

Institutions and Identity: Hip Hop and Rap

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Initial Reflection

Music, as an institution, has long been a space and a tool for addressing and commenting on issues of inequality. Hip hop as a genre specifically has become a space within this larger institution to authentically and explicitly explore and challenge racial inequalities. Kendrick Lamar, Nipsey Hussle, Joey Bada\$\$, Meek Mill, and J. Cole are some of many artists who make space for this in their music. Their music often reflects their experiences as black men under the oppressive and unjust systems of the United States. All media does something. Music is an extremely powerful method of communication. Through this work, hip hop has become a space for marginalized voices to be amplified, and to voice their experiences under systems that perpetuate inequality.

Kendrick Lamar is one of the most influential artists in contemporary hip hop, and has consistently put out music that engages with issues of racial inequality and systemic injustice. Lamar's album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, released in 2015, features music that serves as political commentary, and remains a cultural artifact in this way. While lyrics are the direct and immediate understanding of the message Lamar and other artists are trying to convey, a lot more goes into music making. These artists sample and mix sounds and songs from previous generations of music, which furthers the meaning and depth of the music. In *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar and executive producer Dr. Dre combined sounds from multiple music genres to achieve the final piece, such as jazz and funk.

Music like Kendrick Lamar's creates space for discourse on topics of inequality within mainstream conversations. His and others' music share collective and personal stories about what it means to be a black person in the United States. Through their music we ultimately reach empathy and understanding which then can create action. Anger, and feelings, lead to action, and it is my belief that the music from these artists goes hand in hand with the actions taken.

Another artist in the genre of activist hip-hop is Nipsey Hussle. His legacy is rooted in his advocacy for economic empowerment, social justice, and the deconstruction of systemic inequality. Nipsey Hussle's music reflected his life experiences, which were shaped by the streets of Los Angeles. He was both a product of, and a resistance to, the cycles of poverty and violence. In songs like "Racks in the Middle," he

urges the audience to invest in themselves and their communities, promoting a message of self-sufficiency and economic independence, specifically among black communities. This is why music as an institution, and hip hop as a space is extremely important. Black audiences tapping in with Kendrick and Nipsey's music find life altering support, advice, and comfort.

Another Nipsey Hussle project, *Victory Lap*, released in 2018, emphasized the importance of self-empowerment, particularly through entrepreneurship and the reinvestment of resources into underserved communities. These are concepts that he felt he needed to hear, as a young black man in America. His approach to activism extended beyond his lyrics, most importantly; he was actively involved in efforts to reduce gang violence in his community, and promote economic development. Hussle's activism was one hundred percent grounded in real efforts to empower those who had been systematically denied self-developmental opportunities, such as wealth-building opportunities, which has everything to do with social status, and the way one can live in this world.

Music is important to study in this way because we hear these personal and collective stories. Joey Bada\$\$' album *All-Amerikkkan Bada\$\$* is another project which clearly has political connotations. Lil Baby has a song called "Bigger Picture" which was released at the height of protests happening at the time that George Floyd was murdered. Meek Mill raps about his time in the United States prison system, and the impacts such an experience has on young black individuals, in the moment, in their futures, and in future generations. From understanding what these artists are reflecting on and what they are *choosing* to share with the world, it is one way we engage with topics of inequality, and can work towards decreasing them.

Article Reviews

Fight the Power: Hip Hop and Civil Unrest in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing.

Music is a tool and mode of resistance. “At the height of increased racial tension sprawling from the late 1980s, rap music served as a vehicle of protest among Black America, addressing their discontent with police brutality and harassment. (Gibson 2017) This article discusses the way that hip-hop does this in Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing*, released in 1989, a time of extreme racial intolerance in the United States. This is relevant because at the time events like the Central Park jogger attack, bombing of churches, drug war, and more were occurring and contributing to the mistreatment of Black people in this country. This article argues that hip-hop music is central to the story Spike Lee tries to tell about a racial uprising and the challenging of inequalities Black Americans were facing under what is called democracy.

