

Images of the “Socially Disinherited”: Inner-City Youth in Rap Music

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ABSTRACT

While mainstream American media consistently portray urban youth of color from a stereotypical, deficit-based, and deleterious standpoint, these images run in startling contrast to portrayals in rap music. Rap music artists, instead, consistently document the neglect and abandonment of youth of color in America's devastated inner-city landscapes. This paper is a brief pilot exploration of images of inner-city youth as portrayed in the lyrics of selected rap music artists which, it is found, run counter to mainstream media images of criminal youth predators so prevalent in American society. In addition, the paper will explore rap as a form of oppositional culture and as part of the legacy of Critical Race Theory in the post-Civil Rights Era.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin this paper with a quote from Malcolm X:

I think, I hope, that the objective reader, in following my life—the life of only one ghetto-created Negro—may gain a better picture and understanding than he has previously had of the black ghettos which are shaping the lives and the thinking of almost all of the 22 million Negroes who live in America. Thicker each year in these ghettos is the kind of teen-ager that I was—with the wrong kinds of heroes, and the wrong kinds of influences. . . In the 1964 “long, hot summer” riots in major cities across the United States, the socially disinherited black ghetto youth were always at the forefront. In this year, 1965, I am certain that more—and worse—riots are going to erupt, in yet more cities, in spite of the conscience-salving Civil Rights Bill. The reason is that the *cause* of these riots, the racist malignancy in America, has been too long unattended.¹

* My thanks to Erik Luna for encouraging this journey. Many thanks also to Barry Feld, Joe Feagin, Bonnie Mitchell, Malcolm X, and Richard Delgado for the wealth of their ideas. In addition, I want to give special thanks to the rap artists who continue to share the life experiences of the many youth of color who live trapped in America's “socially disinherited” spaces.

¹ MALCOLM X WITH ALEX HALEY ET AL., *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X* 365–86 (1965) [hereinafter *MALCOM X*].

This quote is a critical assessment of the state of Black inner-city youth in America from an eyewitness who lived in the sort of ghettos he described. Malcolm X's personal observations are the foundation of this paper: the images of "socially disinherited" inner-city youth in rap music. In addition, the quote is telling in that it represents a noteworthy critique of Civil Rights legislation, which the author perceives to have been perhaps too little and too late. Moreover, Malcolm X's quote presents a clear linkage between a racist nation, inner-city immiseration, and the experience of disenfranchised Black youth, offering a critique of the American landscape in which racism is as deeply embedded as the Constitution.

Despite Malcolm X's prophetic observations, American media have in the past and continue today to portray inner-city youth of color not as the victims of structural inequality as suggested by Malcolm, but as stereotypical violent youthful predators and criminals—an obvious "blaming the victim" or "deficit-thinking" strategy.² From the standpoint of mainstream media, inner-city youth should literally be locked up and our country should throw away the key.³ On the other hand, rap music has continued Malcolm's legacy of locating issues for inner-city youth in a structurally racist society. In rap's counterstance to mainstream media, inner-city Black youth are portrayed not as vicious predators, but as prey to the harsh realities America does not like to acknowledge—racism, classism, and sexism.⁴ These are America's "socially disinherited" children, to borrow some words from Malcolm.⁵

Several major studies in recent years have explored rap music as a popular cultural expression that seeks to describe the experiences and struggles of disenfranchised inner-city Black youth in the U.S.⁶ These studies contradict

² See Barry C. Feld, *The Politics of Race and Juvenile Justice: The 'Due Process Revolution' and the Conservative Reaction*, 20 JUST. Q. 765, 783–86, 796–97 (2003).

³ Barry C. Feld, *Race and the Jurisprudence of Juvenile Justice: A Tale in Two Parts, 1950–2000*, in OUR CHILDREN, THEIR CHILDREN: CONFRONTING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN AMERICAN JUVENILE JUSTICE, 122, 142–43 (Darnell F. Hawkins & Kimberly Kempf-Leonard eds., 2005); see also LORI DORFMAN & VINCENT SCHIRALDI, BUILDING BLOCKS FOR YOUTH INITIATIVE, OFF BALANCE: YOUTH, RACE AND THE NEWS 4 (2001), available at <http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/media/media.pdf>; Julian V. Roberts, *Public Opinion, Crime & Criminal Justice*, 16 CRIME & JUST. 99, 116–20 (1992).

⁴ ROBIN D.G. KELLEY, RACE REBELS: CULTURE, POLITICS, AND THE BLACK WORKING CLASS 192–94, 225 (1994); TRICIA ROSE, BLACK NOISE: RAP MUSIC AND BLACK CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA 99, 100, 111, 145 (1994).

⁵ MALCOLM X, *supra* note 1, at 385.

⁶ Adreana Clay, *Keepin' It Real: Black Youth, Hip Hop Culture & Black Identity*, 46 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 1346, 1346–57 (2003); Fernando Pedro Delgado, *Chicano Ideology Revisited: Rap Music and the (Re)articulation of Chicanismo*, 62 W. J. COMM. 95, 95–113; Geneva Smitherman, 'The Chain Remain the Same': *Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation*, 28 J. BLACK STUD. 3, 20 (1997). See generally KELLEY, *supra* note 4, at 183, 227; ROSE, *supra* note 4, at 100–01 ("Not all rap transcripts directly critique all forms of domination; nonetheless, a large and significant element in rap's discursive territory is engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans."); Charis E. Kubrin, *Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music*, 52 SOC. PROB. 360 (2005) (introducing a study on the content of rap music's use of "street code"); Charis E. Kubrin, 'I See

mainstream media images of stereotypically violent, predatory inner-city youth. However, few such studies distinguish rap as a form of oppositional culture in the face of the oppression of inner-city youth.⁷ In addition, no studies to date suggest that rap's oppositional critique highlights tenets of Critical Race Theory, namely, that rap's oppositional stance bears witness to the community knowledge and experience of youth of color in America's inner-cities as it critiques the post-Civil Rights Era.⁸

