

## Beyond bitches, niggers, and ho's: some suggestions for including rap music as a qualitative data source

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### Abstract

The major objective of this paper is to qualitatively demonstrate that rap music is not simply (what some may perceive to be) a disgusting display of violent and misogynistic music. While the authors are aware of the fact that there is a large section of rap music that is lewd and obscene, they argue, instead, that rap music is, at its basic level, an extension and analyses of the greater frustrations of the lived experiences of African Americans, specifically men, in today's society. They suggest that this expression of the frustrations of a certain segment of the United States population is a beneficial qualitative data source that, if triangulated with other methodologies, could have major social policy ramifications. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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### 1. Introduction

Think back 26 years

Be like. . . what if his birth was a miscarriage and I never existed

Have i given something that if taken away you'd miss it

Didn't know that i persisted, it was a call of the wild

I merely say what's in my heart and you call it a style

Don't put it in a cage, don't mistreat it

You say you hunger for knowledge, here it is eat it

—DMX (1998)

Within the past two decades rap music has proven to be a very powerful and persuasive mode of discourse in the global marketplace and in the larger society. Rap began in the South Bronx of New York City in the early 1970s as a cultural expression of "inner city blues." As

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such, rap quickly developed into a complex performance genre in which artists from lower and middle class backgrounds, different ethnicities, races, nationalities, and communities, combined politically conscious poetry with collages of musical beats that spoke, simultaneously, in opposition to the macro societal structure of the United States. These narratives of resistance challenge the politics and ideology of certain groups that support theories of a dominant culture (Lusane, 1993; Rose, 1994; Dyson, 1996; Delgado, 1998; and George, 1998) while detailing the everyday lived experiences, or micro level analyses, of African Americans in urban areas such as New York City, Los Angeles, Houston, Philadelphia, and Newark.

Despite rap's tremendous impact on popular culture over the past twenty years, certain social scientific communities, specifically sociology, have neglected to fully utilize the data presented them by artists who produce first hand accounts of urban street life. Instead, most academicians, have relied upon trained scholars to "objectively" research these issues. A sociological utilization of selected rap lyrics by selected rap artists could result in a surplus of qualitative data describing and analyzing the lived experiences of some urban Americans, specifically African Americans. Should such a course of action be desired by some researchers, rap music can provide another method by which to better understand urban life and could possibly lead to social policy changes and/or modifications. Examples of possible topics derived from such a perspective are investigations into the influence of rap music on American society, both urban and suburban America, and the relationship between rap music and the proliferation of social problems (i.e., teen pregnancy, murder, sexually transmitted diseases, single female-headed households, fatherless homes, etc.).

Sociological investigations analyzing the lived experiences of African Americans, the poor, and other disadvantaged groups are often conducted using either "unbiased" quantitative methods or qualitative methodologies conducted by "outside" researchers in a world in which they may not possess "insider" status, yet investigate anyhow (i.e., Mitchell Duneier's (1992) *Slim's Table*, Charles Keil's (1966) *Urban Blues*, Elliot Liebow's (1967) *Tally's Corner*, and Lee Rainwater's (1970) *Behind Ghetto Walls*). Ironically, first hand accounts of the underclass, which are often expressed in some of the song-lyrics of rap artists, or "real" participant observers, are overlooked and/or dismissed by some segments of the sociological academic community. Instead, rap music, with its hard core lyrics and thundering beats, is often minimized by some sociological scholars as a form of popular culture that does not add any substance to the sociological literature because it is not "academic" nor quantitative. Massey and Denton (1993) state that "although participant observer studies and rap lyrics illustrate the harsh realities of black street life, they do not "prove" [emphasis not ours] the harmful effects of growing up in the ghetto. Hard evidence. . . requires statistical studies using nationally representative data." (178). We believe this line of reasoning suggests that some rap artists, as members of the much investigated and analyzed underclass, do not possess the mental acuity necessary to articulate, or according to Massey and Denton "prove," the horrid lived realities of "ghetto life" because, perhaps, they are not credentialed nor have access to the resources housing the variables necessary to legitimate their claims. This line of ethnocentric reasoning leads one to ask if the variable "near death experience" is enough of a measure for some academicians. In this essay, we suggest that selected rap lyrics should be employed as qualitative data and that the utilization

and understanding of these lyrics, coupled with other qualitative and/or quantitative data, could have major social policy implications. We also seek to demonstrate how rap provides a pointed critique of an oppressive political economic system by challenging societal constructions of normative definitions and advancing narratives of subjectivity.

