” reveals how Dana Owens strategically embarked on a career journey that not only redefined traditional standards of beauty, but also redefined articulations of the corpulent Black female body and its mythical connections to mothering white patriarchy and supremacy.

Queen Latifah’s contribution to Hip Hop politics cannot be overstated. She is considered a pioneer of the rap art form and Hip Hop culture and is one of the first female emcees to gain worldwide stardom. In Hip Hop culture, the process of naming is especially important for artists and most appropriate a name that defines their desired public persona and artistry in general. Historically, Hip hop and rap artists empower themselves with a title that speaks to their uniqueness and style in the game. Dana Owens’s emergence on the rap scene occurred at a time when there were not many women practicing the art form and even fewer making a successful career out of it. Most of the women who were trying to break into Hip Hop as rap artists during the 1980s appropriated the styles and traditions of their male counterparts. For example, the legendary MC Lyte, who quickly rose to prominence in early Hip Hop circles, often adorned clothing in similar to successful male rap artists at the time, sporty tracksuits with sneakers.

Dana Owens decided on a very different path regarding her Hip Hop artistry, one that penetrated the male-dominated culture and stands as one of the most challenging paths to date. In addition to choosing a physical appearance that utilized African-inspired costumes and iconography, and after referring to herself as “Princess of the Posse,” Owens settled on a name that affirmed the teachings of her mother and reflected a racialized gendered identity

⁴ Latifah, 11.

For me, *Latifah* was freedom. I loved the name my parents gave me, Dana Elaine Owens. But I knew then that something as simple as picking a new name for myself would be my first act of defining who I was—for myself and for the world.⁵

In becoming “Latifah,” Dana Owens established her individuality through her public persona; however, it was the prefix “Queen” that further articulated a racialized gendered identity.

For Owens, the title “Queen” pays homage to an African past and present where women are centered in the community:

My mother and I would get into deep discussions about the plight of South African women and talk about how segregation and racism were alive and kicking right here ... Before there was a queen of England, there were Nefertiti and Numidia They are revered not only for their extraordinary beauty and power but also for their strength and for their ability to nurture and rule the continent that gave rise to the greatest civilizations of all time. These women are my foremothers. I wanted to pay homage to them. And I wanted, in my own way, to adopt their attributes. ... “Queen” seemed appropriate. Queen Latifah. When I said it ... I felt dominant.⁶

Dana Owens conceptualized her stage name, “Queen Latifah,” as one that reflects, and is simultaneously bound by, ties to a collective African history and heritage. In her work on the Black Queen concept that is adopted by some women for their public personae and narratives, Leola A. Johnson argues that these Queens “speak to a politics born of necessity ... the necessity of finding a space for a strong, sexually, and spiritually, unconventional black woman.”⁷ Queen Latifah’s name allows her to perform an identity that prioritizes a Black female body. Moreover, her conceptualization of a *racialized* “Queen” as being the nurturer and ruler of civilization effectively articulates a “mothering” that is empowered. Thus, an African-defined Black matriarch counters one that is rooted in Eurocentrism. “Queen Latifah,” as a persona, is rooted in a brand of Hip Hop nationalism that affirms Afrocentric cultural styles and traditions; however, it also complicates misogynic interpretations of Black Nationalist impulses by affirming the Black female body as an empowered matriarchal figure. Via Queen Latifah, this body is articulated and performed as one that is respected and revered. She states in an interview with Joe Clair, “You got to stay true to who you are ... I’m changing what people think ... whether it’s my complexion, being a black

⁵ Latifah, 16, 17.

⁶ Latifah, 17, 18.

⁷ Leola A. Johnson, “The Spirit Is Willing and So Is the Flesh: The Queen in Hip-Hop Culture,” in *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 154–70.

woman, my figure, being a full-figure woman ... my body image alone makes for comfort for some girls ... who don't have that marketable figure."⁸

By politicizing and positing her body in male-dominated Hip Hop culture early on, Queen Latifah performed corpulence in a way that anticipates her 21st-century public identity and the overall cultural movement to redefine how body size is perceived in American society and how it intersects with race and gender. Further, Latifah's performance of corpulent Africentric Queendom in Hip Hop culture demands attention to this body and challenges popular depictions of Eurocentric beauty ideals. Many scholars, including Robin Roberts, have analyzed Latifah's early work, such as the single "Ladies First," as an example of her feminist expression that emphasizes "female solidarity and sisterhood."⁹ In one of the first studies on Hip Hop, Tricia Rose states that "'Ladies First' is a powerful rewriting of the contributions of black women in the history of black struggles."¹⁰ I build on this scholarship by recognizing her work also as a disruption in the systematically oppressive spaces of whiteness as well as a nonconforming bodily interjection in traditional Western feminist expression, which rarely invests in progressive examinations of corpulence identity. My argument is that the corpulent Africentric Queendom articulated in her body of work and public persona is not only progressive in reading and assessing women's concerns, but it is also *communal* and Black nationalist in nature. Therefore, the corpulent Africentric Queendom challenges traditional European-inspired patriarchal standards while it maintains "watch" over a racialized community. This performance of identity is counter to the historical "mammy" construction of Black female bodies that sociologist K. Sue Jewell states, "is in American culture" and is typified by "characteristics ... suggest[ing] submissiveness towards her owner (during slavery) or her employer (following emancipation)."¹¹ Therefore, it is a strategic display of Hip Hop nationalism that renders Black bodies as autonomous, beautiful, and worthy. Jeffrey Louis Decker describes nationalism in Hip Hop as "espousing a black nationalist sound, image, and message draw from both recent struggles that anticipate the coming of the black nation."¹² Further, in her work, *Pulse of the People: Political Rap Music and Black Politics*, Lakeyta M. Bonnette centers the notion of nationalism by arguing that "Black Nationalism promotes racial solidarity [because] ... being a Black Nationalist makes one

⁸ "Queen Latifah Gives Tips on How to Have a Versatile Music Career," *BET Networks*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVB7D8HB-IM>.

⁹ Robin Roberts, *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996), 58.

¹⁰ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary Culture* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 163.

¹¹ K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 37-38.

¹² Jeffrey Louis Decker, "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism," *Social Text*, no. 34 (1991): 54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466354>.

more aware of issues that solely affect the Black community.”¹³ Queen Latifah sums up the role of music by saying “[m]usic has always been powerful for social change.”

In addition to the power of naming herself, Queen Latifah’s adorning herself with African-inspired and influenced clothing also affirms her racialized identity. One of the most striking African customs that Queen Latifah adopted was the headdress that is customary in many African societies. During the 1980s and 1990s, Queen Latifah consistently wore a headdress as an emblem of her Afrocentric Queendom. Further, Queen Latifah’s performance of this custom challenges the demeaning nature of mammy’s customary style. Images of the mammy have always represented her with a rag or bandana on her head. However, Jewell emphasizes the dignity associated with the practice of wearing a headscarf: “The fashioning of handkerchiefs into headscarves can be traced to Africa. The wearing of headgear arises from an African custom that necessitated the covering of the head, particularly in religious ceremonies but also on other occasions.”¹⁴ Thus, a tradition based on lived experiences is distorted to fit the mythology of the Black female body as inferior and emblem of difference based on deviancy.

Queen Latifah’s appropriation of fancy African-centered headdress to complete her corpulent Africentric Queendom persona literally and figuratively redresses the nonconforming Black female body and forces its presence into white and male-dominated spaces such as the music industry. It adds to the imagery of her racialized gendered identity as it recoups this identity in a powerful and autonomous way. For example, the album covers for *All Hail the Queen* (1989) and *Nature of Sista’*, her second album released in 1991, show Queen Latifah in the headdress. On the cover of *All Hail the Queen*, she has a black headdress, which matches her black militaristic uniform. Standing with her head high and clutching the front of the blazer, Queen Latifah performs a challenge to the traditional mammy construction and male-dominated Black Nationalist imagery of cultural and revolutionary organizations of the past. Moreover, her presence is complemented by a black diagram of the African continent encircled with the name “Queen Latifah” in red and “All Hail the Queen” in green. This imagery suggests her investment in her racialized gendered identity as it simultaneously challenges traditional associations of the corpulent Black female body. As “mother” to an Africana community, her Black female body does not succumb to prioritizing whiteness.

The challenge to the mammy imagery recurs in Queen Latifah’s early work and she worked it to accompany her lyrical artistry. In her first album, *All Hail the Queen*,

¹³Lakeyta M. Bonnette, *Pulse of the People: Political Rap Music and Black Politics* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 55.

¹⁴Jewell, 39.

Queen Latifah's agenda brings forth a message of empowerment to women. In her text, *Check It While I Wreck It*, Gwendolyn Pough argues that:

Through Hip-Hop culture, a generation of Black women is coming to voice and bringing wreck. These women are attacking the stereotypes and misconceptions that influenced their lives and the lives of their foremothers.¹⁵

I would add that not only is Queen Latifah attacking misconceptions about Black women, but her corpulence performativity allows her to bring "wreck" to the traditional performance and intersection of weight, race, gender, class, and sexuality. Hence, Eurocentric and white supremacist constructions of mammy are challenged by the autonomy and empowerment of Queen Latifah's play on race and gender relations.

In the first hit single released from the *All Hail the Queen* album, Latifah quickly transitioned her name and celebrity persona from "Princess of the Posse." Roberts analyzes the hit single, "Ladies First," as a reflection of Queen Latifah's pro-woman concerns. Roberts argues that "[b]eing feminist does not mean abandoning her African heritage; instead, it becomes a source of strength and power."¹⁶ This single also fully articulates Queen Latifah's womanist stance because in it she argues that not only have Black women been pivotal instruments in the formation of community and nation, but also that Black women must be a part of liberation efforts and concerns. She says in an interview for *Hip Hop: The Songs That Shook America*, "I felt like I had to speak for the Black community."¹⁷ In another interview she extends this outlook to further include women: "You could talk about what was going on in your community ... wherever there's a lack of female voices, there's a deficit ... whenever a woman's voice is not heard, included, expected, you're going to lose. You will never be as great as you could be."¹⁸

An analysis of the video for the single further sheds light on the woman-centered imagery that Queen Latifah appropriated during this time in her career. The visibility of historical figures such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Angela Davis in the "Ladies First" video allows for a naming and redressing of the Black female body. Queen Latifah not only recognizes and names these three women as important figures in the fight for racial and gender equality, but she also redresses their bodies and identifies the Black female body as an agent for change rather than a passive instrument. In doing so, Queen Latifah emphasizes that her *own* body and shared identity should be taken seriously and is needed in the continued fight against racial discrimination.

¹⁵ Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 87.

¹⁶ Roberts, 166.

¹⁷ "Queen Latifah: 'I Had to Speak for the Black Community,'" *Hip Hop: The Songs That Shook America*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inWjLxB0QLQ>.

¹⁸ "Queen Latifah Dishes on Sexism in the Music Industry, R Kelly, and Feminism," *Yahoo*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R24vhB4GSjw>.

Her alignment with historical Black women figures is a reconfiguration of the symbolic matriarchal Black body. Moreover, the thickness that Latifah possesses adds to a dramatic change in how this body is performed and demands new and broader perceptions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and notions of motherhood. I argue that “Ladies First” is reflective of the concept of an African Diasporic Phenomenon that Harris proposes.¹⁹ Her alignment and collaboration with the British artist Monie Love presents a narrative of Hip Hop as transatlantic. Thus, the argument that Hip Hop and Global Hip Hop are two separate entities would not allow for an analysis of the project. Further, by metaphorically tracing her roots to African queens, Latifah is rearticulating the strength, power, and leadership of Black women and corpulent Black female bodies.

In addition to *All Hail the Queen*, the albums *Nature of a Sista* (1991), *Black Reign* (1993), and *Order in the Court* (1998) articulate a mothering subjectivity founded on Queen Latifah’s racialized gendered identity. In the single “Latifah’s Law,” she affirms the importance of her African heritage in the shaping of her identity. She stresses: “Peace to Africa ... Can’t forget my other land. I won’t fulfill my heart unless I speak about the motherland ... call me your Highness.”²⁰ As a counter to historical requests for respectability by Black women, Queen Latifah’s demands are not apologetic nor are they reflective of existing demands. In “Queen of Royal Badness,” Latifah spells out her demand: “These are the words of a queen of a queendom ... I’m the queen of royal badness! This is a queen speaking wise words ... when you address me, address me as ‘your Highness, one of hip hop’s finest!’”²¹ The song is an example of Queen Latifah’s eloquent construction of her identity. She reveals an intricate conception of Black female motherhood, one that occupies a male-dominated and male-operated space: Hip Hop.

The 1989 hit “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children” is an interesting spin on kinship and it lyrically establishes Queen Latifah’s place in Hip Hop history and architecture. Moreover, the song clearly lays out her self-constructed mother (Mama) identity in music and redefines the corpulent Black female body’s societal “mothering” purpose. The twelve-inch album single cover contains an illustration of a curvaceous woman, assumed to be Queen Latifah, tending to three men-children in a fast sports car version of a stroller. Accompanying her large African-inspired headdress is form-fitting clothing to match. This illustrates the symbolism in this Africentric Hip Hop mothering. As Hip Hop artists who were part of the racially and socially conscious genre of rap music during this time, members of the hip hop group De La Soul act as pupils and offspring of Queen Latifah in the song, who posits herself as mother of this form of activism. In manipulating the assumptions regarding Black motherhood and implementing a Hip Hop symbolic definition with the song, she undermines the constructed mammy image of Black motherhood found in visual and narrative cultures.

¹⁹ Harris, 5.

²⁰ Queen Latifah, “Latifah’s Law,” *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

²¹ Queen Latifah, “Queen of Royal Badness,” *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

Hence, she is viewed and portrayed as a figure of power whose mothering is not physical but psychological and cultural.

In the song, Queen Latifah insinuates that “Mama gave birth to the soul children!” to transfer knowledge and wisdom. The three members of De La Soul are known for their socially conscious lyrics, especially during this time of visibly racially conscious Hip Hop. Therefore, Queen Latifah establishes her “mothering” and nurturing of this consciousness by working with and mentoring De La Soul through her own socially conscious-infused Hip Hop lyrics and overall persona. More importantly, Queen Latifah does not simply maintain a role of actor in this school of Hip Hop consciousness but rather, she makes herself mother and architect. As the trio sing “go mommy” and “go ‘head mama get down,” she professes, “A Black Queen upon the scene ... Prince Paul produces this ... he’s one of my sons ... Check the sounds of Mama Zulu ... as I relay the story untold and if you’re wondering why I got kids so big ... they weren’t born from the body, they were born from the soul!”²² She is the matriarch in the Native Tongues hip hop collective of racially conscious rappers during the time, which in addition to De La Soul included A Tribe Called Quest and Jungle Brothers and others.

“Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children” was the beginning of Queen Latifah’s cultural mothering, which she has continued throughout her rap career. She encourages her suitor in “Come into My House” to “come into” her “house” and she similarly invited audiences into her home where she was the queen and mother to a new form of parenting; one that involved racial, gender, and sexual communities. Dealing with racial and gender pride, domestic issues, and gender roles, Queen Latifah’s music became not only her platform, but also an important soundtrack for the Black community during the time.

As she states in the popular song, “It’s a house party I’m hosting ... for those who dare to ... come into my house ... from the queen of royal badness ... I move multitudes. The Afro-Asiatic Black women, hard core, beat drummin’...it’s hard to keep a good woman so I keep coming ... I symbolize wisdom!”²³ Queen Latifah’s mothering was initially intended for her immediate Black community; however, I regard this community as a nation as Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady identify in their work, *Nation Conscious Rap* (1991).²⁴ In the song, “Evil That Men Do,” Queen Latifah tried to instill pride in both women and men through a critique of the United States’ welfare system, drug use, homelessness, and intraracial violence. She claims, “Black on black crime only shackles and binds ... stop! Bring about some type of peace not only in your

²² Queen Latifah, “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children,” *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

²³ Queen Latifah, “Come into My House,” *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

²⁴ Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap* (New York: PC International Press, 1993).

heart but also in your mind. It will benefit all mankind.”²⁵ This intraracial violence theme has been a constant narrative in her work. In her fourth CD release, *Order in the Court*, she composed a song and flipped the term. “Black on Black Love” is a narrative about the possibilities of unity within the Black community. The song is an extension of the female empowerment theme found in the singles “U.N.I.T.Y.” and “Ladies First.” Going beyond the realm of domestic violence, “Black on Black Love” is a cry for the Black community to come together and spread love in order to survive and thrive. In addition to intraracial violence, drug abuse, domestic abuse, and homelessness, Latifah discusses the beauty in the community, articulating an Afrocentric perspective: “No need to fight. We stayed tight. We all loved our neighbor; had each other’s back ... the whole village chipped in and raised that one child.”²⁶

In addition to the many issues that Queen Latifah addresses in “Black on Black Love,” she also returns to her Black and hip hop nationalist stance, saying “[w]e stood Black and strong ... supported our Black-owned stores ... We all stuck tight ... as a people we lived right ... We took control of our own fate.” “Black on Black Love” reflects Queen Latifah’s conscious mothering of community in her music. In addition to expressing Africentric and communal tropes, Queen Latifah’s artistry reflects the idea of a global and Hip Hop subject through her incorporation of Jamaican dialect in her fourth album, *Black Reign*. The album, released in 1993, was a personal and communal project for Queen Latifah. She no longer adorned herself in a headdress and African-inspired clothing; however, the album was still rooted in Black tradition and discourse. Created around the time that her brother, Lance, died in a motorcycle accident, the album is an example of Queen Latifah’s ability to incorporate jazz, dancehall and soul music elements in her rap. Confident in her flow, she comes harder than she did on her previous albums, but still maintains a softness that characterizes her Africentric nurturing spirit. She infuses song with rap as she continues to propose the idea of a Black community and what Eure and Spady would call “nation.”²⁷ I argue that her music is based on and speaks to this nation. As exemplified in the title, *Black Reign*, Queen Latifah does not abandon her Africentric queendom. In addition to the female empowerment Grammy award-winning hit, “U.N.I.T.Y.,” the singles, “Black Hand Side” and “Listen to Me” were filled with the same empowering lyrics as her previous projects. As with her collaboration with Monie Love, Queen Latifah’s collaborations with Jamaican-born artists, Tony Rebel and Heavy D. demonstrates how a study of such a project would blur lines of Hip Hop and Global Hip Hop. As Harris proposes, viewing Queen Latifah and her projects as African Diaspora Phenomena is in order.

Her dedication to disseminating and nurturing knowledge, wisdom, and pride in culture and heritage extends the realm of her music career. She not only promotes

²⁵ Queen Latifah, “Evil That Men Do,” *All Hail the Queen*, Tommy Boy Records, 1989.

²⁶ Queen Latifah, “Black on Black Love,” *Order in the Court*, Motown Records, 1998.

²⁷ Eure and Spady.

women's empowerment, but rather she is devoted to the survival and well-being of the entire community through her message of loving oneself first. Thus, her music is an extensive catalogue that addresses intersecting issues pertinent to multiple communities, such as racial pride, gender roles, intimate partner abuse, poverty, and child abuse. Queen Latifah's progressive communal depictions serve as intervention in misogynistic commercial hip hop spaces. Therefore, Queen Latifah's corpulent Black female body rearticulates Hip Hop expertise and legend as it centers itself in unfamiliar locales.

Hip Hop's First Lady of Television

The empowering Hip Hop mother narrative that Queen Latifah sketched out in music has followed her to a successful screen career. Moreover, Queen Latifah's "radical womanist persona"²⁸ has been the foundation for many of her television characters. I would like to highlight her television series projects, including one that coincided with her *Black Reign* album and remains a Hip Hop cultural artifact.

The sitcom, *Living Single* (1993–1998), exemplifies the fusion of Queen Latifah's Africentric mothering with the character she portrayed while affirming her identity in Hip Hop culture. I argue that Queen Latifah carries a Hip Hop narrative in the sitcom because of her similarities to her character, Khadijah James. The sitcom, based on the lives of four friends and housemates in Brooklyn, New York in the 1990s, was created by an African American woman, Yvette Bowser.²⁹ Kristal Brent Zook argues that "[b]ecause Bowser is a successful, independent woman, relatively sympathetic to feminist aims, her characters reflected this sensibility."³⁰ Zook contends that Queen Latifah's character, magazine CEO and entrepreneur, Khadijah James, posits a womanist presence in the show that refuses to align itself with traditional sexual and gender discourses.

I extend Zook's argument and suggest that the character Khadijah James "mothers" her sitcom friends and family as well as her audience in the same fashion that Queen Latifah does. Contrary to Eurocentric mammy characteristics such as asexuality and dependency on, and allegiance to, whiteness, Khadijah is a complex character who possesses agency due to her beauty, style, and business savvy that is rooted in Hip Hop culture. Zook's argument that "the radical womanist persona of Queen Latifah provided an implicit challenge to ... the regressive politics of female desperation evident in so many episodes of *Living Single*,"³¹ is the beginning of an analysis of the character Khadijah James. One can go beyond womanist politics to suggest that Khadijah's presence in the series challenges corporeal politics due to the

²⁸ Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66.

²⁹ Yvette Lee Bowser, creator, *Living Single*, Fox Network, 1993–1998.

³⁰ Zook, 68.

³¹ Zook, 68.

complex presentation and performativity of Black women's bodies on the show during this time. Black womanhood is multidimensional, which is an important factor in humanizing and centering the Black female body. The four characters played by Queen Latifah, Kim Fields, Kim Coles, and Erika Alexander, all deviated from traditional European standards of beauty. Queen Latifah and Kim Coles' weight fluctuated throughout the tenure of the series, and, with braided hair, Erika Alexander possessed darker brown skin.

Also, the show was dedicated to centering, uplifting, and affirming the Black community through its portrayal of Black males. The women's closest friends were two racially conscious African American males, Kyle and Overton, played by T. C. Carson and John Henton respectively. The Africentric performances along with tropes such as African art, clothing, and home decorations, all reflected a dedication to racialized communities and therefore, Queen Latifah's Hip Hop performance in the show was also communal. Because her involvement and engagement in the show was loosely based on her life, I argue that her performance was womanist. The show provided a Hip Hop space at a time when Hip Hop was emerging on mainstream mediums. Shows such as *Martin* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* incorporated Hip Hop themes, references, and iconography. Queen Latifah's Hip Hop theme song composition and performance also reflected the Hip Hop roots and space of *Living Single*. Khadijah's entrepreneurship and operation of a Hip Hop magazine in the show further affirmed it as a Hip Hop space where a nonconforming Black female body and her community were centered.

Furthermore, in addition to communal bonds, the construction of the Black female body was rearticulated even more due to the sexual ambiguity of Queen Latifah's persona. Zook argues:

Latifah has been associated with nontraditional representations of femininity, sexuality, and power. Because of her own brand of "sexual liminality," she too has entered (whether willingly or not) into a discourse around both feminism and lesbianism ... Latifah's public and private personas reveal an "ability to slide up and down the registers of masculine and feminine"³²

I concur with Zook's assessment and her argument that it is not important to "out" how Queen Latifah identifies sexually, as it is to identify the empowering narratives written on her public body. Thus, I maintain that this liminality aspect of Queen Latifah's celebrity persona extends to her corpulent Africentric Queendom and redefines the role of the corpulent Black female body and its mothering role in visual and narrative cultures. Thus, a reading of Queen Latifah's body as lesbian rearticulates corpulent Black female mothering in nontraditional ways and provides even more flexibility and fluidity to Hip Hop mothering in varied spaces.

³² Zook, 69.

Queen Latifah's fluid body has continued to enter visual spaces where only males have dominated. As the lead character and star of the 2021 televised action show, *The Equalizer*, her character uses her skills to help people who feel they have nowhere to turn. The show is an extension of a series of action-packed productions with the same title that showcased males as lead warrior stars. The first *The Equalizer* starred a white male, Edward Woodward, and ran from 1985 to 1989 on CBS. The second was in the form of a feature film and starred a Black male. Denzel Washington starred in the 2014 and 2018 film adaptation of the TV series. Queen Latifah pushed boundaries and posited her Black female body in a space that males dominate. Traditionally, in American visual and narrative cultures, heroism is a space that males dominate and construct. Rarely are women portrayed as heroines in action-packed narratives. Further, Black women are still seldomly cast as main characters in television texts. Her role as one of the producers on the show, along with her business partner, Shakim Compere, is even more rare. As with other projects, she carries Hip Hop with her to this project. With *The Equalizer* production, Queen Latifah has centered the corpulent and weight-fluctuating Black female body in television for over twenty years.

Africentric Queen of the Scene

There are other important television, filmic, and cultural productions where Queen Latifah's involvement continues her television corpulent Africentric Queendom and directly speaks to her activism. Because her corpulent Africentric Queendom is a narrative written on her body, Queen Latifah carries it with her regardless of text. Her presence in films such as *Life Support* (2007) and *Flint* (2017) reflect Queen Latifah's mothering to racial and gendered communities. The HBO film *Life Support* stars Queen Latifah as a HIV positive grassroots activist.³³ The film, written by Hip Hop cultural critic Nelson George and based on a true story, is set in New York and portrays Ana as a woman who overcomes the hardships of drug addiction and low self-esteem to empower other women through her community activism. The drama presents a realistic story that is crucial when analyzing racialized and gendered communities because Black women are specifically vulnerable to HIV and other diseases.³⁴ Therefore, the film can be viewed as a form of activism. Like Queen Latifah, the character fights for the protection of, and love for, Black women's bodies as she educates others on safe sex. Because Ana's story is based on a true story, Queen Latifah's portrayal is critical when assessing her corpulence performativity. In this narrative, the corpulent Black female body is an activist and mothers' wisdom to the community about serious issues plaguing it. Her performance earned Queen Latifah a Screen Actors Guild Award, a Golden Globe, and an Image Award in 2008. Queen Latifah's dedication to fighting HIV is also reflected in her ongoing participation in events and performances that fund

³³ George Nelson, dir., *Life Support*, with Queen Latifah, HBO, 2007.

³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

AIDS research.³⁵ In *Flint*, she embodies a woman who is a part of the fight against the environmental racism via the water crisis that has taken place in the Michigan city.³⁶

Queen Latifah has also been involved in other productions and activities that reflect her dedication to Black communities. She has created and authored literary texts that aim to uplift the esteem of Black girls and women. Her mothering in her memoir, *Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman* (2000), her storybook, *Queen of the Scene* (2006), and *Put Your Crown On: Life-Changing Moments on the Path to Queendom* (2010), reflects her corpulent Africentric Queendom. In the texts, Queen Latifah espouses a narrative that seeks to uplift and center the Black female body as it undermines the gender and racial roles that have marginalized them in American society.

Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman is categorized as “Inspiration/Biography,” and thus it is not solely a biography but more of a testimony to Queen Latifah’s lived experiences to uplift others. She states in the text:

Being a queen has very little to do with exterior things. It is a state of mind ... I’m writing this book to let every woman know that she, too—no matter what her status or her place in life—is royalty. This is particularly important for African American women to know inside and out, upside down, and right side up.³⁷

Queen Latifah’s Africentric Queendom, mothering, and other mothering presence in contemporary visual and narrative cultures counters and complicates dominant readings. She not only empowers Black women and girls to love themselves, but she also continues to disrupt traditional Eurocentric gender notions and restrictions.

Queen Latifah’s corpulence performativity also intervenes in traditional spaces where constructions of femininity and masculinity are pronounced and rendered white. Queen Latifah is the spokesperson and face for multiple Procter and Gamble products and projects. A reading of her CoverGirl cosmetics promotions posits Queen Latifah as a redress of the corpulent Black female body due to the nature of the promotions and her place in them. She is not simply promoting cosmetics, but rather, bringing her Hip Hop corpulent Africentric Queendom to a space traditionally reserved for white female bodies. The narrative of “being comfortable in one’s own skin” is prevalent in the promotion. Her “Queen Collection” advertises cosmetics that bring out the “natural hues” and colors of one’s skin. Queen Latifah’s presentation challenges gender expectations and blurs a blatant traditional performance of femininity. She complicates a dominant reading and definition of femininity.

³⁵ Sara Bloom, *Queen Latifah* (Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2002).

³⁶ *Flint*, dir. Bruce Beresford, Sony Pictures Television, 2017.

³⁷ Latifah, 2.

On a CoverGirl commercial early in the campaign, she attests, “One size fits all? No Way!” The commercial espouses that women’s identities and bodies are multi-dimensional and it borrows from Queen Latifah’s personal and public motto of celebrating difference. On another commercial, Queen Latifah is shown in a black “after-five” gown with the paparazzi and thinner, model-like admirers watching her walk down a red carpet. She is the primary focus of the gaze as she smiles and strolls along the carpet to a waiting limousine. The centering of Queen Latifah in such a traditional Eurocentric and ultrafeminine space allows the viewer to witness corpulence intervening and performing in a locale where it is not usually present and revered. This interruption, via Queen Latifah’s corpulent Black female body, poses a threat to traditional gender and racial narratives, thus, upsetting familiar body politics and presenting new ways of seeing and perceiving racialized and gendered bodies. One can read the CoverGirl promotion as not merely assimilation to European standards of beauty or white patriarchy, but rather, as pushing specific boundaries and forcing corpulent Black female bodies into spaces and locations that have historically refused them. In the productions, the corpulent Black female body is centered.

Another Procter and Gamble campaign that centers the body of Queen Latifah is the “My Black is Beautiful” promotion. The promotion attests on the company website that, Procter and Gamble’s “extraordinary new initiative, My Black is Beautiful, celebrates the diverse collective beauty of African-American women and encourages black women to define and promote our own beauty standard.” The promotion professes to instill pride in Black women and girls. The “My Black is Beautiful” campaign is a spin-off from the “Queen Collection” in that Queen Latifah is used in the promotion to inspire Black women and girls to embrace their identities.

The unity of race, gender, weight, (and sexuality) allows Queen Latifah the ability to redress and center a body that is marginalized and the promotions and Queen Latifah’s dedication to Black communities elevate the corpulent Black female body to a status that it has not traditionally occupied in visual spaces. In addition, she has been involved in projects that are centered on body positivity and the full-figured woman, including promotions for Lane Bryant and Curvation, a lingerie company for the full-busted woman, where she launched her own collection of undergarments. Her visibility in visual and narrative cultures has positioned the corpulent Black female body in places and narratives that are generally closed to it.

“Call me Your Highness”

Most notably, Queen Latifah’s role as Hip Hop businesswoman performs corpulence in new and innovative ways. It is this role that merges the many facets of her celebrity persona. As businesswoman and company CEO, she challenges traditional mammy notions because she is in charge and behind the scenes of not only many of her own projects and productions, but those of others as well. As a producer, she further affirms her corpulent Afrocentric Queendom mothering and centers the corpulent Black

female body in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Queen Latifah is one of the first Black women to own and operate a production and record company founded on Hip Hop. Flavor Unit Entertainment emerged from and promoted the advancements of other artists through recording contracts, management, and motion picture involvement. Her dedication to “‘lifting’ as she ‘climbs’” is reflected in her endeavors. Managed by her partner, Shakim Compere, and herself, Flavor Unit Entertainment is responsible for the uplift and centering of Black bodies in narrative and visual cultures.

Flavor Unit Entertainment was also involved in the production of projects such as *Beauty Shop* (2005), *Just Wright* (2010), *Bessie* (2015), *The Real MVP: The Wanda Durant Story* (2016), as well as her own talk show, *The Queen Latifah Show* (1999–2001, 2013–2015). Queen Latifah has used her own career and status to employ women and people of color. She told *Ebony* magazine in 2005:

Every time we do one of these films, we pay back our community with employment ... Just doing the talk show, we employed 150 people. I had a mandate that African Americans be hired, so that went from me down the line. When I get in a position to do that, I can lay down the law like that. It’s not that I’m excluding people, but I’m including people ... including *my people*.³⁸

She also stressed the importance of helping her community during the coronavirus pandemic. In a March 2021 issue of *People Magazine*, she stated,

It’s been great making *The Equalizer* here in New Jersey ... It’s just surreal, almost, shooting on the streets that I grew up on, places that are close to my heart ... it’s great to be able to employ people from here ... so that some of our local folks can work despite COVID.³⁹

This dedication to community is a large part of her personal commitment to the Black community and renders her an important twentieth-century *activist*. She is dedicated to giving back to the community from which she came. Treach, rap artist in the Grammy-nominated and New Jersey-based group Naughty by Nature, articulates Queen Latifah’s Hip Hop mothering. The group was managed and given their break in the music industry by Queen Latifah. He once said, “La was always like a big sister ... She represented the female empowerment. She turned a lot of adults on to Hip hop.” Here, Treach elevates Queen Latifah to the important and vital pioneer of Hip Hop that she is. Another member of the group, Vinnie, added, “[s]he is naturally a Queen.”

Racialized Corpulent Queenliness

Texts are viewed and perceived differently by different spectators and at different historical moments. Identities, shaped by personal and cultural histories, influence the consumption of Queen Latifah in any given text. She still maintains a

³⁸Lynn Norment, “Queen Latifah Changes Her Shape and Her Tune,” *Ebony*, January 2005, 130–35.

³⁹Janine Rubenstein, “It’s Good to Be Queen,” *People Magazine*, March 1, 2021, 47.

strong following due to her personal activism, legacy, and historical roots in racialized and gendered communities.

Analyses and perceptions of Queen Latifah must routinely consider the early and current constructions of her body as an Africentric motherly queen. These constructions have been staples in her career and are still very important parts of her public celebrity persona. They are born from her Hip Hop roots and should be noted in the discourse surrounding her. Queen Latifah is emblematic of the possibilities of Hip Hop. Bonnette argues that political rap positively influences the youth and incorporates issues that are pertinent to assessing the plight of the Black community, stating that “[p]olitical rap ... follows the model of uniting African Americans through music by discussing issues relevant to the Black community.”⁴⁰ Many communities, such as Black women, have come to negotiate their readings of Queen Latifah in cinema and television with her overall legacy and corpulent Africentric Queendom and she remains one of the most revered Black women in American culture. One of her most recent projects is an initiative that creates and fosters cinematic narratives by, and about, women. The Queen Collective is a “push to opening doors for women through mentoring, production support, and creating distribution opportunities content for the next generation of multicultural female directors.”⁴¹ At the time of this study, there have been two cinematic releases by the Queen Collective and both deal with and center Black girls and women.

This study is not meant to be exhaustive, as Queen Latifah’s work is broad and ongoing. However, her overall presence in visual and narrative cultures has been specifically thematic in ways that disrupt traditional constructions of the Black female body as she continues to inspire and center racial and gender communities. She has carried her Hip Hop identity throughout her career. As the first Hip Hop artist to have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, her role as matriarch to contemporary Hip Hop feminism(s) is evident. Latifah should be viewed as a Hip Hop pioneer in the same way that male emcees are. She is a foremother to women Hip Hop emcees who came after her. Her style and approach make her an architect of the genre as well as of specific imagery in Hip Hop. Thus, her performative identity reflects her mothering of a specific narrative that interrelates race, gender, and sexual orientation. Unlike classic rock music artists, Hip Hop artists, particularly women artists, are not revered in United States society. In her critique of producer and music critic Nelson George’s insinuation that women have contributed fairly little to the field of Hip Hop, Rachel Raimist argues that “George attempted to wipe out our contribution to the culture beyond tokenizing,

⁴⁰ Bonnette, 8.

⁴¹ Paulana Lamonier, “Queen Latifah Continues to Shatter the Glass Ceiling with the Launch of the Queen Collective,” *Forbes*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/workday/2019/10/15/matching-customer-desire-to-make-a-positive-social-impact-with-their-talent-needs/#43b5b7ef2011>

marginalizing, and compartmentalizing, saying that we haven't had a real or significant impact on a culture that we have participated in as writers, rappers, artists, managers, publicists, filmmakers, supporters, journalists, photographers, b-girls, graf girls, and every other capacity you could think of since the beginning of hip hop."⁴² Such treatment of the Hip Hop artistry of women must end. Queen Latifah should be revered as the innovator that she is. Not simply for feminist sentiments, but for her contribution to the genre and culture. From her Hip Hop musical roots sprang her Afrocentric Queendom that is reflected in her activism as well. She is the first female Hip Hop rapper to successfully cross the Hip Hop genre and she remains a visibly global figure.