This paper is an exploration of images of inner-city youth as described in the lyrics of rap artists in direct opposition to the prevalent American media images of criminal youth predators. In addition, the paper will explore rap as a form of oppositional culture and as part of the legacy of Critical Race Theory in the post-Civil Rights Era. In part I, I will present a discussion of the violent, predatory images of inner-city youth of color so pervasive in the media. In part II, I will describe rap music as an alternative view of inner-city youth. This discussion will first detail the inception of rap music within inner-city communities and then go on to consider rap as a form of oppositional culture or a culture of resistance within a racist society.⁹ Furthermore, the discussion will provide an additional linkage between rap music and Critical Race Theory, which emerged out of the field of legal scholarship.¹⁰ In part III, I will include a brief methodology and then a

Death Around the Corner: Nihilism in Rap Music, 48 SOC. PERSP. 433, 434 (2006) (citing several studies and noting how the transformation of rap from carefree to gangsta "speaks to issues of identity, culture, and violence. . ."); Theresa A. Martinez, *Embracing the Outlaw: Deviance at the Intersection of Race, Class and Gender*, 1994 UTAH L. REV. 193, 199-202 (1994) [hereinafter Martinez, *Embracing the Outlaw*] ("[T]he 'core' of rap music, the reason for its existence as a cultural music form, is oppression."); Theresa A. Martinez, *Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap As Resistance*, 40 SOC. PERSP. 265, 272 (1997) [hereinafter Martinez, *Popular Culture*] ("[C]ontemporary discourse on rap recognizes the complexity of rap's relationship to the dominant culture. . ."); Theresa A. Martinez, *Recognizing the Enemy: Rap Music in the Wake of the Los Angeles Riots*, 16 EXPLORATIONS ETHNIC STUD. 115, 117 (1993) [hereinafter Martinez, *Recognizing the Enemy*] (using lyrical analysis to open "'a window to the more private areas of experience. . .'" (citation omitted)); Anthony B. Pinn, *How Ya Livin?: Notes on Rap Music and Social Transformation*, 23 W. J. BLACK STUD. 10 (1999) (concluding that rap artists are trying understand an absurd world); Ronald J. Stephens & Earl Wright II, *Beyond Bitches, Niggers, and Ho's: Some Suggestions for Including Rap Music as a Qualitative Data Source*, 3 RACE & SOC'Y 23 (2000) (using lyrics and artists as qualitative data sources to understand messages about black urban life); Erin Trapp, *The Push and Pull of Hip-Hop: A Social Movement Analysis*, 48 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 1482, 1482-95 (2005).

⁷ Venise T. Berry & Harold Looney, Jr., *Rap Music, Black Men, and the Police*, in MEDIATED MESSAGES AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES 263, 263-77 (Venise T. Berry & Carmen L. Manning-Miller eds., 1996); Delgado, *supra* note 6, at 101, 105-56; Martinez, *Popular Culture*, *supra* note 6, at 279-80; Pinn, *supra* note 6, at 17; Smitherman, *supra* note 6, at 279-80.

⁸ See generally CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE (Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic eds. 2000) (providing a survey of Critical Race Theory and theorists and emphasizing community narratives as distinct from dominant culture).

⁹ Berry & Looney, *supra* note 7, at 274-75; Delgado, *supra* note 6, at 272-73; Martinez, *Embracing the Outlaw*, *supra* note 6, at 202-03; Martinez, *Popular Culture*, *supra* note 6, at 272; Pinn, *supra* note 6, at 11, 17; Smitherman, *supra* note 6, at 20; Stephens & Wright, *supra* note 6, at 38.

¹⁰ See generally CRITICAL RACE THEORY, *supra* note 8, at xii-xviii.

summary analysis of rap music that deals lyrically with inner-city youth of color. Finally, in part IV, I will include some closing thoughts.

II. BLACK YOUTH EQUALS CRIME: IMAGES FROM THE MEDIA

The news media are one of the few channels through which most Americans receive information regarding race matters.¹¹ This is largely because most white Americans have very little contact with Blacks or other people of color; that is, "most black and white Americans live more residentially segregated lives now than they did a century ago."¹² This phenomenon is related, of course, to segregation in the educational system. Jonathan Kozol suggests in his newest book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, that "[s]chools that were already deeply segregated 25 or 30 years ago. . . are no less segregated now, while thousands of other schools that had been integrated either voluntarily or by the force of law have since been rapidly resegregating both in northern districts and in broad expanses of the South."¹³ Moreover, Kozol states that there seems to be an "agreed-upon convention in much of the media today not even to use an accurate descriptor such as 'racial segregation' in a narrative description of a segregated school. Linguistic sweeteners, semantic somersaults, and surrogate vocabularies are repeatedly employed. . . ." Kozol writes, in order to avoid the plain and apparently unspeakable truth of segregation.¹⁴

Further, there is a great deal of research which suggests that the American media tends to associate issues of race, class, and gender with crime and delinquency. That is, young Black and Latino men are perceived as the *real* crime and delinquency threat in America.¹⁵

Barry Feld suggests in *The Politics of Race and Juvenile Justice: The 'Due Process Revolution' and the Conservative Reaction*, as mentioned earlier, that the media is one of the only sources for American understanding of issues in inner-cities, and that media portrayals of American inner-city neighborhoods contribute to long-held stereotypes of a particular race and class of men and boys where race, class, and gender become conflated with violence and crime.¹⁶ Feld's analysis details the media's social construction of crime as violent "[t]o increase audience

¹¹ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 782.