The event from the movie that the article discusses takes place in a pizza restaurant where the owner and a customer get into an argument over the customer playing a song. The article addresses the song, Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” as a “hip-hop protest anthem,”¹ as it is constructed of (samples) artists like James Brown and the Isley Brothers. Songs like this carry messages and examples of inequality and power, as “Black American music [is] a socially conscious force and vehicle used in Black youth communities in the mid-1970s.” (Gibson 2017) The article summarizes the event which turns violent, and results in the young Black customer, Radio Raheem’s death in the custody of police. This is the ground point for action in the movie, as the event sparks anger and outrage among the community. The results of the altercation was the unjust murder of Radio Raheem, and the burning down of the pizza restaurant. The movie, and the article, observe how hip-hop is used to do many things in the face of racism and oppression. This article relates to my chosen institution because it talks about a popular film in which inequality and power is addressed and challenged, and how music plays a part in doing that.

This article supports my own ideas about inequality and power represented in hip-hop, as it writes “Lee’s use of hip-hop as a representation of his protest against police brutality offers a more critical way to think about the music’s relevance in shaping Black youths; conversations about racial inequality.”

¹ <https://muse-jhu-edu.muhlenberg.idm.oclc.org/pub/3/article/659466>

(Gibson 2017) The article generally supported my assumptions and previous knowledge on the topic, and provided a lot of useful understandings that I can add to my perspective and research. The article also explores the example of the young Black teens being impacted by Black Power ethos, which “lends credibility to their consumption of rap music and their protest and resistance.” (Gibson 2017) This article speaks to ways that hip-hop matters. In my research I want to focus on the importance of hip-hop’s outreach: Hip-hop music is active against modes of oppression and hip-hop is important in shaping the minds and perspectives of young Black people. This article will be useful in my research because it discusses an example of how rap music has been used in these ways to resist and challenge systems of inequality and power.

Music Is Power : Popular Songs, Social Justice and the Will to Change

This chapter of *Music is power : popular songs, social justice and the will to change* by Brad Schreiber discusses artists like Jimi Hendrix and James Brown. These artists’ music is relevant to the ideas of inequality and power that I am exploring in my research of the importance of hip-hop music in resisting oppression. Schreiber writes,

“Brown reached the height of his social influence in August with the release of what would become a much-needed anthem of self-definition and pride. “Say it Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)” urged both self-actualization and yet used language that could have come from the Panthers or any other black nationalist organization of the time. He memorably insisted it was better to die on one’s feet than live on one’s knees.”

These concepts of identity and power that Schreiber notes are present in the music are very similar to ideas of Franz Fanon about identity and self-actualization. This is relevant to my research because language, in this case music, is a tool. My research is about how language in music can do things: contribute to stereotypes, resist stereotypes, support revolutions, etc. One

way we see this which the article discusses is in music sampling. My research is interested in looking at how hip-hop has been used historically in these ways, compared to how hip-hop and music as an institution engages with inequality and power today. This chapter of the book discusses how artists like James Brown had an “obvious impact on later artists like Prince and Michael Jackson.” (Schreiber 2020) The chapter discusses the “musical artists who take responsibility both in song and public action for addressing social wrongs.” (Schreiber 2020)

This chapter of *Music is Power* emphasizes the transformative power of music in challenging social injustice. Schreiber’s examination of artists like James Brown and Jimi Hendrix shows how artists reflect the struggles that they and those who identify with them experience. The music from these artists also grows their platforms to be able to spread messages that align with resistance and empowerment, which are important things for young Black people to hear. To use Brown’s “Say it Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)” as an anthem of resistance activates it into a political message. Here, music is used as a tool to inspire resistance and challenge the dominant narratives that seek to oppress Black people. This chapter provides comparative information on historical figures in the genre of ‘protest music’ to the role of contemporary hip-hop.

Imagining a Better World: Rap Music Skepticism and the Civic Activism of Young African Americans

This article is about the effects of rap music on Black youth. It is relevant to my research because I am interested in how rap music mobilizes its listeners, how it offers commentary on social issues, and how it relates to ideas of self-identity and actualization. This article provides insights that directly relate to my interests on the significance of hip-hop as an institution for Black youth. One of the key arguments in the article is the idea of “rap consciousness,” which expresses the idea that rap music shapes Black youth culture and encourages political, social, and

self awareness. The article explores “the mobilizing power of rap consciousness” among Black youth. (Bonnette-Bailey and McClerking 2018) It argues that “rap music more than anything else has shaped the new Black youth culture.” (Bonnette-Bailey and McClerking 2018) The article discusses what rap music can do for Black youth, like be an example, spread messages, and politically mobilize. “The need to act politically stems from the inadequacies in government that Blacks perceive” through “music’s mobilizing messages, as rappers include lyrics in their songs... that inspire listeners to seek solutions to socio-political problems.” (Bonnette-Bailey and McClerking 2018)