Further, her articulation of the corpulent and nonconforming Black female body disrupts narratives that marginalize it. Queen Latifah posits the corpulent Black woman as mother of knowledge, wisdom, history, and culture. She said on *60 Minutes*,

I think for people who may be thicker, you know, or people who may be darker, and people who may be female, it's good to see someone like me in one of the magazines under 'beautiful,' so that a girl out there can say, 'You know what? I'm beautiful. She's beautiful. That must make me beautiful.'⁴³

Even as her body size fluctuates, Queen Latifah's celebrity persona reimagines and grants subjectivity to the mothering possibilities of the corpulent Black female body. She has never publicly embraced a thin body as the standard of beauty, stating "I love this body of mine ... I also love my curves, my muscles, my hips.... I may be a big girl, but I am damn proud of my shape."⁴⁴ She has successfully redressed this body through her activism and, in 2019, the Associated Press announced that she was awarded the W. E. B. Du Bois Medal by Harvard University for her "contributions to black history and culture."⁴⁵ She said in an interview with *People Magazine* in 2021:

Every time somebody backs me into a corner, I move in a different direction ... Life is a journey. It takes you where it takes you. Did I want to act in movies? Yes. Did I want to be the first CoverGirl [brand ambassador] who looked like me? Yeah, I did. Did I want to rap? Yeah. A TV show? Yes. A jazz album? For sure. All these things would come cross my mind and my friend's

⁴² Rachel Raimist, "Lensing the Culture: (Hip Hop) Women Behind the Camera," in *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, ed. Brittney Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn (New York: Feminist Press, 2017), 174–78.

⁴³ Rebecca Leung, "From Music Queen to Movie Star," *60 Minutes*, October 7, 2004, CBS, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/from-music-queen-to-movie-star/>.

⁴⁴ Queen Latifah, *Put on Your Crown: Life Changing Moments on the Path to Queendom* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010), 54–55.

⁴⁵ "Queen Latifah to receive Harvard Black Cultural Award Named for W.E.B. Du Bois." *USA TODAY*, Oct. 13, 2019. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/music/2019/10/13/queen-latifah-receive-harvard-web-du-bois-black-culture-award/3972181002/>.

mind. Then we started building it. You don't just come up with these things and they happen. You've got to make them happen.⁴⁶

All hail the Queen.

⁴⁶ Rubenstein, 42–47.

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Spirituality Countering Dehumanization: A Cypher on Asian American Hip Hop Flow

Brett J. Esaki

Flow—an artistic connection to the beat—is essential to the experience and cultural mix of Hip Hop. “Flow” is also a term from positive psychology that describes a special out-of-body state of consciousness, first articulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. When Hip Hop performers get into artistic flow, they sometimes become immersed in psychological flow, and this article examines the combination for Asian American Hip Hop. Based on my national survey of Asian Americans in Hip Hop, I argue that dual flow inspires spiritual transformation and mitigates the dehumanization of social marginalization. However, the combination of terms presents problematic possibilities, given that Hip Hop emerged in diasporic communities and applying psychology can seem like an imposition of Western science on peoples dispersed by Western imperialism. This article takes up my argument as a theme of a cypher, with each voice authentically coming from me yet embodying its own flow and perspective, and each subsequent voice critiquing the previous with evidence, insight, and dignity. In this way, like the non-hierarchical conversational style of Hip Hop, the article does not come to definitive conclusions about Asian American Hip Hop, but rather debates the utility of dual flow and Asian Americans’ cultural location within Hip Hop.

Flow—an artistic connection to the beat—is essential to Hip Hop. All Four Elements consciously craft flow; *individually*, to create one’s own artistic identity, and *collectively*, to establish artistic styles of crews, neighborhoods, ethnicities, and regions. With flow, an audience connects to the music, bounces their heads, gets into “the zone,” goes “dumb,” goes “Zen,” and shouts “OOOO” when it sets up a beatdown (in battles, of course). Without flow, there is no Hip Hop artist, audience, or culture.

To empower artistic flow, Hip Hop artists can enter “flow”—a term from positive psychology that describes a special out-of-body consciousness. First articulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, psychological flow was found in chess players and painters who reached a state of peak performance and simultaneously lost their self-consciousness.¹ To attain this state, people take on challenges just above their normal skill range, and the brain assists by diverting power from areas of self-consciousness to areas of related skills. Following upon his early work, Csikszentmihalyi and other researchers discovered psychological flow in other arts, sports, pastimes, and even test-taking. It is not a surprise, then, that Hip Hop artists experience flow states. In mature articulations, psychological flow is a combination of high-level performance, lack of self-conscious doubt, loss of physical pain, and a feeling of euphoria.

¹ See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1975); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). For clarity, flow from the art of Hip Hop will be called “artistic flow” and flow from psychological research “psychological flow.” The combination will be called “dual flow.”

It is my hypothesis that when Hip Hop artistic flow puts one into psychological flow, Hip Hop is both lethal for battles and transformative for individuals and social groups. Specifically, I researched how this combination of flows might affect Asian Americans in Hip Hop and discovered that it can initiate spiritual transformation while simultaneously alleviating the pain of social marginalization. This article on Asian American Hip Hop will walk through each of these elements—artistic and psychological flow, social marginalization, and spirituality—to illustrate the power of Hip Hop for Asian Americans and to caution about the appropriation of African American, Asian, and white cultures.

The article addresses this intersection for Asian American Hip Hop in the form of the cypher. As such, the whole article and each subsection—like a round around a cypher—are incomplete, with each subsection critiquing the former and providing new insight from a different perspective and style—or “flow.” I hope to create the feeling of a profound cypher, which inspires self-critique and aspiration for greatness. Voices in this incomplete conversation (all authentically coming from me) embody Asian Americans on the ground in Hip Hop, Asian American studies, psychological and psychoanalytic contexts, and religious studies. Poetic interventions are written by the author or sometimes sample Asian American MCs that are not exact quotations (samples cited in discography). The more artistic form for this academic article is meant to follow James G. Spady’s Hiphopography, which is a Hip Hop research and writing method based in conversation that is nonhierarchical, blurs insider/outsider perspectives, and embodies the meaning, emotions, and style of Hip Hop.² Though the cypher’s circle primarily embodies Asian American voices, the conversation is meant to peak the ear of outsiders, especially readers of *JHHS* interested in questions of the relationship of Hip Hop and spirituality.

Artistic and Psychological Flow

Mic check, here we go. Flow is like being in love: you experience it, and you know, or you didn’t and you don’t. Hip Hop artists, like meditating ascetics hoping to catch a glimpse of spiritual heights, engage disciplined work to develop their craft to breach the mundane world of words, body, vinyl, and concrete. Breaking down artistic and psychological elements of flow aids understanding but does not conflate with experience.

Tricia Rose once laid out how artistic flow is essential to Hip Hop. In *Black Noise* (1994), she states that artistic flow does not stand alone in Hip Hop but cocreates, with

² Leandre J. Jackson, “Discourse Methodology in Service of Narrative Strategy: Nommo Seeking in a Hip Hop Universe, James Spady’s Hip Hop Oeuvre,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 37, no. 2 (2013): 7, 10; and James G. Spady, “Mapping and Re-Membering Hip Hop History, Hiphopography and African Diasporic History,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 37, no. 2 (2013): 130.

layering and ruptures.³ Citing all Four Elements, Rose illustrates that flow initiates and sustains “rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity,” while layering adds complexity and ruptures create narratives of managing threats to continuity.⁴ Flow is the foundational smoothness and one-directionality that connects the audience to the art, and other aspects add dimensions and meaning. Think of the break on one turntable, a voice sample on the other, then jungle and scratch it up—bring that back, and you don’t stop. Rose argues that this set of artistic elements creates a narrative of vibrancy in the face of struggle. For our purposes, artistic flow establishes a voice, but, more than a mundane statement of words, it communicates culture and experience in motion. It is therefore not only rhythmic but evocative and meaningful.

Hip hop scholar Travis Harris takes this a step further by linking artistic flow with the cypher. Building on Edouard Glissant, Gerhard Kubik, and H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook,⁵ Harris constructs “flows and ciphaz” as foundations of Hip Hop.⁶ Flows are transmissions of culture and “when flows go back and forth, they create a cipa.”⁷ In this sense, flow has artistic style and more profoundly communicates culture—an expression that embodies place, time, and power relations. The cipa takes flow’s one-directional movement and develops an exchange—a relationship also within a particular context or history of contexts. By making the art reference a history of contexts, Harris argues that flows and ciphaz express patterns of cultural survival and appropriation by African diaspora. These patterns and an understanding of their complex historical, social, and artistic meaning are foundations of Hip Hop, making Africana patterns of survival and appropriation a criterium for analyzing any use of Hip Hop culture.

We can further explicate Harris’ definition to see how flow is multiple. Flow is a vehicle of transmission: it is comprised of a transmitted cultural form, embodies the sociopolitical context of that transmission including place, time, and power, and is a link to the memories and emotions of generations of African diaspora members. The cipa, as exchange, makes the combination of flows evoke more multiplicity, commonly called the blues aesthetic, or the complex emotions of an uneven and asymmetric exchange of cultures. This image of flows and ciphaz matches spoken-word theologian James Perkinson’s concept of the “modality of the multiple,” which is Hip Hop’s active

³ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University, 1994).

⁴ Rose, 59.

⁵ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999); and H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁶ Travis Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?: From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 17–70.

⁷ Harris, 56.

development of Africana religious traditions of perceiving the world's holographic multiplicity – its spirit, concrete materiality, and history.⁸

For the present, artistic flow embodies one set of history and culture, and riding along with an artist's flow indicates that the audience "feels" at least some aspect of that history and culture. Flow by Asian Americans, by Harris's definition, must connect in some way to African diasporic patterns of cultural survival and appropriation in order for it to be considered Hip Hop. That said, Harris' definition leaves flow open to global contexts, wherever the African diaspora might theoretically find themselves and utilize their cultural toolkit to negotiate. These cultural patterns include methods of appropriation, so likewise the African diaspora might incorporate Asian cultures (and Hip Hop has appropriated Asian cultures). Asian American flow can therefore draw upon Asian and Asian American cultures and authentically be Hip Hop, as long as Asian Americans respect its Africana roots and serve as disciples of its active patterns of cultural learning.

Harris further provides a spectrum of appropriation and authenticity within Hip Hop: on one side, "a thriving and vibrant African and African diasporic community coming together against oppression and hegemonic Whiteness aiming to keep control on the other."⁹ The question is then whether Asian Americans in Hip Hop cultivate the roots of thriving or rip out the plant to control the fruits of African diasporic sacrifice. As legend Doze Green has stated, "[t]here's room for change, and there's room for new interpretation. ... But you need to have that root. ... Hip-hop is like a tree, and it's got as many hybrids and low branches around it now. Even hip-hop is connected to a bigger tree called rock 'n roll; rock 'n roll is connected to a bigger tree [and] ... before that to Africa, and Africa before that to Kemet, Mu – you know, it's all the same tree."¹⁰ Passed through my ancestry and family tree, from my grandparents, to my parents, to me. The results of my survey of Asian American Hip Hop suggest that flow can bring out the vibrancy of a mixture of cultures in the Asian diasporic experience, which utilizes mechanisms of mixture from the African diasporic experience.

When the artist and vibrant power of surviving and thriving is combined with psychological flow, profound spiritual experiences may arise. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proselytized psychological flow beyond the field of positive psychology, and as a result many artists and athletes push to learn it. It is a popular aspect of "peak performance," which is a catchphrase for achieving the heights of an endeavor or skill, typically related to sports, high-pressure job tasks, and the arts.

⁸ James W. Perkinson, *Shamanism, Racism, and Hip Hop Culture: Essays on White Supremacy and Black Subversion* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 141.

⁹ Harris, 61.

¹⁰ Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos the Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2006), 330.

It has reached Hip Hop, primarily through musicians and basketball. The latter is most well-known through the “triangle offense” of legendary basketball coach Phil Jackson. The complex system based in reading and reaction and his conception of spirituality in the locker room are extensions of his Zen Buddhism, Christianity, and readings of the Lakota Sioux.¹¹ Inspired by this multireligious perspective, basketball players adopt spiritual language for their peak performances, e.g., they “went unconscious,” “went to a different place,” or were “in the zone.” In the game now, Steve Kerr, head coach of the champion Golden State Warriors (I’m from the Bay, Go Dubs), continually talks about flow for his version of the triangle offense. Kerr demands that his players execute simple plays to establish flow; this follows Csikszentmihalyi’s process of accomplishing easy tasks to increase focus, wherein flow may occur. Musicians often learn about psychological flow through the pursuit of peak performance and come to it from a variety of musical genres, including classical, jazz, and electronic. I have heard many of these musicians using language similar to Phil Jackson’s to describe how flow relates to Asian religions, notably the mindfulness of Buddhism and the mantras of Hinduism.

For Hip Hop specifically, psychological flow has been publicly touted by neuroscientist Heather Berlin and partner MC Baba Brinkman. As Berlin argues, psychological flow is common in “spontaneous creativity,” notably freestyle rap and improv comedy.¹² Brinkman for his part regularly performs by bringing Berlin onstage as freestyle and comedy muse. While Hip Hop as a whole does not utilize neuroscience’s language of psychological flow, I encountered its presence several times in both my formal interviews and free discussions with Asian Americans in Hip Hop – so often that I investigated it for my first book, though these results did not make the final version. I presume, without formal survey, that others in Hip Hop likewise generally experience psychological flow. In broader Hip Hop, I hear the basketball language of flow’s effortless success – “Messed around and got a triple-double” or “My drive be perfect Kyrie Irving / Down the 495 swerving.”¹³

With or without the science language, psychological flow works by shifting our brain’s mode of operation. Csikszentmihalyi and later neuroscientific studies state that psychological flow takes brainpower from the prefrontal cortex which plays a central role in self-consciousness and diverts it to the frontal cortex which plays a central role in nonconscious body coordination. This creates an experience of intense concentration, a

¹¹ Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hachette Books, 1995).

¹² Heather Berlin, “What Time Feels Like When You’re Improvising: The Neurology of Flow States,” *Coordinates* 61 (June 7, 2018), <https://nautil.us/issue/61/coordinates/what-time-feels-like-when-youre-improvising>

¹³ Ice Cube, “It Was a Good Day,” *The Predator* (Lench Mob, 1992); Flowsik, “Kari,” *Kari* (Southpaw, 2018).

merging of action and awareness, a loss of self-reflective consciousness, a sense of personal control, a feeling of time distortion, and a sense of an intrinsically rewarding activity.¹⁴ Combined, this is euphoric and provides an immediate sense of power and success, and typically these coincide with actually accomplishing high-level tasks.

The central claim that flow states decrease prefrontal cortical activity and increase frontal cortical activity has not been conclusively proven, but studies of related sub-phenomena suggest the correlation. For example, some studies of relaxation and meditation utilize the same distribution of brain activity.¹⁵ Studies of chemical and hormone levels suggest other component processes. Corinna Peifer found a correlation of cortisol levels with flow states.¹⁶ Cortisol mediates the body's response to stress by helping the brain selectively react to stimuli related to a particular stress. Interestingly, flow states are positively correlated with cortisol levels that are found in people reacting to everyday stresses and negatively correlated with those responding to overwhelming stresses. In other words, flow feels more like facing normal challenges instead of mortal dangers. This corresponds to a central flow characteristic that difficult tasks seem easy or accomplishable. Dopamine levels have not been proven correlated, but testimonies that psychological flow feels rewarding and positive match descriptions of people with increased dopamine levels.¹⁷

Psychological studies reveal a variety of preconditions, components, and consequences of flow states. For example, one can enter a flow state while doing a mundane or uninteresting task, in which case the transcendent experience is not particularly meaningful, memorable, or joyful. This means that flow states are not necessarily "affective," which means that they did not add emotion to tasks.¹⁸ On the other hand, if one enters a flow state while in a meaningful task – like one that enhances one's career or is a rare moment of joy – the transcendent experience adds to the depth, complexity, and euphoria of the whole experience. As a result, many describe the combination of transcendence, meaning, and euphoria as spiritual.

To the spiritual it goes / Brings high mountains low / From culture trees it grows / Mix, survive, flow. Dual flow wields psychological states of empowerment to mitigate oppression with style and the collective knowledge of diaspora. We use proper hand gestures to conjure ancestors. Accordingly, this article does not use psychological flow to legitimate Hip Hop as scientific but to articulate the experience of Hip Hop's

¹⁴ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

¹⁵ Corinna Peifer, "Psychophysiological Correlates of Flow-Experience," in *Advances in Flow Research*, edited by Stefan Engeser (New York: Springer, 2012), 150-51.

¹⁶ Peifer, 154-56.

¹⁷ Peifer, 152.

¹⁸ Stefan Engeser and Anja Schiepe-Tiska, "Historical Lines and an Overview of Current Research on Flow," in *Advances in Flow Research*, ed. Stefan Engeser (New York: Springer, 2012), 1-22.

intergenerational transcendent power that emerges in contexts of oppression. Asian Americans in Hip Hop attest to this.

Spiritual Empowerment of Asian American Hip Hop Flow

Power, get more power! To glimpse into the combined power of artistic and psychological flow for Asian American Hip Hop, I conducted a nationwide online survey (open November 2015 to November 2018).¹⁹ The sample is small, fourteen individuals, but it includes some of the biggest Asian American artists. It was technically anonymous, but voluntary information about career and follow-up correspondence allowed me to decipher the identities of many of the participants. The ethnic diversity was also strong, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Cambodian, and Hmong, along with a respective diversity of religious affiliations, including Buddhist, Christian, spiritual, and non-religious. Largely the sample consisted of MCs and producers because they are the elements of Asian American Hip Hop that I personally know best and whom I could ask to tap their networks. Since the sample was small, I am supplementing it in this article with media interviews of DJ Qbert. I will take selected quotations and allow them to speak about the power of dual flow for Asian American Hip Hop. I will insert my voice to illuminate these quotations further, especially the larger social context of marginalization.

In total, the Asian American voices of this subsection are exemplary and not meant to imply dual flow occurs for all Asian Americans in Hip Hop. In my next book project, I plan on publishing more of the survey, more interviews, and unpublished data from my first book. Additionally, the focus of the upcoming manuscript will be on the intersection of spirituality and radical politics for Asian Americans, instead of Asian American Hip Hop specifically.

Now they speak. When asked about life struggles or difficulties during the time of a flow experience, many commented that it alleviated suffering from marginalization. In fact, several said that Hip Hop saved their lives. Here are two examples:

I experienced flow when I made a hard knocking beat. I felt like my mind was in a different world and I just magically knew what to do next in the beat. I had a strong sense of how and where I needed to progress the beat. My emotions were also the strongest at that point because I had just faced the harsh reality that I could no longer play the drums because of the pain of carpal tunnel and that my future did not mainly involve drumming.

¹⁹ For more on Asian American Hip Hop in general, see Christine Bacareza Balance, *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Anthony Kwame Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009); Sunaina M. Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002); and Oliver Wang, "Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC," in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture and Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham, NC, 2007), 35–68.

In short: Parents were from Japan and came to US in the 70s. I was born in California. No real ties to the families who were here already. No real ties to Japan. Always an outsider. Hip hop saved my life. Seriously.²⁰

In general, respondents indicated that the union of the narrative of Hip Hop's artistic flow with the out-of-body experience of psychological flow reduces pain, and specifically the quotations discuss the physical and emotional pain of a motor injury and the emotional distress of social alienation. The second quotation expresses a feeling of being separated from a country of ethnic origin, Americans broadly speaking, and other Asian Americans who have had more generations in the United States. This has been called living in the "hyphen" of Asian-American and a permanent "sojourner" status, i.e., not finding a sense of home in any Asian or American community.²¹ Hence, the transcendent experience in an art form that explores themes of belonging and marginalization provides the benefit of a sense of home for Asian Americans.

Hip hop is also particularly powerful to combat the model minority myth. In short, the model minority myth is that Asian Americans are economically successful because of an outsized work ethic.²² While this may seem like a positive image, it has painful results. First, it ignores discrimination in education and the workplace while affirming that the United States is a meritocracy (Kim 1999). Simultaneously, it puts undue pressure on Asian Americans to succeed and to reach the middle class, and should they not achieve this goal, they would seem to fail their race, culture, family, and individual potential. The following respondent illustrates how the model minority myth often infects Asian American households, with some cases turning abusive.

The pressure to do well in school has always been relevant in my life and the consequences from not doing well made [me] afraid about future where I didn't do well in school. I would be threatened with violence from mostly my dad. I know he meant well, but I don't think beating children is worth an increase in their gpa. Hip-hop really help[ed] me rationalize those experiences and gave me a sense of relief because I could rap about it and not hold it all in.

This respondent illustrates how Hip Hop directly counters marginalization through analyses of complex social and familial experiences, with psychological flow able to provide a euphoric experience that affirms these discoveries. Consciousness is

²⁰ Note that I did not correct grammar and spelling of survey responses, choosing to leave the quotations true to the original expression.

²¹ Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford, 2005); and Fumitaka Matsuoka, "Learning to Speak a New Tongue: Imagining a Way that Holds People Together—An Asian American Conversation," in *Asian and Oceanic Christianities in Conversation: Exploring Theological Identities at Home and in Diaspora*, ed. Heup Young Kim, Fumitaka Matsuoka, and Anri Morimoto (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 217–230.

²² Nellie Tran, and Dina Birman, "Questioning the Model Minority: Studies of Asian American Academic Performance," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2010): 106–118, <https://doi.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fa0019965>.

being “raised” in several forms.

With the powerful combination of artistic and psychological flow, the survey respondents asserted that they underwent a spiritual transformation. When asked if flow felt religious or spiritual, they responded across a spectrum of spiritual orientations. On one end of the spectrum, the discovery of a life-saving and community-building art led some to reject religion. For example, one spoke plainly:

Fuck religion. Religion is another form of politics. What I felt can't be labelled. It was spiritual, it was soul, it was my life saver, but most importantly, it was Hip Hop.

By connecting religion to “politics” or what I interpret as political ideology, this respondent demonstrates that flow can affirm a spiritual orientation that rejects religious institutions. That is, a transcendent experience in a context outside traditional religions can reaffirm a sense of organized religions’ spiritual bankruptcy. For those not committed to the rejection of religious institutions, such an experience can shift one towards questioning institutions or at least towards not relying upon them for spiritual experiences. This matches a trope in contemporary spirituality that religion is synonymous with institutions and dogma, while “spirituality” is freer and authentic.

On the other end of the spectrum, flow brought some closer to traditional religion. One respondent thought that the spiritual power of flow would be best explained by sending me a video of a performance. As an Evangelical Christian, he rapped with two other Asian American musicians at a local coffee shop about biblical stories and linked them to his own personal spiritual struggles.

Another associated it with the complicated mix of culture and spirit for Southeast Asian Buddhists:

I'm not religious and don't really believe in God even though I am Buddhist. Being Buddhist to me is more cultural rather than spiritual. I guess you can say that my cultural experiences is spiritual because I was going through a lot of depression recently and being around my Khmer people healed me.

Southeast Asians, like the Cambodian American who spoke here, commonly arrived in the United States as a result of the Vietnam War, often as refugees or otherwise displaced peoples. One consequence was that Southeast Asians developed strong intraethnic ties as they fled their countries and underwent common traumatic experiences across class, sub-ethnicity, and religion. Religious organizations served as ethnic resources, like they do for most ethnicities, but in this case, they worked across Southeast Asian religions. As a result, Christians often attended Buddhist and Muslim

services and holidays, and the same reciprocally.²³ Thus, religious identifications have become nearly synonymous with an intraethnic identity, and ethnic identity is synonymous with a pan-religious identity. By extension, Southeast Asian Hip Hop crews may be multireligious and Hip Hop experiences may feel like they span religious categories or feel particularly ethnically or culturally Southeast Asian. For the previous respondent, flow in a context of a Khmer crew may have brought him to see the healing power of Khmer culture.

Viewing this together with earlier comments quoted here, it becomes clear that context matters. If, within a context that identifies with a single religion, then flow may affirm that religion; if in a context that is mono-ethnic but multireligious, then it may affirm the power of that culture; if outside of religious contexts, then it may affirm the futility of religion. That is, the transcendent power of dual flow lifts pains of marginalization and strengthens the bonds of one's community, whether that be considered religious or not.

Most, however, when asked about the flow experience being religious or spiritual, noted that it had an undefined spiritual power and expanded their sense of self:

Most definitely a spiritual experience because to know and experience Hip Hop means is to know that it is greater than just our individual self.

Definitely spiritual. I think it is communal also. If it happens, I don't ever feel like I was the only one there in flux light that. It was always a group effort to push each other and the whole room into a higher expression.

Spiritual learning experience to toughen me as an individual of society. Learned that nothing in life was going to be handed to me, and that I had to find ways to take it.

From responses like these, the lack of definition or religious location seems to be intrinsic to dual flow's power. Psychological flow can be individualistic when individuals meet challenges. In Hip Hop, individual challenges are understood in larger social contexts, whether that be in an intimate context like a crew, the desire to represent one's community, or within larger racial and ideological structures. As the respondents asserted, experiencing psychological flow in the social context of Hip Hop can make one "greater" and "toughen" the self while simultaneously raising one's consciousness to the inequities of society and the power of one's community. In other words, to "represent" is to embody the community's spiritual heights, physical strength,

²³ Thomas J. Douglas, "The Cross and the Lotus: Changing Religious Practices Among Cambodia Immigrants in Seattle," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, ed. Jane N. Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 159–175.

and courage to face oppression. The exact details of these elements of reppin' vary, but flow is nonspecific enough to elevate all of them.

The undefined power of flow is palpable and, in the mind of a visionary, like the preeminent DJ Qbert, it can transform one's consciousness to see beyond this world. In public interviews, Qbert has expressed the method and power of Hip Hop flow.

Scratching is a form of meditation. When you get into a zone, you're only thinking of one thing – the music being created at hand. All your being, soul, and energy is compressed into a continuous string of creation flowing through you from the universe. At this stage in my life, I'm trying to be able to get to that nirvana (zone, meditative state, groove) at will.²⁴

This transcendent power brings him to great questions:

Where's the center of the universe? What is God? . . . It's like there are so many questions that are hidden from us in this world because this world is like a prison planet. We're just kind of like cattle to the rulers that own this planet and so they're keeping all these secrets of eternal life from us and so I'm trying to learn about all that stuff.²⁵

Instead of hoping that the "secrets" would be released by earthly powers, he looked elsewhere:

Since Earth is like a primitive planet, what about the more advanced civilizations, how does their music sound? So I would imagine it, whatever they were doing, and that's how I would come up with my ideas.²⁶

Following upon Afrofuturist musicians and visionaries Sun Ra and Afrika Bambaataa, Qbert has come to see our planet as "primitive" and a "prison." One might isolate futurism by racial minorities as a form of countercultural postmodernity or connect them to music drug cultures of LSD and MDMA, but the concept of dual flow puts DJ Qbert's visions in a new light. Instead of being merely a countercultural statement, they may reflect the experience and transcendent perspective of dual flow. Psychological flow provides an experience of stepping outside of the physical, social, and psychological pains of the moment, revealing the possibility of overcoming marginalization and thus how oppression has limitations. These are boundaries of the "prison," and their revelation means that this prison planet does not necessarily provide all the answers to deep questions nor the solutions for practical problems of material scarcity and social inequality. Artistic flow provides a style of creative survival, built upon a common framework of Afrofuturism, including the tactic of stepping outside of white perspectives for a realistic view of oneself and an expansive view of

²⁴ Jim Tremayne and Michael Wong, "The Many Phases Of Qbert: With His New Animated Wave Twisters Movie, Turntablism's Master Craftsman Shows the Next Cut," *DJ Times Magazine*, March 2001.

²⁵ Mike Maniaci, "DJ Qbert," *Career Cookbook*, May 7, 2007, http://thecareercookbook.com/article.php?article_id=157.

²⁶ *Scratch*. Directed by Doug Pray (New York: Palm Pictures, 2001).

time – one’s undistorted history and possibilities for the future.²⁷ In other words, alien consciousness and higher intelligence are not only metaphors or euphemisms for drug use, but descriptions of the out-of-body, healing, intelligent, and socially consciousness-raising power of dual flow.

The responses I quoted reveal just a taste of the power of dual flow. As these Asian Americans assert, it provides important physical, emotional, and spiritual buffers against the dehumanization of oppression. It can raise their analysis of society and culture by addressing the issues that they historically faced and currently face. Dual flow’s power can affirm spiritual orientations, whether they be associated with traditional religion, ethnic identity, or anti-religious spirituality. Moreover, it can transmogrify one spirituality to question one’s current spiritual worldview or even to reach beyond earthly worldviews.

Asian Americans attest to the power of entering new states of consciousness and of Hip Hop’s bigger tree of cultural survival and appropriation maintained by the African diaspora. It is a thriving and vibrant Asian diasporic community coming together with the power of an African diasporic art to fight against oppression.

Critical Reflection or: Hold Up!

Hold up! That was some imperialistic garbage! You mean that some crazy rich Asians take some psychobabble from some crazy rich white people, feel good about it, and that’s supposed to be Hip Hop! Remember what Travis Harris said about the OTHER end of the Hip Hop spectrum: “hegemonic Whiteness aiming to keep control.”²⁸ Danger: I see a lot of white in that spirituality and a lot of white in that psychological flow.

First: spirituality. In *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica Miller clearly states that any use of the term religion and its variants (eh hem, “spirituality”) in Hip Hop should be critically evaluated: “Terms such as religion, the sacred, spirituality and so on, not only have complicated inheritances, they are likewise discursive, manufactured, and disciplinary – words that have complex histories used to measure the validity of certain (privileged) experiences.”²⁹ In other words, spirituality gets used by some in Hip Hop cultures to validate their experiences. The Asian Americans quoted above use “spirituality” to make their Hip Hop seem powerful, either to situate it within their religious traditions and thereby enhance the power of their traditions or to assert that it comes from outside of religious organizations and thereby validate not following religion.

²⁷ This transcendent view of the past, present, and future is also, I think unironically, a definition of prophecy in Abrahamic religions.

²⁸ Harris, 61.

²⁹ Monica Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 12.

How does the term “spirituality” do that? It came from white people, so its value comes from its association with whiteness. It originated with the Baby Boomers in the Counterculture Era, when predominantly white Americans sought forms of religion that were not infected by industrialism, authoritarianism, and warmongering.³⁰ This postwar period also saw an influx of new immigrants and their religions, creating a dynamic mixture of religions that white Americans repurposed for their own needs and desires. Sociologist of religion Peter Berger argues that this era’s forces of secularization and religious pluralism pushed many into a kind of spiritual homelessness, where traditional religions did not match boomers’ spiritual demands for a variety of spiritual paths that they might undertake.³¹ Often these so-called “spiritual seekers” would look outside traditional western religions to Asian, African, and Native American religions for their answers, and adopted pieces that seemed to fit—or were made to fit—their spiritual demands. As they got richer (and higher in the white supremacy spectrum), these appropriations grew all the more egregious, with junk versions of dream hoops, voodoo dolls, and yoga pants.

Asian Americans should be aware of this issue since their cultures get horribly appropriated all of the time by these folks. Spirituality often follows Orientalist tropes that praise Asian religions for their beauty, naturalness, wisdom, and peacefulness. And spiritual white people socially and economically support Asian religious figures who assert the same image, sometimes even literally bringing them from overseas. As a result, few Asian Americans run spirituality yoga and “Zen” spa retreats, but somehow there is plenty of room for white spiritual celebrity “gurus.” For Asian Americans in Hip Hop (and this article’s author), using “spirituality” sounds awfully like trying to get back a piece of the whiteness pie!

Not to mention psychological flow—dig a little and you will find that it is imperialist science. The founder, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, took observations of French painters and then began to apply them universally as something hardwired into everyone—and that was without concrete evidence. Even today there is no definitive neuroscientific mechanism identified. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon imperialistic tactic. As many critics of Western science have argued, the value for universal phenomena stems from an imperial mentality. Namely, the Western scientific desire for universal truths arose in the context of world dominance by Europeans.³² Anthropologists, philosophers, and others would craft their visions of human and social evolution with the “new” evidence of peoples discovered in newly explored places.

³⁰ Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

³¹ Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind; Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

³² Sandra G. Harding, *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

Likewise, the presumed universal greatness of technological invention and religious truths would be tested against the technologies and religions of these people and in comparison, to competing imperial nations. That is not to say that Western science does not discover truths, but the impulse to assert universality or to legitimate research based on connections to universality is rooted in an imperial mentality, which is obviously tied to colonialism, Orientalism, racism, and other ideologies of dominance. Doesn't this application of psychological flow to Hip Hop sound awfully similar?!

Dig deeper into psychological flow and there is more whiteness. Without evidence from science, Csikszentmihalyi speculated that flow could have been the result of the evolution of humanity and simultaneously inspired humanity's evolution.³³ He says that flow makes taking on challenges euphoric and expands one's ability to take on challenges, so feels that it might have pushed humans towards risk and the achievement of great things, thus speeding on evolution. At the same time, it simplifies complex brain processes for the sake of accomplishing tasks, so may have been the result of evolving such a multifunctional brain.

He also connects psychological flow to the development of human spirituality. In order to fit flow into spirituality, he created a tidy definition: "what is common to all forms of spirituality is the attempt to reduce entropy and consciousness";³⁴ that is, spirituality smooths and simplifies existence. To fit spirituality into evolution, he argues that evolution increased the complexity of the mind's functions, necessitating "an internal traffic cop" (22) that sorts perceptions and sensations, or else there will be "disorder within human consciousness that leads to impaired functioning" (170). For Csikszentmihalyi, spirituality is an organizing mechanism that helps human consciousness find a sense of harmony and better function. Likewise, flow decreases complexity and makes one enjoy and feel capable of navigating life challenges (190). Accordingly, flow can be an important tool for spirituality (in Csikszentmihalyi's definition) because it reduces psychic entropy and affirms life.

His definition of spirituality and of psychological flow's role in spirituality reflects his cultural preferences. According to Csikszentmihalyi, a disordered life is disjointed and depressing, so society makes normal life predictable and manageable, albeit often boring. At the same time, to evolve, humans must seek new challenges, which leaves a life that is less predictable and more manageable (190–191). Flow enters here; it makes humans seek challenges, which brings disorder, yet rewards challenge-seekers with pleasure. This logic matches the classic Freudian love and death drives, described as the conflicting desires to seek order and unity for the former, and

³³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ed. *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Netherlands, 2014).

³⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self*, 239.

complexity and multiplicity for the latter.³⁵ Psychological flow bridges the two drives to a small degree, making one “love” complexity, thus spurring on evolution.

This link of psychological flow to evolution and spirituality only make sense from a place of privilege. The presumption in Csikszentmihalyi’s argument is that normal life is predictable and manageable, and consequently people must be pushed to seek challenges that might bring disorder. But, what about if you live a marginalized existence, one filled with diasporic dislocation and disruption? (The one foundational to Hip Hop ...) Normal life is not predictable, manageable, and banal! Psychological flow therefore holds little value for Hip Hop since it is about inviting disorder into a privileged life. Q.E.D., mic drop, Hip Hop has no use for psychological flow, let alone its imperialist-scientistic spirituality.

Dialectical Psychoanalytic Response or: “Again”

As Morpheus said, “Again!” Dig deeper, my friend. Spirituality and flow are not necessarily the tools of the master’s house but deep reservoirs of the ancients. To pierce the veil of privilege, we need to dig deeper, into death. Let me take you to the realm of the dialectic, specifically the psychoanalytic.

Let us start with literary theorist Abdul JanMohamed, who will help us rewrite the script of counterculture spirituality and Csikszentmihalyi psychology. In *The Death-Bound-Subject* (2005), JanMohamed uses psychoanalysis to articulate the effects of the inversion of a privileged world.³⁶ Specifically, he analyzes the works of Richard Wright to uncover how African Americans might psychically confront social death. With JanMohamed’s psychoanalytic view of social death, we can replace Csikszentmihalyi’s framework of the love and death drives that is undergirded by privilege.