¹² *Id.* See generally DOUGLAS S. MASSEY & N. A. DENTON, *AMERICAN APARTHEID: SEGREGATION AND THE MAKING OF THE UNDERCLASS* (1993) (examining persistent poverty among black Americans and deliberate segregation); D.R. Kinder & T. Mendelberg, *Cracks in American Apartheid: The Political Impact of Prejudice Among Desegregated Whites*, 57 J. POL. 402 (1995) (investigating whether racial isolation affects prejudice).

¹³ JONATHAN KOZOL, *THE SHAME OF THE NATION: THE RESTORATION OF APARTHEID SCHOOLING IN AMERICA* 18 (1995).

¹⁴ *Id.* at 21.

¹⁵ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 782-83; Dennis M. Rome, *Stereotyping by the Media: Murderers, Rapists, and Drug Addicts*, in *IMAGES OF COLOR, IMAGES OF CRIME: READINGS* 85, 89, 92-94 (Coramae R. Mann & Marjorie S. Zata eds., 1998).

¹⁶ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 784-86. See generally DORFMAN & SCHIRALDI, *supra* note 3, at 1; Thomas B. Edsall & Mary D. Edsall, *Race*, *ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, May 1991, at 53.

shares and advertising revenues”—the old “if it bleeds, it leads” adage—misrepresenting and distorting actual rates of violent crime and flying in the face of crime statistics.¹⁷ He writes, “[d]uring the 1990s, violent crime decreased 20% while network news coverage increased 83%, and homicides declined by one third while news coverage increased 473%. . . Murder accounts for less than 1% of all crime, but constitutes more than one quarter of all crime coverage.”¹⁸

Moreover, Feld states that this on-going social construction of violent crime is conflated with the race and class of the “offender.”¹⁹ He writes “[t]he term *offender* itself elicits a predictable, negative stereotype—a young, lower-class, physically unattractive black man who was involved in a violent crime.”²⁰ Feld argues moreover that “people are ‘cognitive misers,’”—only too happy to unburden their days with the substantive nuances of inner-city life by embracing the worst sort of racist myths about communities of color.²¹ Further, Feld suggests that the cumulative effects of cognitive miserliness has far-reaching implications, dealing a significant blow to public understanding of the experience of youth and people of color living in America’s most disenfranchised neighborhoods and impacting the treatment of adults and youth of color.²² He writes, “[c]ombining images of violence and race exerts a pervasive and cumulative effect on public opinion,” and lends support to punitive policies toward those “outsiders and predators.”²³

Dennis Rome echoes this analysis, and adds some historical and contemporary nuances. He suggests that the media-constructed stereotype of the “violent Black criminal” hearkens back to grotesque ante- and post-bellum Southern images of Blacks as sexually immoral “animals” and beasts, together with the immeasurably harmful image of the “violent Black rapist,” and this imagery was used to terrorize Black people in America with the threat of lynching.²⁴ Rome also makes a fascinating comparison between the rape of a white, female investment banker in Central Park with the rape of a young, white, mentally disabled teenage girl in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. The alleged perpetrators in the Central Park case were young men of color from disenfranchised

¹⁷ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 784–85. See generally DORFMAN & SCHIRALDI, *supra* note 3, at 11; Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. & Shanto S. Iyengar, *Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public*, 44 AM. J. OF POL. SCI. 560, 560–73 (2000); Franklin D. Gilliam et al., *Crime in Black and White: The Violent, Scary World of Local News*, 1 HARV. INT’L J. PRESS POL. 6, 6–23 (1996).

¹⁸ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 784; see also KATHERINE BECKETT & THEODORE SASSON, *THE POLITICS OF INJUSTICE: CRIME & PUNISHMENT IN AMERICA* 76–78 (2000). See generally Gilliam & Iyengar, *supra* note 17, at 560–73; Gilliam et al., *supra* note 17, at 6–23.

¹⁹ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 782–83.

²⁰ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 783; see also Julian V. Roberts, *Public Opinion, Crime, and Criminal Justice*, 6 CRIME & JUST. 99, 101–02 (1992).

²¹ Feld, *supra* note 2, 782; see also Robert M. Entman & Andrew Rojecki, *THE BLACK IMAGE IN THE WHITE MIND: MEDIA AND RACE IN AMERICA* 58 (2000).

²² Feld, *supra* note 2, at 782–83; Gilliam et al., *supra* note 17, at 6–23; Mark Peffley et al., *The Intersection of Race and Crime in Television News Stories: An Experimental Study*, 13 POL. COMM. 309, 311–12 (1996).

²³ Feld, *supra* note 2, at 784.

²⁴ Rome, *supra* note 15, at 85–87.

backgrounds while the alleged Glen Ridge perpetrators were young, middle- to upper-class white men.²⁵ The media's coverage of the two cases is what Rome finds most telling. Rome suggests that in the Central Park case, the media's depiction of the alleged perpetrators was skewed toward the negative, using labels like "vicious," "savagely beating," "marauding,"—implying the cruel, "animalistic" nature of the alleged perpetrators.²⁶ By extreme contrast, the media depiction of the Glen Ridge case described the alleged perpetrators as "sweet and obedient," "the most popular students in the school," and to individuals as "former captain of the football team" and an "honor student,"²⁷ alluding to the boys in fairly glowing and positive terms, and almost begging the misconception of the victim as seductress and femme fatale—a conclusion that the residents of Glen Ridge actually adopted.²⁸

Mainstream media's stereotypical, deficit-based, and deleterious depictions of young urban males run in startling contrast to portrayals in rap music. Rap has been and continues to be a voice for the voiceless in American society—inner-city Black youth.