The article does also address a main critique of rap music, which is that it promotes bad or negative behaviors and beliefs. While this is not the focus of my research, it is relevant to the argument that music is mobilizing, and to this critique, the authors of the article write that

“The politically empowering content in rap music often reaches its audience as a “noisy signal,” one in which “bad” messages are frequently packaged along with “good” ones. The willingness to critique rap, therefore, tells us something about an individual’s capacity: highly critical rap fans can decipher their music’s content, gleaning the mobilizing signals from the noise.”

This article provides useful and specific information on how rap music mobilizes its listeners politically. This is absolutely relevant to the idea of music as a tool and method of resistance against systems of oppression. Related to this is music’s power to resist and redefine societal systems and institutions, and politically motivate people. The piece discusses research conducted on the relationship between rap music consumption and civic participation, and critique of rap, offering insights on how music can contribute to political engagement among Black youth. The findings support that heavy rap consumers who engage critically with the

music, are more likely to translate their critiques into civic action. Interestingly, another study demonstrates how skepticism expressed in rap music towards politics resonates with Black youth. “As a result, these youths may prioritize non-traditional methods of political participation-methods that align more closely with the grassroots empowerment themes often found in hip-hop.” (Bonnette-Bailey and McClerking 2018)

The article provides a relevant and modern examination of the effects of rap music. It explores the influential role of music in shaping Black youth culture, promoting social awareness, and politically mobilizing. Hip-hop is not just entertainment. It is a form of resistance that empowers its listeners to critique and challenge societal systems. I took a lot from this article on how rap music can contribute to both individual and collective agency, which then impacts the broader society.

Fear of a Black Planet": Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s

This book section from *The Journal of Negro Education* argues that there is a heavy policing of rap music and Black youth in public spaces, and argues that security forces within these spaces act in ways “to contain African Americans’ public presence and public pleasure.” (Rose 1991) One of the main focuses of this article is to understand how Hip Hop community fans receive and respond to the context of its music. The author explores the relationships between rap music, cultural politics, and institutional power, with a focus on how Hip Hop artists navigate these concepts. A main argument is that rap’s political importance goes beyond its lyrical content. The article challenges the perspective that rap music has to explicitly address political issues, to have effective power, dismissing non-political rap as basically lacking of any meaning. “To dismiss rappers who do not choose so-called “political” subjects as “having no politically resistive meaning” requires ignoring the complex web of institutional policing to which all rappers are subject.” (Rose 1991) In addition, this section is beneficial to my research because it provides counter-action, and discusses how Hip Hop provides a “range of counter-reactions to the range of

institutional policing faced by any young African Americans.” (Rose 1991) To examine the connections between institutional and ideological power, one of these counter actions that the piece discusses is how what clothes people wear can serve as “an act of defiance and self-possession.” (Rose 1991) The power dynamics we see here exist around where, how, and by who, musical messages are delivered.

One of the key findings in this article is the idea that Hip Hop has faced a continuous struggle over access to public space. Cultural politics is “the struggle over context, meaning, and public space.” (Rose 1991) The article notes that Black youth whose public presences are almost always being scrutinized and monitored and restricted by the institutions they are in, often find themselves in negative “relationships to the institutions that most prominently frame and constrain their lives.” (Rose 1991) From these ideas in the piece, I can draw conclusions about the policing of Black youth in public spaces, the constant surveillance of Hip Hop, and other modes that exist to try and diminish or limit Black identity and expression.