### *1.1. How do we know what we know*

Our specific objective is to not only connect research related to public discourse and human values with an exploration into the lyrics of rap artists, but also to explore and analyze multiple ways of reporting research findings related to sociological analysis as the negotiation of competing narratives and “constructions of truths.” We suggest that the “truth” can be revealed through a number of mechanisms. First, one can research the truth. By this we mean that scholars can engage in hands off, nonbiased quantitative and/or qualitative research that does not involve intimate contact with the subjects of the study. Second, we suggest that one can observe the truth. Those who observe the truth are best illustrated as participant observers engaged in scholarship “in the field” but are not “of the field.” This type of researcher has the ability to know the “truth” through observational research, but only as he/she interprets the data from those individuals actually existing and/or living in the research field. The third mechanism by which we suggest that one can know the truth is by actually being an insider in the research setting. This type of researcher has the ability to directly identify and illustrate his/her lived experiences from the perspective of a person “in the field” who is “of the field.” It is our contention that some rap artists employ this third mechanism, or set of truths, through a multivocality of competing narratives—otherwise known as rap music. Despite our assertion that rap artists employ an insider perspective, we are aware that individuals with similar lived experiences can possibly have different interpretations of that experience (Mannheim, 1968). Nevertheless, rappers such as Tupac Shakur, in his hit single “Dear Mama” (1995) for example, often present generalizable first-hand accounts of the horrid lived realities of urban life such as poverty, family bonding through street gang affiliation, drug dealing in pursuit of the American dream, and attitudes about single-female headed households as told through their personal lenses:

I hung around with the thugs and even though they sold drugs  
 They showed a young brother love  
 I moved out and started really hanging  
 I needed money of my own so i started slanging  
 I ain't guilty. . . cause even though i sell rocks  
 It feels good putting money in your mailbox  
 I love paying rent when the rent's due  
 Hope you got the diamond necklace that i sent to you  
 Cause when i was low you was there for me  
 You never left me alone because you cared for me  
 And i can see you coming home after work late  
 You in the kitchen trying to fix us a hot plate  
 Just working with the scraps you was given  
 Momma made miracles every thanksgiving

But now the road got rough you're alone  
 Trying to raise two bad kids on your own  
 There's no way i can pay you back  
 But, my plan is to show you that i understand

Clearly, these lyrics serve as a window into the world of a young African American male rapper who is in search of an escape route from the social isolation and disfranchisement that sometimes results from living in an impoverished condition. Additionally, Tupac recognizes that there are institutional factors limiting his ability to achieve the American dream. Consequently, although he does not enjoy his career as a drug dealer, Tupac revels in the fact that he is able to provide financial support, albeit on a limited basis, for his family. This data are presented by the artist, a member of the much investigated and analyzed underclass, and not by an objective outside researcher; thus, providing a possibly more valid critique of American society. We do not suggest that every rap artist depicts events and situations as they really exist. However, we do suggest that an intense investigation into the life histories of chosen rap artists could produce useful data for scholars engaged in empirical research affecting urban Americans.

### *1.2. Literature review*

Some scholars and theorists across disciplinary boundaries depict rap music as a socializing agent that leads to decreased social control and social cohesiveness, without fully analyzing and/or understanding the powerful lyrics that vividly explain the artists' world and all that lies within it (Stephens, 1996). In studies of rap as black street talk, for example, Keyes (1992) emphasizes negative rap lyrics directed at women and suggests that the lyrics offer the participants an opportunity to engage in "dialogism"—dialectical public conversations with one another, public officials, law enforcement agencies, and representatives of watchdog groups. For Keyes, the rap industry represents a male-dominated industry in which public conversations, that occur between male and female rappers, frame various issues that essentially involve entry into the marketplace. As for rap as a cultural expression of despair and hopelessness, Keyes (1991), similar to Berry (1990), suggests that rap represents the lived experiences of low-income African American adolescents and their desire to succeed despite the many odds placed before them. While Keyes' (1991) study focuses on rap's African and Western roots as street culture, rap's voice as a political forum, and rap as an opportunity for the exchange of messages between male and female rappers, she insufficiently connects rap lyrics with broader socioeconomic issues. Thus, she places an inordinate amount of attention on the offensiveness of rap lyrics while ignoring the hidden transcript behind the obvious vulgarity and profanity.