III. RAP MUSIC: STORIES OF RESISTANCE

A. *A Brief Background on Rap: The Music of Subversion*

The mid-1970s saw hip-hop culture emerge in the South Bronx, a postindustrial urban landscape characterized by structural dislocation and one of the most economically disenfranchised communities anywhere in the country coping with "social isolation, economic fragility, truncated communications media, and shrinking social service organizations."²⁹ Rap was one thread of hip-hop culture, which also included graffiti and break dancing.³⁰ Rapping, which was "lively in style, colorful in language, rich in images, intended to persuade or give information," became part of a continuum of verbal dueling genres along with toasting, signifying, and the dozens—all longstanding elements of oral culture among African Americans, and it was also

²⁵ *Id.* at 89–91.

²⁶ *Id.* at 90.

²⁷ *Id.* at 89–90.

²⁸ See BERNARD LEFKOWITZ, *OUR GUYS: THE GLEN RIDGE RAPE AND THE SECRET LIFE OF THE PERFECT SUBURB* 377–78 (Vintage Books 1998).

²⁹ ROSE, *supra* note 4 at 33–34; see also JONATHAN KOZOL, *AMAZING GRACE: THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND THE CONSCIENCE OF A NATION* 192 (1995).

³⁰ See Houston A. Baker, *Scene . . . Not Heard*, in *READING RODNEY KING/READING URBAN UPRISING* 38, 46 (Robert Gooding-Williams ed., 1993) (writing about rap as a commentary of inner-city conditions). See generally B. ADLER & JANETTE BECKMAN, *RAP: PORTRAITS AND LYRICS OF A GENERATION OF BLACK ROCKERS* (1991) (chronicling biographies and lyrics from some of hip-hop's most influential artists); MARK COSTELLO & DAVID F. WALLACE, *SIGNIFYING RAPPERS: RAP AND RACE IN THE URBAN PRESENT* (1990) (sampling rap lyrics and noting rappers' poignant illumination of cultural divisions); DAVID TOOP, *RAP ATTACK 2: AFRICAN RAP TO GLOBAL HIP HOP* 12–15 (1991); ROSE, *supra* note 4, at 59.

influenced by Afro-Caribbean music.³¹ Rappers launched small independent labels as hip-hop DJs and used available equipment: "They turned two turntables into a sound system through the technical addition of a beat box, heavy amplification, headphones, and very, very fast hands."³² Kool DJ Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash³³ were some of the earliest hip-hop DJs who introduced the practice of "scratching," which involves moving a cued up record back and forth over the same beat.³⁴

In time, the digital synthesizer would replace the turntable and rappers would vocalize their words over a background characterized by edited, borrowed, and combined digital sound bytes.³⁵ The borrowing of various other recordings used by rappers was a technique called "sampling," which was a sort of "mother methodology" and "understood in-scene as an outlaw credential"—a signifier of street credibility, a willingness to subvert or work outside of the box or system, and perhaps a method of displaying authenticity.³⁶ Samples could be anything from the voice of Malcolm X to African drums and from doo-wop croons to the shouts of James Brown in what some described as a "hybrid."³⁷ Law professor Regina Austin distinguishes rap artists as hip-hop subversives, appropriating the sound and speech of others and refusing to follow traditional mores of "professional courtesy."³⁸

Contemporary debates reveal complex relationships that have emerged over time as rap has become more a part of mainstream marketing, influencing aspects of production and consumption in the U.S.³⁹ Yet, despite concerns about this unique musical form's co-optation by dominant hegemonic discourses, rap continues to be seen and understood as a popular cultural genre that is authentic to the experience of

³¹ Onwuchekwa Jemie, *The Verbal Continuum: Rapping, Signifying, Toasts, in Yo' MAMA!: NEW RAPS, TOASTS, DOZENS, JOKES, AND CHILDREN'S RHYMES FROM URBAN BLACK AMERICA* 40, 40 (2003); see also KELLEY, *supra* note 4, at 185–87, 189; ROSE, *supra* note, 4 at 75; TOOP, *supra* note 30, at 187.

³² HOUSTON A. BAKER, *BLACK STUDIES, RAP, AND THE ACADEMY* 88 (1993).

³³ See Jefferson Morley, *Introduction* xxi–xxii, in *RAP: THE LYRICS* (Lawrence A. Stanley ed., 1992); TOOP, *supra* note 30, at 69; ROSE, *supra* note 4, at 53.

³⁴ TOOP, *supra* note 30, at 26; see BAKER, *supra* note 32, at 90.

³⁵ COSTELLO & WALLACE, *supra* note 30, at 85.

³⁶ *Id.* at 105.

³⁷ BAKER, *supra* note 32, at 89.

³⁸ Regina Austin, 'The Black Community,' *Its Law Breakers, and a Politics of Identification*, 65 *S. CAL. L. REV.* 1769, 1812–13 (1992).