The language in this section is also important and relevant to my own research. The section discusses violence as a social construction, and the larger social phenomena of labelling. “Labels are critical to the process of interpretation because they provide a context for social behavior.” (Rose 1991) This is an important key idea in this text because it leads us to question things that are contextualized and labeled. In the case of relations between rap and violence, we are urged to question if violence is present, or if things are framed and labeled that way. Rose writes that “hegemonic discourses have rendered these institutional aspects of Black cultural politics invisible.” There is a growing misunderstanding towards Hip Hop and rappers’ content. I want to utilize this book chapter to develop my research on rap’s modern “poetic voice,” and how it has developed and changed. (Rose 1991) Because “rap music is fundamentally linked to larger social constructions of Black culture,” it is viewed as a “threat to dominant American culture and social order.” (Rose 1991) My research will argue that we need to threaten dominant American culture and social order, and rap music is a tool to do this; “a form of testimony of the young... a language of liberation and social protest.”

Synthesis Essay

Hip Hop is more than a genre; it is a culture and institution originating in resistance, community, expression, and more. Born from the lived experiences of systemic oppression and inequality, Hip Hop has always existed as a tool for self-development, political and social commentary, and protest. This essay explores how Hip Hop, as an institution, creates space for Black expression while simultaneously being policed and discredited by the existing dominant structures. Drawing from some key studies, I found that Hip Hop both reflects and resists inequalities, and that it remains a tool for challenging systemic racism and oppression in the United States.

Hip Hop has long existed in a sort of tense space between dominant powers and cultural expression or autonomy. Rose argues that “security forces within these spaces act in ways to contain African Americans’ public presence and public pleasure” (1991). This reflects how inequality and oppression is maintained and reproduced through the control and monitoring of Black, public, creative spaces. Rap music in particular is policed not just through censorship, but ideologically, as it disproportionately faces adversity and negative attention. It is often ideologically discredited, as institutions label it with negative stereotypes such as violent, and unproductive.

This scrutiny reflects the larger systems of power and inequality. Rose writes that “hegemonic discourses have rendered these institutional aspects of Black cultural politics invisible,” meaning that the cultural, social, and political work accomplished by Hip Hop is often erased or discredited by dominant structures (1991). As a result, Black youth are unfairly criminalized for the same forms of expression that offer them identity, community, guidance, and resistance.

Despite dominant powers consistently trying to discredit Hip Hop’s legitimacy and power, Hip Hop remains to be a creative space of resistance. Rose explains that “to dismiss rappers who do not choose so-called ‘political’ subjects ‘having no politically resistive meaning’ requires ignoring the complex web of institutional policing to which all rappers are subject” (1991). This means that even seemingly non-political Hip Hop music is part of a political context. An example of this is the clothes artists choose to wear, which Rose identifies as “an act of defiance and self-possession” (1991). The

importance and the power of Hip Hop goes way beyond lyrics; Hip Hop includes visual aesthetics, dance, music, and more. Hip Hop is a culture whose components all challenge norms of white supremacy and oppression.

The political potential of Hip Hop is especially important for Black youth. In *Imagining a Better World: Rap Music Skepticism and the Civic Activism of Young African Americans*, Bonnette-Bailey and McClerking argue that “rap music more than anything else has shaped the new Black youth culture” (2018). Their research demonstrates that those who engage critically with rap are more likely to then participate politically and communally, in non-traditional ways like grassroots organizing and local community activism. The authors note that “as a result, these youths may prioritize non-traditional methods of political participation; methods that align more closely with the grassroots empowerment themes often found in Hip Hop” (Bonnette-Bailey and McClerking). Rather than viewing Hip Hop as apolitical and irrelevant, this framework views it as a fundamental space for self-awareness and mobilization.

Throughout history, Hip Hop has existed as a platform for the storytelling of Black experiences in the United States of America. In *Fear of a Black Planet: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1900s*, rap music is defined as “a form of testimony for the young, a language of liberation and social protest.” This framing reinforces Hip Hop’s value as political commentary, and challenges negative stereotypes about the genre’s lyricism. Hip Hop tells stories that the dominant institutions would rather, and do attempt to erase, like stories about police brutality, poverty, systemic neglect and more. Artists like James Brown, Public Enemy, Kendrick Lamar, and so, so many others have used their platforms to express the realities of racism and inequality. In *Music Is Power: Popular Songs, Social Justice and the Will to Change*, Schreiber writes that artists who address social and political inequalities “both in song and public action” contribute to the understanding of music as political resistance. Songs become known anthems of Black pride and empowerment.