Demott (1988) suggests that rather than view hip-hop (or rap) subculture in the U.S. as a symptom of a culture of poverty, the identity of some rap artists as working-class youth should be framed as a shared ideological subculture that goes beyond superficial public and private conceptions of reality to relay their lived experiences to those outside their realm of reality. Pressley (1992) adds that given all the complexities and controversies surrounding rap, its rhetorical symbols give voice to the oppressed through realistic expressions of despair

and hopelessness. When viewed this way, rap artists articulate ideological and subversive identities and politics.

Hence, Rose's (1994) argument that rap's position as Black "cultural expression prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America" (2) is on-target. In so stating, Rose paints a vivid analyses of some of the institutions in American society that contribute to the tenuous situation for today's black youth (i.e., massive changes in society through a loss of federal funding for American cities, increased joblessness, homelessness, worsening racial tensions, and sudden shifts in occupational demographics nationwide). Rose states that "rap [artists] act out inversions of status hierarchies, and tell alternative stories of contact with the police" (100). She further suggests that rappers use provocative speech and disguised rhetorical codes to analyze and challenge traditional bases of social inequality.

Commenting on other controversial issues concerning gangsta and political rap, Lusane (1993) highlights the role that power politics, power economics and power lyrics play in rap's discourse. His Marxist analysis of these voices in rap are framed as a critique of a United States system of internal colonialism that oppresses young, poor African American youth. While explaining rap's role as a rhetorical device for Black youth that exposes political injustices, Lusane asserts that rap "is the voice of alienated, frustrated, and rebellious black youth who recognize their vulnerability and marginality in postindustrial America. Denied access to the real levers of political and ideological power, rappers have created what Public Enemy's Chuck D calls black folks CNN" (37). Summarily, Lusane illustrates how rap artists situate themselves in positions to "school," or educate, the nation about the ways in which many urban residents exist in contemporary society.

### *1.3. Selection of artists and song-lyrics*

In this essay we identify several rap artists, and groups, who were instrumental in the development and advancement of this form of musical expression through various phases. Specifically, we selected Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five because they initiated socially conscious rap music in the late 1970s and early 1980s. KRS One and Public Enemy then advanced rap music in the 1980s with their emphasis on political as well as social issues. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, NWA, the first recognized gangsta rap group, became the first rap artists to nationally address political and social issues with violence ridden undertones. Shortly after gangsta rap became popularized into American culture, Tupac Shakur personified the mind set of some mid-1990s young African American males through his "thug life" style that enabled him to maintain a following as both a rap artist and movie star. Currently, Master P and Mystikal, members of the No-Limit recording family, best represent, through their lyrical content, the experiences of some contemporary urban African Americans. After identifying the artists chosen for this essay, we then selected certain rap song-lyrics that fully expressed, as defined and experienced by the artists, the conditions and lived experiences of some urban Americans. Our use of content analysis, as employed here, represents a research technique useful for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their content. The basis for making such inferences is the analytical construct, which essentially involves a set of logical rules of correspondence between data and context. We then categorized the lyrical contents of the songs that dealt with themes involving critiques

of American society, violence, death, crime, unemployment, unwed mother, teen pregnancy, fatherlessness, homelessness, and police brutality. Ultimately, the occurrence of these themes, and not the frequency of occurrence, was of primary concern

#### *1.4. Rap's original social conscious*

Since its inception as urban America's articulation of the Post Civil Rights era, a number of rap artists have chronicled urban life experiences through a variety of subgenres, styles and mediums. Many have rapped about the poor, experiences of ghetto life, unwed motherhood, teen pregnancy, fatherless homes, homelessness, unemployment, drug use and abuse, and a host of other social issues. Commenting on the social history from which rap emerged, George (1998) traces some of the societal trends that help to conceptualize the rap music revolution:

Postsoul kids grew up with the Vietnam War. Their fathers came back with drugs and bad dreams—if they came back at all. As they grew up, both the black middle class and the black lower class expanded; they grew up with Wall Street greed, neo-con ideology, Atari Gameboys, crack, AIDS, Afrocentricity, and Malcolm X as movie hero, political icon and marketing vehicle. They saw Nelson Mandela walk out of jail and Mike Tyson walk in. Some say this is the first generation of black Americans to experience nostalgia. And it all showed up in the music (xi).