³⁹ KELLEY, *supra* note 4, at 183–227; ROSE, *supra* note 4, at 4–6; Mako Fitts, *The Political Economy of Hip Hop and the Cultural Production of Racialized and Gendered Images*, 66(A) *DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS INT'L, HUMAN. & SOC. SCI.* 2389 *passim* (2005); Ryan Ford, *Hip-Hop White Wash: The Impact of Eminem on Rap Music and Music Industry Economics*, 18 *SOCIALISM & DEMOCRACY* 127, 127, 132–33 (2004); David Hesmondhalgh, *Digital Sampling and Cultural Inequality*, 15 *SOC. & LEGAL STUD.* 53, 55, 64 (2006); Jennifer C. Lena, *Social Context and Musical Content of Rap Music*, 85 *SOC. FORCES* 479, 490 (2006); Elarick R. Jerry Persaud, *Ghetto Echoes: Hip Hop's Subversive Aesthetics* 67 *DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS INT'L, HUMAN. & SOC. SCI.* 351 (2006); Alexander Riley, *The Rebirth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Hip Hop: A Cultural Sociology of Gangsta Rap Music*, 8 *J. OF YOUTH STUD.* 297, 297–310 (2005); Gilbert b. Rodman, *Race... and Other Four Letter Words: Eminem and the Cultural Politics of Authenticity*, *POPULAR COMM.* 95, 107 (2006).

urban youth of color,⁴⁰ documenting resistance to and survival within the dominant society.⁴¹ Clarence Lusane, for example, documents the contradictions apparent in rap. That is, on the one hand rap is a subversive, resistance genre that raises consciousness about the dominant hegemony.⁴² On the other hand, rap is exploitative, consumer-driven, commodified, and even sexist at times.⁴³ Lusane voices these contradictions in rap openly, yet reaches the conclusion that rap will continue to “deconstruct and destroy racist images of black youth while at the same time construct a new humanity and society that is more egalitarian and just than the one in which they live and function.”⁴⁴ Tricia Rose, in the same way, argues that rap continues to be an authentic voice: “The drawing power of rap is precisely its musical and narrative commitment to black youth and cultural resistance, and nothing in rap’s commercial position and cross-cultural appeal contradicts this fact.”⁴⁵ The next section will explore this authentic voice in more depth.

B. Rap: A Critical Voice of Resistance for Youth of Color

Rap music’s lyrical message has centered on the experience of Black youth and other youth of color living in inner-city America; within communities which rap music describes as communities in crisis—neglected, abandoned, and victimized by mainstream institutions, including government, the health care system, the media, and law enforcement. Robin Kelley and Houston Baker document rap’s popular cultural critique of dominant institutional structures, such as law enforcement, placing rap in the context of a devastated inner-cityscape characterized by hopelessness, disenfranchisement, and joblessness.⁴⁶ Kelley writes: “The criminalization, surveillance, incarceration, and immiseration of black youth in the postindustrial city have been the central theme in gangsta rap, and at the same time, sadly, constitute the primary experiences from which their identities are constructed.”⁴⁷ Baker emphasizes that rap “was an articulate cry to the world about the insufferable poverty, relentless police brutality, and frustrated hopes of the black urban scene. . . . It presented its own clear black understanding of the inner city’s economic and political abandonment.”⁴⁸ Tricia Rose, in particular, underscores the critique of law enforcement within rap music when she writes: “For many poor and working-class African Americans, police

⁴⁰ KELLEY, *supra* note 4, at 190–99, 208; Austin, *supra* note 38, at 1812–14; Dipa Basu, *What is Real About ‘Keeping It Real’?* POSTCOLONIAL STUD. 371–76, 385 (1998).

⁴¹ Delgado, *supra* note 7, at 96, 101, 109; Martinez, *Recognizing the Enemy*, *supra* note 6, at 115–27; Pinn, *supra* note 6, at 17; Smitherman, *supra* note 6, at 7.

⁴² Clarence Lusane, *Rhapsodic Aspirations: Rap, Race and Power Politics*, 23 BLACK SCHOLAR 37, 49 (1993).

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*; see also Judith McDonnell, *Rap Music: Its Role as an Agent of Change* 16 POPULAR MUSIC & SOC’Y 89, 91, 104–05 (1992); Yasue Kuwahara, *Power to the People Y’All: Rap Music, Resistance, and Black College Students*, 16 HUMAN. & SOC’Y 54, 70–71 (1992).

⁴⁵ ROSE, *supra* note 4, at 19.

⁴⁶ KELLEY, *supra* note 4, at 183–227; Baker, *supra* note 30, at 38.

⁴⁷ KELLEY, *supra* note 4, at 208.

⁴⁸ Baker, *supra* note 30, at 46.

and brutality are synonymous. . . . Police brutality, racism, and harassment form the political core of male rappers' social criticism, and lyrics that effectively and cleverly address these issues carry a great deal of social weight in rap music."⁴⁹ Berry and Looney echo Rose, suggesting that rap music actually exposed the general public "to the problematic relationship between black men and the police" and made it part of the larger cultural agenda.⁵⁰

Interestingly, it is the authentic lyrical message of rap documenting life in a "complex, dangerous world"⁵¹ that draws so much interest and attention from American youth audiences. Walser, paraphrasing George Lipsitz, alludes to this fact within his analysis of rap music when he writes that "in a world where more and more people feel dislocated and disenfranchised, the culture of people who have historically lived with the contradictions of being outsiders becomes increasingly relevant to everyone."⁵²

Rap's lyrical critique of dominant institutions, including law enforcement and the media, embodies what Bonnie Mitchell and Joe Feagin describe in their theory of *oppositional culture or culture of resistance*, which suggests that groups will draw on their own distinct cultural resources to resist oppression.⁵³ Feagin and Mitchell suggest that oppositional cultures and cultures of resistance operate to preserve dignity and autonomy, to provide an alternative construction of identity (one not based entirely on deprivation), and to give members of the dominant group an insightful critique of their own culture. "From this perspective, members of oppressed subordinate groups are not powerless pawns that merely react to circumstances beyond their control, but rather are reflective, creative agents that construct a separate reality in which to survive."⁵⁴