Building on the foundational analysis of slavery by Orlando Patterson as a practice of human parasitism, JanMohamed argues that the condition of the enslaved, which Patterson coined “social death,” cannot be overcome by direct rebellion against this status.³⁷ That is, when a society deems a people of no social status, those people cannot force a status change. The shift to a free self is impossible both in social and in psychic terms, where the socially dead self continues an inevitable march towards physical death. As JanMohamed argues, the only escape from such a status of social death is a symbolic transformation of facing death. However, this is a temporary ritual that must be repeated. In psychoanalytic and Hegelian terms, the negation of a socially

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey. The Standard ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

³⁶ Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

dead state alters it at the symbolic level, but unlike typical Hegelian logic the new self lasts for a short duration only, and then reverts to its previous, socially dead state.

Here, we can dig deeper into the earlier discussion of flow and privilege. For African Americans, the institution of slavery initiated social death and was followed by new instantiations – Jim Crow, redlining, the school to prison pipeline, and so on. The presumption by Csikszentmihalyi that life is banal comes from the perspective of the socially alive, where society supports citizens' humanity and mitigates life challenges – normal life becomes boring thanks to social enfranchisement. For the socially dead, society does the opposite of support – it exploits, ignores, and murders them. In the mind of society, these disciplinary acts upon the socially dead maintain the social order by keeping consequences of exploiting the socially dead, such as their pain, complications, and morally gray realities, outside of society, creating a significant disconnect in the sense of “order” for the privileged and the socially dead. Marginalized African Americans' normal, everyday life is filled with dread, and order is disciplinary. Moreover, as should be evident, society does not mitigate life challenges but adds to them.

While this dialectic may seem to confirm that psychological flow has no value for Hip Hop, in fact, it shows a different and perhaps more fundamental need. Recall that psychological flow takes challenging or disorderly states of mind and provides a feeling of mastery over challenges – often to the point of euphoric fun. In scientific terms, psychological flow states reduce cortisol levels to the level of everyday stress; this reduction of stress can increase health and again can make the seemingly insurmountable seem manageable. Likewise, dopamine levels increase, further calming the mind. These effects partially explain the experiential value of the arts and sports for the marginalized, given that these are commonly available ways to reach flow states.

Does this change from dread to manageable remove the socially dead status? No, but it provides a window – albeit brief – into social life. Here, let's bring back JanMohamed's dialectic, and we can see a possibility of how Hip Hop can negate social death. In the dialectic, one engages a ritual that directly negates the symbols of social death and does so by directly facing death. In Hip Hop, realness requires confronting the realities of social death without mitigating words, whether that be organizing against racist policies, calling out intra-racial oppression like sexism and homophobia, and embracing pleasures of communal belonging, sex, and drugs. Repping a crew, neighborhood, city, or culture is intrinsic to Hip Hop rituals, and images of social life are part of the symbolic negation of social death. Moreover, repping means embracing the existential risks that the social group faces everyday (the opposite – the wack – are those who try to rep a group while never facing the challenges). With the euphoria of psychological flow, there is an additional embodied assurance that fighting the power uplifts the self and community. In sum, psychological flow as a combined flow creates a possible foundation for the expressions that Hip Hop is love, respect, and realness, and counters white supremacist packaging that Hip Hop glorifies Black violence.

Using a similar dialectic, Asian Americans in Hip Hop can negate their marginalized social status without embracing hegemonic whiteness or taking Csikszentmihalyi's privileged viewpoint. Unlike the social death experienced by members of the African diaspora, Asian Americans experience the social alienation of the "perpetual foreigner." As Claire Jean Kim and Mia Tuan have both articulated, white hegemony toggles Asian Americans between the model minority and forever foreigner in an effort to discipline other racial minorities (as the "model" minority to assert that others are "lazy") and to reject the belonging and citizenship of Asians when convenient (as the foreigner to galvanize others against Asians).³⁸ This racialization provides circumstantial social life (again, when beneficial for the white hegemony), so it is categorically different than social death. However, this degree of social life comes at the cost of the dissolution of national belonging, and United States' policies repeatedly target Asian Americans to reduce their opportunities for, degree of, and value of American citizenship. Take for example the World War II internment camps that switched the status of US-born Asians from citizens to enemy alien, or the so-called "anchor babies" moral panic that threatened to remove the citizenship of Asian Americans whose parents were not American citizens at the time of birth. So, it is not the vampiric parasitism of social death, but the drip-by-drip erosion of social dissolution.

In practice, social dissolution takes place domestically but in reference to global conditions. As we recently experienced, an international concern around a global pandemic brought white supremacist circles to conspire that it was an attack by China, leading to anti-Asian violence across the United States without consideration for the character, ethnicity, or national status of Asian Americans. This also occurs in the context of globalization, which, building upon structures of colonialism, takes international economic and political inequality and selectively applies it locally. For example, in *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop*, M. T. Kato mentions how, at the time of the 1992 L.A. riots, globalization's process of economic upheaval and unjust jurisprudence undergirded some of the antagonism between African Americans and Asian Americans.³⁹ While Hip Hop was releasing tracks that pointed out these oppressive realities (e.g., "Cop Killer" and "Black Korea"), Hollywood was obfuscating the interracial and pan-Asian revolutionary work of Bruce Lee (*Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*). In this way, globalization with the one hand instills unrest and with the other whitewashes its traces, often misrepresenting Asian Americans as the face of oppression. Social dissolution isolates Asian Americans from others and tears off pieces of their citizenship – conquer, divide, and divide more.

³⁸ Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105-138; and Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

³⁹ M. T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2007), 173.

Kato, analyzing the work of Bruce Lee, provides a dialectic for removing the socially dissolved status. In the narrative of *Game of Death*, Lee's final movie, Lee's character moves into the unknown to face death. Specifically, the character takes an existential risk by entering a tower of unknown martial artists and styles, indicating a "willingness to surrender himself to infinite possibility" (196). The final opponent (played by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) represents a style beyond style and the absence of the fear of death (194, 198). As Lee battles successive opponents, he incorporates more Asian martial arts styles, and thereby becomes increasingly pan-Asian. When he reaches the final challenge, he comes to embody the "autonomous power of the people of Asia" and the "pursuit of transcultural pan-Asianism" (200). However, when meeting the final opponent, he must use the power of nature (a trope in philosophical Taoism) to overcome Abdul-Jabbar's transcendent style that has no fear of death. In this way, the film illustrates that, to defeat social dissolution, pan-Asianism requires the embrace of a symbol that unites beyond human difference. Kato proclaims that the final triumphant Lee, who further learns from Abdul-Jabbar's style, foreshadows "the global circulation of people's struggle in the context of the post-Black Power and post-Third World social movements" (200). The end of the movie follows an over-exhausted Lee, who must continue to struggle even after his victory.

In conversation with JanMohamed's dialectic of social death built on the works of Richard Wright, we can see an analogous dialectic explicated by Kato and illustrated by Bruce Lee. For Asian Americans, social dissolution involves breaking the self into pieces, predominantly by invalidating pieces, sometimes by uplifting one piece as a "model minority" and using it to discipline and to exploit others, but perpetually to keep the self from wholeness and belonging. In Wright's work, the negation of social death meant facing death, and analogously in Lee's work negating social dissolution meant facing dissolution, or the infinite pieces into which one has been broken. In *Game of Death*, Lee faced the dread of infinite possibility, where death could come from every angle.⁴⁰ At each stage, facing dissolution, he gained more martial power and wisdom from Asia. The final challenge meant embracing the symbol of nature, which in philosophical Taoism has no definition yet fundamental, infinite power. The dissolution of Asia by colonialism and racist discord are thus reversed and forges together the self with a spiritual power beyond the human. Moreover, in JanMohamed's dialectic, social death is never totally overcome but requires repeated rituals wherein temporary social life is experienced. In Kato's dialectic, Lee repeatedly faced dissolution and death, experienced temporary transcendence, and repeatedly returned to the struggles of daily marginalized existence.

Just as Hip Hop provides a ritual space for African Americans to face social death, Hip Hop provides space for Asian Americans to face social dissolution. Despite decades of participation and achievement in Hip Hop (e.g., MC Joe Bataan with "Rap-O

⁴⁰ *Game of Death*, dir. Robert Clouse, 1978.

Clap-O" in 1979, DJ Qbert as DMC World Champion in 1992, Bboy Cloud as Red Bull DC One Finalist in 2009, Jabbawokeyz as first dance crew show in Las Vegas 2010), the Asian body still has an uncomfortable place in Hip Hop. Whatever the battle, opponents and haters abound, and Asian Americans frequently find themselves in other people's territory. They experience the threat of social dissolution and the ignorance that comes from their racialization, yet Hip Hop simultaneously provides the ritual space wherein they can face social dissolution and embrace the multiplicity of their identities, while connecting to cultural patterns attuned to combat white hegemony.

Similarly, Counterculture spirituality participates in hegemonic whiteness, but digging deeper, one will find that it has foundations in negating aspects of hegemonic whiteness. First, the Counterculture was rejecting forms of authoritarianism, mass industrialization, and world war; these are themes that racial minorities embrace, though from different angles than their white counterparts. Secondly, racial minorities can take concepts popularized by white groups and appropriate them for their own purposes. For example, "spirituality" has the air of countering religion, but the concept of "religion" also varies across and within racial groups. For those of Christian backgrounds, embracing spirituality can mean following non-Christian metaphysical traditions like spiritualism, card reading, and fortune telling, many of which predate Christianity. African Americans, under the term "spiritual," continue a diversity of African rituals and beliefs, engage spiritual and folk healing practices, and hold mystical worldviews.⁴¹

Asian Americans utilize "spirituality" to maintain traditions of religious skepticism and familism, both once rooted in Asian religions, but in the context of the United States are categorized as nonreligious and considered spiritual.⁴² The longer history of Asian diaspora is that the term "religion" was often imposed on Asians by foreigners, like the United States used trade treaties in the 1860s and the American Occupation after World War II to impose American hegemony in Japan. For this reason, Asian Americans take the term "spiritual" as a counter to imposed colonial frameworks for "religion." Spirituality thus links to the counterculture connotation of being antiauthoritarian and antiwar, though from different cultural and historical frameworks. Put together, the idea of spirituality can be very "Asian" for Asian Americans, referring to a history of surviving colonial violence and encompassing a variety of Asian traditions deemed nonreligious. It thus signifies precolonial cultures while holding

⁴¹ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁴² Russell M. Jeung, Seanan S. Fong, and Helen Jin Kim, *Family Sacrifices: The Worldviews and Ethics of Chinese Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Russell M. Jeung, Brett J. Esaki, and Alice Liu, "Redefining Religious Nones: Lessons from Chinese and Japanese American Young Adults," *Religions* 6 (July 2016): 891–911.

memory of the process of surviving colonial domination through hiding Asian cultures within American frameworks.

At the same time, we can recognize how minority forms of spirituality can be undergirded by structures of whiteness. For example, Oprah Winfrey presents forms of spirituality in ways that are approachable to a racially diverse audience, while many of these spiritual products, practices, and interpretations of non-white spiritual traditions (of African, Asian, and Native American origin) follow common reductions of their cultures. Here, we can see how whiteness-inflected spirituality can found secondary appropriation, or the appropriation by nonwhites of nonwhite cultures transformed to fit white desires. Bruce Lee, for example, while doing revolutionary multiracial work on the communal level, adopted Western philosophical Taoism from college courses and predominantly white new religious movements. Thus, Lee's martial arts philosophy is both powerful for developing a pan-Asian revolutionary consciousness and for transmitting white appropriations of Asian cultures. I suppose that means that when Hip Hop appropriates Bruce Lee's philosophy or Russell Simmons's positive thinking influenced by yoga and mindfulness, then it would be doing tertiary appropriation of Asian cultures, but that is beside the point; racial minorities may respond to the deleterious effects of white supremacy by healing with spirituality poisoned by whiteness.

Do these whiteness infections make spirituality impossible to use by Hip Hop without transmitting white hegemony? I respond "no." The dialectics of social death and social dissolution were not created by the oppressed—nor was the process of cultural appropriation. As diasporic survivors within these systems, African Americans and Asian Americans use the tools they had to do the most they could. We adapted to survive, and as a result we are left with complication, messiness, and infections. That does not mean that we are unaware of the scars, sores, and symptoms; these are part of the long road, the briars from the fields, the rot from the stagnant waters. Instead, we can remember this history, value the seeds that were kept safe, and eat the fruits of the rising plants. Flow and spirituality are examples of terms from white hegemony that wrap gifts from the diaspora. We can keep them.

There is a Price

No disrespect to the ancestors, but we put away paper for later, so we're stable. We don't have to cloak our preserved heritage in whiteness. If we keep up these old defensive appropriations of white culture, there is a price that we will continue to pay: we will invest more into whiteness without whiteness giving anything back to us. Instead of psychological flow, consider Afro-Latino religious states of consciousness or even the psychological term, trance. Instead of spirituality, seek the real deal from Asia. Let us rediscover these old paths. We can honor the price that our ancestors paid, while cultivating what they paid to keep.

Instead of flow, consider states of consciousness from Afro-Latino religions, which are already part of Hip Hop heritage. In Afro-Latino mediumship and shamanism, one communicates with the ancestors, becomes possessed or “ridden” by a spirit, and reads transcendent energies for healing, competition, and fortune-telling. The “flow” that one enters is the energy of those spirits, transformed and translated to the human body. Immersed in Hip Hop, people hear the ancestors, embody iconic sounds and movements of heroes and powerful technology, and feel electricity, love, and other transcendent energies surge through the body. Since the ancestors of Hip Hop struggled through slavery and its reiterations, it is these traditions that more appropriately define the Afro-diasporic consciousness of Hip Hop.

If we want to tap into modern science, consider the psychological category of trance that may be closer to Afro-Latino states of consciousness. In general, psychology defines trance by a mixture of four characteristics: focused attention, absorption, relaxation, a sense of automaticity and altered experiences of self-agency.⁴³ The classic pop culture image of trance is a doctor who hypnotizes a patient who then will hypnotically follow the doctor’s commands. This is not necessarily what occurs, but the popular image does articulate the four characteristics of trance.

To create these effects, neuroscientific studies point to trance’s ability to affect the anterior cingulate cortex, which plays important roles in attention, emotion, and impulse control. This partly explains trance’s ability to alter one’s control of the body, where patients may act out of character or believe a part of the body is paralyzed. Similarly, trance can lower or increase one’s perception of pain. With focus, absorption, and relaxation, those in trance can also be taken on a guided journey or to relive pleasant memories. Given Hip Hop’s body control, emotional intensity, and absorbing narratives, it seems likely that Hip Hop regularly engages trance rituals that partly originated in Afro-Latino religions.

Trance may also better explain the value of Hip Hop’s higher states of consciousness. Fully absorbing an audience in a story about survival places the audience in a context of oppression, thus creating deep empathy, safely reliving trauma for healing and clarity of perception, or escaping to alternate universes. Further, the mitigation of pain when in trance helps the audience physically cope with oppression. Sure, one may consider that the category of trance originated in western science to diminish the religions of “primitive” peoples, but at least there is a definitive line of the term to ancient traditions, instead of psychological flow that points to French painters. And even though trance has an association with the primitive, at least there are neuroscientific studies that confirm and define its mechanisms, so we can appropriately,

⁴³ David A. Oakley, “Hypnosis, Trance and Suggestion: Evidence from Neuroimaging,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hypnosis: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Amanda J. Barnier and Michael R. Nash, New York: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2012.

without outright speculation, connect aspects of trance to Hip Hop.

Instead of spirituality, just take the time to learn about religions before colonial conquest, or even go to the religious places of Asia, Africa, Meso-America, the indigenous peoples of the world, and so on, and learn from those religious specialists. This may take time and effort to find a religious master and to research one's own history, but you can do this. I am also going to say that it is not disrespectful to your ancestors to go looking for the descendants of your ancestors' relatives. This is called searching for truth, becoming your true self, and putting a nail in the coffin of the colonizer. If you want to call this "spirituality," then you are welcome to, but here is a better option: fully embrace your diasporic reality and identify with the real terms for your inherited traditions.

What Do You Mean, Safe? (Not Yet)

Yes, yes to real roots. No, no—it is not safe to be Asian in America, so we can't just drop our defenses in search of truth. Nah, nah, they are not going to let a better something better come. After September 11th, they murdered us for having darker skin, having beards, covering our heads, and just existing in the United States. Fast forward twenty years, and they murdered us for a disease that we did not create, haul over, or purposefully spread. And that's just the murder. Asian Americans across gender and sexual identities are raped, beaten, harassed, depicted as angry, depraved, frail, sickly, hyper- and hypo-sexual, not to mention treated as out-of-place, out-of-time, and out of their presented identities. And that's just the physical and representational violence. They are perennially trying to take away our citizenship, to deport us (to countries that we do not know), to strip us of our jobs, and then to accuse us of stealing college seats. No, it is not safe. It is not time to forget the history and the mechanisms of surviving. Instead, like Hip Hop, we should use these tools, even if our ancestors mixed their cultures with whiteness.

And, we do not have to do this by fiat; we can see the results of states of consciousness that match psychological flow and the experiences that they deemed spiritual. From the survey of Asian Americans in Hip Hop: "I just magically knew what to do next in the beat." "Spiritual learning experience to toughen me as an individual of society." "It was spiritual, it was soul, it was my life saver." Hip hop saves lives, and the combination of art and experience does this saving. Asian Americans are using the term "spirituality" to communicate the impact and validity of their Hip Hop experiences. We should not seek to strip them of this existential scaffold just because we desire a diasporic past that is pure.

And on that purity thing, the search for a precolonial past can be futile or just as neocolonial as white spirituality. In white hegemonic spirituality, there is a constant search for pure cultures, untouched by modernity, yet little critical analysis of this search or what is found. Namely, the search is a call to the days of colonial exploration,

a time when Europeans sought Edenic locations, encountered primitive peoples, and proved the value of science over their superstitions and so-called “magic.” This is also a sense of imperial history that flows in one direction where Western technology continually grows more powerful and quintessential.⁴⁴ In this way, ironically, white spirituality romantically explores the globe to find peoples untouched by colonialism but also hopes that these discovered cultures will perfectly align with modern Western science. If they find people touched by colonialism, they are viewed as corrupted; if they find people with beliefs that conflict with Western science, they are viewed as barbaric. If anything were beyond the capabilities of modern science (like the Egyptian pyramids), then their ingenuity is denied and called the result of massive human abuse and enslavement.

In short, romantic spiritualists don’t want to meet people; they want to find an instantiation of their own image of purity. If they go to Japan, for example, they want to meet katana-wielding samurai, or rice-planting peasants, or meditating Buddhists in mist-covered temples. Likewise, if I, a Japanese American, search for a pure precolonial past in Japan, am I not simply looking for my own image of purity – perhaps something ancient, pastoral, samurai-y, and misty-mystical? Isn’t this what white hegemonic spirituality does? The spiritual seeker me would not want to meet real Japanese people in all their complications, but to find the image of Japan that affirms my hopes for an ancient, buried, inner purity.

If I actually sought to understand Japanese people, I would find that they challenge my ways of thinking. Japanese people pushed their religions to survive modernity, a survival history that included persecution, state-sponsored indoctrination, and different forms of colonial impositions by Japan, the United States, and other nations. Yes, many or even the majority in Japan survived by becoming one with colonial Japanese ideologies; others, however, survived through resistance. To understand Japanese people, I would learn about these survival tactics under the oppression of multiple governments. I would not find a pretty picture of pure Japanese roots that make me feel better about myself, but a deep history of cultural survival, where cultures mixed and shifted over time.

In essence, I would be learning about how my distant relatives took sometimes blasphemous steps to survive and to pass on heritage but survive they did. To be honest with myself, that is very much the story of my Japanese American ancestors, though in a different context. So instead of searching out there in Japan for my ancient and pure precolonial past, I might as well look here to my own diasporic history and the transformation of Japanese American cultures under oppression. In fact, I started this work in my book, *Enfolding Silence: The Transformation of Japanese American Religion and*

⁴⁴ Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2003).

Art under Oppression (2016).⁴⁵ I discovered that Japanese cultures mixed with cultures in the United States because of my ancestors' sociopolitical negotiations and creative survival strategies. Undeniably, nationalistic ideologies from the United States and Japan became incorporated into Japanese American culture, but they were also done strategically, and with deep emotional legacies, communicated through silences.

Hip Hop is one art form that facilitates and strengthens the process of coming to a complex understanding of an Asian American self, precisely because Hip Hop does this work. Hip Hop has roots in African diasporic strategies of survival and thriving, and it is mixed with white hegemony in complex ways, and I should add is self-reflective about this mix. Asian Americans in Hip Hop sit squarely in this contradiction, going dumb, showing grillz, searching for our ancestors, and flying off this prison planet. They know that it takes a generation time to change a situation, and Asian Americans in Hip Hop are using tools at their disposal, like artistic flow, psychological flow, and spirituality, to make something from nothing as best as they can.

⁴⁵ Brett J. Esaki, *Enfolding Silence: The Transformation of Japanese American Religion and Art under Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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“A Different Type of Time”: Hip Hop, Fugitivity, and Fractured Temporality

Pedro Lebrón Ortiz

In this article, I seek to explore Hip Hop as an expression of marronage. I identify marronage as an existential mode of being which restitutes human temporality. Slavery and flight from slavery constituted two inextricable historical processes, therefore logics of marronage must also constitute contemporary human experience. I argue that Hip Hop offers a distinct way of affirming and expressing one’s existence through what has been called a “maroon consciousness.” In the same way that maroons created new worlds free from the tyranny of slavery, Hip Hop offers the Hip Hoppa a space free from colonial logics.

The present article is divided into four main parts plus a conclusion. The first part lays out the theme of the article in which I suggest that racialized and colonized subjects inhabit a fractured temporality but Hip Hop, understood as an expression of marronage, allows the Hip Hoppa to situate themselves within a sutured time through the development of first-order consciousness. The second part introduces the crux of the article: marronage and its potential relationship to Hip Hop. The following part reflects on the concept of marronage and challenges understandings of dehumanization as omnipresent within contexts of oppression. In other words, to understand marronage as a phenomenon, one must resist the urge to believe that the dehumanization of the racialized/colonized subject is internalized as universal and complete. Fundamental to an understanding of marronage as a phenomenon and an existential mode of *being* is the recognition of a humanity that survived genocide, kidnapping, the Middle Passage, and enslavement, however fragmented. It is this humanity that allows the racialized/colonized subject to recognize their condition as oppressed subject and provides the space for them to move towards liberation. The fourth section reflects on “Yak Thoughts” by Young M.A. through marronage as an analytic to make the general point of this article, which is a conception of Hip Hop as a site of fugitivity which produces, and is produced by, a maroon consciousness.

I. We’re Supposed to Be Finished

In her poem “Duality of Time,” Afro-Caribbean Colombian poet Dinah Orozco Herrera states that: “When the death bell rings, life responds in chorus.”¹ I read Orozco

¹ Dinah Orozco Herrera (Ashanti Dinah), “Duality of Time,” in *Las semillas del Muntú* (New York: Nueva York Poetry Press/Abisinia Editorial/Editorial Escarabajo, 2019), 38. All translations from Spanish are my own.

Herrera as describing the temporality which the wretched of the Earth inhabit, one where the guarantee of death harbors the possibility of life in as much as in death lies an irremediable pulsation for life. Put differently, the premature death imposed on racialized and colonized subjects through diverse and differential time-fracturing technologies produces a life-affirming drive.² Similarly, in the 1999 track “Nas is Like,” Nas opens with the lines “Freedom or jail, clips inserted, a baby’s being born / Same time a man is murdered, the beginning and end.”³ I take Nas as articulating the same duality of time that is the subject of Orozco Herrera’s poem; that life and death are “extracts of the same blood,”⁴ that death brings with it the possibility for life. In what follows, I suggest that Hip Hop as a culture was born of an existential way of *being* produced from conditions which impose a premature death on the racialized/colonized subject. In other words, Hip Hop culture is an expression of the subjectivity of those “who have learned to live in the womb of death,”⁵ within a fractured temporal schema. Hip Hop is an expression of a suffering that allows those who embody the former – the Hip Hoppa⁶ – to manifest themselves within “a different type of time” as Dave East put it.⁷ Hip Hop, in so far as it confronts the structural violence of racial capitalism and imperialism, provides a space to exit the fractured temporality imposed by Euro-American modernity, enabling a distinct temporality not bound to the strictures of Man.⁸ Hip Hop, then, could be understood as a site of fugitivity which produces, and is produced by, a distinct way of *being* in the world. Hip Hop could be understood as the

² For a reflection on how debt functions as a time-fracturing technology which manifests differentially across race/gender/class lines, see Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021). Puerto Rican militants and theorists Shariana Ferrer-Núñez and Zoán T. Dávila Roldán stated the following as it pertains to debt as a time-fracturing technology: “Debt marks bodies/peoples banishing them, impoverishing them, extracting from them and robbing them of the possibility of a future.” See Shariana Ferrer-Núñez and Zoán T. Dávila Roldán, “Nosotros contra la Deuda,” in *¿Quién Le Debe a Quién?*, ed. Silvia Federici, Verónica Gago, and Luci Cavallero (Buenos Aires: Fundación Rosa Luxemburgo/Tinta Limón Ediciones, 2021), 43. This theft of “the possibility of a future,” it seems to me, could be understood as the fracture of human temporality.

³ Nas, “Nas is Like,” track 13 from *I Am ...* (Columbia, 1999).

⁴ Orozco Herrera, 38.

⁵ Nathalie Etoke, *Melancholia Africana*, trans. Bill Hamlett (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), xix-xx.

⁶ I borrow this term from Travis Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?: From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 17–70.

⁷ Dave East, “Type of Time,” *Kairi Chanel* (Mass Appeal Records, 2016).

⁸ I am invoking Sylvia Wynter here, who referred to the “present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man” as the overrepresentation of the human. In other words, Man refers to a specific way of expressing one’s humanity. See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>.

cultural expression of a sovereign ontology which affirms a *world*⁹ that is distinct from the Euro-American *world* that is bound up in anti-Blackness and imperial impulses.

My conception of fugitivity does not merely imply “an ontology that has Blackness always *on the run* and as such always in flight *away* from the structures that govern a priori the anti-Black world,”¹⁰ as Kevin Eubanks put it in his discussion of Fred Moten’s “‘fugitive ontology’ of blackness.”¹¹ Rather, I conceptualize fugitivity as *marronage*, in which the singular and collective subject always already has the potentiality to affirm a *world* distinct from that of Euro-American modernity while engaging in a confrontation with Euro-American modernity in an effort to bring about its destruction, to bring about the end of the [Euro-American] *world*. In this sense, I agree with Eubanks’ conception of Hip Hop as a “counter-performance” which, following Jared Sexton, necessitates a “turn toward blackness” and “as such, [a turn] toward an unprecedented confrontation with the oppressive productions of anti-blackness.”¹² In this sense, I conceptualize *marronage* as the execution, necessarily, of a double movement. On the one hand, *marronage* should be conceived as the affirmation of an ontological sovereignty, a way of *being* in the world that stands on its own foundation. To spit it differently, *marronage* could be conceived as a particular genre of the human free from the strictures of the Human. As such, *marronage* should not be understood merely as a dialectical negation, dissolving itself within the dialectical movement of Euro-American ontology. Rather, *marronage* should be understood as the affirmation of a distinct *world*, this as an ontological totality, which structures one’s *being-in-the-world* and *being-with-others*. There is resonance here with Sexton’s conception of Black life and Black art, which according to Eubanks, is a “black life and black art that takes place neither *in* nor *for* an anti-black world but rather *in* and *for* a world in which *that* world does not live, a black world, and it is, consequently and following Sexton’s clearing, only *in* and *out* of this world that an authentic black freedom and optimism can position itself to emerge.”¹³ In other words, this primary affirmation of ontological sovereignty is a fundamental first movement in a liberatory struggle for racialized/colonized subjects.

⁹ The term “world” in italics is meant to denote an ontological totality that structures one’s experiences, hopes, dreams, interpretations of physical phenomena, and so forth. See Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, *Filosofía del cimarronaje* (Cabo Rojo: Editora Educación Emergente, 2020); Enrique Dussel, *14 tesis de ética: hacia la esencia del pensamiento crítico* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2016).

¹⁰ Kevin Eubanks, “After Blackness, Then Blackness: Afro-Pessimism, Black Classical Hip Hop as Counter-Performance,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 8.

¹¹ Eubanks, 5.

¹² Sexton quoted in Eubanks, 8; Eubanks, 8.

¹³ Eubanks, 9.

It seems to me, then, that one could interpret this movement away from an anti-Black *world* – which is the *world* capitalism and empire have created – as the movement, or rather, the affirmation of a *world* structured by “a different type of time,” one not governed by the metronomic explosions of government-issued pistols and authoritarian clock card machines. In other words, the Hip Hoppa comes to inhabit a sutured time, a human time, in as much as Hip Hop is understood as the affirmation of that “black world” that Sexton describes. Afro-Cuban MC Rxnde Akozta, on the track “No Taim Tu Lus,” raps, “No tengo tiempo pa’ perderlo, prefiero ir cultivando rimas luego recoger el fruto y defenderlo / Mantenerlo fresco como en los noventa, mijo / Si no respondo a los mensajes es que ando con mi hijo / Ahora soy dueño de mi tiempo, mi tiempo no es dueño de mí gracias al rap y al público aun sigo aquí.”¹⁴ These bars invoke a conception of Hip Hop as a mode of flight away from the time-fractured *world* of racial capitalism and Euro-American modernity. In addition, it seems to me that Rxnde Akozta is also saying that, because of Hip Hop, and the fans that support him, he’s still *here*, which is to say, one can take him to be affirming that his continued material existence is safeguarded from the violence of the Euro-American *world* thanks, at least in part, to Hip Hop.

On the other hand, marronage as fugitivity unfolds into a direct confrontation with the structures of Euro-American modernity. Historically, marronage, understood strictly as flight from the plantation, by and large, was insufficient to ward off the imperial drives of the Euro-American *world* and its political devices. To be sure, although certainly there are maroon communities throughout the Western hemisphere today that are direct descendants of maroon communities established during centuries past, many maroon communities entered into agreements with the colonial state to their detriment in the long term,¹⁵ had their territories encroached upon by nascent capitalist enterprises and/or colonial expansion,¹⁶ or became politically irrelevant after abolition. As such, marronage eventually passes a critical threshold and mutates into revolution.¹⁷ This resonates with Eubanks’ reflection on the works of Frank Wilderson and P. Khalil

¹⁴ Rxnde Akozta, Pielroja, and Portavoz, “No Taim Tu Lus,” *Qué Bolá Asere*, 2018. In English, these bars would go something like “I don’t have time to lose, I prefer to cultivate rhymes then pick the fruit and defend it / Keep it fresh like in the nineties, homie / If I don’t respond to your messages it’s ‘cause I’m with my son / Now I own my time, my time doesn’t own me, thanks to rap and the fans I’m still here.”

¹⁵ See for example Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 67.

¹⁶ See for example Marcus P. Nevius, *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763–1856* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 101.

¹⁷ Leslie F. Manigat, “The Relationship Between Marronage and Slave Revolts and Revolution in St. Domingue-Haiti,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 292 (1977): 421; Lebrón Ortiz, *Filosofía del Cimarronaje*, 158.

Saucier and Tryon P. Woods and tracks by The Coup, Notorious BIG, and Mobb Deep, when Eubanks states that: “In these examples, Hip Hop clearly recognizes and seeks to come to terms with the gratuitous structural violence of black life, and, as I would like to argue here, realizes precisely what Wilderson says is really wanted of black art and what Saucier and Woods say is wanted in Hip Hop studies, that is, a more ‘direct reflection’ on the structural basis of black captivity.”¹⁸ Examples of this are too numerous to lay out here, but to offer one, we could take Neek Bucks’ track “Pain,” when he raps that: “I knew mama could lose me to the game / This right before they tried to school me to the game / I managed to maintain my name through the war / The grave just explains all the pain we endured / Wasn’t tryna be no doctor or dentist / Was on the block with them hittas / *God was with us, we’re supposed to be finished.*”¹⁹ In this particular joint, Neek Bucks is speaking on the “structural basis of black captivity,” articulating a reflection on Black life in the context of the United States, also applicable to the Global South in general. What I would like to highlight from the bars quoted is Bucks’ recognition of the fractured time that constitutes the life, or lack thereof, of those racialized as non-white as well as the ways in which racialization overdetermines one’s *proyecto*,²⁰ or sense of futurity. “We’re supposed to be finished” posits a recognition of the necropolitics which governs the life and death of the wretched of the Earth. Similarly, Puerto Rican trap artist Darell, on the track “Un Barrio,” sings the following hook: “De un barrio ... / De ahí vengo yo / Donde se mata y venden drogas / De ahí vengo yo / Donde el trabajo es dentro un punto / De ahí vengo yo / Donde una madre llora un hijo / De ahí vengo yo ...”²¹ Darell is speaking on the limited economic possibilities for impoverished individuals from particular communities (“de un barrio, de ahí vengo yo”), which in turn drives them towards the illegalized, though constitutive, underside of the capitalist economy (“donde se mata y venden drogas [...]

¹⁸ Eubanks, 7–8.

¹⁹ Neek Bucks and Benny The Butcher, “Pain,” *Neighborhood Hov* (H4 Records, 2021); my emphasis.

²⁰ Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2017), 24. The term “proyecto” in Dussel’s work is used in the Heideggerian sense.

²¹ Darell, “Un Barrio,” *LVV: The Real Rondon* (Sony Music Latin, 2020). This hook could roughly be translated as “From a hood ... / That’s where I’m from / Where people kill and sell dope / That’s where I’m from / Where work is at the drug spot / That’s where I’m from / Where a mother mourns her son / That’s where I’m from.” There is another theme at play in this album as well which falls outside the scope of this article but could be a topic for a future reflection. As one listens to *LVV: The Real Rondon*, one notices that it contains an aesthetic and subject matter that would suggest that Darell was explicitly gesturing towards narco culture and narco corridos. For a phenomenal study of narco culture, see Carlos Alberto Sánchez, *A Sense of Brutality: Philosophy after Narco-Culture*, Kindle (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2020) and Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, trans. John Pluecker (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotexte, 2018).

donde el trabajo es dentro de un punto”). Far from merely a glorification of narco culture, Darell is speaking on the confluence of space/racialization/poverty and the death drive which constitutes it (“donde una madre llora un hijo”). Nevertheless, and as I suggested above with Rxnde Akozta’s bars, Hip Hop provides the (meta)physical space to affirm one’s own humanity while simultaneously confronting the “gratuitous structural violence” of the Euro-American *world*, thus producing a life-affirming impulse by way of a sutured time.

II. From Fractured Time to Fugitivity

When Martinican psychiatrist, revolutionary, and thinker Frantz Fanon stated, in reference to the Indo-Chinese revolution of 1946, that it was not because they “discovered a culture of their own that they revolted. Quite simply this was because it became impossible for them to breathe, in more than one sense of the word,”²² Fanon recognizes the way in which fractured time is ultimately bound up with a fundamental will to life; that “behind the face of one [death], lies the other [life].”²³ Michael E. Sawyer beautifully articulates it this way: “Because the Black Subject is Human the fracturing of a coherent relationship with Time through physical and metaphysical coercion awakens the desire of the aggrieved subject to return themselves to the coherence of Human-ness that is indicated by being properly situated in Time.”²⁴ The events of May 25, 2020, made Fanon’s insights particularly salient yet again, while also highlighting Orozco Herrera’s insight that “life and death are [...] extracts of the same blood.”²⁵

For approximately nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, the world watched through social media as the life was violently expelled from George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man from Minneapolis, MN (US), by a white police officer.²⁶ While some white folks may have watched in horror, racialized people watched the events as the manifestation of what seems to be the eternal return of anti-Black violence. Some three months prior, on February 23, 2020, twenty-five-year-old Ahmaud Arbery was chased down and killed by white vigilantes near Brunswick, Georgia (US).²⁷ One month later, on March 13, 2020, twenty-six-year-old Breonna Taylor was shot and killed while she slept by white police officers as they executed a questionable, if not illegal, search

²² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 201.

²³ Orozco Herrera, 38.

²⁴ Michael E. Sawyer, *An Africana Philosophy of Temporality: Homo Liminalis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), vii.

²⁵ Orozco Herrera, 38.