Dominated by male African American rappers and a wide variety of rap music subgenres (i.e., gangsta rap, nationalist rap, feminist, dance rap, comedic rap, etc.), the rap industry not only promotes the pain, pleasure, and suffering of angry, young African American voices, it also enables those outside the urban “ghetto” to experience the life of the rap artist, thus, allowing the pleasure and pain to cross racial, gender, and other lines of divide; even if vicariously (West, 1993).

The first rap group to produce socially conscious rap messages was Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, featuring DJ Grandmaster Flash and the master rapper Melle Mel. In 1982 their song, “The Message,” helped to popularize rap music before a national audience while simultaneously graphically depicting the hard times and desperation in, what the group alludes to as, a urban war zone. The groups message came after the nation was recuperating from the findings of the Kerner Commission's report that documented the existence of racial divisions in America, the social movements of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, and the Middle East oil crisis in the early 1970s. The discourse of Melle Mel, through the song, “The Message,” resonated quite clearly as a rhetorical reflection of hard times experienced by some African Americans as a result of inflation, increased unemployment, and the inability of hard working poor black and brown people to find decent employment; thus, being forced to live below the poverty line. This critique was vividly articulated when Melle Mel communicated to society to:

Don't push me cause i'm close to the edge  
 I'm trying not to lose my head  
 It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder  
 How i keep from going under

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five are credited for incorporating multiple personal narratives into rap songs, verbally illustrating the debilitating state of urban life, and helping audiences better understand the living conditions of many urban African American families. Additionally, other facets of urban life (i.e., religion, second-class citizenship, and hatred of underclass status) are included in their seminal work:

A child is born with no state of mind  
 Blind to the ways of mankind  
 God's smiling on you and he's frowning too  
 Cause only god knows what you gon' do  
 Now you grow up in the ghetto livin' second rate  
 And your eyes will sing a song of deep-seated hate  
 The places you play and where you stay  
 Looks like one great big alleyway

"The Message" became the first nationally recognized socially conscious rap song and it provided many young African Americans with an example of how to use their own lived experience as a point of reference while engaging the public in a passionate conversation using the emerging musical style that they loved. However, the passion by some rap artists to be true to the "rap game" and to be as "real" as possible to their fans lead to many controversies concerning their public and private persona as well as intense scrutiny of their lyrical content and their, often Marxist, critiques of American society.

### *1.5. Rap's hip-hop era in mainstream America*

As rap music entered the 1990s, now being termed hip-hop, the popularity of nationalist and gangsta rap helped to reshape the face of this medium. Lusane (1993) notes that one major objective of nationalist and gangsta rap artists is to "school" one another and the nation about escalating social crisis witnessed and experienced by many African American youth in urban neighborhoods throughout the country. Noting the pointed critiques advanced by these young artists, Lusane states that:

A lyrical analysis of the gangsta and political rappers uncovers important political yearnings—yearnings that mostly go ignored by black leaders. The macho boasting, misogyny, violent fantasies, and false consciousness exists side-by-side with a immature, but clear critique of authority, loathing of the oppressive character of wage labor, hatred of racism, and expose of Reaganism (41).

With the release of "By The Time I Get to Arizona" (1991), during the Reagan-Bush presidential tenure, Chuck D, nationalist rapper of the group Public Enemy, articulated his dislike of the racism exhibited by the state of Arizona in their refusal to acknowledge the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a state holiday (Stephens, 1998). In elevating and amplifying the perceived ideology of the dominant culture, Rose (1994), through an analysis of the music of Public Enemy and others, claims that "rap's discursive territory is engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, and materially oppress African Americans" (34). Accordingly, Chuck D, in "By The Time I Get To Arizona" declares:

Yeah, he appear to be fair, the cracker over there  
 He try to keep it yesteryear  
 The good ol' days, the same ol' ways  
 That kept us dying  
 Yes, you, myself and i'ndeed  
 What he need is a nosebleed  
 Read between the lines  
 Then you see the lie that's politically planned  
 But understand that's all she wrote  
 When we see the real side  
 That hide between the vote

We suggest that Chuck D is attempting to expose some government officials who are untrustworthy to and ineffective for the African American community because their rhetoric is designed to elicit votes and not address or alleviate real issues affecting the populous. Viewed in this manner, we further suggest that Chuck D, and other nationalist, gangsta, and socially consciousness rappers, take it upon themselves to inform Black America of the unfairness that politicians express toward them. Blumstein (1996) suggests that local, as well as national, politicians did little to alter the escalation of the alcohol and marijuana epidemics and the crack cocaine explosion in the 1980s and 1990s in the black community.

Rap artist Tupac Shakur similarly critiques ideological rhetoric disseminated by social institutions and political leaders that have the possibility of adversely affecting the lives of African Americans in urban centers. In the song, "I Wonder If Heaven Got A Ghetto" (1997), Tupac Shakur delves into dialogue that exemplifies the ideological warfare that Lusane describes earlier. In fact, Shakur furthers the discussion of the oppressive state of American race relations to provide a vivid account of how internalized oppression can sometimes lead to social inequality. The themes of black-on-black crime, poverty, and the constant lack of a fear of death as adhered to by his generation of "thug life lovers" dominate his discourse. Shakur brazenly verbalizes, for example, daily experiences faced by some African Americans in his attempt to provide mainstream America with a "real" description of what's transpiring in the inner city. This type of presentation is possibly in opposition to media images of African American success that had been presented to America during the previous decades through television shows such as *Julia*, the *Bill Cosby Show*, the *Hughleys* and other African American centered shows that depicted economic success that contrasted to that experienced by many urban African Americans. Observe how Shakur addresses daily concerns faced by many urban African Americans:

It ain't a secret don't conceal the fact  
 The penitentiary's packed and it's filled with Blacks  
 I wake up in the morning and i ask myself  
 Is life worth living should i blast myself  
 I'm tired of being poor and even worse i'm black  
 My stomach hurts so i'm lookin for a purse to snatch  
 Cops don't give a damn about a ne-gro  
 Pull a trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero  
 Mo' niggas, mo' niggas, mo' niggas

I'd rather be a dead than a po' nigga  
 Let the lord judge the criminals  
 If i die, i wonder if heaven got a ghetto

These potent lyrics, although rife with profanity and references to the word Nigger, provide harsh commentary on how many young urban African American males, from possibly fatherless and low socio-economic backgrounds, conceptualize the social conditions in some African American neighborhoods throughout the United States. Despite the despair of living in an “urban war zone,” Shakur maintains his faith in religion by, we suggest, acknowledging that the perpetration of crimes are wrong, but appealing to the almighty to judge him and others like him within the context of their lived reality. Thus, when viewed this way, Shakur questions whether or not Heaven will be divided between the haves and have-nots when he bemoans “I wonder if heaven got a ghetto?”

When the West coast rap group NWA (Niggaz with Attitude) released “Fuck tha Police” (1989), a song that vividly describes the police brutality witnessed and experienced by these and other young men during their youth in Los Angeles, it sparked tremendous criticism from local and national law enforcement agencies. Between real instances of gang violence in the City of Los Angeles and elsewhere in the United States, NWA’s lyrics offer a pragmatic narrative that explicitly explore common-sense issues and concerns about real events and activities happening in many Black neighborhoods in Compton, CA and other areas of the United States. Representing a sizeable population of young African American males over the intensity of corrupt policing practices in the “ghetto,” NWA states:

Fuck tha police coming straight from the underground

A young nigger got it bad cause i'm brown

I'm not the other color

Some people think they have the authority

To kill a minority

Fuck the shit, cause i ain't the one

For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun

To be beaten on, and thrown in a cell

We can go toe to toe

In the middle of a cell

Fuckin' with me cause i'm a teenager,

With a little bit of gold and a pager

Searching my car, looking for the product

Thinking every nigger is selling narcotics

They'd rather see me in the pen

Than me and Lorenzo rolling in a benzo

Beat a police outta shape

And when i finish bring the yellow tape

To tape off the scene of the slaughter

Still getting swole of bread and water

I don't know if they fags or what

Patting niggaz down and touching their butts

... They'll slam you down to the street top

### Black police showing off for the white cop

A close reading of these lyrics reveal that NWA is voicing the concerns of a marginalized community of young African Americans from Los Angeles, California to New York City, and all other geographical locations in-between. Viewed in this manner, rap music, powered by NWA's brazen lyrics, provided an outlet for which young African Americans could voice their feelings on subjects such as the mistreatment of their brethren by police officers.