Extended family networks, social movements, and expression in artistic and cultural mediums are just a few examples of oppositional cultures. Mitchell and Feagin, suggest that much oppositional culture can be an oppressed group's use of "their own art and music, and their own philosophical and political thinking about oppression and liberation," as a "critical assessment of the dominant culture."⁵⁵

Further, rap music's lyrical critique resonates with some of the main tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT emerged in the post-Civil Rights era as a voice of resistance and concern in the face of the backlash to civil rights laws and the slow pace of racial equality.⁵⁶ Some of the tenets of CRT include recognizing that "racism is normal, not aberrant in American society" and that "white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also

⁴⁹ ROSE, *supra* note 4, at 106.

⁵⁰ Berry & Looney, *supra* note 7, at 276.

⁵¹ Robert Walser, *Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy*, *ETHNOMUSICOLOGY*, Spring 1995, at 211.

⁵² *Id.* at 210.

⁵³ Bonnie L. Mitchell & Joe R. Feagin, *America's Racial-Ethnic Cultures: Opposition within a Mythical Melting Pot*, in *TOWARD THE MULTICULTURAL UNIVERSITY* 65, 68 (B. Bowser et al. eds., 1995).

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 69.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 72-73.

⁵⁶ *CRITICAL RACE THEORY*, *supra* note 8, at xvi-xvii.

promote white self-interest.”⁵⁷ CRT also emphasizes the significance of stories and community knowledge among people and communities of color, stressing that such narratives are distinct from those of the dominant culture and deserve to be heard. In fact, CRT scholars “have been using biography and autobiography, stories and counterstories, to expose the false necessity and unintentional irony of much current civil rights law and scholarship.”⁵⁸ Delgado and Stefancic suggest that “many CRT writers urge attention to the details of minorities’ lives as a foundation for our national civil rights strategy.”⁵⁹ Moreover, CRT stresses the multiple lenses through which individuals experience the social world, lenses which encompass the simultaneity and specificity of race, class, and gender among other critical lenses such as age, sexuality, and religion.⁶⁰

In the same way, rap music resonates and reveals specific counterstances to the status quo. The lyrics of rap emphasize and highlight the particular life experiences of inner-city youth, sharing the unique community knowledge of abandoned, neglected youth of color growing up in America’s urban landscape—a landscape which reveals the staying power of racism, classism, and sexism. Further, rap’s collective and individual storytelling reveals the experiences of individuals with multiple lenses on the social world; specifically, the experiences of disenfranchised Black male youth.

IV. INNER-CITY YOUTH OF COLOR: STORIES FROM RAP MUSIC

A. *Brief Methodology*

If “analysis is conceived as an emergent product of a process of gradual induction. . .,” and if analysis is “very much a creative act,”⁶¹ the following brief analysis of rap music lyrics falls within this analytical framework. The rap music artists that will be the focus of this brief analysis were chosen from an emergent snowball sample of sorts gleaned from talking with other researchers in this area, my students, and consulting my own frame of reference over years of studying rap music. What emerged was a pilot study grounded in the lyrics of some of the most well-known politically conscious rap artists. The groups and artists that are the focal point of this analysis are 2Pac, Kanye West, Mos Def, and Immortal Technique.

Themes emerged in reading and re-reading the lyrics as guided by the theory of oppositional culture and Critical Race Theory. As Shulamit Reinharz asserts, “qualitative sociologists apply an inductive, interpretive framework to cultural

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.* at xvii.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at xviii.

⁶⁰ *See generally id.*

⁶¹ JOHN LOFLAND & LYN LOFLAND, *ANALYZING SOCIAL SETTINGS: A GUIDE TO QUALITATIVE OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS* 181 (1995).

artifacts. What differentiates sociologists from historians is simply the use of sociological theory as an aid in the explanation. . . ."⁶²

The rap music artists that are the focus of this pilot study deal specifically with issues facing youth of color in disenfranchised inner-city communities. This analysis serves partly as a counterstance to stereotypical media images of urban Black youth as discussed previously in this paper, but also as a nuanced narrative message of resistance or oppositional culture grounded in community knowledge of race, class, and gender oppression, through the multiple lenses apparent in the lives of these youth. As noted in the discussion of rap music above, some of the core themes in rap center on critiques of major institutions in U.S. society, exploring issues of crisis and neglect. This brief analysis will include rap lyrics that deal specifically with the experiences of and issues facing youth of color in neglected inner-city communities in America.

B. The Message Is in the Music

Far from the stereotypical, "urban Black criminal predator" which is the common image in the mainstream media, images in rap music lyrics paint a far different picture. Instead, what emerges are the unique experiences and community knowledge of disenfranchised Black male youth who are set up to fail by a system fueled by racism, classism, and sexism, which denies or overtly blocks access to needed resources. The rap lyrics also hold messages of resistance and encouragement to youth of color from the rap music artists themselves, who use their pens/rhymes to empower.