²⁶ Evan Hill et al., “How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

²⁷ “Ahmaud Arbery: What Do We Know about the Case?,” *BBC News*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52623151>.

warrant.²⁸ While the extrajudicial killings of Floyd, Arbery, and Taylor were the most salient in 2020, the evidence that these cases were certainly not the exception but the rule is too ample to recite here. In fact, according to *The Washington Post*, 1,218 Black men and boys and forty-seven Black women and girls were fatally shot by police officers between January 2015 and June 3, 2020.²⁹ These numbers do not include extrajudicial killings by white vigilantes, nor does it include extrajudicial killings by police officers through means other than their service pistols (therefore Arbery's and Floyd's killings are not included in this database). Numb, racialized subjects filled the streets in revolt.

But numb, nonetheless. What I am highlighting is the impact racial capitalism, white supremacy, and colonization have on one's mental and emotional well-being. The Euro-American *world* can bear down on one's soul. On the track "Trauma," Meek Mill highlights this point when he says "Ain't no PTSD's, them drugs keep it at ease / They shot that boy twenty times when they could'a told him just 'freeze' / Could'a put him in a cop car / But they let him just bleed."³⁰ Similarly, Young M.A. in her track "Yak Thoughts" states: "Paranoid, ever since I seen my brother dead / Observing n[...], yeah, that's why I'm always one ahead / Try and get these fucking evil thoughts out of my fucking head / It ain't normal when you gotta bring your gun to bed."³¹ While I will circle back to "Yak Thoughts" below, I want to remind the reader of the multiple tracks in Hip Hop which explore the mental and emotional effects of oppression. From Biggie's "Suicidal Thoughts" to DMX's "Ready to Meet Him," Hip Hop is riddled with a dialectic of tracks which reveal a suffering subjectivity, on the one hand, and on the other, a subjectivity who simultaneously confronts and flees from the *world* of Euro-American modernity.³²

The suffering of Black people was precisely Fanon's point when he referred to the lack of breath in a colonial context.³³ Revolt for the wretched of the Earth becomes a

²⁸ "Breonna Taylor: What Happened on the Night of Her Death?," *BBC News*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54210448>.

²⁹ "Fatal Force: Police Shootings Database," *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>. Accessed on June 3, 2020. Unfortunately, material limitations inhibit accessing the database to report current numbers. Nevertheless, the trend is clear.

³⁰ Meek Mill, "Trauma," *Championships* (Atlantic / Maybach Music, 2018).

³¹ Young M.A., "Yak Thoughts," *Off the Yak* (M.A. Music/3D, 2021).

³² Notorious B.I.G., "Suicidal Thoughts," track 17, *Ready to Die* (1994; remastered 2004, Bad Boy Records); and DMX, "Ready to Meet Him," track 6, *Dark Man X* (UMG Records, 2020).

³³ Certainly, the lived experience of the Black subject within the territorial bounds of what is referred to as the United States of America can be described as internal or domestic colonialism. See for example, Pablo González Casanova, *De la sociología del poder a la sociología de la explotación. Pensar América*

biological necessity; it is not teleological nor is it a product of culture or ideology.³⁴ This is why Fanon stated that he was “willing to feel the shudder of death, the irreversible extinction, but also the possibility of impossibility.”³⁵ In a nod to Heidegger, who understood death as antithetical to *Dasein*, to [white] *being*, in as much as when death *is*, *Dasein* is *not*, the opposite is true for Fanon. As a [Black] *being* constituted by a temporality that is “marked as death,”³⁶ it is better for the racialized/colonized to risk extinction if it leads to potentially limiting death to mere possibility, thus reinserting oneself into a true human temporal schema. Certainly, “when the death bell rings, life responds in chorus.”³⁷

When death is taken as a point of departure, life responds in chorus on multiple registers. Undoubtedly, contemporary human experience is constituted by the logics of slavery, the ultimate expression of racial capitalism.³⁸ One of the ways in which life historically responded in chorus under such conditions was through acts of flight from the plantation, known as marronage. While historiographical and anthropological studies have tended to distinguish between *petit* and *grand* marronage, i.e., between short-term and long-term flight, recent studies have taken a more philosophical approach.³⁹ If it is true that Hip Hop can be understood as a “counter-performance”

Latina en el siglo XXI (Mexico/Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores/CLACSO, 2015); Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 2.

³⁴ This point is further elaborated in Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, “Against the Mythological Machine, Towards Decolonial Revolt,” *Theory & Event* 24, no. 3 (2021): 787–815, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2021.0043>.

³⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 193.

³⁶ Sawyer, *An Africana Philosophy of Temporality*, 113.

³⁷ Orozco Herrera, 38.

³⁸ Germán Carrera Damas, “Huida y Enfrentamiento,” in *África En América Latina*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals (México: Siglo XXI Editores México, 2006), 35; Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³⁹ Examples of historical or anthropological texts include Nevius, *City of Refuge*; Lennox Honychurch, *In the Forests of Freedom: The Fighting Maroons of Dominica* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019); Ruma Chopra, *Almost Home: Maroons between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Daniel O. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archeology of Maroons, Indigenous American, and Enslaved Labourers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015); Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Benjamin Nistal-Moret, *Esclavos, prófugos y cimarrones: Puerto Rico, 1770–1870* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2004); Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); examples of texts that explore marronage philosophically include Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, *Filosofía del cimarronaje* (Cabo Rojo: Editora Educación Emergente, 2020); Edizon León Castro, “Acercamiento crítico al cimarronaje a partir de la teoría política, los estudios culturales, y la filosofía de la existencia” (PhD Diss., Ecuador, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2015); Edizon León Castro, *Filosofía de las existencias desde el cimarronaje* (Ediciones Abya Yala, 2021); and Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

through which a “black *Dasein*” is revealed,⁴⁰ I suggest that it could relatedly be understood as an expression of what I have termed *maroon logics*,⁴¹ which can be defined as the multidimensional manifestation of marronage constitutive of the contemporary human experience of those subjects whose humanity has been rejected within the “white power network.”⁴² Specifically, I would suggest that Hip Hop was born from a particular state of *being* manifested through what Afro-Ecuadorian thinker Édizon León Castro has called a *maroon consciousness*, which he defines as comprised by a two-step process through which the enslaved subject first develops a consciousness of being dehumanized, then a rejection of that dehumanization through a reconstruction of the *self*.⁴³ Put differently, maroon consciousness is a first-order consciousness produced through the decolonization of *being*. This tracks with Eubanks’ theorization of the revelation of a black *Dasein* which reveals itself in Hip Hop as a praxis that “in the turn toward itself blackness comes to *know* itself through the structural violence at the ground of its existence.”⁴⁴ In short, I would like to suggest that Hip Hop was birthed from a maroon consciousness, inserted within the revolutionary struggles of “Afro-America,”⁴⁵ for as Travis Harris has asserted, Hip Hop is indeed an African diasporic phenomenon.⁴⁶

For the remainder of this article, I briefly elaborate concepts related to contemporary philosophical theorizations of marronage and suggest that the subject that embodies Hip Hop culture could be understood as the embodiment of a subjectivity constituted by a maroon consciousness, thus suggesting the liberatory (decolonizing and abolitionist) effect Hip Hop could have. Particularly, I suggest that Hip Hop can serve as a medium through which the dehumanized subject can develop a first-order consciousness. This is to say, because the “colonized subject’s awareness of Being is therefore distilled from the oppressive material conditions of Western domination that shape the individual’s psyche and ontology,”⁴⁷ the

⁴⁰ Eubanks, “After Blackness, Then Blackness,” 20.

⁴¹ This term was first introduced in Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, “Maroon Logics as Flight from the Euromodern,” *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 9, no. 2 (2019), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5k54f73z>.

⁴² Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers* (London: Verso, 2019), 11.

⁴³ Édizon León Castro, “Acercamiento al cimarronaje” (PhD Diss, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2015), 184; León Castro subsequently published his dissertation as *Filosofía de las existencias desde el cimarronaje* (Quito: Primera, 2021). For this article, I will remain in dialogue with the 2015 dissertation.

⁴⁴ Eubanks, “After Blackness, Then Blackness,” 20.

⁴⁵ See Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2018).

⁴⁶ See Harris, “Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?”

⁴⁷ LaRose T. Parris, *Being Apart: Theoretical and Existential Resistance in Africana Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 109.

racialized/colonized subject can always ever see themselves through the eyes of the Other: the eyes of the white, imperial, capitalist man and woman. Hip Hop, then, provides a discursive and artistic space through which the subject can develop a sense of *self* distinct from that imposed by the racial capitalist order. In this way, Hip Hop can be understood as an anticolonial or “decolonial” aesthetic which “very directly challenges, not only each basic coordinates of modernity/coloniality, but its most visceral foundations and overall scope.”⁴⁸ It seems to me that Young M.A.’s joint cited above, “Yak Thoughts,” and its accompanying visuals, which I will return to in the closing moments of this article, is a salient example of Hip Hop as a space for the development of first-order consciousness, of a black *Dasein* knowing itself “through the structural violence at the ground of its existence.”⁴⁹ With this in mind, this article should not be understood as definitive nor exhaustive, but rather as an attempt to view Hip Hop through the framework of a philosophy of marronage to potentially provide alternative readings of Hip Hop as a phenomenon embedded within the broader legacy of marronage as resistance to colonialism, racial capitalism, and anti-Blackness.

III. The Hip Hoppa as Maroon

Hip Hop, I suggest, was born from a distinct existential way of *being* produced within a double movement. On the one hand, there is the assertion of an ontological sovereignty, a *being* for oneself. On the other, this *being* comes to know themselves with greater focus through a confrontation with the structural conditions which impose a premature death. As Mozzy rapped early in 2020, after the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and also commenting on the mass incarceration of racialized/colonized subjects, “Crackers killing unarmed Africans, we ain’t solve that / That shit be hard for me to turn the other cheek / I get to tweaking, thinking ‘bout my people dangling from a tree [...] I ain’t got no friends, just lawyers and paralegals / If the life of Blacks matter, then why we ain’t treated equal?”⁵⁰ It is this lived experience of the racialized/colonized subject which produced Hip Hop as an existential mode of *being*, then as a culture, and which gives Hip Hop as a musical genre its distinctly political aesthetic.

Furthermore, the parallels with marronage are salient. For example, James O’Neil Spady has commented that the insurrectionary talk of the Denmark Vesey

⁴⁸ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality,” *Caribbean Studies Association*, October 23, 2016, 27.

⁴⁹ Eubanks, “After Blackness, Then Blackness,” 20.

⁵⁰ Mozzy, “Unethical & Deceitful,” *Beyond Bulletproof* (Mozzy Records/EMPIRE, 2020).

conspiracy constitutes a form of “psychic marronage.”⁵¹ The decision to “create space within the city”⁵² to plan the botched 1822 revolt can be interpreted as analogous to the decision to create space within the city, which manifests as the Cypher, to express discontent with the socioeconomic conditions of 1970s New York or the decision to create space during the 1990s in Puerto Rico to protest the politics of *Mano Dura Contra el Crimen*,⁵³ while both instances presupposed a form of *being* that is distinct from the dehumanized *being* the hegemonic order sought to craft. Put differently, to “create space” first requires the emergence of a maroon consciousness.

It is this maroon consciousness which I argue is constitutive of Hip Hop. As Grand Mixer DXT put it,

Here comes this guy saying his name is Afrika Bambaataa, and for me I go to this party, and I’m hearing these beats and I’m seeing Zulu and Afrika and it automatically made sense. I grew up where I was taught and conditioned when I see Africa or hear African or anything like that, I’m running. I’ve been trained to disconnect from my heritage. Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation, that whole ideal rescued that consciousness for me.⁵⁴

It seems to me that what Grand Mixer DXT is articulating here is the fact that colonization and slavery aimed to erase ways of expressing one’s existence or humanity as African through physical and metaphysical coercion. In this sense, Grand Mixer DXT’s comment could be understood as the articulation of a maroon consciousness in as much as he is articulating the two-step process León Castro identifies as constitutive of a maroon consciousness. This is, a two-step process through which the dehumanized subject first develops a consciousness of *being* dehumanized or rather a consciousness of the rejection of one’s humanity, then a rejection of that rejection through a reconstruction of *being* through a primary affirmation of ancestral knowledge and ways of *being* tempered to a particular sociopolitical context. In other words, the dehumanized subject recreates their sense of *self*, a true first-order consciousness, through a rejection of their dehumanization or rejected humanity, never truly

⁵¹ In Richard Bodek and Joseph Kelly, eds., *Maroons and the Marooned: Runaways and Castaways in the Americas* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 31.

⁵² James O’Neil Spady, “Belonging and Alienation: Gullah Jack and Some Maroon Dimensions of the “Denmark Vesey Conspiracy,” in Bodek and Kelly, 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11sn6b2.6>.

⁵³ In short, *Mano Dura Contra el Crimen* was a policy instituted by former governor Pedro Rosselló, supposedly to fight crime. In effect, the policy resulted in an increase of police repression and brutality and a deepening of the criminalization of poverty, particularly within Afro-Puerto Rican communities. See for example Marisol LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Mayra Santos-Febres, *Sobre Piel y Papel*, 3rd ed. (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2011), 94–115.

⁵⁴ Darby Wheeler, “The Foundation,” *Hip Hop Evolution* (HBO Canada / Netflix, 2016).

internalized in the first place, for as Grand Mixer DXT stated “that consciousness” was “rescued,” not produced.

The Black experience in the United States of America, and the experience of the racialized in the Global South more broadly, it seems to me, is constituted by the problematic that the great W. E. B. Du Bois identified over a century ago. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois stated that “this American world” is a “world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”⁵⁵ “It is a peculiar sensation,” he continues, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”⁵⁶ In other words, the racialized/colonized subject never manages to develop a true sense of *being* in as much as we are always already “radically inserted”⁵⁷ within the world shaped to a large extent by racial capitalism, a *world* which seeks to dehumanize us. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere,⁵⁸ I do not think this dehumanization is ever totalizing. To put it differently, it may be that racialized/colonized subjects are not *dehumanized* but rather our humanity is rejected. To explain, the experience of colonialism and slavery collapsed the trans-ontological into the sub-ontological or colonial ontological difference,⁵⁹ which means that beyond *being* was collapsed into *sub-being* – what Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres has called the *coloniality of being*.⁶⁰ When the coloniality of being sediments in a subject’s sense of the *self*, the question “why go on?” manifests, “a question that illuminates the condition of the damned of the Earth.”⁶¹ The problem, it seems to me, is that if one assumes that the coloniality of being is ubiquitous, it would inhibit all possibility of resistance. “Why go on?” implies an existential pessimism which closes off the possibility of revolting against the current order. “Why go on?” implies a sterility which inhibits creative potentiality.

⁵⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Restless Classics (Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books, 2017), 9.

⁵⁶ Du Bois, 9.

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 174.

⁵⁸ Particularly in “Resisting (Meta) Physical Catastrophes through Acts of Marronage,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 23, no. 1 (2020): 35–57, <https://doi.org/10.5840/radphilrev2020219103>.

⁵⁹ By this, I do not mean to conflate the particularities of colonialism and slavery, a critique Selemawit D. Terrefe levels against Maria Lugones’ conceptualization of decolonial feminism in the former’s text “The Pornotrope of Decolonial Feminism,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 8, no. 1–2 (2020): 143.

⁶⁰ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Sobre la Colonialidad del ser: contribuciones al desarrollo de un concepto,” in *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global.*, ed. Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores / IESCO-UC / Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2007), 146.

⁶¹ Maldonado-Torres, 150.

It is the rejection of the ubiquity of the coloniality of being that provides the space through which an alternate consciousness can develop. As León Castro has stated, “The colonizer failed to completely empty that humanity, and that is what will generate political action, starting from the taking of consciousness.”⁶² This understanding is fundamental for explaining the multiple modes of resistance racialized/colonized subjects enact on a quotidian basis, on multiple registers, from artistic expressions of resistance to community organizing to revolt. This reality – that the coloniality of being is not ubiquitous – is particularly salient when one considers the historical experience of marronage.

León Castro theorizes marronage from a Fanonian framework to explore the ways in which marronage constitutes “political action from a denied humanity, fractured, mutilated, imploded.”⁶³ Indeed, the subject kidnapped from the African continent and enslaved in the so-called New World was, like First Nation peoples, subjected to apocalyptic levels of coercion and oppression, leading to the rejection of their humanity.⁶⁴ However, the historical experience of marronage and the existence today of communities descended from those maroon communities established between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries evidence that “the condition of non-being [...] is not ontological[;] their condition of humanity still persists in the memory of the enslaved, and this is their existential ontology.”⁶⁵ Or as Fanon put it, “Confronted with a world configured by the colonizer, the colonized subject is [...] made to feel inferior, but by no means convinced of his inferiority.”⁶⁶ It is the persistence of humanity as ontology of the enslaved that serves as the cornerstone for the development of a maroon consciousness, a process through which the maroon subject returns that “dispossessed humanity” to themselves through the reconstruction/reinvention of the *self*, using its fragmentation as a point of departure.⁶⁷ In other words, the process of developing a maroon consciousness is the process through which a racialized/colonized subject can develop a first-order consciousness by affirming their humanity, never truly stripped away, and by struggling against the forces that seek to dehumanize them. In the process,

⁶² León Castro, “Acercamiento al cimarronaje,” 152.

⁶³ León Castro, 227.

⁶⁴ On the notion of “apocalypse,” see Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018); Gerald Horne, *The Dawning of the Apocalypse: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, Settler Colonialism, and Capitalism in the Long Sixteenth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

⁶⁵ León Castro, “Acercamiento al cimarronaje,” 181.

⁶⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 16.

⁶⁷ León Castro, “Acercamiento al cimarronaje,” 157.

through the becoming of a maroon consciousness, the subject constitutes themselves within a sutured time, a human time, for it provides the space to struggle against the time-fracturing mechanisms at play.

There is a latent tension, then, in a maroon subjectivity between the affirmation of forms of ancestral knowledge and *being* albeit fragmented, and the ontological weight of coloniality that can settle in the consciousness of the enslaved and maroon subjectivity, and from which one must free oneself in the process of affirming an *Other world*. This tension between affirming an *Other world* and struggling against the *world* of Euro-American modernity and racial capitalism is what I have identified as two elements of a maroon subjectivity which can be referred to as analectical and sociogenic marronage.⁶⁸

I borrow the term “sociogenic marronage” from Jamaican political theorist Neil Roberts, who, drawing on the Fanonian concept of “sociogenesis,” coined the term to refer to decolonizing revolutions, particularly the Haitian Revolution, as an example of marronage as flight from the oppressive forces of modernity through permanent institutional change.⁶⁹ I believe that one can also read sociogenic marronage as an element of maroon subjectivity which drives the subject in that direction. The term “analectical” I borrow from philosopher Enrique Dussel, who in his *Philosophy of Liberation* states that “the analectical moment is the *affirmation* of exteriority; it is not only the denial of the denial of the system from the affirmation of the totality. [...] To affirm exteriority is to realize what is impossible for the system [...] what has not been foreseen by the totality.”⁷⁰ For example, marronage is not merely the denial of slavery (which constitutes a denial of the humanity of the enslaved). Rather, marronage constitutes a primary affirmation, that of one’s humanity, which “has not been foreseen by the totality” of Euro-American modernity. Therefore, I define analectical marronage as the affirmation of a distinct way of expressing one’s existence and humanity predicated on ancestral ways of *being*.

The two elements of a maroon subjectivity, the sociogenic and analectical components, manifest as basic aspects of the human experience for racialized/colonized subjects in multiple dimensions. It is this which I have denoted as “maroon logics,” which are responses to racial capitalism and anti-Blackness produced from a maroon consciousness. An example of maroon logics may be political actions such as radical

⁶⁸ Lebrón Ortiz, *Filosofía del cimarronaje*, 117–142.

⁶⁹ See Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 113–137.

⁷⁰ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 160.

autonomous organizing.⁷¹ Fundamental to an understanding of marronage as “life respond[ing] in chorus” when the enslaved subject is faced with premature death are the ways in which creativity manifests on multiple registers.

If the development of a maroon consciousness involves using those ancestral memories tempered to a new sociopolitical reality, irremediably there is a creativity that manifests itself in countless cultural, social, and political spaces. Numerous anthropologists have highlighted the creativity of maroon communities, strictly understood.⁷² As Nina de Friedman has stated, “in the history of Black creativity in America, maroon formations are fundamental.”⁷³ It is this creative legacy of the manifestation of the new when faced with death, oppression, and the annihilation of *Other worlds* that I refer to as *creative transcendent acts*, and which Hip Hop may be a paradigmatic example of.

Creativity refers to the formation of the new, to what did not exist before, to the innovative and valuable. Creativity itself, in the context of marronage, is an expression of freedom as the affirmation of an *Other world*, in as much as an enslaved subject, in the strict sense, whose life is dictated in its totality by the enslaver, and who has fully internalized the coloniality of being, does not think of themselves as being capable of creating absolutely anything. According to the Puerto Rican poet and revolutionary Clemente Soto Vélez, “one has consciousness of freedom, when one lives in body and soul the revolutionary life of *creative intelligence*.”⁷⁴ I read Soto Vélez as indicating that freedom, in its broadest sense, implies the unfolding of creativity. Vodoun, in its Haitian expression, for example, did not exist prior to the kidnapping and enslavement of African subjects. It was valuable in the sense that it allowed the enslaved to maintain ties with their ancestral ways of knowing and *being* even while enslaved, in addition to providing the normative ethical principles that Leslie Manigat saw as crucial for the Haitian Revolution in as much as it facilitated the production of a revolutionary consciousness,⁷⁵ and that Neil Roberts identified as *vèvè architectonics*, the “blueprint of freedom that an individual or collectivity imagines in an ideal world.”⁷⁶ León Castro puts it differently, stating that maroon communities, in the strict sense, “are not reduced

⁷¹ Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, “Reconstructing Locality through Marronage,” *APA Newsletter on Native American and Indigenous Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2020): 3–11.

⁷² A reading of Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) makes this point clear.

⁷³ Quoted in León Castro, “Acercamiento al cimarronaje,” 18.

⁷⁴ Clemente Soto Vélez, *Obra Poética* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1989), 77. Emphasis added.

⁷⁵ Manigat, “Marronage and Slave Revolts,” 421.

⁷⁶ Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 126.

to the simple fact of resistance, but rather also create, recreate, and open a wide range of communal strategies with a great capacity for creativity."⁷⁷

Transcendence refers to the surpassing of, or going beyond, the sociohistorical context, its effects, and the Manichaeian structure of the colonized world.⁷⁸ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon critiques the *Négritude* movement—a movement which sought to affirm Blackness through the exaltation of African history and culture—when he stated that “[i]n no way does my basic vocation have to be drawn from the past of peoples of color” and “I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction” due to what he saw as the reversal of the Manichaeian structure.⁷⁹ Fanon closes *The Wretched of the Earth* with a similar appeal, stating that “if we want humanity to take one step forward, if we want to take it to another level than the one where Europe has placed it, then we must innovate, we must be pioneers.”⁸⁰ In other words, one must seek to push beyond one’s current context into the realm of the unimaginable for the current order, but always rooted in an *Other world*, in a *being* otherwise.⁸¹

By *act*, I seek to invoke a praxis that stems from the racialized/colonized singular “I” or the collective “we.” It is not a directive or command imposed from above, but rather refers to that transpluriversal impetus from below that drives the racialized/colonized to action. Here it is worth remembering Fanon’s quote above which highlighted the fact that the Indo-Chinese did not revolt because they discovered a particular culture. Fanon then closes out *Black Skin* stating that the Antillean—the racialized/colonized subject in his text—“will undertake and carry out this struggle not as the result of a Marxist or idealistic analysis but because quite simply he cannot conceive his life otherwise than as a kind of combat against exploitation, poverty, and hunger.”⁸² In other words, the struggle will not be imposed by a vanguard academic or intellectual class, celebrities, the non-white entrepreneurial class, nor by a vanguard revolutionary subject, but rather it will be carried out by the oppressed, subaltern masses. Therefore, we can define a creative transcendent act as a praxis and process from below in the formation of consciousness and subjectivity that stems from an *Other world* and which seeks to surpass the current sociopolitical conditions of subjection through innovative institutions and ways of relating. These acts can occur in the political, cultural, epistemological, economic, ecological, and ontological dimensions.

⁷⁷ León Castro, “Acercamiento al cimarronaje,” 18.

⁷⁸ “The colonial world is a Manichaeian world.” Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 6.

⁷⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 201, 204.

⁸⁰ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 239.

⁸¹ Lebrón Ortiz, “Reconstructing Locality through Marronage,” 5.

⁸² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 199.

Characteristic of creative transcendent acts is that they manifest in moments of suffering, pain, and death. For example, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe states that “[t]he human figure is by definition plastic. The human subject par excellence is the one who is capable of becoming another, someone other than himself, a new person. It is the one who, constrained to loss, destruction, even annihilation, gives birth to a new identity out of the event.”⁸³ From the traumatic and apocalyptic experience of enslavement and deculturation, for instance, emerged a variety of social, political, and intersubjective practices, such as a new Creole and maroon identity.

“When the death bell rings,” creativity is a fundamental aspect through which a new way of *being* can emerge, and is affirmed, when “life responds in chorus.” This new way of *being*, this maroon *being* in the context of racial capitalism and anti-Blackness, manifests, it seems to me, as an anticolonial aesthesis which is foundational to Hip Hop. In this way, Hip Hop should be understood not only as a musical genre, but as a metaphysical, cultural, and discursive space produced by a maroon consciousness which constitutes a first-order consciousness. That is, it provides a space through which the racialized/colonized subject can forge a sense of *self* away from the white imperialist gaze of the dehumanizing hegemonic order, always already with the understanding that their humanity was never completely vacated by the oppressor.

Although outside the scope of this article, it may be worthwhile to linger a bit longer on the notion of the creation of space in its relation to Hip Hop.⁸⁴ To be sure, the creation of space—a constitutive element of marronage—is paradigmatic of Hip Hop. The B-Boy and B-Girl not only create space to manifest their *being* as Hip Hoppa in the form of the Cypher, as the MCs do, but also, at least at one point in time, by way of the cardboard dance floor. With a piece of cardboard, any physical space could become a Hip Hop space. Similarly, the DJ could convert any physical space into a Hip Hop space by way of their turntables, mixer, speakers, and a crate of records. Graffiti artists, in turn, would transform the decaying spaces of late capitalism into wonderful Hip Hop artistic spaces. In many cases, these Hip Hop spaces are produced outside the purview of mainstream artistic spaces, which are permeated by logics of anti-Blackness. In this sense, the Hip Hoppa could be conceived as a variation of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, for as Michael E. Sawyer states, “[t]he Invisible Man chooses to locate himself in a permanent *zone of non-being*, the cave where he retreats and begins to locate his truth of

⁸³ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 133.

⁸⁴ I owe this brief reflection to Travis Harris, who posed some thought-provoking questions and remarks while reading an earlier draft of this manuscript. This may be the topic of another reflection, which engages more readily with work being done in Black Geography studies, for example, to think through the relationship between Hip Hop and space as seen through marronage as an analytic.

self.”⁸⁵ It must be noted that the zone of nonbeing in Fanon is a reference to nonbeing in the Sartrean sense, which relates to the indeterminacy of freedom.⁸⁶ For Fanon, the Black subject does *not* have access to the zone of nonbeing because there is an “historical-racial schema”⁸⁷ that overdetermines them. Hence, to remove oneself from the purview of the white gaze allows one access to the zone of nonbeing.

In this sense, the Hip Hoppa – as MC, as B-Boy/Girl, as DJ, as graffiti artist – has the potentiality to create a space, in a material and metaphysical sense and in a way analogous to how the maroon creates the *palenque*, that allows them to plunge into the zone of non-being to craft, or affirm, a distinct *being*, and express their genre of humanity. In other words, the Hip Hoppa could be conceived as maroon, in a broad, philosophical sense, who crafted a first-order consciousness through an affirmation of the *self* and through a confrontation with the structural violence that conditions, in great measure, Afro-diasporic life. In this sense, the Hip Hoppa reinserts themselves within a human time.

IV. Reflections on Yak Thoughts

It seems to me that the lyrical arrangement and themes on “Yak Thoughts” by Young M.A., as well as its accompanying visuals, allows us to reflect on Hip Hop as a site that provides space for the emergence of a first-order consciousness; of a subject who inhabits a “different type of time.” The video starts off with Young M.A. walking through a doorway of what seems to be an abandoned building, potentially a school. Within the first few seconds of her walking through the doorway, one notices that her face is covered by her hair. In fact, for the first two verses, her hair is covering her face essentially the entire time. In addition, Young M.A. is walking within dark, shadowy hallways, which renders her face unintelligible, for the duration of those first two verses. This recalls Mexican philosopher Carlos Alberto Sánchez’s comment, in the context of a discussion of Judith Butler’s theory of mourning in relation to narco culture, when he states:

Who counts as human? The answer seems to be anyone who is capable of mourning, anyone who deserves mourning, anyone with a “face,” anyone who stands in embodied relationality with me; ultimately, to “count” as human is to have a face, to be in communion with others, and most importantly, to be embodied.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Sawyer, *An Africana Philosophy of Temporality*, 260.

⁸⁶ Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality,” 13.

⁸⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 91.

⁸⁸ Sánchez, *A Sense of Brutality*, 141.

In other words, what I would suggest is that, through her facelessness, Young M.A. is gesturing toward the recognition that as a young, Black, lesbian woman in the United States her humanity is rejected. As we saw with Fanon above, the coloniality of being produces a sense of despair. Hence, immediately she spits that she's "Smokin' and drinkin', drinkin' and smokin' / Hopin' for hope, but I'm hopeless / Too much distractions, I'm losin' my focus / Too much pain, could barely notice the beauty in things." As she continues walking through the gloomy hallways, the camera going in and out of focus and face still covered, she continues speaking on pain, trauma, mental health, and self-medication.⁸⁹ She says that she "ain't just drinkin' the Henny now / I'm abusin' it / I don't even get a buzz because I'm used to it / In other words, I feel numb, I'm immune to it." As Young M.A. spits that second verse, she is surrounded by dim red lights shining through doorways flanking her on both sides, which produce an eerie red aura which covers her body. This may be a gesture toward the "gratuitous structural violence of black life."

However, after the second verse and as the interlude is playing, which consists of her speaking over the beat, Young M.A. takes a corner as she walks through the building before light shines on her face as she flips her hair back. She raps, "No doorman, it's Young M.A. who open doors up," as she walks through the doorway which leads to what seems to be either a school cafeteria (those with stages) or a small theater. Young M.A. walks right in front of the stage, face completely lit and exposed. She raps, "I built my brand from the floor up / Came from the bottom, made some hundreds then I doubled my commas / Went from wearin' white tees to cashin' out on designers / But still rock white tees, still humble, I promise." The glorification of consumer culture notwithstanding, what we see as Young M.A. walks into the cafeteria or theater is the emergence of the Hip Hoppa, the transition from a subject who is submitted to the time-fracturing technologies of racial capitalism to the subject restituted within a human temporal schema. For, as she raps on the last two bars, "[I]ike this hunnid racks I'm holdin', I will never fold / Goin' back broke, that's a place I'll never go." If poverty functions as a time-fracturing mechanism, the assertion of not going back implies being situated in a coherent relationship with time, being situated within a sutured, human time.

The accompanying visuals to "Yak Thoughts," it seems to me, allows us to bear witness to Hip Hop as counter-performance, as the emergence of a Black *Dasein* that gets to know themselves through a confrontation with the structural violence of the Euro-American *world* by way of a reflection on the pain and trauma produced by it and

⁸⁹ See Dana Miranda, "Approaching Cadavers: A Philosophical Consideration of Suicide and Depression in the African Diaspora" (PhD diss, University of Connecticut-Storrs, 2019).

the expression of a full human subjectivity who manages to wrest free from its grasp. We bear witness to a maroon consciousness.

V. To Spit Godly

This paper did not seek to present a hermeneutical reflection on Hip Hop artistic productions, nor fully elaborate marronage as an existential phenomenon, but rather it has been an attempt to contribute to the ever-growing scholarship on Hip Hop by briefly viewing Hip Hop within recent philosophical frameworks of marronage. Crucial to an understanding of marronage as a phenomenon and an existential mode of *being* is the recognition of a humanity that survived genocide, kidnapping, the Middle Passage, and enslavement, albeit fragmented. It is this humanity that allows the racialized/colonized subject to recognize their condition as oppressed subjects and provides the space for them to move towards liberation. It is this double movement, these two elements in tension, that I see operating in what León Castro called a maroon consciousness. On the one hand, a maroon consciousness is constituted by the affirmation of ancestral ways of knowing and *being* that in Hip Hop is expressed through a return to the sonic landscapes of the Black tradition that had been censored or disavowed in a time where disco dominated the airwaves. In other words, there was an affirmation of an *Other world* during the incipient moments of Hip Hop as a cultural movement and way of *being*. On the other hand, a maroon consciousness is constituted by the recognition that it inhabits a world which inhibits a pure return to tradition, thus requiring the subject to push back against dehumanization and disavowal through a creative potentiality that manifests in multiple dimensions.

The point of departure for this maroon consciousness is the premature death the racialized and colonized are subjected to. But, as Dinah Orozco Herrera and Nas have pointed out, there is a duality of time by which death is irremediably bound to life. It is the guarantee of death within the world of racial capitalism and anti-Blackness that provides the impetus for the manifestation of a creative potentiality that characterizes marronage, and Afro-Diasporic artistic traditions broadly understood. I conceptualize this creative potentiality as acts of creative transcendence, by which I mean that when faced with annihilation, the racialized/colonized subject harnesses a creativity through which they are able to surpass their current socioeconomic and political condition through the production of innovative sociopolitical institutions, mutual aid initiatives, or, as in the case of Hip Hop, forms of cultural and musical expression. This is particularly salient in the transformation of the turntable from a passive listening device to a musical instrument. In reflecting on “Yak Thoughts” by Young M.A., both its lyrical content and accompanying visuals, this essay sought to think through marronage as an analytic to make the general point of this article, which is a conception of Hip Hop as a

site of fugitivity which, as a culture, produces, and is produced by, a maroon consciousness.

It is this maroon consciousness which I believe was operating during what is understood as the emergence of Hip Hop. In this sense, Hip Hop consisted of a particular way of *being*, *being* as maroon, before it coalesced into a cultural expression. This Hip Hop subjectivity, as maroon subjectivity, serves to create space within the world of anti-Blackness and racial capitalism for the racialized/colonized subject to develop a true first-order consciousness away from the dehumanizing gaze of the white Other. In his song “Otherside of America,” Meek Mill describes the lived experience of Black subjects living within the world of anti-Blackness and racial capitalism, but not before stating that “Mama let me sip the forty, I was just a shorty / Then I started spittin’ godly, then they said record me.”⁹⁰ Mill’s emphasis here on “spittin’ godly” and the effects it had on his sense of *being*, I would argue, serves to highlight that Hip Hop provides a space in which dehumanized subjects can affirm their humanity but also establish a sense of *self* that is distinct from “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” as Du Bois had highlighted.⁹¹ As such, Hip Hop can be interpreted in a broad sense as a *palenque*, or maroon town, ordered by a human temporal schema that allows its inhabitants to resist and thrive in spite of the conditions of oppression imposed by racial capitalism, with death ever looming. Certainly, “when the death bell rings, life responds in chorus.” And it is deafening.

⁹⁰ Meek Mill, *Otherside of America* (Atlantic/Maybach Music, 2020).

⁹¹ Du Bois, 9.

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For the Dead Homie: Black Male Rappers, Homicide Survivorship Bereavement, and the Rap Tribute of Nipsey Hussle

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Ermias “Nipsey Hussle” Asghedom’s murder represented a cultural cataclysmic event that startled the Hip Hop community and triggered previous memories of Black men’s homicidal deaths in the world. Nipsey Hussle’s death inspired touching rap tribute songs by Black male rappers, who sought to commemorate his cultural legacy and express their bereavement as homicide survivors. Rap tribute songs occupy a significant history, as rappers historically employed them to honor Hip Hop’s fallen soldiers, communicate their homicide survivorship bereavement processes, and speak about social perils in the Black community. Framed by critical race (CRT) and gender role conflict theoretical frameworks, this study investigated twenty-six rap tribute songs, which were authored by twenty-eight Black male rap artists in commemoration of Nipsey Hussle’s life and legacy. We sought to understand how the examined Black male rappers use their music to grieve and communicate their bereavement experiences as homicide survivors.