The artists within the institution of Hip Hop work to challenge and address inequality. Schreiber writes about these artists such as James Brown, NWA, Public Enemy, Ice Cube, Mos Def and more. These

artists' works significantly influenced the early "gangsta rap" genre and focused on issues of racial profiling and police brutality. (Schreiber 2019) To contextualize what rap truly means to its creators, other titles than "gangsta rap," given by rappers like Ice Cube and Mos Def, include "reality rap," "street knowledge," "rap consciousness." (2019) Ice Cube defined rap, "street knowledge" as "letting the street know what the politicians is trying to do to them. And letting the politicians know what the street thinks of them, if they listening." (2019) How is this *not* an important form of education and socialization for Black youth, for all youth, for all the public to be aware of?

Some of these artists are known for their explicit lyrics that engage with social injustice and inequality. In this way, rap music has directly addressed inequalities and at the same time become a voice for Black communities. Schreiber highlights Mos Def and his idea of "Rap is not pop, if you call it that, stop," meaning that there is a critical difference between commercial music and the authentic expression of marginalized voices and stories, which we get from Hip Hop. (2019) Furthermore, rap reclaims itself as a form of resistance.

Music is Power speaks to rap music's origin "as a rejection of social norms." (Schreiber 2019) Hip Hop and rap music were born out of resistance, and continue to resist the same dominant powers. Despite its birth due to oppression and racism, Hip Hop and rap music developed into something remarkable. The essence of rap, and the essence of Black individuals succeeding in this country is reflective of one another.

Neither the media nor the music industry foresaw that decades of racial profiling in the inner cities, the influx of crack cocaine, and the history of police violence against unarmed black citizens would lay the groundwork for rap as a viable genre of music. (Schreiber 2019) This is a key reason that Hip Hop matters, and is important for Black youth. Hip Hop is a culture and an education and a community. Despite the intentional tearing down of Black people and their art in this country, their messages persist and resist.

Another idea relevant to this is how explicit an artist must or can be with their lyrics. Schreiber also writes about NWA, a group known for its explicit and politically relevant songs. Songs represent

experiences. The research from these articles support that Hip Hop is a reflection of the experiences of members of its community, and this is something that should not be censored or oppressed in any way. Hip Hop and rap music remain as tools of fighting oppression and resisting inequality. The attempt to silence Black voices contributed to Hip Hop's development, in the sense that those who would not support rap, like by selling records, were at a disadvantage. (2019) Rap provided legal ways for youth to work, and self-actualizing ways for youth to think.

While many focus on Hip Hop's lyrical content, it is important to recognize Hip Hop's capacity for resistance. A clear example of this, discussed in *Music is Power*, is seen in a Public Enemy performance. "During the tour... Public Enemy hung the likeness of a Ku Klux Klan member onstage, a reminder of the nation's horrific legacy of lynchings, which had inspired 'Strange Fruit.'" (2019) This performance not only confronted white supremacy directly but served as a symbolic reclaiming of this country's narrative. This act echoed Malcolm X's ideas of violence needing to be met with violence at times. A country that has enslaved, lynched, and oppressed Black people for centuries remains *more* outraged by the symbolic hanging of a white supremacist, than by the violence it represents. That contradiction is historical and institutional racism. This is the essence of Hip Hop, and as the articles support, challenges the discrediting of rap as a harmful and violent genre. Public Enemy's intentional choices in that performance show Hip Hop's unique role in exposing issues of inequality and oppression.

Hip Hop is an active institution of resistance, one that reflects the lived realities of Black individuals and communities, while proposing new possible ways for justice to look like. The influence of rap aligns with the philosophy supported by Mos Def and others which is to 'think globally, act locally.' Hip Hop, using art not just to comment on injustice but to encourage action in communities, is how we do this. Because of this, meaningful policies to support Hip Hop's impact on inequality could look like the decriminalization of things like lyrical content, marijuana and petty drug charges, and other things that disproportionately target Black people, especially rappers. The creation of some arts education program, rooted in the Hip Hop pedagogy laid out in this paper, could include things like funding community media centers, critical race theory teaching, grants for youth artists, political motivation, and more. These would

of course need to be led by people from the communities they serve, and center themes of racial justice, identity, and resistance. This could contribute to the challenging of dominant narratives that criminalize and dehumanize Black people and their artistic expression. It could provide young people with resources to develop their critical thinking, and become active participants in their communities, and in shaping the world they live in.

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