After leaving NWA in 1990, O'Shea Jackson (a.k.a. Ice Cube) released a solo album entitled *Death Certificate* (1991). While the album achieved platinum status, it did so with much criticism and controversy. In articulating practices of discrimination in Black communities by other minority groups, Ice Cube's narrative of racial polarization, an "us" versus "them" dichotomy, embraced a rhetorical strategy that transcended superficial stereotypes of African Americans held by other under-represented groups in the U.S. In doing so, however, his misinformed critics protested against what they perceived as anti-Korean, anti-Jewish, and anti-gay lyrics. For instance, in "Black Korea," Ice Cube responds to the shooting death of a fifteen year old African American female in which a Korean businessman who accused her of stealing a bottle of orange juice. In the song, Ice Cube suggests that certain proprietors, whom he labels as "Oriental one-penny-counting motherfuckers," need to "pay respect to the Black fist or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp." Clearly, this song increased already heightened tensions between African Americans and Korean Americans and, possibly, contributed to boycotts and fire bombings aimed at various Korean owned stores in South Central Los Angeles. By using an actual event that transpired in a "ghetto" neighborhood, this song served as a warning to certain Korean store owners who constructed and acted upon narratives of African American consumers as thieves and criminals.

By designating the ghetto as a metaphor, Ice Cube's "A Bird In the Hand" further illustrates the alienation, frustration, and feelings of mistrust towards the federal government being voiced by African American youth living below the poverty line, when he asks:

Do i have to sell me a whole lot of crack  
 For decent shelter and clothes on my back  
 Or should i just wait for help from President Bush  
 Or Jesse Jackson and Operation Push

On the surface it appears that most rap artists offer little suggestions to solving the problem of drug trafficking in the United States. However, a close analysis of some rap lyrics indicate that some artists, through lyrics similar to Ice Cube's, are encouraging societal institutions, particularly the government, to replace the illegal drug economy with practical solutions and functional employment opportunities for the young and the poor. Blumstein (1996) reports that illicit drug trafficking is big business in the United States, with an estimated payoff of approximately 150 billion. He adds that in the black community, the drug economy is believed to range from 16 to 29 billion dollars annually. The inability of some young African American males to find gainful employment, which has resulted in their involvement in the underground economy, coupled with other social factors such as police brutality, may have facilitated the eruption following the 1992 trial of the century.

The not-guilty verdict in the 1992 Rodney King trial resulted in the Los Angeles rebellion and, for the first time in the history of presidential politics, dialogue between a presidential candidate and rap artists concerning social issues. The Rodney King verdict elicited intense

responses from within and outside the hip-hop community. One internal response came from then Public Enemy rapper Sistah Souljah during an interview with *The Washington Post*. Souljah, while commenting on the lack of concern that America has typically displayed in regards to Black on Black crime, stated that, “If Black people kill Black people, why not have a week and kill White people” (King, 1992, 2). This public comment was roundly condemned by Clinton and other presidential candidates as racist. Clinton suggested that, “If you took the words white and black and reversed them, you might think (Louisiana politician and Klansman) David Duke was giving that speech” (Wambe 1996, 136). This event increased the already heightened tension between then-Governor Bill Clinton and the Reverend Jesse Jackson because of Clinton’s decision to use Jackson’s forum to criticize Sistah Souljah. Soon after the Clinton-Souljah spectacle, President George Bush entered the politician versus rapper debate by attacking the “original gangsta” rapper, Tracey Morrow (a.k.a. Ice T) for penning rap and rock lyrics that spoke unfavorably of police departments in his song “Cop Killer” (1991). Both President Bush and Vice President Dan Quayle adamantly condemned the song as “sick” (Stephens 1996, 258). However, in an interview with *Vibe Magazine*, bell hooks (1995), a Black feminist scholar, compares Ice T’s song “Cop Killer” (the song that initiated the denunciation by Bush and Quayle) to the film “Reservoir Dogs” in that it expounds on the role of the cultural arts as “some kind of social commentary and critique” (60). hooks also observes that “the greatest thing about Ice T’s book, *The Ice Opinion*, is his forcing of America to realize that rappers are not “just putting shit out there like whatever comes to our head” (60). Instead, their lyrics represent well thought out critiques of society.