The findings yielded complex, yet contradictory themes related to existing scholarship on Black men’s homicide survivorship bereavement strategies, rap’s homicide-related lyrics, and the sociocultural functions of rap tribute songs as rhetorical expressions of Black men’s homosociality and as laments of deceased friends and rappers. The examined rap tribute songs advanced three dominant themes in relation to the Black male rappers’ articulations of their homicide survivorship bereavement of Nipsey Hussle, which were 1) Black men’s grief, homosociality, and complex vulnerability narratives, 2) fear and paranoia declarations, and 3) and resolution of internal conflict and grief with vengeance. This investigation was significant to Hip Hop studies, for it illustrated how twenty-eight Black male rap artists leveraged the rhetorical power of rap tribute songs to articulate their complex homicide survivor bereavement processes, advance vital counternarratives concerning Black men’s mental health experiences with repeated exposure to homicide deaths and violence in rap and urban communities, and offer rich criticisms of gun violence, internalized racism, poverty, and systemic oppression.

Introduction¹

In 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released staggering statistics, reporting that although Black men aged 15 to 34 represented only two percent of the United States population, they made up thirty-seven percent of homicidal deaths. The proclamation was clear: gun violence is a health crisis that profoundly affects Black men’s life expectancies. And the statistic was proven true yet again,² this time on a scale too tectonic to ignore, when gun violence visited the

¹ The authors humbly dedicate this academic work to the memories of Marshall A. Latimore and Torian Bailey. Although your transitions were not caused by homicide, you are both forever missed and in our hearts.

² Nada Hassanein, “Young Black Men and Teens are Killed by Guns 20 Times more than Their White Counterparts, CDC Data Shows,” *USA Today*, February 25, 2021,

neighborhood of beloved Eritrean-American rapper, Ermias “Nipsey Hussle” Asghedom on March 31, 2019.³ Nipsey Hussle was fatally shot outside his Marathon clothing store in South Los Angeles, California, rattling the Hip Hop community at its core and launching a months-long grieving period in mass media. A community activist, entrepreneur, rapper, and “Rollin’ 60s Crip” member, Nipsey Hussle’s murder drew comparisons to that of Tupac “2Pac” Shakur’s and ignited overwhelming grief among rappers, who publicly mourned his death as a catastrophic Hip Hop tragedy and yet another heartbreaking case of a culturally impactful Black male rapper gone too soon.⁴ In reaction, Nipsey Hussle’s legacy was honored with a memorial service at the Staples Center, stirring tributes at the 2019 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards and 2020 Grammys, and a tribute letter from former United States (US) President Barack Obama.⁵ His mantra, “The Marathon Continues,” also crystallized through touching rap tribute songs from Black male rappers such as Meek Mill, Roddy Ricch, and YG.⁶ In these songs, the rappers articulated their bereavement, reflected on Hussle’s legacy, and connected his murder to the homicide deaths of Black men in urban communities.

The epidemic of homicide among Black men remains an American tragedy, with homicide rates disproportionately impacting Black men more than their Hispanic and white peers.⁷ According to the National Criminal Justice Resource Service homicide report, Black men were victims of murder and non-negligent homicide 1.5 times more frequently than white men and 3.3 times more frequently than Hispanic or Latinx men.⁸ Of all Black victims, eighty-nine percent were killed by a Black perpetrator with whom they had some form of a prior relationship; a statistic that directly correlated with

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/02/23/young-black-men-teens-made-up-more-than-third-2019-gun-homicides/4559929001/>.

³ Throughout the study, all deceased rappers will be first introduced by their full and stage names, and then referenced by only their stage names. Contrarily, the examined Black male rappers will be exclusively referenced by their stage names.

⁴ Justin Tinsley, “Still Grieving Nipsey Hussle a Year Later: Coming to Terms with Hussle’s Death Hasn’t Gotten Any Easier,” *The Undefeated*, March 31, 2020, <https://theundefeated.com/features/still-grieving-nipsey-hussle-a-year-later/>.

⁵ Kendall Trammell, “Barack Obama Pays Tribute to Nipsey Hussle,” *CNN*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/11/entertainment/obama-letter-nipsey-hussle-trnd/index.html>.

⁶ August Brown, “Meek Mill and Roddy Ricch Release Nipsey Hussle Tribute Song, ‘Letter to Nipsey,’” *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-01-27/nipsey-hussle-meek-mill-roddy-ricch-letter>.

⁷ Charles H. Hennekens, Joanna Drowos, and Robert S. Levine, “Mortality from Homicide among Young Black Men: A New American Tragedy,” *American Journal of Medicine* 126, no. 4 (2013): 282–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2012.07.007>.

⁸ National Criminal Justice Resource Service, “2017 National Crime Victims’ Rights Week Resource Guide: Crime and Victimization Fact Sheets,” 2017, https://www.ncjrs.gov/ovc_archives/ncvrw/2017/images/en_artwork/Fact_Sheets/2017NCVRW_Homicide_508.pdf.

Nipsey Hussle's death. In the case of Nipsey Hussle, he was murdered due to an alleged conflict with accused killer Eric Holder, which resulted in gun violence. Nipsey Hussle's murder showcased the troubling state of affairs in Hip Hop and urban communities in which the smallest infractions or disputes can accelerate into violence, and guns are used as problematic, restrictive means in Black men's gender conflict resolution (GRC) and as a way to end rap beefs.⁹

Because of such sociocultural factors, Black men are also placed at higher risk for experiencing the tragic loss of a peer and thus becoming homicide survivors.¹⁰ Homicide survivors are the friends, family, and community members who face the task of carrying the legacy of a slain loved one.¹¹ Lula M. Redmond has estimated that each homicide victim typically leaves behind at least seven to ten family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbors who must survive their violent death.¹² These typical homicide survivor numbers were magnified due to Nipsey Hussle's community impact, commercial success, and respect within the rap industry. Grieving the homicide of a loved one is a multidimensional, complex process that extends beyond just the event or their relationship with the victim to community/neighborhood, cultural, historical, and social factors as well.¹³ Black American survivors of homicide victims often create and rely on spiritual coping and meaning-making, maintaining a connection to the deceased, collective coping and caring for others, and the concealment of emotions to manage grief brought about by having experienced the murder of a loved one.¹⁴ Additionally, narratives are central to the grief process, as narrators include a great deal about the person who died, their life challenges and experiences, and how much the grieving person has lost due to the homicide victim's death.¹⁵

⁹ James M. O'Neil, Glenn E. Good, and Sarah Holmes, "Fifteen Years of Theory and Research on Men's Gender Role Conflict: New Paradigms for Empirical Research," in *A New Psychology of Men*, edited by Ronald F. Levant and William S. Pollack (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 164–206; Sunni Ali, *Lessons Learned: Critical Conversations in Hip Hop and Social Justice* (Chicago Heights: African American Images, 2020).

¹⁰ Tanya L. Sharpe and Javier Boyas, "We Fall Down: The African American Experience of Coping with the Homicide of a Loved One," *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 6 (2011): 855–73.

¹¹ Sharpe and Boyas, "We Fall Down."

¹² Lula M. Redmond, *Surviving: When Someone You Know Was Murdered* (Clearwater, FL: Psychological Consultations and Educations Services, 1989).

¹³ Tanya L. Sharpe, "Understanding the Sociocultural Context of Coping for African American Family Members of Homicide Victims: A Conceptual Model," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 16, no. 1 (2015): 48–59.

¹⁴ Sharpe and Boyas, "We Fall Down."

¹⁵ Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationship* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 2000).

There is a dearth of literature on the unique experiences of Black male homicide survivors in Hip Hop, and this study redresses that lamentable scholarly shortcoming. Americans are widely familiar with the trope of the daughter, mother, and/or sister who survives and mourns the death of Black male homicide victims, but much less so the image of the son, father, brother, or in this case, the Black male rap peer. Thus, this research's focus on Black male rapper homicide survivors and their bereavement experiences contributes to a growing body of literature on Black men's and Hip Hop studies. As noted by Tommy Curry, Black men struggle with death and homicide in different ways as victims structurally disadvantaged by their race, sex, and societal oppression and their "genred" existence deserves further study and theorization.¹⁶ For example, Black male rappers who are homicide survivors identify with their deceased Black male homicide victims due to lived experiences and music industry politics, leading to grieving experiences and coping mechanisms that are different from those of Black female homicide survivors. Therefore, the authors aimed to increase the amount of rigorous and humanizing scholarship on Black men, while advancing counter-narratives for Black male homicide survivors in Hip Hop studies in a manner that does not imply a zero-sum with research on Black women.

Rap music remains a pivotal influence in the socialization process of Black men and a therapeutic, expressive tool to engage in grief work (following the murder of a loved one), to support mental health treatment among Black American men, and to memorialize a rapper's death through rap tribute songs.¹⁷ For conceptualization purposes, the authors defined a rap tribute song as "a musical composition authored by a rap artist(s) to commemorate a rapper, rap figure, and/or friend's (famous or non-famous) death and to eulogize their Hip Hop legacy using rap lyrics."

Rap tribute songs occupy a significant history, as rappers historically employed them to honor Hip Hop's fallen soldiers, communicate their homicide survivorship bereavement processes, and speak out about social perils in the Black community.¹⁸ Moreover, rap tribute songs represent powerful mechanisms for Black male rappers to share their grief-stricken experiences as homicide survivors. Acknowledging this history and the impact of Nipsey Hussle's murder on the rap community, this study conducted a critical discourse analysis of twenty-six rap tribute songs, authored by twenty-eight Black male rappers and dedicated to Nipsey Hussle, between March 31,

¹⁶ Tommy Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Don Elligan, "Rap Therapy: A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Psychotherapy with Young African American Men," *Journal of African American Men* 5, no. 3 (2000): 27-36.

¹⁸ XXL, "The Current Status of Every Murdered Rapper's Case," November 17, 2020, <https://www.xxlmag.com/current-status-murdered-rappers-cases/>.

2019, and September 30, 2020. Specifically, it considered the following research question: How did Black male rappers use the examined Nipsey Hussle rap tribute songs to communicate their bereavement experiences as homicide survivors?¹⁹ Ultimately, this study examined the rap tribute song as a form of social critique and a rhetorical expression of Black male rappers' grief processes as homicide survivors.

The Life and Legacy of Nipsey Hussle

Born August 15, 1985, to an Eritrean father and Black mother, Nipsey Hussle was an activist, community organizer, entrepreneur, Grammy award-winning rapper, and philanthropist, who famously took his stage name from the famed comedian and actor Nipsey Russell.²⁰ An underground legend in Los Angeles, California, Nipsey Hussle amassed critical acclaim for his thirteen mixtapes (released between 2005 and 2017) before the release of his Grammy-nominated, first studio album, *Victory Lap*, in 2018. A business-oriented rapper, Nipsey Hussle was renowned for his entrepreneurial acumen and once sold mixtapes out of a car trunk in parking lots at the corner of Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue, where he later established a store for his clothing line, The Marathon.²¹ Despite being relatively unknown at the time, he famously priced his 2013 *Crenshaw* mixtape at \$100, at a time when most mixtapes sold for about five dollars, and made headlines when Hip Hop icon Jay-Z spent ten thousand dollars to purchase one hundred copies from Nipsey Hussle.²² Unfortunately, the parking lot where Nipsey Hussle built his rap legacy would become the very place where he was killed on March 31, 2019, by alleged murderer Eric Holder, who shot Nipsey Hussle ten times following a disagreement. According to Angel Jennings, Holder was a familiar face in South LA, whose social media pictures showed him wearing gang paraphernalia (i.e., "Crips-blue bandannas").²³ To date, there are still a number of questions surrounding Holder's allies and his actions leading up to Nipsey Hussle's violent murder; a factor that prompted assassination allegations considering the broader political context of the rapper's life

¹⁹ This is research question RQ1.

²⁰ Kendall Trammell, "That 'Nipsey Russell' Flub Was a Reminder of How Nipsey Hussle Got His Name," *CNN*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/11/entertainment/nipsey-russell-nipsey-hussle-trnd/index.html>.

²¹ Soren Baker, *The History of Gangster Rap: From Schoolly D to Kendrick Lamar* (New York: Abrams Image, 2018).

²² Rob Markman, "Nipsey Hussle Breaks Down His \$10,000 Album Transaction with Jay-Z: Watch Now," *MTV News*, October 9, 2013, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1715358/nipsey-hussle-jay-z-crenshaw/>.

²³ Angel Jennings, "Nipsey Hussle's Brother Found Him Dying. These Are His Final Moments," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-nipsey-hussle-final-moments-20190404-story.html>.

and work and additional investigations into the Los Angeles police department's discriminatory targeting of Nipsey Hussle's street corner and store before his death.²⁴

Michael Ralph noted two distinguishing characteristics of Nipsey Hussle's cultural impact on the Los Angeles and Hip Hop communities: "His emphasis on uplift (financial planning, political acumen, and motivation, nestled in a sustainable vision for individual and community empowerment)" and "his ability to move across the political and economic spectrum and to navigate regional distinctions and armed conflicts with extraordinary grace."²⁵ In his media interviews and music, Nipsey Hussle encouraged Black people to buy assets that appreciated rather than flashy commodities, emphasized the importance of financial strategy and the economic promise of cryptocurrency, and urged musicians to "create different methods to monetize the connection" with fans in a 2013 *Forbes* interview.²⁶ Nipsey Hussle also moved seamlessly between varying communities, as he owned property in territories dominated by rival gangs with competing economic and political interests; united community associations and gangs; employed formerly incarcerated people at The Marathon clothing store; created "Destination Crenshaw" to rebuild school playgrounds and gymnasiums and bring beautification to his Crenshaw neighborhood; and even met with the president of Eritrea in 2018.²⁷ At the time of his death, Nipsey Hussle had a meeting scheduled with law enforcement officials on combating gang violence in an attempt to spark a truce between warring gangs.²⁸

More than a talented artist and philanthropist, Nipsey Hussle represented a hero and political icon with an incomparable capacity to mobilize people through his strategic thinking and vision of economic organization. He frequently referenced his cultural teachings of endurance, integrity, and self-sufficiency, which "obligated [him] to carry that same integrity" in the music industry and his brand, The Marathon.²⁹ Nipsey Hussle remains revered in Los Angeles, Hip Hop, and around the world. After

²⁴ Ali, *Lessons Learned*; Sam Levin, "Revealed: How LAPD Targeted Nipsey Hussle's Store Corner and Store," *The Guardian*, November 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/07/revealed-nipsey-hussle-lapd-the-marathon-clothing>.

²⁵ Michael Ralph, "Higher: Reflections on the Life and Legacy of Nipsey Hussle (Ermias Asghedom)," *Transforming Anthropology* 27, no. 2 (2019): 81-84.

²⁶ Natalie Robehmed, "Rapper Nipsey Hussle and the \$100 Mixtape," *Forbes*, November 6, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2013/11/06/rapper-nipsey-hussle-and-the-100-mixtape/#330463fa4bc0>.

²⁷ Ralph, "Higher: Reflections on the Life and Legacy of Nipsey Hussle."

²⁸ Janelle Griffith, "Nipsey Hussle Planned a Meeting with L.A. Police on Gang Violence to Go on in His Honor," *NBC News*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/nipsey-hussle-s-planned-meeting-l-police-gang-violence-go-n989676>.

²⁹ Eri-TV, "Eri-TV: Interview with Nipsey Hussle, Eritrean-American Recording Artist and Entrepreneur," *YouTube*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSjKr7nxiiQ>.

his passing, Nipsey Hussle's music experienced a surge of 2,776 percent in sales and streaming and posthumously earned the artist two Grammy awards for his rap collaborations, "Racks in the Middle" and "Higher."³⁰ Additionally, his death inspired truces between warring gangs and rappers, ignited cultural discussions of gang violence and gun reform, and was revered by commemorative rap tribute songs released by his rap peers. These songs articulated the critical perspectives of Black male rappers as homicide survivors, shedding light on how they coped with the grief, loss, and trauma of Nipsey Hussle's murder and, thus, served as the focus of this analysis.

Critical Race Theory, The Rapper, and The Rap Tribute Song

Critical Race Theory (CRT) explicates the embeddedness of racism in every area of American society, making visible the ways in which race-neutral institutions, systems, policies, and practices maintain a "regime of White supremacy."³¹ In doing so, CRT emphasizes the absolute centrality of history and context in any attempt to theorize the relationship between race, legal, and social discourses.³² CRT amplifies the power of the voice-of-color in articulating the expertise of people of color, whose direct experiences as the recipients of racism position them as expert voices in the discourse of racism that can aid in transforming cultures of oppression.³³ Its tenet, "experiential knowledge (and counter storytelling)," emphasizes the power of Black narratives to make visible the subjugated realities of what it is like to be Black in America and to counter mythical and stereotypical depictions (e.g., Black criminality and violence) of Black life.³⁴ Under this prism, Black counternarratives offer a "cure for silencing," which abolish historic tendencies for marginalized groups to internalize blame for experiences of racial trauma, to tell no one about personal encounters with racial trauma, or to minimize the impact of individual exposures to racial trauma.³⁵ When connected to the current study, these counternarratives represent critical, rhetorical tools for Black men's experiences of homicide survivorship and racial trauma to be named, more clearly recognized, and addressed. Moreover, this context is critical for understanding the overrepresentation of Black American homicide victims and the multilayered experiences of their survivors.

Rap tribute songs are musical compositions authored by rappers to commemorate a rapper, rap figure, and/or a (famous or non-famous) friend who has

³⁰ Robert Blair, "Juice Wrld, Pop Smoke, & Hip Hop's Growing Posthumous Hypocrisy," *Highsnobiety*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/juice-wrld-pop-smoke-posthumous-hip-hop-hypocrisy/>.

³¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil T. Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995), xiii.

³² Crenshaw et al., *Critical Race Theory*.

³³ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

³⁴ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 48.

³⁵ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 49–51.

passed and to eulogize their Hip Hop legacy. From DJ Pete Rock and CL Smooth's "They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y.)" (1992), Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's rap tribute song to Wallace "Wally" Laird III and Eric "Eazy-E" Wright, "Tha Crossroads" (1996), and the multiple songs written in memory of 2Pac to the Grammy award-winning rap tribute to Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, and Nipsey Hussle ("I'll Be Missing You" [1997] and "Higher" [2020]), rappers used rap tribute songs to navigate their grieving processes and to pay respect to fallen friends.³⁶ Most notably, "I'll Be Missing You," a 1997 rap tribute song released by Diddy, Faith Evans, and the group 112, made history as the first rap song to debut at number one on the *Billboard Hot 100*.³⁷ In 2019, Diddy recounted the legacy of the rap tribute song and its role in healing the rap community after The Notorious B.I.G.'s murder on the Netflix series *Hip Hop Evolution*. He stated, "Hip Hop wasn't really vulnerable.... That song ["I'll Be Missing You"] humanized us. We can be at our lowest point and still feel hope."³⁸

As rhetorical expressions, rap tribute songs also afforded Black men inimitable opportunities to express their humanity toward other men whom they considered friends in progressive ways that were indicative of rap's homosociality between Black men. In his research on homosociality and Black masculinity in gangster rap music, Matthew Oware notes three themes of homosociality that bear relevance to the rap tribute song as a form of commemoration: 1) friends are family; 2) success by association (namely monetary success), and, most relevant to this study; 3) lament for friends lost due to incarceration or death.³⁹ In detailing the third theme, Oware describes how rappers craft rap tribute songs to courageously express their vulnerability due to the passing of beloved companions (both rapper and non-rappers), while attempting to comprehend the damages caused by their lives and those of other adherents of gang dogma and urban communities.

Such discourse positioned rap tribute songs as counternarratives that reimagined conventional understandings of rap artists, Black masculinity, and documented accounts of Black men's homicide survivorship experiences. Furthermore, they articulated Black male rappers' coping strategies and reflected their cultural beliefs,

³⁶ XXL, "The Current Status of Every Murdered Rapper's Case."

³⁷ Gary Trust, "This Week in *Billboard* Chart History: Puff Daddy and Faith Evans' Tribute to The Notorious B.I.G. Hit No. 1," *Billboard*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/7825802/this-week-in-billboard-chart-history-in-1997-puff-daddy-faith>.

³⁸ *Hip Hop Evolution*, season 3, episode 2, "Life after Death," produced by Darby Wheeler, Rodrigo Bascuñán, Russell Peters, Scot McFadyen, Sam Dunn, and Nelson George, September 6, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80141782>.

³⁹ Matthew Oware, "Brotherly Love: Homosociality and Black Masculinity in Gangsta Rap Music," *Journal of African American Studies* 15 (2011): 22-39.

practices, and societal experiences as Black Americans and survivors of homicide victims. Within this context, CRT acted as an appropriate foundation for this research study, for it analyzed the examined rap tribute songs to uncover the multifaceted range of emotions and experiences shared by Black male rappers in reaction to the homicide death of Nipsey Hussle.

Black Male Rappers, Gender Role Conflict Resolution, and the Rhetoric of Homicide in Rap

The history of rap music and the prevalence of Black male homicide deaths of rappers are too vast to discuss comprehensively in this work. For example, in the thirty-three years between the shooting deaths of rappers Scott “Scott La Rock” Sterling of Boogie Down Productions in the Bronx in 1987 and Bashar “Pop Smoke” Jackson in 2020, *XXL Magazine* documented over seventy murdered rappers, equating to nearly two rappers per year and over forty unsolved legal cases.⁴⁰ However, it is necessary to provide a cultural analysis of the rhetoric of homicide in rap music and how Black male rappers are positioned and impacted. Depictions of homicide (fictional and nonfictional) are common in American cultural discourses and media, yet rap music commonly appropriates homicide as a theme in its songs, rapper personas, and rhetorical themes. In rap, homicide is more visible due to its graphic content, presumed “shock value,” racial connotations, and urban culture ties, but it is still present in nearly every musical genre.⁴¹

Particularly in mainstream rap, lyrics about homicide are commoditized by music executives and record labels, removed from their origins of storytelling and symbolic meaning, and strategically curated to develop on- and offline rapper personas and generate profit.⁴² Consequently, the coopting of homicide in rap has historically attracted, and continues to attract increased audiences due to its egregious violence, virility, misogyny, and graphic nature and, thus, remains a major theme in popular rap songs. Gwen Hunnicutt and Kristy Humble Andrews noted three major themes in homicide-related rap lyrical content: 1) the normalizing of killing; 2) respect maintenance; and 3) conflict with power structure, vengeance, and masculine confrontation.⁴³ The threat of homicide was often articulated as a tool in respect maintenance and revenge-seeking against power structures and individuals and also to

⁴⁰ *XXL*, “The Current Status of Every Murdered Rapper’s Case.”

⁴¹ Edward G. Armstrong, “The Rhetoric of Violence in Rap and Country Music,” *Sociological Inquiry*, 63 (1993): 64–83.

⁴³ Gwen Hunnicutt and Kristy Humble Andrews, “Tragic Narratives in Popular Culture: Depictions of Homicide in Rap Music,” *Sociological Forum* 24, no. 3 (2009): 611–30.

maintain hypermasculine superiority in conflicts with other men; it functioned as a flawed form of gender role conflict resolution.

Gender role conflict theory is used to describe unconscious phenomena produced when perceptions of masculine gender roles deviate from, restrict, devalue, or violate norms and to explain “how sexism and gender role socialization interact to produce oppression.”⁴⁴ Its theorists maintain that these learned gender roles are individualized, generational, and contextualized according to age, masculinity, and ethnicity, among other factors, and thus, reify specific masculinities in Hip Hop culture.⁴⁵ Themes of contest and confrontation are undoubtedly part of rap’s authenticity markers, masculine expressions, and street codes, yet this gendered form of control, domination, and conflict resolution represents a distinct type of hypermasculinity for its Black male artists.⁴⁶ This gendered pattern also suggests that the importance of respect through violence continues to take on symbolic importance for rap artists, which presents a dangerous paradox for Black male rappers, with material consequences.

Indisputably, the gendered plight of Black men and Black male rappers is distinct because in many regards “they have not been factored into the social, cultural, and economic future of the society.”⁴⁷ Rap’s homicidal rhetorical practices are emblematic of a sadder state of affairs that exists in many American communities, where some individuals are programmed in geo-spaces to see no other way to resolve their conflicts than with a gun.⁴⁸ Also, the settling of personal vendettas with a gun remains a promoted narrative in American military discussions and mass media, as core principles of revenge play out widely in its criminal justice and political systems.⁴⁹ Thus, the positioning of Black men in rap within a homicidal milieu illustrates how racial homogenization, poverty, economic marginalization, and public policy can actively contribute to Black rage and nihilism and present violence as a recognizable outlet for Black men’s gender role conflict resolution.

⁴⁴ O’Neil, Good, and Holmes, “Fifteen Years of Theory,” 166.

⁴⁵ James M. O’Neil, “Summarizing 25 Years of Research on Men’s Gender Role Conflict Using the Gender Role Conflict Scale: New Research Paradigms and Clinical Implications,” *Counseling Psychologist* 36 (2008): 358–445.

⁴⁶ Geneva Smitherman, “The Chain Remains the Same: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation,” *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1997): 3–25.

⁴⁷ Joy DeGruy Leary, “A Dissertation on African American Male Youth Violence: ‘Trying to Kill the Part of You That Isn’t Loved’” (PhD diss., Portland State University, 2001), 36.

⁴⁸ Ali, *Lessons Learned*.

⁴⁹ Richard V. Reeves and Sarah E. Holmes, “Guns and Race: The Different Worlds of Black and White Americans,” Bookings Institute-Social Mobility Memos, December 15, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/12/15/guns-and-race-the-different-worlds-of-black-and-white-americans/>.

Black American Men's Homicide Survivorship

Survival is an endemic aspect of Black men's lives, as the visible loss of Black men in the context of homicide has increased domestic and international awareness of the impact of race in the United States.⁵⁰ There is a concentrated disadvantage in urban and impoverished communities that places Black men at disproportionate risk for exposure to violence and trauma.⁵¹ Homicide represents a health disparity that positions Black men as vulnerable to premature violent death and traumatic loss, particularly when peers are murdered.⁵² As a result, Black male homicide survivors and their social networks are burdened with disproportionate experiences of loss, grief, and other mental and physical health concerns.⁵³

Homicide is the leading cause of death for Black youth aged ten to twenty-four in the United States, and among this population, the homicide rate is 51.5 deaths per 100,000.⁵⁴ This rate exceeds the combined homicide rates of Hispanic/Latinx men (13.5 per 100,000) and white men (2.9 per 100,000) of the same age range and amplify as young Black men enter adulthood.⁵⁵ Homicide remains the leading cause of death for Black men aged twenty-five to thirty-four, as more young Black men are killed annually than young men of any other racial-ethnic group in the United States.⁵⁶ With a stagnant statistic, and an abundance of historical precedence for Black male homicide, the conversation on homicide survivorship is not simply about preventing death in the Black community, but about how those left behind choose to recover and resume their lives.

⁵⁰ Jocelyn R. Smith-Lee and Michael A. Robinson, "'That's My Number One Fear in Life: It's the Police': Examining Young Black Men's Exposures to Trauma and Loss Resulting from Police Violence and Police Killings," *Journal of Black Psychology* 45, no. 3 (2019): 143-84.

⁵¹ Jocelyn R. Smith-Lee and Desmond Upton Patton, "Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Context: Examining Trauma Responses to Violent Exposure and Homicide Death Among Black Males in Urban Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 86, no. 2 (2016): 212-23.

⁵² Jocelyn R. Smith, "Peer Homicide and Traumatic Loss: A Qualitative Examination of Homicide Survivorship among Low-Income, Young, Black Men" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2013).

⁵³ Osagie K. Obasogie and Zachary Newman, "Police Violence, Use of Force Policies, and Public Health," *American Journal of Law & Medicine* 43 (2017): 279-95.

⁵⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC), "Youth Violence: Facts at a Glance," 2012, http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv_datasheet_2012-a.pdf.

⁵⁵ CDC, "Youth Violence."

⁵⁶ Jocelyn R. Smith Lee, Andrea G. Hunter, Fernanda Priolli, and Veronica J. Thornton, "'Pray That I Live to See Another Day': Religious and Spiritual Coping with Vulnerability to Violent Injury, Violent Death, and Homicide Bereavement among Young Black Men," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 70 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101180>.

Black Americans are at a disproportionate risk for experiencing traumatic loss of peers and, thus, becoming homicide survivors.⁵⁷ Alarming, the likelihood that Black youth will have someone close murdered is 7.8 times that of whites, and the risk is highest for young Black men.⁵⁸ Black homicides also have a higher chance of being reported in the media compared to the violent crimes of other races, and the perpetrator is often known to the victim, which further complicates the grieving process for survivors.⁵⁹ Black homicide survivors attempt to process their losses and are often confronted by paranoia and suspicion, as the relationships that are usually available in times of grief may be strained.⁶⁰

Anna Laurie and Robert A. Neimeyer maintain that Black people tend to eschew professional counseling methods due not only to a generations-entrenched distrust for systemic healthcare, but a strong aversion to appearing unstable to the rest of the community (e.g., revealing personal secrets and trauma).⁶¹ For such reasons, reliance on religion remains one of the more noteworthy homicide survivor bereavement strategies within the Black community.⁶² To fill the gap, Black homicide survivors often turn to the church and spiritual leaders to steer them through recovery with a familiar reference point. As Joleen Schoulte writes, though not all Black Americans identify with Christianity, many Christian influences are relevant to grieving for them.⁶³ In the case of Black male homicide survivors, religiosity and spirituality are crucial cultural and developmental assets that help them to process pain, construct meaning, find hope after homicide, and reduce fears of violent victimization and retaliation.⁶⁴ Moreover, religious and spiritual coping fosters posttraumatic growth among Black men.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Jocelyn R. Smith Lee, "Unequal Burdens of Loss: Examining the Frequency and Timing of Homicide Deaths Experienced by Young Black Men across the Life Course," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. S3 (2015): S483-S490.

⁵⁸ David Finkelhor, Richard Ormrod, Heather Turner, and Sherry L. Hamby, "The Victimization of Children and Youth: A Comprehensive, National Survey," *Child Maltreatment* 10 (2005): 5-25.

⁵⁹ Tanya L. Sharpe, Sean Joe, and Katie C. Taylor, "Suicide and Homicide Bereavement among African Americans: Implications for Survivor Research and Practice," *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 66 (2013): 153-72.

⁶⁰ Anthony L. Bui, Matthew M. Coates, and Ellicott C. Matthay, "Years of Life Lost Due to Encounters with Law Enforcement in the USA, 2015-2016," *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 8 (2018): 715-18.

⁶¹ Anna Laurie and Robert A. Neimeyer, "African Americans in Bereavement: Grief as a Function of Ethnicity," *Omega Journal of Death and Dying* 57, no. 2 (2008): 173-93.

⁶² Smith, "Unequal Burdens of Loss."

⁶³ Joleen Schoulte, "Bereavement among African Americans and Latino/a Americans," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 33, no. 1 (2011): 11-20.

⁶⁴ Smith Lee, Hunter, Priolli, and Thornton, "'Pray That I Live to See Another Day.'"

⁶⁵ Smith Lee, Hunter, Priolli, and Thornton, "'Pray That I Live to See Another Day.'"

But even a well-developed faith relationship cannot stave off some of the mental and social ramifications of homicide survivorship. Previous research has established a strong association between Black men's exposure to violence and the endorsement of posttraumatic stress symptoms.⁶⁶ In a study of traumatic events and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), A. L. Roberts, S. E. Gilman, J. Breslau, N. Breslau, and K. C. Koenen found that lifetime prevalence for PTSD was highest among Black Americans due to exposure to personal violence, and exposure to witnessing violence.⁶⁷ Three years later, Tanya L. Sharpe, Philip Osteen, Jodi Jacobsen Frey, and Lynn Murphy Michalopoulos examined the experiences of Black homicide survivors and found that no coping mechanisms were able to significantly reduce symptoms of PTSD felt by the survivors, even up to five years after the homicide victim's death.⁶⁸ Also, in this study, Black men were reported to be more likely than Black women to suppress outward demonstrations of their sorrow. For Black men, particularly, breaking through anger and grief to bring their deeper reactions to the surface, galvanize healing, and avoid retaliation is one of the dominant challenges of homicide survivor bereavement and treatment.⁶⁹ Accordingly, the ways in which Black men cope with trauma as homicide survivors speaks to the lack of support available to Black men who experience chronic community violence and a deeper need for traumatic stress screening, psychoeducational resources, and treatment services.⁷⁰

Methodology

The authors conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of rap tribute songs, authored by Black male rappers, in commemoration of the late Nipsey Hussle. Specifically, the researchers conducted an analysis of twenty-six rap tribute songs, authored by twenty-eight Black male rappers, to examine how Black male rappers articulated their experiences as homicide survivors and communicated grief. According

⁶⁶ Margartia Alegría, Lisa R. Fortuna, Julia Y. Lin, Fran H. Norris, Shan Gao, David T. Takeuchi, James S. Jackson, Patrick E. Shrout, and Anne Valentine, "Prevalence, Risk, and Correlates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Across Ethnic and Racial Minority Groups in the United States," *Medical Care*, 51 (2013): 1114–23.

⁶⁷ A. L. Roberts, S. E. Gilman, J. Breslau, N. Breslau, and K. C. Koenen, "Race/Ethnic Differences in Exposure to Traumatic Events, Development of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and Treatment-Seeking for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the United States," *Psychological Medicine* 41 (2011): 71–83.

⁶⁸ Tanya L. Sharpe, Philip Osteen, Jodi Jacobsen Frey, and Lynn Murphy Michalopoulos, "Coping with Grief Responses among African American Family Members of Homicide," *Violence and Victims* 29, no. 2 (2014): 332–47.

⁶⁹ Tanya L. Sharpe, Derek Kenji Iwamoto, Johari M. Massey, and Lynn Murphy Michalopoulos, "The Development of a Culturally Adapted Pilot Intervention for African American Family Members of Homicide Victims: A Preliminary Report," *Violence and Victims* 33, no. 4 (2018): 708–20.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Purtle, Linda J. Rich, Sandra L. Bloom, John A. Rich, and Theodore J. Corbin, "Cost-Benefit Analysis Simulation of a Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 48 (2015): 162–69.

to Teun A. van Dijk, CDA is a form of discourse analytical research that investigates language as a social practice tied to specific cultural and political contexts.⁷¹ CDA recognizes the power of language and how it can contribute to oppression and be used for liberation.⁷² Thus, its approach is characterized by a realist social ontology, which regards both abstract social structures and concrete social events as parts of social reality.⁷³ From this perspective, CDA analysts provide a dialectical view of the relationship between structure and agency, the relationship between discourse and prominent social events (e.g., Nipsey Hussle's death), and the ways in which discourse reconstructs social life in processes of social change.⁷⁴ This was a key benefit to this research, as it considered the impacts of Nipsey Hussle's death on his homicide survivors and their bereavement expressions in rap music. Acknowledging the role of rap lyrics as texts that serve as "storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music" and their abilities to provide insight into the personal experiences of rappers, CDA enabled the researchers to take an observational role in the analysis of the examined rap tribute songs, focus on prevailing themes and storylines within the rap texts, and analyze Black male rappers' various ideologies about Nipsey Hussle's death and Black men's societal oppressions, grief, and homicide survivorship, among other topics.⁷⁵

The current study employed a criterion sampling technique, which enabled the researchers to construct a comprehensive understanding of phenomena by stating explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, including specifications for methodological rigor.⁷⁶ For the research, the authors sought to include rap tribute songs released by mainstream and underground rappers. As a consequence, a criterion sampling technique enabled them to select a diverse range of Black male rappers in terms of commercial success, regionality, social class, and underground rap origins. Thus, the criteria for inclusion were as follows: 1) the rap tribute song must be authored by a Black man; 2) the rap tribute song must be available on the streaming services of Amazon Music, Apple Music, Soundcloud, Spotify, and/or Tidal; and 3) the rap tribute song's original release date must occur between March 19, 2019, and September 30, 2020. Amazon, Apple Music, and Spotify were chosen based on subscribership and their

⁷¹ Teun A. van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Study* (London: Sage, 1998).