1. Youth of color are set up to fail

In the song *Mathematics*,⁶³ Mos Def states for the record that young Black men and boys living in the inner-city are set up to fail.⁶⁴ The lyrics intone a biting critique of America's system of (in)justice in which poor youth of color become trapped within a structural arrangement whose number one priority is to guarantee their failure and eventual commitment to prison.⁶⁵ The arrangement is simply this: if you lose every viable option to survive and virtually all other opportunities are denied you, you will eventually break and succumb to the code of the capitalist system. You will find a new way to survive in the irregular economy, and that means dollars for the "powers that be" who can reap exponential rewards from the multi-billion dollar prison-industrial complex, which becomes, in effect, the new housing authority for youth of color. Moreover, the lyrics suggest that punishments for youthful Black offenders continue to become stiffer as the profits mount.⁶⁶ Fundamentally, the lyrics explore the lived experiences of so many Black teens

⁶² SHULAMIT REINHARZ, *FEMINIST METHODS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH* 159 (1992).

⁶³ MOS DEF, *Mathematics*, on *BLACK ON BOTH SIDES* (Rawkus Records 1999).

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

living in the inner-cities who learn to survive with racism, classism, and sexism on a daily basis. Here is an illustrative excerpt from the song:

Young teens and prison greens facin life numbers. . .
Young bloods can't spell but they could rock you in PlayStation. . .
Yo it's six Million Ways to Die, from the seven deadly thrills
Eight year olds gettin found with [.9 mils]. . .
Young soldiers tryin to earn they next stripe
When the average minimum wage is \$5.15
You best believe you gotta find a new grind to get cream
The white unemployment rate, is nearly more than triple for black
so frontliners got they gun in your back
Bubblin crack, jewel theft and robbery to combat poverty
and end up in the global jail economy
Stiffer stipulations attached to each sentence
Budget cutbacks but increased police presence
And even if you get out of prison still livin
join the other five million under state supervision.⁶⁷

Dead Prez artists, stic.man and M1 epitomize a critical stance toward the government and systems of power in the country in their lyrics. The song *Behind Enemy Lines*, underscores a system "set up" to play with and manipulate the lives of Black families whose youth become just another pawn in the overall racially profiled government hustle of Black lives into prison rolls.⁶⁸ The "enemy lines" referred to in the lyrics are prisons that resemble concentration camps where young Black men find themselves in the hands of the system, fated to incarceration.⁶⁹ The lyrics throughout the song, further, make continuous reference to a long history of set-ups where Black youth are placed in crimogenic, unspeakable circumstances and faced with abysmal choices, only to find ends in the cell or the cemetery:

Behind enemy lines, my niggas is cellmates
Most of the youth never escape the jail fate
Super maximum camps will advance they game plan
To keep us in the hands of the man locked up. . .
Little Kenny been smokin lucy since he was twelve
Now he twenty-five locked up wit a L
They call him triple K, cuz he killed three niggas
Another ghetto child got turned into a killa
His pops was a Vietnam veteran on heroin
Used like a pawn by these white North Americans
Mama couldn't handle the stress so went crazy

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ DEAD PREZ, *Behind Enemy Lines*, on LET'S GET FREE (Loud Records 2000).

⁶⁹ *Id.*

Grandmama had to raise the baby
 Just a young boy, born to a life of poverty
 Hustlin, robbery, whatever brung the paper home
 Carried the chrome like a blind man hold a cane
 Tattoos all over his chest so you could know his name
 But y'all know how the game go
 Deez kicked in the front door and guess who they came for
 A young nigga headed for the pen, coulda been, shoulda been
 Never see the hood again.⁷⁰

2. Resistance and empowerment

In the song *Mathematics*, Mos Def opens with some illustrative numbers and then starts the artist's tale with an opening salvo across the bows of the racist, classist, and sexist prison-industrial complex.⁷¹ The lyrics make clear that the artist intends to resist, to do battle with this Goliath who would guarantee a life sentence to youth of color, with his pen and ink, exposing the "mathematics," the numbers, the hard realities for young men of color and making visible the racism, classism, and sexism that undergirds America's sprawling capitalist urban centers.⁷² Here is an excerpt which illustrates the theme of resistance:

The body of my text possess extra strength
 Power-liftin powerless up, out of this, towerin inferno
 My ink so hot it burn through the journal
 I'm blacker than midnight on Broadway and Myrtle
 Hip-Hop past all your tall social hurdles
 like the nationwide projects, prison-industry complex
 Working class poor better keep your alarm set
 Streets too loud to ever hear freedom ring
 Say evacuate your sleep, it's dangerous to dream
 for cha-ching cats get {{they}} CHA-POW, {{you}} dead now
 Killin fields need blood to graze the cash cow.⁷³

Keep Ya Head Up by 2Pac echoes this thematic content, also signifying resistance to oppression that he has faced and that he sees his godson facing.⁷⁴ Resistance in these lyrics is an encouragement to struggle, to survive in the face of the "set-up" that insures that the rich get richer and the poor lose ground. In fact, the lyrics imply that the artist is speaking directly to an audience that relates to and resonates with the experiences he shares of a youth and young adulthood literally under the gun. Here is an excerpt from the song:

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ MOS DEF, *supra* note 63.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ 2PAC, *Keep Ya Head Up*, on STRICTLY 4 MY N.I.G.G.A.Z. (Interscope Records 1993).