⁷² Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁷³ Norman Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis," *International Advances in Engineering and Technology* 7 (2012): 453–87.

⁷⁴ Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis."

⁷⁵ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2.

⁷⁶ Harsh Suri, "Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research Synthesis," *Qualitative Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 63–75.

status as three of the more popular music streaming platforms, with Soundcloud and Tidal being included to specifically target underground rap artists.⁷⁷ Additionally, the time period was significant, for it captured Nipsey Hussle's death date and all subsequent rap tribute songs released by Black male rappers to the date of this analysis.

When selecting the examined rap tribute songs, the authors used the following six keywords for searches: "Nipsey Hussle tribute song," "Nipsey Hussle rap tribute song," "Nipsey Hussle tribute song 2019," "Nipsey Hussle tribute song 2020," "Nipsey Hussle rap tribute song 2019," and "Nipsey Hussle rap tribute song 2020." After compiling the initial search results, a secondary filtering of the data was conducted to review each artist's biography, gender identity, and race, and to exclude non-Black men and women per the study's focus on Black male rappers. "Nipsey Hussle Tribute" instrumental songs were also excluded given the analysis of lyrical content. Based on these criteria, twenty-six rap tribute songs, authored by twenty-eight Black male rappers, were analyzed, and the researchers' transcribed lyrics from each rap tribute song, examining each song separately and then collectively, based on the rap artists who authored them. While conducting the CDA, the researchers investigated the rap tribute song's musical messages and captured significant discourse concerning each rapper's expression of grief and homicide survivorship in relation to Nipsey Hussle's death. Once data were collected, a qualitative inductive thematic analysis was conducted to discover prominent themes within the texts.

Overview of Findings

The twenty-six examined rap tribute songs revealed a number of complex and sometimes contradictory themes related to prior literature on Black American men's homicide survivorship bereavement strategies, CRT, and rap's homicide-related lyrics. It also furthered our understanding of the sociocultural functions of rap tribute songs as rhetorical expressions of Black men's homosociality and as laments of friends and rappers concerning deceased Black men. Dually functioning as insightful bereavement and commemorative narratives, the rap tribute songs of Black male rappers foregrounded the cultural impact and legacy of Nipsey Hussle through vivid accounts of his character attributes, entrepreneurial philosophy, and political teachings, and through personal memories of him. The rappers referred to Nipsey Hussle as "an example," "big brother," "fam[ily]," "[someone] influential," and a "peacemaker," among other endearing terms. Their adulation of Nipsey stressed that his murder was atypical compared to other slain rappers, and, instead, called his death a "blow to the [Black] culture." Additionally, they made direct references to previously murdered

⁷⁷ Christian de Looper and Steven Cohen, "The Best Music Streaming Services You Can Subscribe To," *Business Insider*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/best-music-streaming-service-subscription>.

Black cultural figures (e.g., 2Pac, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and The Notorious B.I.G.) and described his death as a “wake-up call” for the Black community in terms of gun violence, rap’s homicidal culture, and presumed street violence in gang and urban communities. *Table 1* provides a listing of the positive names Black male rappers used to describe Nipsey Hussle.

A Banger with a Reason	Dead Homie
A Good Dude	Dedicated
A Real Big Brother	Different
A Real One	Don
A Real Peer	Entrepreneurial
A Real Solider	Fam[ily]
An Example	Fly Crip
Black Man Stirring Up Politics	Friend
Big Brother	Grammy-Nominated
Boss	Great
Brother	Hero
Brother from Another Color	Hussle the Great
Bright like a Lightbulb	Hustler
Cuh	Influential
Kin[folk]	Street Legend
King	Teacher
Not a Thug	The Great
Legend	The Motivation
Locc’d Out Crip Nigga	The New 2Pac
Loyal	The New Snoop [Dogg]
My Nigga	The Vibes
Peacemaker	Young 2Pac for this Generation
Powerful	
Respected	
Sacrificial	

Table 1 *Positive Names Black Male Rappers Used to Describe Nipsey Hussle*

In the rap tribute songs, Black male rappers expressed a variety of emotions, which ranged from anger, disbelief, and personal devastation to posttraumatic stress, suicidal thoughts, and vengeance declarations. The examined rappers candidly acknowledged feeling lost without Nipsey Hussle, shedding tears, and wanting to seek revenge toward his alleged murderer. Moreover, they detailed the posttraumatic stress incurred from repeated exposures to Nipsey Hussle and other Black men’s homicide deaths in Black and rap communities. Their discourses suggested a sense of fear and paranoia, as the rappers questioned the loyalty of their social circles, shared painful anxiety moments related to Nipsey Hussle’s death, and uttered traumatic fears that they

would be murdered next. In response, they vowed to “stay strapped” or carry guns for safety measures and “only hang with real niggas” and “shooters” who would protect them and murder enemies on their behalf.

Comprehensively, the examined rap tribute songs advanced three dominant themes in relation to the Black male rappers’ articulations of their homicide survivorship bereavement of Nipsey Hussle and the study’s analytical framework. The themes that we developed out of our critical discourse analysis are: 1) Black men’s grief, homosociality, and complex vulnerability narratives; 2) fear and paranoia declarations; and 3) resolution of internal conflict and grief with vengeance. *Table 2* displays frequencies and corresponding percentages and depicts the prominence of these themes in the twenty-six examined rap tribute songs. Ultimately, the emergent themes revealed the multidimensional grieving processes of Black male rappers and the complex ways in which they employed the expressive and therapeutic, rhetorical functions of rap tribute songs to publicly document homicide survivorship experiences, engage in grief work, and memorialize a rapper’s death.⁷⁸

Dominant Theme	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 26)	Percentage of Total
Black men’s grief and vulnerability narratives	18	69.2
Fear and paranoia declarations	13	50
Resolution of internal conflict and grief with vengeance	14	53.8

Table 2 Dominant Homicide Survivor Bereavement Themes Presented in Black Male Rappers’ Nipsey Hussle Rap Tribute Songs

Black Male Rappers Use Nipsey Hussle Rap Tribute Songs to Express Grieving Pains, Homosociality, and Complex Vulnerability

Complex grief and vulnerability narratives pervaded the rap tribute songs of Black male rappers as they chronicled the pain, stress, and trauma following Nipsey Hussle’s murder. In the musical compositions, all twenty-eight rappers expressed feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness, recounted despair and complicated grief pains, and communicated their difficult meaning-making processes in the aftermath of

⁷⁸ Oware, “Brotherly Love.”

his death. Throughout the sample, the rappers questioned the reality of Nipsey Hussle's murder and noted feeling "angry," "anxious," "depressed," "empty," "sick to their stomachs," and suicidal, among other emotions. For these men, Nipsey Hussle's death represented a cultural cataclysmic event that triggered previous memories of Black male homicidal deaths in rap and their surrounding communities, and subsequently, the recollections left them feeling defeated, fearful, hopeless, and stunned.

LGM Quis declared in "One Last Lap," "They done killed my nigga Nip, and it hurt me to my heart" and "I went crazy in my mind."⁷⁹ Cash B proclaimed, "Man this shit hurt. This shit dug deep," and admitted to waking up on April 1 and wishing Nipsey Hussle's death was a joke in "R.I.P. Nipsey."⁸⁰ Charlie Sky and Snap Dogg articulated comparative reactions. In "Nipsey Hussle Tribute," Charlie Sky declared, "Somebody tell me if this real ... I heard the news and caught chills. I don't even know how to feel" and questioned if death was "even worth a record deal?"⁸¹ Charlie Sky suggested a desire to forsake his current rap occupation in lieu of its homicidal culture and implications for Black male rappers. Likewise, Snap Dogg's "Fallen Solider" characterized Nipsey Hussle's death as "this nightmare feelin' like a dream" and even revealed the rapper's suicidal thoughts as he asked, "Lord tell me. Do you got some room for a thug?"⁸² As a social group, the rappers displayed the complicated grief often experienced by survivors of homicide, an event which prompts "protracted and impairing grief response to the loss of an attachment figure that is more debilitating and intractable than traditional grief trajectories."⁸³ Further, their lyrics implied key symptoms associated with complicated grief responses to homicide loss, which included avoiding reminders of the traumatic event, disbelief, and suicidality.⁸⁴

Rap tribute songs also outlined a number of personal coping mechanisms used by the rappers to assuage the traumatic anxiety, grief, and paranoia sustained from Nipsey Hussle's death and their violent environments. Coping methods included alcohol ("I put my pain in the bottle," Geechi Gotti and Poppa Chop),⁸⁵ comedy ("I crack a joke to hide the pain, it doesn't work," Earthgang),⁸⁶ marijuana ("I think I hit the

⁷⁹ LGM Quis, "One Last Lap (Nipsey Hussle Tribute)," 1111292 Records DK, 2019.

⁸⁰ Cash B, "R.I.P. Nipsey," Vision Records Entertainment, 2019.

⁸¹ Charlie Sky, "Nipsey Hussle Tribute," 907830 Records DK, 2019.

⁸² Snap Dogg, "Fallen Solider (Nipsey Hussle Tribute)," track 1 on *Fallen Solider (Nipsey Hussle Tribute)*, Bronco Boyz Entertainment, 2019.

⁸³ Rebecca J. Zakarian, Meghan E. McDevitt-Murphy, Benjamin W. Bellet, Robert A. Neimeyer, and Laurie A. Burke, "Relations among Meaning Making, PTSD, and Complicated Grief Following Homicide Loss," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2019.1565111>.

⁸⁴ Zakarian, McDevitt-Murphy, Bellet, Neimeyer, and Burke, "Relations."

⁸⁵ Geechi Gotti and Poppa Chop, "Condolences (Dedication to Nipsey)," track 9 on *NoStudioN 3.5, Ruin Your Day*, 2019.

⁸⁶ Earthgang, "This Side," track 6 on *Mirrorland*, 2019, Dreamville Records.

joint too hard, plus I'm tired of all this trash," Earthgang),⁸⁷ and most frequently mentioned, religion. It bears noting that mental health and psychological treatment services were not mentioned in any of the twenty-six examined rap tribute songs as potential grief coping options, denoting the longstanding tendency of Black male homicide survivors to eschew professional counseling methods and traumatic stress treatment services.⁸⁸ However, it bears noting that lyrics are performative, and the rappers might have sought medical services independent of a song's content.

Religious narratives permeated the rap tribute songs, for Black male rappers referenced religious concepts and teachings (e.g., love thy neighbor, reaping and sowing, spiritual healing) in an attempt to make meaning of not only Nipsey Hussle's death, but also their own fears of death and violence. Black male rappers admittedly prayed for fallen rap soldiers, Nipsey Hussle's family, and their "niggas and niggettes," while asking Allah and God to heal their bereavement pains and to hear their cries for help and protection. Kid3RD's "R.I.P. Nip" best embodied this rhetorical trend, professing, "People dying every day. On my knees praying to the Lord that He take death far away. On my knees praying to the Lord that you take this pain all away."⁸⁹ Poetic Lamar engaged Muslim religious beliefs and asked, "Oh my Allah, can you hear my cry? Tears for my soldier in the Southern Sky," LilCadiPGE asked God, "Why do all the legends die young," and Earthgang referenced God and accepted their own mortality amid rap's violent mythology, stating: "If it pleases God, I hope the shooter aim best. Then I can fly to better lands and Neverlands like Sandra Bland."⁹⁰ Consistent with Jocelyn R. Smith-Lee, Andrea G. Hunter, Fernanda Priolli, and Veronica J. Thornton's research on Black male homicide survivor coping strategies, religiosity and spirituality were crucial cultural and developmental assets that helped Black male rappers to process pain, construct meaning, find hope after homicide, and reduce fears of violent victimization and retaliation.⁹¹

Though most rappers expressed disbelief and sorrow, there were more introspective discussions of Nipsey Hussle's life and legacy that uplifted his mantra of "The Marathon Continues" and memorialized previous slain rappers. For instance, longtime friend and rapper on Nipsey Hussle's label, J. Stone, commemorated Nipsey Hussle's legacy ("[Barack] Obama wrote you a letter, what more can I say? ... 'The Marathon Continues,' that's what you would say"), shared details of his funeral

⁸⁷ Earthgang, "This Side."

⁸⁸ Purtle, Rich, Bloom, Rich, and Corbin, "Cost-Benefit Analysis Simulation."

⁸⁹ Kid3RD, "R.I.P. Nip (Nipsey Hussle Tribute)," track 1 on *Motiv8D*, R.L.G.G., 2019.

⁹⁰ Poetic Lamar, "Tribute Nipsey Hussle," track 3 on *Mourning Blues*, 2019; LilCadiPGE, *The Marathon Must Continue*, Pilot Gang Entertainment, 2019; Earthgang, "This Side."

⁹¹ Smith-Lee, Hunter, Priolli, and Thornton, "'Pray That I Live to See Another Day,'" 70.

(“Stevie [Wonder] sang at your funeral, nigga, you the great”), and, most significantly, situated his murder within the context of prior Black male rapper homicides.⁹² In “The Marathon Continues,” J. Stone cross-referenced Stephen “Fatts” Donelson, a thirty-year-old Los Angeles, California, rapper who was murdered in 2017, and stated, “Damn I wish Nip and Fats was here. How y’all die at thirty something after banging all them years?”⁹³ Comparably, Meek Mill’s ode to Nipsey Hussle (“Letter to Nipsey”) mentioned his fallen protégé, eighteen-year-old rapper Addarren “Lil Snupe” Ross, who was killed via gun violence in 2013.⁹⁴ J. Stone and Meek Mill’s lyrics positioned homicide as a health disparity that disproportionately shortened the life expectancy of Black men in gang and urban communities due to social determinants of violence, which increased the propensity for crime, violence, and ultimately death. Furthermore, their commentary highlighted homicide’s longstanding status as the leading cause of death for Black men aged twenty-five to thirty-four; an age range occupied by the named victims (Lil Snupe [eighteen], Fatts [thirty], and Nipsey Hussle [thirty-three]).⁹⁵

The rap tribute songs were not exclusively somber in tone. Homosociality narratives dominated the sample, as Black male rappers voiced brotherly love for Nipsey Hussle, and shared heartwarming memories and lessons learned from the late rapper. Similar to Oware’s research, the twenty-six rap tribute songs expressed Black male rappers’ love for Nipsey Hussle, while claiming familial bonds with Nipsey Hussle and the larger Hip Hop community. As griots of Nipsey Hussle’s legacy, the rappers humanized him as a “motivation,” a “real big brother,” “friend,” “homie,” “good dude,” “teacher,” and someone who was entrepreneurial (“you sold a mixtape for a whole \$100. Jay-Z bought 100 copies, that’s \$10,000”), exhibited unwavering loyalty (“and when them niggas went against me, you ain’t change on me”),⁹⁶ provided intellectual stimulation (“he gave me books to read and shit like that”),⁹⁷ impacted dietary options (“he taught me alkaline, vegan since 2017, that’s my diet and way of eating” [2 Official]),⁹⁸ and supported young rap artists (“you ain’t have to do that for

⁹² J. Stone, “The Marathon Continues,” track 1 on *The Definition of Loyalty*, All Money In Records, 2019.

⁹³ Nicole Santa Cruz, “Stephen Donelson, 30,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2017, <https://homicide.latimes.com/post/stephen-donelson/>.

⁹⁴ Meek Mill and Roddy Ricch, “Letter to Nipsey,” Atlantic Records, 2020; *Billboard Staff*, 2013.

⁹⁵ CDC, “Youth Violence.”

⁹⁶ Meek Mill, “Letter to Nipsey” 2020.

⁹⁷ YG, “My Last Words,” track 13 on *4REAL 4REAL*, Def Jam Recordings, 2019.

⁹⁸ 2 Official, “Nipsey Hussle,” track 14 on *Everything Counts*, Family or Nothing Music Group, 2019; YG, “My Last Words,” track 13 on *4REAL 4REAL*, Def Jam Recordings, 2019.

me on that ‘status symbol,’ but I’m thankful that you did” [LilCadiPGE]), among other touching accounts.⁹⁹

Many Black male rappers deviated from stereotypical guises of “strong Black men” and “gangster rappers” to openly engage in homosocial rhetoric and uplift other Black men in affirming and caring ways. For example, Yo Gotti reflected on Nipsey Hussle’s death and declared, “I done cried to my niggas (cried to my niggas) ‘cause real brothers really love each other” and proclaimed to younger, Memphis, Tennessee, rappers Blac Youngsta, BlocBoy JB, and Moneybagg Yo, “I love these niggas dearly” in “Untrapped.”¹⁰⁰ Reflecting on his message of unity, rappers accredited Nipsey Hussle’s passing as inspiration to “squash” existing disagreements and rivalries with other Black male rappers. Big Sean’s “Deep Reverence” cited Nipsey Hussle’s death as his motivation to “reach out to Kendrick [Lamar]” and discuss prior discrepancies, while analogously, Problem mildly acknowledged the possibility of resolving a longstanding, regional disagreement with rapper YG in “Janet Freestyle (Tribute to Nipsey Hussle).”¹⁰¹ The rappers collectively expressed love for not only Nipsey Hussle, but also perceived rap peers and rivals. Their lyrics exemplified the power of rap tribute songs to manifest positive and progressive, homosocial messages for Black men in times of despair and grief as homicide survivors.¹⁰²

However, in spite of this homosocial rhetoric, some Black male rappers still struggled to fully express bereavement and vulnerability. In these cases, rappers proclaimed, “real niggas don’t cry”; they only shed tears for Nipsey Hussle because he was a “real nigga,” and confessed to hiding and suppressing their emotions. An example of this discourse was Meek Mill and Roddy Ricch’s “Letter to Nipsey.” In the song, Meek Mill declared, “You made me cry, and I don’t cry, nigga,” while Roddy Ricch admitted to turning off his phone, throwing on shades, meditating, and “wishing to go blind to hide the tears.”¹⁰³ Nipsey Hussle’s protégé, LilCadiPGE, expressed similar sentiments in “The Marathon Must Continue,” as he told concerned listeners, “Don’t ask me if I’m straight!” after labeling Nipsey Hussle’s death as “traumatizing.”¹⁰⁴ Their contradictory yet multifarious narratives were significant to this study for two distinct reasons. First, they demonstrated Black men’s tendencies to suppress outward demonstrations and expressions of sorrow as homicide survivors.¹⁰⁵ Second, the lyrics

⁹⁹ LilCadiPGE, “The Marathon Must Continue.”

¹⁰⁰ Yo Gotti featuring Estelle, “Untrapped,” track 14 on *Untrapped*, Epic Records, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Big Sean and Nipsey Hussle, “Deep Reverence,” track 3 on *Detroit 2*, G.O.O.D. Music, 2020; Problem, “Janet Freestyle (Nipsey Hussle Tribute),” Diamond Lane Music Group, 2020.

¹⁰² Oware, “Brotherly Love.”

¹⁰³ Mill and Ricch, “Letter to Nipsey.”

¹⁰⁴ LilCadiPGE, “The Marathon Must Continue.”

¹⁰⁵ Sharpe, Osteen, Frey, and Michalopoulos, “Coping with Grief Responses.”

illuminated Hip Hop's gendered function as a "medium for Black men to give voice to their vulnerable situatedness" and how Black male rappers organize and negotiate their masculinity in distinct ways.¹⁰⁶ Together, these factors elucidated the complex emotionality of homicide survivors, and its interplay with Black masculinity.¹⁰⁷

"The Streets Is Done!" Black Male Rappers Share Death Fears and Vow to "Stay Strapped"

Nipsey Hussle's murder outraged Black male rappers into larger discussions of death anxiety, gun violence, and street code violations in Black urban communities and Hip Hop. In rap tribute songs, the rappers discussed the presence and frequency of crime, gun violence, poverty, and police brutality around them, while detailing how repeated, traumatic exposures to neighborhood violence and rap peer deaths (like that of Nipsey Hussle) left them fearful and paranoid for their own lives. Their discourses suggested a sense of fear and paranoia, as the rappers questioned the loyalty of their social circles, shared traumatic anxiety and stress related to Nipsey Hussle's death, and uttered fears that they would be murdered next.

Declaring "the streets is done," the rappers cited presumed violations of "the street code," which previously "articulated "powerful norms and characterize[d] public social relations among residents, particularly with respect to violence"¹⁰⁸ yet were being broken due to rap fame, government informants, "jealous niggas," lack of Black unity, incarceration, poverty, and social media clout chasers, among other factors. Pimpin Pat and Yo Gotti were most critical of the Black community and rap's cultural climate in relation to gun violence, homicide, and street code violations. In "Tribute to Nipsey Hussle," Pimpin Pat purported, "Black folks the only race that don't stick together, while every nigga on your team got a full clip. We only come together for memes and bullshit."¹⁰⁹ From Pimpin Pat's perspective, Black people suffered from self-hate stemming from internalized racism, jealousy, and poverty, and as a result of systemic oppression were more likely to kill one another in pursuit of clout, fame, and wealth. Relatedly, Yo Gotti questioned Hip Hop's sad state of affairs, condemning street code violations, gang culture, Internet gangsters, and "rats" or government informants who murdered and "snitched" on street peers for lighter federal prison sentences. The

¹⁰⁶ Keven James Rudrow, "'I Was Scared to Death': Storytelling, Masculinity, and Vulnerability in 'Wet Dreamz,'" *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2020): 5. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1741660>.

¹⁰⁷ Natalie Graham, "Cracks in the Concrete: Policing Lil Wayne's Masculinity and the Feminizing Metaphor," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 4, (2016).

¹⁰⁸ Charis E. Kubrin, "Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music," *Social Problems* 52, no. 3, (2005): 363, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2005.52.3.360>

¹⁰⁹ Pimpin Pat, "Tribute to Nipsey Hussle," Pimp Mob LLC, 2019.

rappers viewed these social-structural perils as key contributors to the increased homicide deaths, social disorganization, and gun violence in the rap community. As a consequence, they felt trapped in rap and urban communities' milieu of gang banging, homicide, and violence "despite the hit songs."¹¹⁰

Black male rappers recognized that fame and wealth were simply not enough to protect them from the egregious violence of "the streets" and urged other rappers to watch their surroundings and "stay strapped" or carry guns for safety measures. In "Condolences (Dedication to Nipsey Hussle)," Geechi Gotti acknowledged the structural disadvantages Black male rappers faced as public figures, which from his vantagepoint, made them more susceptible to homicide. He declared, "When you young and you Black," rappers were left with two polarizing options: "You'll shoot or you get killed. This is really how it is."¹¹¹ As a result, Geechi Gotti "kept a steel [gun] in the ride" and stayed away from "fuck niggas," who would kill him if given the opportunity.¹¹² Of equal significance, Meek Mill stated that Nipsey Hussle's death "made me feel like I could die," and because of this anxiety, he was "scared to go outside without the flame [gun] on" him.¹¹³ Rap duo Earthgang communicated akin death fears and compared Nipsey Hussle's death to the deceased rapper Jahseh "XXXTentacion" Onfroy. In "This Side," they rapped, "They took Nip, took X, just a hatin' ass nigga. Hope that I ain't next" before warning listeners that "death around the corner."¹¹⁴ Poetic Lamar confirmed similar paranoia, rapping, "The same niggas I gave love, wanna see me dead. Catch me at the bodega and put two in my head.... Got me feeling like Nip bullets inside of me."¹¹⁵

In reaction to these fears, rappers advised rap peers to carry guns, "move safely in the streets," "watch who they trusted," and "don't fuck with niggas who ran the streets," while promising to "only hang with real niggas" and "shooters" who would protect them and kill on their behalf. In "Tribute Nipsey Hussle," Poetic Lamar bragged about hanging with "real gangsters" who aimed like professional basketball player "Steph Curry when they shoot" at his enemies, while Yo Gotti cautioned younger Black male rappers: "Don't get caught up in these streets, you one hit away."¹¹⁶ Recognizing the streets' violent social climate, KiD3RD advised rappers to watch their social circles

¹¹⁰ Big Sean, "Deep Reverence."

¹¹¹ Geechi Gotti and Poppa Chop, "Condolences (Dedication to Nipsey Hussle)," 2019.

¹¹² Geechi Gotti and Poppa Chop, "Condolences."

¹¹³ Mill and Ricch, "Letter to Nipsey."

¹¹⁴ Earthgang, "This Side."

¹¹⁵ Poetic Lamar, "Tribute Nipsey Hussle."

¹¹⁶ Yo Gotti, "Untrapped," track 14 on *Untrapped*, Epic Records, Roc Nation, and Collective Music Group, 2020.

and asserted, “Better watch who you make enemies with. Make sure the people around you legit.... Ever since Nip died, can’t take no more. I can’t ignore shit.”¹¹⁷

The rap tribute songs produced three significant themes in relation to Black men’s homicide survivorship and the positioning of guns as symbols of power, protection, and remedy in street culture. First, the rappers’ lyrics embodied common symptoms of posttraumatic stress and trauma produced by Black men’s violent exposures to homicide, such as anxiety, arousal, and reactivity in response to neighborhood violence-related stressors, hypervigilance, intrusive images of death, and prolonged distress. Second, the songs uncovered how Black male rappers’ prior life course exposures to Nipsey Hussle’s murder and other related homicide deaths informed their appraisals of presumed vulnerability to gun violence, which fueled their efforts to protect themselves from potential harm using guns. Aligning with the work of Tanya L. Sharpe, and C. Shawn McGuffey and Tanya L. Sharpe, the rappers made racial appraisals about gun violence and homicide that were informed by repeated exposures to death and violence, the permanence of racism in society, and the embeddedness of racism in law and criminal justice.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, the rap tribute songs personified key tenets of CRT.¹¹⁹ Using rap lyrics, they made visible the subjugated realities of Black homicide survivors, while advancing astute counternarratives of their personal struggles with grief, homicide, posttraumatic stress, and racial trauma related to Nipsey Hussle’s death and “the problems of black urban life in contemporary America.”¹²⁰

Third, the rappers’ reliance on guns for protection corresponded with Deanna Wilkinson and Charis E. Kubrin’s research on urban community street codes and the positioning of the gun as a symbol of power and remedy for disputes.¹²¹ Wilkinson argues, “violence is thought to be the single most critical resource for achieving status among those who participate in street culture,” and for such reasons, guns raised the stakes of the street code even higher.¹²² Under this prism, guns were viewed as symbols of respect, identity, and power, had strategic survival value, and served as mechanisms

¹¹⁷ KiD3RD, “RIP Nip.”

¹¹⁸ Tanya L. Sharpe, “Understanding the Sociocultural Context of Coping for African American Family Members of Homicide Victims: A Conceptual Model,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 16, no. 1 (2015): 48–59; and C. Shawn McGuffey and Tanya L. Sharpe, “Racial Appraisal: An Integrated Cultural and Structural Response to African American Experiences with Violent Trauma,” *Journal of Sociology and Social Work* 3, no. 2 (2015): 55–61.

¹¹⁹ Sharpe, “Understanding the Sociocultural Context of Coping”; and McGuffey and Sharpe, “Racial Appraisal.”

¹²⁰ Rose, *Black Noise*, 2.

¹²¹ Deanna Wilkinson, “Violent Events and Social Identity: Specifying the Relationship between Respect and Masculinity in Inner-City Youth Violence,” *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* 8 (2001): 231–65; Kubrin, “Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas,” 360–78.

¹²² Wilkinson, “Violent Events and Social Identity,” 243.

to deter future assaults.¹²³ For rappers invested in street culture, guns discouraged enemies from challenging them and built violent reputations that prevented future challenges. In the case of the examined rappers, “staying strapped” with guns functioned as both a coping mechanism and protective strategy that temporarily soothed death fears and posttraumatic stress symptoms related to their homicide survivorship bereavement. However, their actions concurrently upheld previously established street codes that promoted gun violence and murder as means of gender role conflict resolution and protection, did little to eradicate existing rhetorical themes of homicide and violence in rap culture and urban communities (e.g., the normalization of killing and masculine confrontation), and, thus, made the rappers complicit in the social problem under critique.

Black Male Rappers Seek Vengeance for Nipsey Hussle’s Death

In addition to eulogizing Nipsey Hussle’s life, Black male rappers consistently drew on rap’s homicidal themes of revenge and vengeance to resolve their anger toward his alleged murderer, Eric Holder. From their perspectives, murder and violence were the only viable forms of conflict resolution and retaliation for Nipsey Hussle’s homicide. The rappers loathed Holder as a “foul,” “jealous,” “fuck nigga” “informant,” and “rat,” who deserved to die and not simply be incarcerated for his crime. Baffled by the details of Nipsey Hussle’s death, the rappers advanced conspiracy theories and questioned why fellow rappers and street gangsters allowed Holder to kill Nipsey without violent consequences. Corresponding with Gwen Hunnicut and Kristy Humble Andrews’s research, the rappers normalized homicide and violence as appropriate revenge-seeking tools for Nipsey Hussle’s murder and against Holder and vowed to “apply pressure,” “hang him on the [railroad] tracks,” “kill his family,” and “tape him off” until he “burned in hell.”¹²⁴ *Table 3* outlines the negative names Black male rappers used to describe Nipsey Hussle’s alleged murderer.

Cold Nigga	Jealous Nigga
Clout Chaser	Informant
Foul	Rat
Fuck Nigga	Snake in Disguise
Hating Ass Nigga	Selfish
Hater	Troll
Hoe	Vulture
Jealous	Witness Protection Informant

Table 3 *Negative Names Black Male Rappers Used to Describe Nipsey Hussle’s Alleged Murderer*

¹²³ Kubrin, “Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas.”

¹²⁴ Hunnicut and Humble Andrews, “Tragic Narratives in Popular Culture.”

In the sample, rappers advanced conspiracy theories related to Nipsey Hussle's death. However, the most prevalent allegation contended that Holder was an informant sent by the government to murder the late rapper. Most notably, Cash B's "R.I.P. Nipsey" questioned if Nipsey Hussle's death was a government set-up and accused Holder of being a "witness protection informant," who the government would eventually "let ... off" and "move to another state to do another job." In response, he felt justice would not be properly served until Holder was dead and "hang him off the [railroad] tracks."¹²⁵ LilCadiPGE also mistrusted the police and rejected Holder's arrest for Nipsey Hussle's murder, "And we don't want him in no cell. We want more than jail. Tape him off, kill his family, tell him burn in hell."¹²⁶ For LilCadiPGE, Holder's wrongdoing provoked a violent response similar to capital punishment, and the rapper would not be satisfied until the alleged murderer was dead. Snap Dogg expressed similar desires and warned Holder, "If them niggas catch you out, I hope the lord bless you cause them niggas ain't gonna leave until somebody stretch you. They done took the wrong nigga's life."¹²⁷ His lyrics metaphorically referenced the act of sending a victim to the hospital for emergency treatment services and stressed his desires for violent revenge on behalf of Nipsey Hussle. Pledging to "slide on his dead homie's name," Poetic Lamar sought vengeance via "hittas" who would "slide for him" and kill Nipsey Hussle's murderer.¹²⁸

In the preceding examples, there was a language of militarization and readiness to kill, which inspired extreme methods of discipline and vengeance commonly referenced in American military culture. Through rap tribute songs, the rappers presented gun violence as a narrow yet viable avenue to ease grieving pains, resolve anger and conflict, and enact revenge, while assembling additional Black men and rap entourages to commit homicide. Their assertions reified rap's street codes of conflict resolution and hypermasculinity, promoted themes of contest and confrontation, and positioned homicide as a tool to avenge fallen rappers' deaths and seek justice. Most important, their vengeance actions, if successful, would further increase the number of Black-on-Black homicides and, in turn, produce more Black homicide survivors. Still, the rap tribute songs spoke to Black men's cultural distrust of law enforcement and the government in delivering justice to Black homicide survivors, which prompted the rappers to engage in horizontal homicides and vengeful self-help in the absence or weakness of legal protections and third-party control.¹²⁹ From this perspective, these gendered, violent forms of control, domination, and conflict resolution are indicative of

¹²⁵ Cash B, "R.I.P. Nipsey."

¹²⁶ LilCadiPGE, "The Marathon Must Continue."

¹²⁷ Snap Dogg, "Fallen Soldier."

¹²⁸ Poetic Lamar, "Tribute Nipsey Hussle."

¹²⁹ Alan V. Horowitz, *The Logic of Social Control* (New York: Plenum Press, 1990).

the concentration of economic disadvantage and violence in their urban neighborhoods, established street codes that laud homicide as vengeance-seeking means, and the amplification of guns as dispute resolvers in American cultural values and military practices.

Conclusion

Nipsey Hussle's murder represented a cultural cataclysmic event that startled the Hip Hop community and triggered previous memories of Black men homicidal deaths in rap and Black American urban communities. Most significant to this study, Nipsey Hussle's death inspired touching rap tribute songs by Black male rappers, who sought to express their bereavement pain as survivors of his legacy. As a consequence, this study investigated twenty-six rap tribute songs, which were authored by twenty-eight Black male rap artists in commemoration of Nipsey Hussle's life and legacy. The findings revealed complex, yet contradictory, themes related to existing scholarship on Black American men's homicide survivorship bereavement strategies, CRT, rap's homicide-related lyrics, and the sociocultural functions of rap tribute songs as rhetorical expressions of Black men's homosociality and laments of deceased Black male friends and rappers. In rap tribute songs, Black male rappers foregrounded the cultural impact and legacy of Nipsey Hussle through vivid accounts of the rapper's character attributes, entrepreneurial philosophy and political teachings, and personal memories.

Detailing their homicide survivorship bereavement experiences, they expressed a variety of emotions, which ranged from anger, disbelief, and personal devastation to posttraumatic stress, suicidal thoughts, and vengeance declarations. Based on this study's analytical framework, the examined rap tribute songs advanced three dominant themes in relation to the Black male rappers' articulations of their homicide survivorship bereavement of Nipsey Hussle: 1) Black men's grief, homosociality, and complex vulnerability narratives, 2) fear and paranoia declarations, and 3) resolution of internal conflict and grief with vengeance.

Our findings bear significance to Hip Hop studies, for our study illustrated how twenty-eight Black male rap artists leveraged the rhetorical power of rap tribute songs to articulate their complex homicide survivor bereavement processes, advance vital counternarratives concerning Black men's mental health experiences with repeated exposure to homicide deaths and violence in rap and urban communities, and offer rich criticisms of gun violence, internalized racism, poverty, and systemic oppression. While sharing these narratives, this research advanced a timely criticism of the social problems of gun violence and homicide in the United States. Since the murder of Nipsey Hussle, homicide-related deaths in rap continue to increase, with recent examples including Adolph "Young Dolph" Thornton, Melvin "Mo3" Noble, Dayvon "King Von" Bennett, Rudolph "Lil Marlo" Johnson, and Pop Smoke.

Reflecting on the violent deaths of Black male rappers, Fabolous declared in a 2020 Instagram story, “Respectfully ... being a rapper has become one of the most dangerous job in America. Black men are surviving the trenches, constant battles in a war zone environment ... and somehow still end up dead or in jail.”¹³⁰ His sentiments echoed previous statements from Jim Jones, who described the career choice as “harder than fighting a war in Iraq.”¹³¹ The major themes found in these Nipsey Hussle rap tribute songs exposed the cultural conditions under which Black male rappers publicly navigated homicide survivorship in lieu of Nipsey Hussle’s death and, most significantly, repeated exposure to gun violence in their respective communities. As lyrical compositions, the examined rap tribute songs commemorated Nipsey Hussle yet revealed that the tragic side of rap’s gangster, inner-city biosphere, which deeply threatens the life expectancies of Black male rappers, will likely yield more Black homicide victims and, tragically, result in more Black male homicide survivors and rap tribute songs.

Yet, there remain further questions for future studies of Nipsey Hussle’s homicide murder and its cultural impact on Black American culture and Hip Hop studies. For instance, how do we explain Nipsey Hussle’s posthumous popular notoriety, and what will potential mediated commodification mean for the preservation of his cultural legacy? What are we, as Hip Hop studies scholars, to make of the enduring assassination accusations of Nipsey Hussle raised by the examined artists, given the propensity of rap’s homicidal deaths and unsolved murders? The notable absence of references to professional mental health services by Black male rapper homicide survivors remains a consistent trend in Hip Hop and a larger society; why does this problem persist in Black men’s grief studies? These answers could not be answered given the scope of our analysis, yet indubitably prompt additional analyses of Black men’s homicide survivorship bereavement experiences, Hip Hop studies, and Nipsey Hussle worthy of future scholarly queries.

¹³⁰ Mike Winslow, “Jim Jones, Fabolous Say Rapping Is the Most Dangerous Job in the United States,” *All Hip Hop*, December 11, 2020, <https://allhiphop.com/news/jim-jones-fabolous-rapping-most-dangerous-job/>

¹³¹ Winslow, “Jim Jones, Fabolous.”

APPENDIX A

List of Nipsey Hussle Tribute Songs Examined

Artist Stage Name	Song Title	Release Date (in chronological order)
LGM Quis	"One Last Lap"	April 2, 2019
Charlie Sky	"Nipsey Hussle Tribute"	April 3, 2019
Geechi Gotti (featuring Poppa Chop)	"Condolences (Dedication to Nipsey)"	April 5, 2019
LilCadiPGE	"The Marathon Must Continue"	April 5, 2019
Snap Dogg	"Fallen Soldier"	April 7, 2019
Pimpin Pat	"Tribute to Nipsey Hussle"	April 15, 2019
Ghost Omega	"Nipsey Hussle Tribute"	April 17, 2019
Cash B	"RIP Nipsey"	April 21, 2019
Pappi Nixon	"Nipsey Hussle"	May 8, 2019
DJ Khaled	"Higher (featuring Nipsey Hussle, John Legend)"	May 17, 2019
YG	"My Last Words"	May 23, 2019
J. Stone	"The Marathon Continues"	June 10, 2019
2 Official	"Nipsey Hussle"	July 4, 2019
Poetic Lamar	"Tribute Nipsey Hussle"	August 11, 2019
Snoop Dogg	"Nipsey Blue"	August 14, 2019
Benji Stone featuring Stonie	"Bad News"	August 21, 2019

Rif	"Nipsey Hussle"	August 23, 2019
Ar Wings	"Nipsey Hussle"	August 24, 2019
Kid3rd	"R.I.P. Nip (Nipsey Hussle Tribute)"	August 30, 2019
Earthgang	"This Side"	September 6, 2019
SwaveyDuPree	"Lifted Up"	October 25, 2019
Meek Mill featuring Roddy Ricch	"Letter to Nipsey"	January 26, 2020
Yo Gotti	"Untrapped (featuring Estelle)"	January 31, 2020
Problem	"Janet Freestyle (Remix)"	May 15, 2020
Da Gweed	"TMC (Tribute to Nipsey Hussle)"	May 31, 2020
Big Sean	"Deep Reverence (featuring Nipsey Hussle)"	September 4, 2020
Dom Kennedy	"Saint Ermias"	September 25, 2020

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A Critical Interpretive Synthesis of Research Linking Hip Hop and Well-being in Schools

Alexander Hew Dale Crooke, Cristina Moreno-Almeida, and Rachael Comte

Hip Hop is recognized as an agent for youth development in both educational and well-being spaces, yet literature exploring the intersection of the two areas is comparatively underdeveloped. This article presents a critical interpretive synthesis of twenty-two articles investigating school-based well-being interventions which used Hip Hop. The critical stance taken aimed to identify or expose assumptions underpinning this area of scholarship and practice. Our analysis suggested several assumptions operate in this space, including the idea rap represents a default for Hip Hop culture, and the default beneficiaries of Hip Hop-informed interventions are students of color living in underprivileged, inner-city US neighborhoods. Further, while cultural relevance is a key justification for Hip Hop interventions, few researchers engage critically with the concept in relation to students, practitioners, or themselves. We also identified distinctions between interventions that add Hip Hop, and those that center the culture. Subsequent recommendations are offered to inform future research.

It's 8:30 am on a Friday morning, half an hour before the bell rings for first period.¹ A dozen or so of the most "disengaged" students in the school are waiting excitedly outside a classroom as a small group of beat-making facilitators approach: "Yo, where've you been? You're late!" cries one of the students. "Hey, DJ Daily, let me carry that" says another, grabbing at a crate of headphones and cables, as the rest flow into the unlocked classroom in a wave of positive energy and enthusiasm. Even the two girls who a staff member warned could break into physical confrontation are laughing together, as everyone in the room helps set up the space they will share for the rest of the day.

The scene described is from a real program, one that led to a range of real, and documented, well-being and educational outcomes for those involved.² This scene, or something like it, will also be familiar to many Hip Hop heads around the world who have either worked in mainstream school settings, or been lucky enough to access Hip Hop culture during their formal schooling. It's likely that the benefits of these kinds of programs have been experienced by those that have participated in them. As Hip Hop scholars such as Bettina Love, Christopher Emdin, and Emery Petchauer point out, the

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² Alexander Crooke and Cristina Moreno-Almeida, "'It's good to know something real and all that': Exploring the Benefits of a School-based Hip Hop Program," *Australian Journal of Music Education* 51, no. 1 (2017): 13-28.

growing field of Hip Hop Based Education (HHBE) has clearly shown and proven that having Hip Hop in schools can lead to positive identity development, community empowerment, and social change.³ Hip Hop embraces difference. It speaks truth to systems of power. It strives for its community. It's creative. and it's just plain dope.

Those with an embodied experience of Hip Hop culture probably won't need research to tell them about the benefits. They know. But as Love and others point out, whether we like it or not, research and the academy are engaging with and talking about Hip Hop.⁴ And in the school setting, it's not always all good. Many within the academy have dedicated serious time and effort defending Hip Hop culture from academics who are either too focused on proving its negative consequences, or who engage a simplified and often culturally insensitive version of it.⁵

With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to explore what has been said in the research literature looking specifically at Hip Hop and well-being in schools to see whether this literature paints a picture that resonates with lived experience. It also aims to expose any assumptions around what Hip Hop is and who should participate in it. Essentially, we aim to turn a critical lens on Hip Hop and well-being in schools, in the same way that Love, Emdin, and Petchaur, and others, have applied a critical lens to Hip Hop-based education and the pedagogical space. Ultimately, we hope the following article offers some guidance for both practitioners and academics interested in this area.

³ Bettina L. Love, "Culturally Relevant Cyphers: Rethinking Classroom Management Through Hip-Hop-Based Education," in *Breaking the Mold of Classroom Management: What Educators Should Know and Do to Enable Student Success*, ed. Andrea Honigsfeld and Audrey Cohan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 103–110; Christopher Emdin, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and The Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); and Emery Petchaur, "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (2009): 946–978.

⁴ Bettina L. Love, "What Is Hip-Hop-Based Education Doing in Nice Fields Such as Early Childhood and Elementary Education?" *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 106–131; and Decoteau J. Irby, Harry Bernard Hall, and Marc Lamont Hill, "Schooling Teachers, Schooling Ourselves: Insights and Reflections from Teaching K-12 Teachers How to Use Hip-Hop to Educate Students," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 15, no. 1 (2013).

⁵ Edgar H. Tyson, "The Rap Music Attitude and Perception (RAP) Scale," *Journal of Human Behavior in The Social Environment* 11, nos. 3–4 (2005): 59–82, https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v11n03_04; Raphael Travis, *The Healing Power of Hip Hop* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016); Marc Lamont Hill, and Emery Petchauer, *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop-Based Education Across the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013); Don Elligan, "Contextualizing Rap Music as a Means of Incorporating into Psychotherapy," in *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop*, ed. Susan Hadley and G. Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 27–38; Aida McClellan Winfrey, *HYPE: Healing Young People Thru Empowerment* (Chicago: African American Images, 2009).

Background

Since the inception of Hip Hop culture roughly half a century ago, we have seen a steady increase in its impact on societies across the globe, most notably in popular culture.⁶ Yet the influence of Hip Hop is also increasingly evident in social institutions. Two areas where this impact has been most apparent in recent decades is well-being⁷ and education.⁸ This impact is demonstrated, in part, by growing scholarly attention to the ability of Hip Hop-informed programs, pedagogies, and interventions to support youth development.⁹ This has led to two bodies of literature that are developing in parallel: (1) Hip Hop-based education, and (2) Hip Hop-informed well-being strategies.

While each of these bodies of literature is distinct in its focus and purpose, they share several key tenets. This includes the idea that Hip Hop-informed practices offer an alternative approach to services which sit in juxtaposition to, or directly challenge, the systems of oppression embedded within the mainstream social institutions of colonial or colonized nations.¹⁰ In education, this includes critical pedagogies which seek to help students uncover and problematize dominant narratives contained within sanctioned knowledge and learning practices.¹¹ In the well-being space, this includes using narratives within Hip Hop culture to help clients and professionals unpack the impact of culture, world view, and systemic marginalization on individual well-being.¹²

⁶ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2007).

⁷ Susan Hadley and G. Yancy, *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁸ Emery Petchauer, "Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 2 (2009): 946–978.

⁹ See Travis; Michael Viega, "Exploring the Discourse in Hip Hop and Implications for Music Therapy Practice," *Music Therapy Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (2016): 138–146, <https://doi.org/10.1093/Mtp/Miv035>; and Emdin, *For White Folks*.

¹⁰ Daudi Abe, "Hip-Hop and the Academic Canon," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 4, no. 3 (2009): 263–272; T. Tomás Alvarez, "Beats, Rhymes, and Life: Rap Therapy in an Urban Setting," in *Therapeutic Uses of Rap and Hip-Hop*, ed. Susan Hadley and George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 117–128; and A. A. Akom, "Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy as a Form of Liberatory Praxis," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 42, no. 1 (2009): 52–66.

¹¹ H. Samy Alim, "Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies: Combat, Consciousness, and the Cultural Politics of Communication," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 6, no. 2 (2007): 161–176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348450701341378>.

¹² Raphael Travis and Anne Deepak, "Empowerment in Context: Lessons from Hip-Hop Culture for Social Work Practice," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 20, no. 3 (2011): 203–222; Raphael Travis, Scott W. Bowman, Joshua Childs, and Renee Villanueva, "Musical Interactions: Girls Who Like and Use Rap Music for Empowerment," in *Symbolic Interactionist Takes on Music*, ed. C. J. Schneider and J. A. Kotarba (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group, 2016), 119–149; and Ahmad Rashad Washington, "Integrating Hip-Hop Culture and Rap Music into Social Justice Counseling with Black Males," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 96, no. 1 (2018): 97–105, <https://doi.org/10.1002/Jcad.12181>.

Considering the obvious overlap between these two areas, the lack of literature which directly assesses links between Hip Hop and well-being in school settings is surprising. To address this gap and help shed some light on this specific area, we undertook a narrative synthesis of twenty-two peer-reviewed research articles investigating the outcomes of school-based well-being interventions that included Hip Hop. This narrative synthesis identified many of the more practical aspects of the existing research in this area, including the key intervention approaches, constructs of well-being addressed, and the ways in which Hip Hop has been used.¹³ The current article extends on this previous review by undertaking a critical interpretive synthesis to identify any assumptions that may be influencing both research and practice in this area. Critical discourses including critical pedagogy,¹⁴ critical race theory,¹⁵ critical applied linguistics and many more¹⁶ have been consistently centralized across different areas of Hip Hop studies. Given this primacy of critical thinking in Hip Hop discourses, we considered this extra level of critical analysis necessary to link, and more faithfully align with, approaches in existing areas of Hip Hop studies. Furthermore, scholars argue the need to evaluate approaches when introducing Hip Hop into academic and well-being practices as there is a risk to perpetuate dominant narratives or expose students to ongoing trauma. To address these risks and support positive growth in research exploring the well-being benefits of Hip Hop in schools,¹⁷ this critical interpretive synthesis aims to identify key assumptions, narratives, or patterns that emerged in relation to the way this research has been conducted so far. We hope that in identifying and assessing these, this article will provide a valuable resource to guide future research exploring the well-being affordances of Hip Hop in schools.

Methodology: Critical Interpretive Syntheses

To explore themes and ideas in the existing literature, we chose a Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) approach to analysis. The CIS approach is an established method of data collection used when standard literature review methods are unsuitable: “Conventional systematic review techniques have limitations when the aim of a review is to construct a critical analysis of a complex body of literature.”¹⁸ The CIS approach is

¹³ Alexander Hew Dale Crooke, Rachael Comte, and C. Moreno-Almeida, “Hip Hop as an Agent for Health and Well-being in Schools: A Narrative Synthesis of Existing Research,” *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 20, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.15845/Voices.V20i1.2870>.

¹⁴ Alim.

¹⁵ Akom.

¹⁶ H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, eds., *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁷ Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in A Changing World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Mary Dixon-Woods, Debbie Cavers, Shona Agarwal, Ellen Annandale, Antony Arthur, Janet Harvey, Ron Hsu, Savita Katbamna, Richard Olsen, and Lucy Smith, “Conducting A Critical Interpretive

also noted useful for exploring issues around “access to healthcare by vulnerable groups.”¹⁹

More specifically, the CIS can be understood as playing dual roles; 1) integrating information from a diverse range of studies on a certain topic, and 2) critically interrogating or interpreting results (and studies) to identify non-explicit understandings of how a field approaches or understands phenomena under investigation. This second role best distinguishes a CIS from standard systematic literature reviews or syntheses, which often focus on describing or aggregating results across studies. Beyond description and aggregation, a CIS seeks to interpret how approaches to, or presentations of research may indicate unspoken assumptions or value systems.²⁰ This helps uncover how researchers, or a whole field, may “conceptualize and construct the phenomenon under consideration.”²¹

Ellen Annandale, Janet Harvey, Debbie Cavers, and Mary Dixon-Woods describe the CIS as a dynamic, iterative, recursive process.²² Researchers go back and forth to the data, searching for and interrogating themes that emerge across studies which may reveal explicit or implicit understandings within an area of study. This flexible approach allows researchers to develop and revise research questions as new themes or understandings arise from the data.²³

Selection of Literature

Literature was identified and retrieved systematically, via searching for all peer-reviewed research articles reporting on the outcomes of school-based well-being interventions that included one or more elements of Hip Hop culture. A wide range of databases were searched (see Table 1) using the terms: “Hip Hop” (or “Hip-Hop” or

Synthesis of the Literature on Access to Healthcare by Vulnerable Groups,” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 6, no. 1, art. 35 (2006): para. 1.

¹⁹ Dixon-Woods et al., paragraph 1.

²⁰ Katrina Skewes McFerran, Sandra Garrido, and Suvi Saarikallio, “A Critical Interpretive Synthesis of the Literature Linking Music and Adolescent Mental Health,” *Youth & Society* 48, no. 4 (2013): 521–538, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X13501343>.

²¹ Angela Harden and James Thomas, “Mixed Methods and Systematic Reviews: Examples and Emerging Issues,” in *Sage Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*, ed. Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 755.

²² Ellen Annandale, Janet Harvey, Debbie Cavers, and Mary Dixon-Woods, “Gender and Access to Healthcare in the UK: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis of the Literature,” *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice* 3, no. 4 (2007): 463–486, <https://doi.org/10.1332/174426407782516538>.

²³ Melissa Al Murphy and Katrina McFerran, “Exploring the Literature on Music Participation and Social Connectedness for Young People with Intellectual Disability: A Critical Interpretive Synthesis,” *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 21, no. 4 (2017): 297–314, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629516650128>.

“HipHop” or “Rap”) AND “Health” (or “Well-being” or “Well being” or “Well-being” or “Quality of life” or “Therapy” or “Counseling or “Counselling”) and “School” (or “Education” or “Classroom” or “Student” or “Class”).

Index/Database	Date of Search
Discovery (University of Melbourne Library Search Engine)	15/05/2017
EBSCO Host	15/05/2017
Academic Search Complete	15/05/2017
America: History & Life	16/05/2017
CINAHL Complete	16/05/2017
Education Research Complete	16/05/2017
ERIC	16/05/2017
Family & Society Studies Worldwide	16/05/2017
SocINDEX	16/05/2017
Music Index	16/05/2017
MEDLINE	16/05/2017
Humanities International Complete	16/05/2017
Art Index Retrospective (H.W. Wilson)	16/05/2017
Communication & Mass Media Complete	16/05/2017
Ovid	16/05/2017
Proquest	16/05/2017
Web of science	23/05/2017
Joanna Briggs Inst.	24/05/2017
Cochrane Library	24/05/2017
CAIRSS for music	24/05/2017
JStor Library	24/05/2017
Science Direct	24/05/2017
Scopus	26/05/2017
Informit	26/05/2017
Taylor and Francis Online	03/06/2017

Table 1 *Databases and Search Date*

Initial searches returned 3,122 articles. These was reduced to a final sample of twenty-two papers when results were limited to peer-reviewed, full text articles, and exclusion criteria were applied, which included: duplicates; studies not reporting well-

being outcomes; studies not located in schools; studies without a clear connection to Hip Hop culture. A full account of this process is reported elsewhere.²⁴

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed iteratively over sixteen months. The first iteration occurred during the literature search, where authors kept notes about key themes that emerged during the process. Upon selection of the final twenty-two papers, data was extracted to undertake the previously reported narrative synthesis.²⁵ During this process, Alexander Hew Dale Crooke and Cristina Moreno-Almeida kept updated notes and discussed emerging categories with Rachael Comte online. These notes were put aside while conducting the narrative synthesis yet revisited during the final write-up of results, at which stage the authors were sufficiently familiar with the data to identify the most salient themes for the CIS. A list of key themes was then used to reinterrogate the twenty-two articles and start constructing the results. During this construction, themes were updated as new topics and relationships between them emerged. Analysis was considered complete once all themes that surfaced over the sixteen months had been explored across the twenty-two articles and results had been written up.

Position of Authors

In line with the critical approach taken, and findings and recommendations presented below, we situate this study within the context of the authors' own relationships to Hip Hop culture. This aims to maintain a position of transparency in how these relationships may have impacted chosen research questions, analysis, results, and discussion. Crooke is a white, straight, CIS-gendered male who grew up in Australia. He became an avid listener of Hip Hop music in the late 1990s and has been actively engaged with the culture as a DJ/turndablist, record collector, and beat maker for almost twenty years. After combining his passion for Hip Hop culture with an existing research career, Crooke has been working as a Hip Hop scholar and educator for approximately three years. Comte has been researching Hip Hop in non-Western contexts for the past eight years. Growing up listening to Cuban rap, she became a fan of North African rap. She has lived for over five years in Morocco, where she has actively contributed to the Hip Hop scene by organizing concerts and public debates, as well as through cultural programs such as one which brought together Colombian and Moroccan rappers. Moreno-Almeida is a white, Australian, straight, CIS-gendered female who is a practicing musician in folk and jazz scenes. She has been working with

²⁴ Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.

²⁵ Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.

youth in custody for the past three years, with a strong focus on Hip Hop and Trap song-writing methods.

Results and Discussion

Results are presented in relation to key themes or patterns which emerged during analysis. We discuss each in relation to wider literature to explore potential implications for research and practice.

Focus on Rap

Research has overwhelmingly (68%) focused on using “rap” as the primary medium to address well-being (see Table 2). Most significantly this includes writing rap lyrics,²⁶ but included other active methods like performing raps,²⁷ analyzing lyrics,²⁸ and lyric analysis.²⁹ Passive methods included exposing students to rap songs through

²⁶ See Christopher Emdin, E. Adjapong, and Ian Levy, “Hip-Hop Based Interventions as Pedagogy/Therapy in STEM: A Model from Urban Science Education,” *Journal for Multicultural Education* 10, no. 3 (2016): 307–321, <https://doi.org/10.1108/Jme-03-2016-0023>; Tabia Henry Akintobi, Jennie C. Trotter, Donaria Evans, Tarita Johnson, Nastassia Laster, Debran Jacobs, and Tandeca King, “Applications in Bridging the Gap: A Community-Campus Partnership to Address Sexual Health Disparities Among African American Youth in the South,” *Journal of Community Health* 36, no. 3 (2011): 486–494. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10900-010-9332-8>; Alan Crouch, Heather Robertson, and Patricia Fagan, “Hip Hopping the Gap – Performing Arts Approaches to Sexual Health Disadvantage in Young People in Remote Settings,” *Australasian Psychiatry* 19 (2011): S34–S37, <https://doi.org/10.3109/10398562.2011.583046>; Gretchen Ennis, Heather Clark, and Fraser Corfield, “Adventure Territory: An Action Evaluation of An Outback Australian Performance Project,” *Youth Theatre Journal* 28, no. 2 (2014): 115–129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2014.932876>; and Shaniece Criss, Lilian Cheung, Catherine Giles, Steven Gortmaker, Kasisomayajula Viswanath, Jo-Ann Kwass, and Kirsten Davison, “Media Competition Implementation for the Massachusetts Childhood Obesity Research Demonstration Study (MA-CORD): Adoption and Reach,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13, no. 4 (2016): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.3390/Ijerph13040403>.

²⁷ See Ernesta Paukste and Neil Harris, “Using Rap Music to Promote Adolescent Health: Pilot Study of Voxbox,” *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 26, no. 1 (2015): 24–29, <https://doi.org/10.1071/HE14054>.

²⁸ See Marc Lamont Hill, “Wounded Healing: Forming A Storytelling Community in Hip-Hop Lit,” *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 1 (2009): 248–93; Carla Boutin-Foster, Nadine McLaughlin, Angela Gray, Anthony Ogedegbe, Ivan Hageman, Courtney Knowlton, Anna Rodriguez, and Ann Beeder, “Reducing HIV and AIDS Through Prevention (RHAP): A Theoretically Based Approach for Teaching HIV Prevention to Adolescents Through an Exploration of Popular Music,” *Journal of Urban Health* 87, no. 3 (2010): 440–451, <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11524-010-9435-7>; and Alonzo DeCarlo and Elaine Hockman, “RAP Therapy: A Group Work Intervention Method for Urban Adolescents,” *Social Work with Groups* 26, no. 3 (2004): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v26n03_06.

²⁹ See Tiphonie Gonzalez and B. Grant Hayes, “Rap Music in School Counseling Based on Don Elligan’s *Rap Therapy*,” *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 4, no. 2 (2009): 161–172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401380902945293>; and Leah Olson-McBride and Timothy F. Page, “Song to

audio recordings,³⁰ videos,³¹ and performances.³²

The focus on rap is perhaps not surprising given it has been the most popular and well-known element of Hip Hop culture since the early 1980s, at which stage the popularity of breaking, graffiti, and DJing had given way to the prominence of the Emcee.³³ Rap has since dominated discussions in media and academia and has become the most marketable, profitable—and arguably most demonized—of all elements.³⁴ It has also been centered in existing academic discourse around the therapeutic potential of Hip Hop.³⁵

The popularity or pervasiveness of rap in commercial media, and consequent place in mainstream consciousness, may have impacted its prevalence in this work compared to other elements. Few authors reported personal connections with Hip Hop culture, yet the way Hip Hop is described and positioned suggests these connections varied. Some positioned Hip Hop as a culture, referencing its different elements³⁶ and socio-political roots,³⁷ suggesting at the very least an informed understanding of Hip Hop. Others positioned Hip Hop as an activity, genre or artform, primarily related to

Self: Promoting a Therapeutic Dialogue with High-Risk Youths Through Poetry and Popular Music," *Social Work with Groups* 35, no. 2 (2012): 124–137, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2011.603117>.

³⁰ See Itsuko Yoshida, Toshio Kobayashi, Sabitri Sapkota, and Kongsap Akkhavong, "A Scale to Evaluate Music for Health Promotion in Lao PDR: Initial Development and Assessment," *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice* 5, no. 2 (2013): 120–131, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.736395>.

³¹ See Steve Sussman, Vanessa C. Parker, Cheryl Lopes, David L. Crippens, Pam Elder, and Donna Scholl, "Empirical Development of Brief Smoking Prevention Videotapes Which Target African-American Adolescents," *International Journal of the Addictions* 30, no. 9 (1995): 1141–1164, <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826089509055832> (Sussman et al. 1995, Tucker et al. 1999, Lamb and Randazzo 2016)

³² Olajide Williams and James M. Noble, "'Hip-Hop' Stroke—A Stroke Educational Program for Elementary School Children Living in a High-Risk Community," *Stroke* 39, no. 10 (2008): 2815, <https://doi.org/10.1161/STROKEAHA.107.513143>. (Williams and Noble 2008)

³³ Chang.

³⁴ For examples, see Denise Herd, "Changes in Drug Use Prevalence in Rap Music Songs, 1979–1997," *Addiction Research & Theory* 16, no. 2 (2008): 167–180; T. L. Kandakai, J. H. Price, S. K. Telljohann, and C. A. Wilson, "Mothers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Violence in Schools," *Journal of School Health* 69, no. 5 (1999): 189–195; and Charis E. Kubrin, "Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music," *Social Problems* 52, no. 3 (2005): 360–378.

³⁵ Travis, *The Healing Power of Hip Hop*; and Viega.

³⁶ See Boutin-Foster et al.; Emdin, Adjapong, and Levy, "Hip Hop-Based Interventions"; Gonzalez and Hayes; Neil Harris, Leigh Wilks, and Donald Stewart, "Hyped-Up: Youth Dance Culture and Health," *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice* 4, no. 3 (2012): 239–248, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.677849>; Sussman et al.; and Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin, and Edmund S. Adjapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work," *Social Work with Groups*: (2017): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2016.1275265>.

³⁷ DeCarlo and Hockman; and Hill, "Wounded Healing."

music, suggesting a more limited or compartmentalized view of Hip Hop primarily as rap music.³⁸ Others offered little to no description of Hip Hop (or rap) at all,³⁹ and while this may be due to journal word count, it may also indicate limited familiarity. Perhaps this unfamiliarity, combined with the popularity of rap in mainstream consciousness, positions rap as the default for Hip Hop in this space; or perhaps there is an underlying assumption that Hip Hop is most relevant when it's rap.

Author	Year	Primary Discipline	Country of intervention	Primary form of Hip Hop used
Sussman, et al.	1995	Public health	USA	Rap
Tucker, et al.	1999	Public health	USA	Rap
DeCarlo & Hockman	2004	Social work	USA	Rap
Williams & Noble	2008	Public health	USA	Rap
Hill	2009	Education	USA	Rap
Gonzalez & Hayes	2009	School counselling	USA	Rap
Boutin-Foster, et al.	2010	Public health	USA	Rap
Crouch, Robertson & Fagan	2011	Public health	Australia	Rap & Dance
Akintobi, et al.	2011	Public health	USA	Rap
Harris, Wilks & Stewart	2012	Public health	Australia	Dance
Romero	2012	Public health	USA	Culture
Olsen-McBride & Page	2012	Social work	USA	Rap
McEwan, et al.	2013	Public health	Australia	Rap & Dance
Yoshida, et al	2013	Public health	Lao PDR	Rap
Ennis, Clark & Corfield	2014	Theatre	Australia	Rap
Paukste & Harris	2015	Public health	Australia	Rap

³⁸ See James M. Noble, M. G. Hedmann, and Olajide Williams, "Improving Dementia Health Literacy Using the FLOW Mnemonic: Pilot Findings from the Old School Hip-Hop Program," *Health Education & Behavior* 42, no. 1 (2015): 73–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198114537063>; (Noble, Hedmann, and Williams 2015, Olson-McBride and Page 2012, Romero 2012, Williams et al. 2016, Williams and Noble 2008, Yoshida et al. 2013)

³⁹ Lamb and Randazzo; Tucker et al.; Akintobi et al.; Criss et al.; Crouch, Robertson, and Fagan; and Alexandra McEwan, Alan Crouch, Heather Robertson, and Patricia Fagan, "The Torres Indigenous Hip Hop Project: Evaluating the Use of Performing Arts as a Medium for Sexual Health Promotion," *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 24, no. 2 (2013): 132–136, <https://doi.org/10.1071/HE12924>.

Noble, Hedmann & Williams	2015	Public health	USA	Culture
Emdin, Adjapong & Levy	2016	Education	USA	Rap
Lamb & Randazzo	2016	Education	USA	Rap
Williams, et al.	2016	Public health	USA	Culture
Criss, et al.	2016	Public health	USA	Rap
Levy, Emdin & Adjapong	2017	Social work	USA	Culture

Table 2 *Articles reviewed, and descriptive information*

Another explanation is that rap is the most available and easiest to consume for youth. The central role music plays in youth's lives is well documented.⁴⁰ Thus, rap may also be the element youth engage with most, offering further explanation for its prevalence in the reviewed research. The mere accessibility of recorded rap music, or the fact writing or performing rhymes is possible in most settings with minimal material investment, may be another factor. This accessibility makes it the least resource-intensive and could be seen to require little from facilitators—particularly when using receptive approaches. Similarly, there may be a relationship between the relative ease for academics to identify themes related to well-being, identity or politics in lyrics when compared to breaking or DJing. This aligns with Joseph G. Schloss's argument in *Making Beats* that the cultural, historical, and aesthetic complexity of other elements means scholars have largely focused on studying rap.⁴¹

There also appears a link to the primacy of oral language in health interventions. The ability to explicitly communicate messages about well-being seems a key motivation for its use in the public health interventions and psycho-education programs that rely on written or verbal language to transmit information. In therapeutic approaches, rap was often seen to offer the words (and the themes and life experiences expressed through them) necessary to connect with youth or certain communities. It was also presented as a more engaging or less confronting way to facilitate the types of conversations usually broached in talk-based therapies, either through writing or

⁴⁰ Katrina Skewes McFerran, *Adolescents, Music and Music Therapy: Methods and Techniques for Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London: Kingsley Publishing, 2010); Katrina Skewes McFerran and Suvi Saarikallio, "Depending on Music to Feel Better: Being Conscious of Responsibility When Appropriating the Power of Music," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 41 (2014): 89-97, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2013.11.007>; and Suvi Saarkallio and Jaakko Erkkilä, "The Role of Music in Adolescents' Mood Regulation," *Psychology of Music* 35, no. 1 (2007): 88-109.

⁴¹ Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

discussing lyrics. These rationales align with music therapy practice and theory,⁴² and can be seen to underpin the different iterations⁴³ of rap therapy and its particular relevance to youth of color.⁴⁴

Use of rap as literary text and its ready translation to school settings also seemed important. The ability to integrate rap into existing school programs or activities appeared fundamental to at least two articles investigating interventions embedded within the curriculum.⁴⁵ Here, Marc Lamont Hill as well as Christopher Emdin, Edmund S. Adjapong, and Ian Levy reported that the writing and analyzing of raps to achieve educational goals afforded important opportunities for self-reflection, connection, and subsequent psychosocial benefits. This aligns with how rap lyrics have been used as texts for critical pedagogy,⁴⁶ and the sizable amount of literature exploring the diverse roles of rap in curriculum and pedagogy.⁴⁷ Rationales for using rap also related to particular stylistic qualities, including the speed and rhythm of the music, the idea that it is “readily learned,” and value of call and response for information retention.⁴⁸

While these factors suggest rap is a logical choice in this space, it does invite the question of whether other elements of Hip Hop are suitable for addressing well-being in schools. The only other element reported⁴⁹ as the focus of a program was “dance,”⁵⁰ however dance often shared this focus with rap.⁵¹ Some reported more holistic approaches, centering three or more elements in a way that made explicit reference to

⁴² Kenneth E. Bruscia, *Defining Music Therapy* (3rd ed., Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers, 2014); and McFerran.

⁴³ Don Elligan, *Rap Therapy: A Practical Guide for Communicating with Youth and Young Adults Through Rap Music* (New York: Kensington Books, 2004); Caroline Kobin and Edgar Tyson, “Thematic Analysis of Hip-Hop Music: Can Hip-Hop in Therapy Facilitate Empathic Connections When Working with Clients in Urban Settings?” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 33, no. 4 (2006): 343–356, <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.Aip.2006.05.001>; and Edgar H. Tyson, “Hip Hop Therapy: An Exploratory Study of a Rap Music Intervention with At-Risk and Delinquent Youth,” *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 15, no. 3 (2002): 131–144.

⁴⁴ Alvarez.

⁴⁵ Emdin, Adjapong, and Levy, “Hip-Hop Based Interventions”; and Hill, “Wounded Healing.”

⁴⁶ David Stovall, “We Can Relate: Hip-Hop Culture, Critical Pedagogy, and the Secondary Classroom,” *Urban Education* 41, no. 6 (2006): 585–602, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085906292513>.

⁴⁷ Petchauer, “Framing and Reviewing Hip-Hop Educational Research.”

⁴⁸ Noble, Hedmann, and Williams.

⁴⁹ Harris, Wilks, and Stewart.

⁵⁰ It is acknowledged the dance element of Hip Hop culture is more often referred to as B-Girling/B-Boying or breaking. However, the term “dance” is used here to reflect language used in the reviewed articles.

⁵¹ McEwan et al.

their shared position in Hip Hop culture.⁵² We understood these studies as using “Hip Hop culture” as a medium to impact well-being, rather than distinct elements. Outcomes from these dance or culture studies do indicate their value for well-being, with culture-based approaches emerging as particularly valuable. That significantly fewer studies reported on non-rap focused interventions indicates an area with significant scope for future study. This aligns with wider calls to explore the well-being benefits of interventions which employ multiple Hip Hop elements.⁵³

Focus on US Students of Color in Underprivileged Inner-city Neighborhoods

Just as rap emerged as the default for Hip Hop, the relationship between Hip Hop and well-being emerged most relevant in the US, with students of color living in disadvantaged inner-city communities. This was evidenced by the fact sixteen of twenty-two studies were located in the US and involved primarily African American participants.⁵⁴ Students of Hispanic (including Mexican/Mexican-American; Romero 2012) Asian, Native American,⁵⁵ Pacific Islander, and “mixed heritage” backgrounds⁵⁶ were also prominent. Most of these studies were also located in inner-city neighborhoods.⁵⁷

This focus is again logical given Hip Hop originated within inner-city neighborhoods of US cities and speaks directly to the realities of African American and Afro-Latinx communities, and we do not dispute this relevance remains.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it begs the question of whether Hip Hop is seen as only relevant for people of color and disadvantaged communities and whether this perceived relevance is shaped by an underlying assumption that goes beyond cultural and historical links. This question becomes more relevant considering that even Australian studies have focused on

⁵² Williams et al.; Romero; Levy, Emdin, and Adajapong, “Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work”; and Noble, Hedmann, and Williams.

⁵³ Travis and Viega.

⁵⁴ Gonzalez and Hayes; Hill, “Wounded Healing”; Lamb and Randazzo; and Noble, Hedmann, and Williams.

⁵⁵ Akintobi et al.

⁵⁶ Sussman et al.

⁵⁷ Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.

⁵⁸ Chang; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Tricia Rose, *The Hip-Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip-Hop and Why it Matters* (New York: Civitas Books, 2008); and Venice Thandi Sulé, “White Privilege? The Intersection of Hip-Hop and Whiteness as a Catalyst for Cross-Racial Interaction among White Males,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 48, no. 2 (2015): 212–226.

Indigenous⁵⁹ and diverse students from low socio-economic backgrounds.⁶⁰ Again, this suggests an assumed best-fit between these communities and Hip Hop.

This focus on marginalized students of color is also reported in the field of Hip Hop pedagogy. In a Facebook post, Dr. Jarritt Sheel offered a critical take on what might be seen as a narrow view of the relevance of Hip Hop in this space:

The general narrative that hip-hop pedagogies [...] can only benefit children of color, and those on the margin is simply reductive and simplistic. Hip-hop, like all music, has portions that are universal and others that are very specific in nature (cultural references). HOWEVER, because the times we live in (contemporary times) and the nature of how interconnected our society is, hip-hop is world-wide – EVERYWHERE. So, it benefits ALL to explore, examine and interrogate it.⁶¹

Through ensuing discussion, Sheel and other scholars such as Adam J. Kruse suggest that while the voices of marginalized communities should remain foregrounded in this exploration, many aspects of Hip Hop have value for the world at large (including the foregrounding of marginalized voices).⁶² Martin Urbach has expanded this further, arguing that limiting relevance to disadvantaged or non-white communities can perpetuate narratives of oppression:

On top of being simply reductive and simplistic, that view upholds white supremacy culture. Got a misbehaved class? Teach them hiphop. Teach in a “title 1” school teach them hiphop. Teach in an Urban school? Teach them hiphop. Kids are disengaged? Teach them hiphop. Kids destroy instruments? Teach them hiphop. Don’t have any budget? Teach them hiphop. Are you afraid your classes look like a shitshow because X and your principal is gonna show up? Teach them hiphop.⁶³

This quote appears to speak to an underlying assumption that white or mainstream communities don’t need Hip Hop. Rather it is something brought in only as a last resort or a pacifier for non-dominant peoples. This has clear implications for the othering of such peoples and introduces the idea that Hip Hop interventions are code for strategies to work with students beyond the reach of interventions for people of a dominant culture. An example of this in the reviewed articles comes from Steve Sussman et al., who, after comparing the use of soap opera-styled and rap-themed videotapes to deliver health messages, offer this key recommendation:

⁵⁹ McEwan et al.