You know it's funny when it rains it pours
 They got money for wars, but can't feed the poor
 Say there ain't no hope for the youth and the truth is
 it ain't no hope for tha future
 And then they wonder why we crazy. . .
 We ain't meant to survive, cause it's a setup
 And even though you're fed up
 Huh, ya got to keep your head up. . .
 I was given this world I didn't make it
 And now my son's gettin older and older and cold
 From havin the world on his shoulders
 While the rich kids is drivin Benz
 I'm still tryin to hold on to survivin friends
 And it's crazy, it seems it'll never let up, but
 please. . . you got to keep your head up.⁷⁵

Around My Way, by Talib Kweli suggests that harsh living conditions faced by those living in desolated communities can lead to rebirth and recreation so that their children have a chance away from oppressive conditions.⁷⁶ In these lyrics, and in direct contradiction of stereotypes as old as the writings of Daniel Patrick Moynihan,⁷⁷ the artist pays tribute to community values and extraordinary efforts made by families in inner cities to survive. Moreover, while the artist urges youth to stay in school on the way to their dreams, he also emphasizes that there is a responsibility to give back to the community:

I'm on the block, I'm tracing your footsteps, I keep the faith in you
 Your love, plus hard work and ambition
 We gonna make it through, my songs is psalms I'm spiritual when I'm
 lyrical
 This is for my soldier niggaz looking in the mirror who
 Sitting home scratching off serials eating cereal
 The way we find a way to survive, shit is a miracle. . .
 These conditions make us strong
 And we create our own businesses so later on
 Our children have things in their name that they can say they own. . .
 Be a doctor or a lawyer or make your momma a promise that
 You'll finish school, but when you got a dream you gotta follow that
 And make sure when you make it out the hood, you always holler back

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ TALIB KWELI, *Around My Way*, on *The Beautiful Struggle* (Rawkus / Umgd 2004).

⁷⁷ See generally Ellis Cose, *Long After the Alarm Went Off: The Statistics so Worrisome About Blacks Then, Would Eventually Describe Reality for Whites*, NEWSWEEK, Mar. 6, 2005 (critiquing the Moynihan Report's shortsighted and stereotypical conclusions about the so-called pathology within the Black family).

Think about what you got from that
 And always put your dollars back
 On top of that, this is a legacy and we a part of that
 The hood is where my heart is at
 Catch me around my way.⁷⁸

Immortal Technique's lyrics/rap from the song *Poverty of Philosophy* clearly intones a message of resistance emphasizing that youth on "the street"—the "enemy" according to mainstream media—are not even close to being the real perpetrators.⁷⁹ Instead, the artist suggests that we as Americans have much more to fear from those in government/power and those who inhabit corporate suites.⁸⁰ Here is a brief excerpt from the song:

My enemy is not the average white man, it's not the kid down the block or the kids I see on the street; my enemy is the white man I don't see: the people in the white house, the corporate monopoly owners, fake liberal politicians those are my enemies. The generals of the armies that are mostly conservatives those are the real Mother-Fuckers that I need to bring it to, not the poor, broke country-ass soldier that's too stupid to know shit about the way things are set up.⁸¹

This brief analysis of the lyrical content of rap music from even a few selected artists clearly represents a counterstance to images of urban youth of color found in mainstream media. Instead, the analysis uncovers a perception of brutal and profiteering neglect of youth of color in America's inner-cities. The rap artists create a faithful montage of experiential and community knowledge of youth of color, which offers a critique of abandoned neighborhoods that habitually see violence and the killing of dreams. Moreover, the music is a message of resistance to the "suppression" witnessed daily.

V. LAST WORDS

Prophetically, Malcolm X warned of a debilitating racist cancer in the soul of America back in 1965.⁸² This cancer, or "smog" as Beverly Tatum describes it,⁸³ is still visible and comes in many different forms. Despite news flashes to the contrary, the real perpetrator here is not the stereotypical young urban Black male predator. No, the predator is much closer to home, alive and well in a "system of

⁷⁸ KWELL, *supra* note 76.

⁷⁹ IMMORTAL TECHNIQUE, *Politics of Poverty*, on REVOLUTIONARY, VOL. I. (Viper Records 2005).

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ *Id.*

⁸² See MALCOLM X, *supra* note 1, at 380.

⁸³ BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM, WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE CAFETERIA AND OTHER CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE 6 (Basic Books, 1997).

advantage based on race,"⁸⁴ which is so ubiquitous in America⁸⁵ that privilege based on race, the "invisible knapsack" so aptly described by Peggy McIntosh,⁸⁶ is rarely acknowledged unless threatened. Moreover, the knapsack can be expanded to fit elements of classism and sexism. In point of fact, the system profits off the backs of the "truly disadvantaged." In point of fact, the young Black inner-city youth is the child to whom we should be at pains to make amends. Such children are part and parcel of a brutally criminogenic environment as well as a racist/classist/sexist social structure, which would render any youth desperate, panicked, and bound out to the survival imperative—indentured servants, if you will, to absolute deprivation and the need to eke out existence by any means necessary. We must own this fact as individuals and as a society.

Rap music creates a method in the madness, a way for those who have no voice to speak their piece. The lyrics of rap intone a chant of community knowledge reflected along the axis of race, class, and gender; making visible the experience of youth of color who live in our country's forgotten spaces. The lyrics speak of disenfranchisement and loss, but also resistance and strength. Patricia Hill Collins tells us that while individuals experience oppression at "the level of personal biography, the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions,"⁸⁷ we can also resist oppression at each level as well. The point is to listen and then to act.

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 7 (quoting DAVID T. WELLMAN, *PORTRAITS OF WHITE RACISM* (Cambridge University Press 1977)).

⁸⁵ JOE R. FEAGIN, *RACIST AMERICA: ROOTS, CURRENT REALITIES, AND FUTURE REPARATIONS* 16 (Routledge 2000).

⁸⁶ Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women Studies*, in *RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER: AN ANTHOLOGY* 70, 71 (Margaret L. Andersen & Patricia Hill Collins eds., 1992).

⁸⁷ PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT* 227 (Routledge 1991).