⁶⁰ Paukste and Harris.

⁶¹ Jarrit Sheel, Facebook, Sept. 3, 2018

⁶² Sheel; and Adam J. Kruse, “‘Therapy Was Writing Rhymes’: Hip-Hop as Resilient Space for A Queer Rapper of Color,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* nos. 207-08 (2016): 101-122. <https://doi.org/10.5406/Bulcouresmusedu.207-208.0101>.

⁶³ Martin Urbach, Facebook, Sept. 3, 2018.

The soap videotape is the preferred one to show to general audiences, although the rap videotape should be used with higher risk hip-hop oriented youth. This recommendation is made because the results [...] indicate that the soap videotape is better liked by students, and [...] that such a less extreme approach would have a longer shelf-life and be more well-received by adult gatekeepers. On the other hand, the rap videotape is considered more believable and more accurate in its depiction of African-American culture. Also, hip-hop oriented audiences are likely to better receive the rap videotape because of its explicit appeal to the hip-hop culture.⁶⁴

Venice Thandi Sulé explains such positioning as playing into a larger process where “despite its appeal in a culture where whiteness is the norm [...] hip-hop remains stigmatized because of its association with the black experience, which is often framed as dysfunctional and criminal in public discourse.”⁶⁵ Sulé further argues, given a substantial percentage of the Hip Hop fanbase are white and Hip Hop remains centered on Black, urban identity, engaging those from the dominant white culture offers a powerful opportunity to address issues around white privilege, cross-racial interactions, and social equity. While such issues may not be a priority for all well-being interventions, the ability for Hip Hop programs to provide a space for such culture-centered discussions indicates important potential for social-focused interventions.

From an international perspective, “people of colour” may not resonate or be a significant identifier for some communities or individuals facing marginalization. The complexities of Australia’s colonial history mean skin color is a problematic identifier for some Indigenous Peoples.⁶⁶ This introduces further nuance to underlying assumptions that Hip Hop is most relevant to students of colour.

It’s unlikely existing research has intentionally sought to establish Hip Hop programs as deficit-based interventions. Neither have they focused solely on disadvantaged students of color living in inner-city neighborhoods. Several studies include white students⁶⁷ or were located in rural or suburban areas.⁶⁸ Some studies also recommended the applicability of Hip Hop-based programs for other socioeconomic groups. Nevertheless, there appears to be a sustained focus. For example, in 2008, Olajide Williams and James N. Noble stated:

⁶⁴ Sussman, Parker, Lopes, Crippens, Elder, and Scholl, 1155.

⁶⁵ Sulé, 213.

⁶⁶ Suzi Hutchings, “Indigenous Anthropologists Caught in the Middle: The Fragmentation of Indigenous Knowledge in Native Title Anthropology, Law and Policy in Urban and Rural Australia,” in *Transcontinental Dialogues: Activist Research and Alliances from and with Indigenous Peoples of Canada, Mexico and Australia*, edited by R. Aída Hernández Castillo, Suzi Hutchings, and Brian Noble (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 193–219.

⁶⁷ Criss et al.

⁶⁸ Paukste and Harris.

The generalizability of this version of HHS [Hip Hop Stroke] to other ethnic groups or to suburban and rural areas is uncertain. The majority of central Harlem's elementary school students are African-American or Caribbean-Hispanic. Given the adaptability of HHS to popular culture, it may be effective among diverse groups.⁶⁹

Yet, seven years later the same authors reported ongoing concentration in this area:

Given the ubiquitous nature of hip-hop in popular culture [...] it may be effective among diverse sociodemographic groups beyond those studied here. Our program has not yet been tested outside of Manhattan, New York City, although our group is currently exploring generalizability of our other hip-hop-themed programs to other communities, given hip-hop's broad appeal.⁷⁰

Despite recognition of a gap, these quotes suggest sustained focus in this area. Yet, the value of widening the purview of research seems important. As noted, Hip Hop has significant appeal across a broad cross-section of society, yet its potential in supporting student well-being throughout this cross-section remains underexplored. Again, an international lens amplifies this issue; despite a handful of studies in Australia and one in Lao PDR,⁷¹ research is overwhelmingly concentrated in the US. This jars with the extensive adoption of Hip Hop culture across the globe⁷² and signifies a major gap in current research.⁷³

The Idea of Cultural Relevance

Hip Hop's function of making well-being interventions relevant to the cultural experience of the "default" communities mentioned above was the most salient theme to emerge across studies. While terminology used to describe this notion ranged from "cultural relevance" to "cultural targeting", "cultural familiarity", "culturally appropriate", and "culturally sensitive", several assumptions appeared to underpin these culturally bound justifications for using Hip Hop. While acknowledging the important role Hip Hop plays in grounding programs and activities within youth culture—particularly those traditionally marginalized⁷⁴—we suggest this concept

⁶⁹ Williams and Noble.

⁷⁰ Noble, Hedmann, and Williams, "Improving Dementia Health Literacy," 80.

⁷¹ Itsuko Yoshida, Toshio Kobayashi, Sabitri Sapkota, and Kongsap Akkhavong, "A Scale to Evaluate Music for Health Promotion in Lao PDR: Initial Development and Assessment," *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice* 5, no. 2 (2013): 120–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.736395>.

⁷² Tony Mitchell, ed., *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); and Marcyliena Morgan, "'The world is yours': The Globalization of Hip-Hop Language," *Social Identities* 22, no. 2 (2016): 133–149.

⁷³ This research gap may well be amplified in this review given only papers in English were included in the analysis.

⁷⁴ Alvarez; and Travis.

requires critical assessment in several areas. The first involves student perceptions of relevance, and their experience of engagement. Many studies, particularly those using quantitative methods, appear to assume students perceived programs as authentic representations of Hip Hop. James B. Tucker compared the suitability of a rap video against a generic or “commercial” video in raising student awareness about violence and trauma. Students reported the commercial video as more effective. This may be explained by the fact the rap video was created by violence prevention staff (whose connection with Hip Hop is unclear), and therefore perhaps insufficiently representative of students’ experience of Hip Hop. This contrasts with several studies that did engage Hip Hop community members—who were actively practicing a given element (i.e., Emceeing or Breaking)—to design or deliver programs. Here, engaging members of the Hip Hop community was reported critical for achieving observed outcomes.⁷⁵ Thus, maintaining authentic connection to Hip Hop culture seems paramount when implementing interventions under the rationale of cultural relevance.

Further, fostering or maintaining genuine connection to the Hip Hop community also presents social justice issues; when cultural relevance is cited as central to a program, youth have the right to authentic cultural experiences within those programs. Additionally, Hip Hop has been historically marginalized in mainstream institutions⁷⁶ and appropriated by dominant cultural groups in Western countries,⁷⁷ meaning practitioners of Hip Hop are often excluded from practicing in such spaces, while facilitators with little or no connection to the culture are positioned as representatives in their place. This misses an important opportunity to engage and acknowledge the value of marginalized Hip Hop practitioners, placing an onus on researchers or practitioners wanting to utilize Hip Hop to be respectful and responsible in this space.

Researchers and practitioners should also evaluate how they engage with the idea of cultural relevance. Is it just a convenient way to “reach youth,” or is there genuine and critical engagement with how Hip Hop relates to the reality of the students? Ian Levy, Christopher Emdin, and Edmund S. Adjapong write explicitly about how their participants (students of color in inner-city neighborhoods) were negatively affected by a system (government, education, and health systems) that demonize them, which in turn impacts their willingness to engage in well-being services seen as part of

⁷⁵ For examples, see Williams and Noble; and Paukste and Harris.

⁷⁶ Robert Murray Thomas, *What Schools Ban and Why* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008); and Ethan Hein, *Teaching Whiteness in Music Class*, the Ethan Hein Blog, May 18, 2018, <http://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2018/teaching-whiteness-in-music-class/>.

⁷⁷ Kruse, ““Therapy was writing rhymes,””; and Jason Rodruiguez, “Color-Blind Ideology and The Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 6 (2006): 645–668, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606286997>.

that same system.⁷⁸ They then present Hip Hop as something that both relates directly to their particular lived experience—beyond fashion and slang, but as a culture that explicitly seeks to voice resistance to the same system that marginalizes them—and also offers an alternative to existing services or programs. Here, clear links are drawn between how Hip Hop is positioned in relation to the socio-cultural realities of students, and how this positioning can generate meaningful participation and specific well-being outcomes.

This same depth is not evident in all studies. Many appear to rely on perceived relevance to students, and assumptions this relevance is sufficient to engage youth without having to address any potentially contributing systemic issues. A different issue is where such systemic issues are acknowledged, yet the relevance of Hip Hop to the context is not sufficiently explored. Gretchen Ennis, Heather Clark, and Fraser Corfield write:

The impacts of colonization on Indigenous Australian communities have been devastating [...] Understanding the historical and lived realities of Australian colonization and its manifestations in particular communities is critical for community arts programs to avoid reproducing already existing social inequalities.⁷⁹

Yet, there is no discussion of how Hip Hop relates either to this community, or issues of colonization more broadly. This suggests interventions would benefit from engaging with the concept of cultural relevance beyond what is appealing to students, including how it relates to their socio-cultural situation and constructs of well-being addressed.

Considering whether Hip Hop does constitute relevance to the socio-cultural reality of given student groups becomes critical if researchers follow recommendations to explore benefits in wider populations. Such recommendations are inevitably based on claims for the “wide appeal” of Hip Hop to youth. Yet, there is little critical engagement with what constitutes this appeal beyond relevance to disadvantaged communities or global youth culture. This begs the question of how youth culture is conceived at a global level—is it something that is homogenous around the world? Itsuko Yoshida et al. found students living in a major Laotian city considered Hip Hop as less effective or relevant for promoting well-being messages than traditional string or folk music.⁸⁰ This suggests, whether or not Hip Hop had “appeal” to these youth, it was less relevant for supporting well-being in their cultural context.

⁷⁸ Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong, “Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work.”

⁷⁹ Ennis, Clark, and Corfield, 117.

⁸⁰ Yoshida, Kobayashi, Sapkota, and Akkhavong.

This is not to say Hip Hop doesn't speak profoundly to the lives of diverse youth globally, there is abundant evidence it does. Yet, it does suggest the need to carefully consider how different student populations experience their connection with Hip Hop and the subsequent impact on well-being interventions. Specifically, it indicates the need to explore intersections between Hip Hop (local and imported), cultural relevance, and well-being in other countries, to ensure researchers and practitioners are better placed to deliver and investigate Hip Hop programs.

Adding Hip Hop versus Working Through It

A difference emerged between studies that centered Hip Hop and those where it was an add-on. Studies positioning Hip Hop as an add-on used Hip Hop-related activities or aesthetics as a way to foster buy-in from participants to an intervention not grounded within the culture or practice of Hip Hop. Here Hip Hop often "serves as a 'hook,' or a means of encouraging attendance and piquing interest" in an intervention for "disengaged" or hard to reach populations.⁸¹ Tabia Henry Akintobi et al. have explained how Hip Hop was used to increase participation and retention in an existing evidence-based intervention model: "Additional programming implemented to increase the effectiveness of the program included art classes that were geared toward and appealed to African-American youth culture such as hip-hop and rap."⁸² Here we see Hip Hop engaged almost as an afterthought to promote appeal or engagement in, or compensate for the (perceivably) unengaging nature of, the 'real' intervention.

While other studies took a more considered approach, often Hip Hop still emerged as a marketing tool rather than an approach or orientation. James B. Tucker et al. (1999) and Sussman et al. (1995) list cultural cues (slang, clothing, graffitied walls, rap music, and breakdancing) embedded within health-promotion material to increase its appeal.⁸³ Olajide Williams and James M. Noble describe engaging long-time rapper Doug-E-Fresh to deliver a rap about stroke.⁸⁴ While this may suggest engagement with Hip Hop culture, it appears more an effort to use the cultural capital offered by Doug-E-Fresh and Hip Hop culture to deliver information from mainstream health discourse. This approach may be aptly framed via the notion of "cultural targeting" used by Olajide Williams et al., which implies that certain cultural cues can be used successfully

⁸¹ Olson-McBride and Page, 125.

⁸² Akintobi et al., 487.

⁸³ James B. Tucker, J. E. Barone, J. Stewart, R. J. Hogan, J. A. Sarnelle, and M. M. Blackwood, "Violence Prevention: Reaching Adolescents with the Message," *Pediatric Emergency Care* 15, no. 6 (1999): 436-439, <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006565-199912000-00019>; and Sussman et al.

⁸⁴ Williams and Noble.

to access, engage, or communicate to certain communities.⁸⁵ For several authors this revolved chiefly around embedding, reframing, or packaging information with/in cultural signifiers so it could be consumed, accessed, or understood in relation to particular students' world realities. We do not deny this approach may prove useful in some contexts, yet we do suggest it limits the potential of Hip Hop in this space to a "sweetener" rather than an agent of well-being.

Conversely, rather than simply adding Hip Hop artifacts as cultural signifiers, interventions that worked through Hip Hop appeared to use the culture itself to achieve certain well-being goals. These interventions used messages, narratives, processes or practices that are endemic to Hip Hop to support or scaffold well-being: rather than repackaging messages from outside, health promoting messages/ practices are located within the culture. Examples included studies where a particular element of Hip Hop was seen as a primary agent for well-being, or where Hip Hop culture provided a lens or orientation for addressing a well-being issue. This includes Levy et al.'s study mentioned above,⁸⁶ and Hill, who not only used the text of rap songs as culturally relevant tools to facilitate dialogue, but also drew upon the ideological orientations within Hip Hop culture to support student well-being.⁸⁷ This involved foregrounding discourse within Hip Hop (and associated texts) around issues of privilege, class, race, gender, sexuality, and identity, and exploring how these related to students' own narratives. Andrea J. Romero went beyond using breaking as a physical activity, including several other aspects of Hip Hop culture to scaffold students' understanding of physical health through a cultural lens.⁸⁸ This included "interactive discussions on the basis of Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy [which] encouraged youth to critically think about social injustices (e.g., discrimination, neighborhood resources) through rap lyrics and graffiti images," and how these issues impacted physical health in their localized setting.⁸⁹ In both cases, inclusion went beyond adding a Hip Hop activity or aesthetic to increase an intervention's appeal or relevance. Rather, Hip Hop culture, its particular elements, and orientations to being in the world, were seen as the primary well-being resources.

⁸⁵ Olajide Williams, A. Desorbo, V. Sawyer, D. Apakama, M. Shaffer, W. Gerin, and J. Noble, "Hip Hop HEALS: Pilot Study of a Culturally Targeted Calorie Label Intervention to Improve Food Purchases of Children," *Health Education & Behavior* 43, no. 1 (2016): 68–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198115596733>.

⁸⁶ Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work."

⁸⁷ Levy, Emdin, and Adjapong, "Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work"; and Hill, "Wounded Healing."

⁸⁸ Romero.

⁸⁹ Romero, 210.

This approach aligns with Michael Viega's discussion of incorporating Hip Hop in music therapy:

Hip Hop is not something we simply do, but a way of being in the world in relation to one's self and with each other; it is something that is produced with the world of relationships; it is an ingrained understanding of what it is to be other, marginalized, oppressed, and victimized, not only culturally, socially, and politically, but psychologically as well.⁹⁰

Again, we see reference to Hip Hop as representing an orientation to or understanding of being in the world. It seems invalidating or not fully acknowledging this orientation when engaging Hip Hop for well-being may do a disservice. This is because Hip Hop can speak to the contextual (personal, social and systemic) factors that underpin many health and well-being issues, helping address the impact of these on well-being goals.

Kruse offers an interpretation of the difference between "using" and working "through" Hip Hop in the music education classroom. He articulates this in terms of going "beyond teaching hip-hop skills and songs to actually being hip-hop," where the latter represents using Hip Hop culture as an orientation to classroom work, rather than simply adding Hip Hop songs or activities to existing curriculum or pedagogical approaches.⁹¹ He explains how this requires a shift in perspective: from relying on the cultural attaché of Hip Hop artefacts, to taking on principals of Hip Hop culture which themselves carry transformative potential. Expanding on this idea through social media, Kruse posits that such engagement requires acknowledging the potential discrepancies that Hip Hop culture may present in a traditional school setting.⁹² This includes different understandings of power, privilege, values, and relationships between students and adults. He contends faithful engagement thus requires preparation of a space to account for the worldviews embedded or represented within the culture and also to avoid superficial use of Hip Hop in ways that may speak or lead to cultural appropriation. He further argues that not doing this can be harmful as it has the potential to alienate students and reinforce negative cultural stereotypes. This consideration is particularly important when cultural relevance is a key goal: if the presentation of Hip Hop jars with students' experience of it, it may disengage students and thus undermine the goals of presenting culturally relevant interventions.

⁹⁰ Viega, 140.

⁹¹ Kruse, "Being Hip Hop," 53.

⁹² Adam J. Kruse, "'Hip-Hop wasn't Something a Teacher Ever Gave Me': Exploring Hip-Hop Musical Learning," *Music Education Research* 20, no. 3 (2018): 317–329, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2018.1445210>.

Need to Consider Potential Contraindications

Few articles considered any potential contraindications of using Hip Hop in this space, suggesting a presupposition that well-being interventions that engage Hip Hop will always be a positive experience. Yet Hill (2009) has identified several potential contraindications for using Hip Hop for well-being in classrooms.⁹³ Like Kruse, Hill argues the need to consider and constantly reassess how bringing Hip Hop into education spaces impacts power relations, as well as student and facilitator experiences and expectations of being in a traditional schooling space. They also argue the need to reflect critically on the impact of connecting students to culturally relevant ideas, concepts, or narratives:

We must resist the urge to romanticize the relocation of previously marginalized cultural artifacts, epistemologies, and rituals into formal academic spaces. Although such processes can yield extraordinary benefit, we must also take into account the problematic aspects of “culture” and the underside of “relevance.” in particular, we must keep track of the ways in which many of our connections to culturally relevant texts are under written by stories of personal pain, forces of structural inequality, and sources of social misery. Although these realities should not necessarily disqualify such texts from entering the classroom, they demand that we move beyond merely hortatory approaches and adopt more critical postures.⁹⁴

Hill’s argument suggests the need to consider the impact of cultural relevance beyond an engagement strategy, and how—despite facilitators’ intentions—it may surface associations which are not always positive. Hill also stresses consideration for how this content—and commitment to opening up democratic spaces to process issues—may impact facilitators. Furthermore, creating such spaces can mean facilitators open themselves, and students, to exposing and potentially destabilizing their sense of self.

Similarly, Viega argues music therapists should undertake preparation before working with or through Hip Hop. This includes reflection on the ethical implications of introducing aspects of Hip Hop that may be emotionally laden and being prepared to cope with any issues that such introduction brings to the fore for clients and facilitators. Viega advocates for appropriate facilitator training in this area, ongoing support, and critical self-awareness. From a social work perspective, Raphael Travis argues—particularly when employing Hip Hop to address trauma—facilitators should actively work to minimize chances that students are re-exposed to traumatic experiences or conditions.⁹⁵ This suggests an imperative for facilitators to dedicate time and effort to

⁹³ Hill, “Wounded Healing.”

⁹⁴ Hill, “Wounded Healing,” 290-91.

⁹⁵ Travis, *The Healing Power of Hip Hop*.

preparing themselves for this work to avoid reenforcing the very issues they aim to ameliorate.

Positionality of Facilitators

It appears having people familiar with (or practitioners of) Hip Hop culture involved in the conceptualization or delivery of programs was valuable for cultural relevance and engagement. Olajide Williams et al. argued the importance of having “role models (hip-hop artists) advocating healthy eating behaviors [for] reframing dietary norms.”⁹⁶ Ernesta Paukste and Harris (2015) report having program facilitators that were recognized rap artists, producers, and promoters was critical for student engagement. Students described this as “Learning from the real deal,” and facilitators noted the “positive body language and visible excitement of participants when working with the rap artists.”⁹⁷ Stakeholders elaborated that beyond the “Wow factor” artists provided “Great role models” and “students were less involved when rap artists were not present.”⁹⁸ For Romero (2012), having program content “created in collaboration with key stakeholders [which included] local break dancers” was significant for grounding their obesity intervention within Hip Hop culture.⁹⁹ Further, by integrating social role models who shared important sociocultural contexts with the students, students could both relate to facilitators and discuss physical health in the context of their own cultural milieu.

These examples indicate the importance of facilitators’ positionality in relation to Hip Hop culture; seemingly, having facilitators familiar with, or positioned within, the culture reduces potential schisms between their own cultural realities and student experience. Yet, being an insider to Hip Hop culture did not always present the most important factor. Several authors stressed the importance of acknowledging gaps between facilitator and student experiences of (or connection to) Hip Hop. This included explicitly naming their lack of cultural knowledge, positioning themselves as learners, and allowing youth to take on expert roles.¹⁰⁰ Consistent with wider Hip Hop and well-being literature,¹⁰¹ this both empowered students and enabled genuine rapport-building. Thus, while engaging facilitators from the Hip Hop community may be ideal, facilitators’ willingness to position themselves openly in relation to the culture

⁹⁶ Williams et al., 71.

⁹⁷ Paukste and Harris, 28.

⁹⁸ Paukste and Harris, 28.

⁹⁹ Romero, 210.

¹⁰⁰ Gonzalez and Hayes; and Olson-McBride and Page.

¹⁰¹ Edgar H. Tyson, “Rap Music in Social Work Practice with African American and Latino Youth,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 8, no. 4 (2004): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1300/J137v08n04_01; and Washington.

and acknowledge potentials shifts in power dynamics is equally important. Thus, we recommend practitioners reflect on their own positioning to Hip Hop when preparing themselves for this work.

Implications also emerged around bringing Hip Hop community representatives into formalized settings. Paukste and Harris (2015) state that while students engaged most when rappers were present, youth workers co-facilitating the program reported negative attitudes to the rappers.¹⁰² This reveals an added layer of power dynamics between facilitators from the Hip Hop community and others working in well-being spaces. It also indicates potential bias against Hip Hop within mainstream health services. Such bias emerged in a study by Steve Sussman et al. (1995), who reported a commercial health video represented a more viable option than a rap video, given it offered “a less extreme approach [and] would have a longer shelf-life and be more well-received by adult gatekeepers.”¹⁰³ Similar biases emerged in schools. Alan Crouch, Heather Robertson, and Patricia Fagan state: “Negotiation of the workshops with school principals [...] was complex and included in each setting the need to address significant misconceptions about the nature and intent of the interaction with youth and hip hop performers (sic).”¹⁰⁴ These accounts suggest the need to consider how facilitators from the Hip Hop community may be received by, or engage in, mainstream education/health spaces.

Positionality of Researchers

As described elsewhere,¹⁰⁵ while some authors positioned themselves and their research in relation to Hip Hop, many made little or no mention of the culture and any potential connections. The need for transparent positionality seems critical given Hip Hop culture is bound so closely to discourses around race, privilege, and cultural worldviews that challenge dominant Western discourse. Therefore, when a researcher engages with Hip Hop, they also enter a space that requires interaction with these discourses. This places an onus on researchers to not only position their study in relation to Hip Hop, but also consider and acknowledge how their own sociocultural positioning interfaces with the discourses the culture speaks to. As H. Richard Milner writes, “dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen can emerge for researchers when they do

¹⁰² Paukste and Harris.

¹⁰³ Sussman et al., 1155.

¹⁰⁴ Crouch, Robertson, and Fagan, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Crooke, Comte, and Moreno-Almeida.

not pay careful attention to their own and others' racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world."¹⁰⁶

While researcher reflexivity is often associated with humanistic rather than positivist research approaches,¹⁰⁷ we advocate all research in this space undertake some level of positioning. This is particularly relevant in the present context given researchers explicitly use cultural relevance to influence the well-being of (often marginalized) youth. Thus, ignoring how a researcher's own views or positionality may impact their understandings of how Hip Hop interacts with well-being in schools ignores the potential they may impose or overlay ways of knowing or experiencing this interaction that are inconsistent with those of students. Thus, Hill's, Travis's, and Viega's argument that facilitators critically assess all implications of using Hip Hop for well-being¹⁰⁸ also rings true for researchers: not critically reflecting on and positioning themselves in relation to Hip Hop means researchers may not only miss important context regarding their findings, but also potentially trigger or reinforce views or narratives that can be traumatic or disempowering for youth.

Conclusion

This paper presents a CIS on research exploring links between Hip Hop and well-being to identify any key understandings or assumptions that underpin this particular field of research. Overall, we found a clear lack of research in this specific area, which was somewhat narrow in scope, and tended more towards public health than other disciplines which have a more established relationship with Hip Hop culture, such as Hip Hop-Based Education (HHBE) and Hip Hop therapy. It seems strange that research looking at Hip Hop and student well-being has not engaged more with fields like HHBE, and we argue for the value of collaboration in this space going forward. Such collaboration would be particularly useful for helping address the lack of discourse we found around cultural relevance. For example, it seems that the concept of "culturally relevant learning"¹⁰⁹ would undoubtedly help support authentic engagement, not to mention well-being outcomes. We also argue the need for

¹⁰⁶ H. Richard Milner, "Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen," *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 7 (2007): 388.

¹⁰⁷ Jenny Moore, "A Personal Insight into Researcher Positionality," *Nurse Researcher* 19, no. 4 (2012): 11-14; and Gillian Rose, "Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics," *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 305-320, <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913297673302122>.

¹⁰⁸ Hill, "Wounded Healing,"; Travis; and Viega.

¹⁰⁹ For more information on the importance of culturally relevant learning in this area, please see Gloria Ladson-Billings, "'Yes, but how do we do it?': Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*, edited by William Ayers, 162-177 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

researchers and scholars in this area to engage more critically with how their intervention, practitioners, and the authors themselves are positioned in relation to Hip Hop culture. There is also a need to consider both the implications of the prevalence of rap in school programs, as well as ways to encourage educators and practitioners to engage in other elements.

In summary, our findings illustrate the clear need for a synthesis of ideas, understandings, and approaches, as well as concepts of best practice around engaging Hip Hop culture and or the community in educational settings for well-being. There is also clear need for research and theory in the specific area of Hip Hop and student well-being to look to the field of Hip Hop-Based Education. Research which addresses these points is likely to be best positioned to further expand our understanding of how, when, and why Hip Hop can be used to help improve the well-being of our students.

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Book Reviews

Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South

By Bradley, Regina N. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 136. \$19.95

Right out of the gate, Regina N. Bradley centers *Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South* as a book inspired by her depth of love for OutKast and what it means to have grown up Black in Georgia in the 1990s. Bradley immediately discloses that her theories about the Black South and the genius of OutKast are personal, intricate, and deeply rooted in her love for community. Bradley is Assistant Professor of English and African Diaspora Studies at Kennesaw State University and is an alumna Nasir Jones Hip Hop Fellow at Harvard University. Her deeply personal and academic storytelling within *Chronicling Stankonia* solidifies her expertise as a leading academic on Black southern experiences as they relate to Hip Hop and popular culture. Like academic predecessors such as Imani Perry (*Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*) and Zandria Robinson (*This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*), Bradley draws on the concepts of Hip Hop cartography. However, the reader will quickly learn that *Chronicling Stankonia* is not just about Atlanta or OutKast.

Bradley begins the journey with a plea to her readers to remember that “The Mountaintop Ain’t Flat” (4) and opens a direct conversation with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech recognizing that the lived experiences of racism in all its forms are still pervasive in the South and globally. Hip Hop provides discourse and relief that helps past and present Black youth circumvent the notions that “Southern blacks are expected to cower in the shadows of racism, succumb to their believed innate backwardness, and live in daily terror simply for being black in the South” (4). She reminds her readers that the “Hip Hop South” provided space for Black people to continuously fight for their right to “speak their truth to power” (5). She then draws attention to OutKast’s special role, suggesting that, while OutKast didn’t invent southern Hip Hop, they are “founding theoreticians of the Hip Hop south”; this is a theory about the South, Hip Hop, and OutKast that no other scholar has ventured. This move gives room for contemporary scholars who want to challenge this notion or contribute to it. Bradley recounts repeatedly that the South “is not a monolith” and that various forms of Hip Hop aesthetics coming out of the South continue to challenge whitewashed, non-southern notions of the South as backward, other, suspended in time, rural, and noncontemporary.

Bradley's book is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, Bradley chronicles OutKast's music and how the artists managed to navigate placing Atlanta on the Hip Hop map. Bradley contends that OutKast winning Best New Rap Group at the 1995 Source Awards served as a reckoning, a moment when southern Hip Hop proved to have pushed past the geographic and cultural boundaries and into mainstream consciousness, much to the chagrin of the New York audience who booed the group during their acceptance speech. Bradley walks us through OutKast's fourth album, *Stankonia*, where OutKast manifests a creative vision, she argues, that reached full maturation as the group continued to "thrive in the taboo and miss fitted pockets of hip-hop and American popular culture" (30). *Stankonia* further vindicates OutKast as legendary Black southern artists who influenced other Black southerners to experiment with expressions of the multiplicities of Black southern life, from joy to pain and back again. OutKast knowingly embraced their position outside of East Coast/West Coast Hip Hop and subsequently existed on the peripheries of mainstream Hip Hop culture until they became creators of it.

In Chapter 2, Bradley walks the reader through her theories of southern Hip Hop aesthetics as forms of storytelling, arguing that "Hip-hop allows post-civil rights writers ... to create literary spaces where the past is in conversation with the present and future" (43). She uses Hip Hop aesthetics as a lens to analyze Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (a novel about a young Black boy growing up in post-Katrina Mississippi navigating his racial identity through time travel).¹ Laymon's use of OutKast's sophomore album, *Aquemini*, as inspiration for the story serves as key evidence for Bradley's theories of how southern writers connect to the Hip Hop south.² Laymon's use of time travel is cleverly dissected as a metaphor for how southern Black identity and generational anxiety shift while remaining constant.

Bradley gives us another great example in Paul Beatty's 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, from which she analyzes a passage that heavily exaggerates one of the characters' need for acceptance, bringing into focus the subsequent complacency about a racist hazing ritual.³ Throughout *Chronicling Stankonia*, Bradley examines how southern writers and artists navigate the sociohistorical complexities of being southern while fighting (often through trauma) for equal rights and acceptance in environments not built for them to thrive. Bradley theorizes how contemporary writers use Hip Hop aesthetics while reflecting on the ways in which Black youth often have painful, joyful, and complex relationships with their Blackness, Southernness, and the difficult realities of trying to live authentically. Ultimately Bradley suggests that, unlike many Black

¹ Kiese Laymon, *Long Division* (Chicago: Agate Bolden, 2013).

² OutKast, *Aquemini* (Atlanta: LaFace Records, 1998).

³ Paul Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle* (1996; New York: Picador, 2021).

southern literary predecessors, writers influenced by Hip Hop aesthetics (knowingly or unknowingly) are choosing to bring identity politics and Black trauma to the forefront of stories of the South while embracing the uncertainty of Black futures. OutKast and writers like Laymon and Beatty bring forth conflicting experiences of southern Blackness while “disrupting the narrative of southern black stoicism ... [and believing that] the multiplicities of southern blackness exist simultaneously in the past, present, and future” (59).

Bradley also takes the reader into a foray of contemporary pop culture examples that utilize Hip Hop aesthetics to create fictional versions of the US South that serve as case studies for “slavery’s position in a hip-hop South by illustrating how black oppression, black complicity, and black protest remain inextricably linked” (17). Bradley explores how sonic and cultural Hip Hop aesthetics ground modern slave narratives. She dissects the opening scene of WGN television series *Underground* which depicts a fugitive from slavery being hunted by patrollers with dogs ready to viciously attack. Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead” percussion grounds the opening scene, using Hip Hop as “an entry point for witnessing the horrors and complexities of enslaved black people trying to maneuver the white supremacist power structures historically documented in the American imagination while plotting their own sense of freedom and agency” (62). Bradley posits that understanding the presence of Hip Hop aesthetics in popular culture provides a contemporary way of engaging with the representations of slavery that endure and exist in direct conversation with contemporary life. Bradley also uses Chapter 3 to discuss typical imaginings of the South by popular writers such as Karen L. Cox, author of *Dreaming of Dixie* and *Gone With the Wind*. These novels highlight the selective memory of the elaborate South in popular culture. White columns, large porches, pecan trees, and visual beauty are all examples of selective memories that ignore the realities of how these luxuries came to exist (65). In less palatable representations that cast light on the true horrors of slavery, “the unimaginable is often sonic” (65). Examples include “The screams of enslaved women and men as they were raped; the size and huffs caused by overworked black hands ... Sounds of big dogs and slave patrollers’ excited laughter as they incite their dogs to tear into fugitive slaves’ bodies” (65). Creators use Hip Hop aesthetics (sonic, rhythmic) as sonic ways of engaging the consumer with the horrors of the past in representations where creative visual might be too grotesque to consume (65).

In chapter 4, Bradley explores the sociological concept of “the trap” (underground drug culture) and how “the trap” is understudied as a space for grief, particularly the grief of black men that often remains invisible and unheard. Bradley’s interrogation of “the trap” in Clifford “T.I.” Harris’ music serves as one of her case studies for her theorization of what “the trap” represents in fluid, Black collective consciousness. Bradley begins by giving us an emotionally compelling description of

how T.I.'s *Urban Legend* album helped her grieve the sudden loss of her father. Specific tracks like "Motivation" helped her sonically self-medicate and work through the anger and confusion she experienced while mourning. She contends that T.I. branded "trap rap" (rap music with a heavy focus on illegal drug culture) in the commercial ways that mainstream audiences recognize the genre today. While many trap rap artists such as Yo Gotti, Gucci Mane, and Jeezy perform stoic trap that celebrates how "hustling" and drug culture can provide a come-up, artists like T.I. offer multiple meanings in their "trap" (86). T.I. uses "the trap" in his music to articulate how he navigates the complexities of witnessing, participating in, and grieving violence. She contends that T.I.'s trap music presents a space for reckoning and vulnerability while humanizing drug dealers who are so often misunderstood and written off by society. Trap music strategically navigates maintaining authenticity in conjunction with commercial gain. One of the ways in which Bradley authenticates her theorization of "the trap" as a space for grieving is by taking a deep dive into T.I.'s album *T.I. vs. T.I.P.* She breaks down how T.I.'s schizophrenic persona in the album denotes the silent code of Black male grieving; the suffering that many Black men face while enduring internal conflicts of maintaining authenticity, overextending their representation of Blackness, and navigating capitalism and marginalization while simply existing in the South. For Bradley, trap music provides a space where southern Black communities and individuals can openly and angrily grieve those who "may not be seen as respectable or worthy of remembrance," at times including themselves (98).

Bradley's *Chronicling Stankonia* is a must-read for anyone wanting to understand the past, present, and future of American Hip Hop. Bradley's work makes great strides to circumvent the lack of academic scrutiny and ignorance surrounding Hip Hop as it relates to the South and the multidimensional experiences that it entails. *Chronicling Stankonia* also serves as a call-to-action for scholars to step forward and center the South in academic discourse surrounding Hip Hop. Bradley closes the book by ensuring her readers are acknowledging that southern Hip Hop aesthetics dominate Hip Hop and mainstream culture today. New explorations of southern Hip Hop include "the possibility of a digital South" since "regional affiliation [is] no longer the hurdle it was in the early 1990's" when OutKast rose to stardom (100). As Bradley puts it, "the South still got something to say" (101). *Chronicling Stankonia* serves as a rallying call to bring the non-monolithic South and the criticism that engages it to the forefront of Hip Hop and academic scholarship.

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