While there were many public attacks launched at rap artists because of their brashness, the individuals who lead the attacks often did so without fully understanding that the lyrics of the artists were not simply profanity ridden outbursts of ignorant and uncouth malcontents, but rather, rap artists articulating their desire for and support of structural changes that could better the lives of the people they objectify in their songs. In articulating the concerns of many African American youth, some of these artists attempt to bring to the public’s attention the experiences of some fragile African American families (i.e., being a poor, single-mothered, welfare dependent, fatherless, person of color in the United States). In a powerful ballad dedicated to his mother entitled “Dear Mama” (1995), thug life rapper Tupac Shakur reflects on many of these same themes:

When i was young me and my momma had beef  
 Seventeen years old kicked out on the streets  
 Now back at the time i thought i’d never see her face  
 Ain’t a woman alive that can take my momma’s place  
 Suspended from school and scared to go home  
 I was a fool with the big boy breaking all the rules  
 Shed tears with my baby sister  
 Over the years we were poorer than the other little kids  
 And even though we had different daddies but the same drama  
 When things went wrong we blames momma  
 I reminisce on the stress i caused. . . it was hell  
 Hugging on my momma from a jail cell  
 Who’d think in elementary i’d see the penitentiary one day

Running from the police. . . that's right  
 Mama catch me put a whooping to my backside  
 And even as a crack fiend mama  
 You always was a black queen mama  
 I finally understand for a woman it ain't easy trying to raise a man  
 You always was committed  
 A poor single mother on welfare tell me how you did it  
 There's no way i can pay you back  
 But the plan is to show you that i understand  
 You i appreciate

Rappers such as Tupac Shakur not only provide the listener with an image of urban life, they also invite the listener to understand their experiences and why they live their lives as they have chosen. This process is similar to academic attempts to “objectively” explain similar issues and concerns. However, the difference between academic and rap analyses are that most rap artists are actual participants in the environment that they depict. Notwithstanding the insider research conducted by scholars such as Davis (1959), Becker (1963), Wiseman (1979), Anderson (1990), Vaughan (1990), and so forth, we suggest that some rap artists should be thought of as critical theorists in the area of urban issues.

### *1.6. Rap artists as critical theorists*

The role of the rap artist as a critical participant observer is to uncover how those in power are responsible for historically defining the truth and marginalizing others in the process (Becker 1963). Lusane (1993) adds that, “hard core rappers not only remain radically true, but also advocate a distinct class perspective. In substance and in form, they evoke both a black nationalist and a working class (often quasi-lumpen) orientation” (37). A key component in this line of reasoning involves analyzing the relationship between social institutions, many of which constitute the American dream, and the individuals and situations depicted by rap artists. The recording career of conscious, or nationalist, rapper Kris Parker (a.k.a. KRS-One), illustrates how a rap artist gains access to public discourse and engages his audience in thought provoking discussions concerning political issues, world events, and Black awareness. In his album *By All Means Necessary* (1989), (a title adopted from a major theme, “By Any Means Necessary,” addressed by Malcolm X) KRS One, a former homeless pauper, “expresses opinions about drugs, violence at rap concerts, racial stereo-types, health, and so forth” (Stephens, 1991, 39). In his song, “Self-Destruction,” for example, KRS One insists that many of the escalating social ills in the African American community come as result of a few dislocated brothers who need to revisit American history:

Well today's topic is self-destruction  
 It really ain't the rap audience that's buggin'  
 It's one or two suckers, ignorant brothers  
 Tryin' to rob and steal from one another  
 Cause the way we live is positive  
 We don't kill our relatives.  
 Back in the sixties our brothers and sisters were hanged

How could you gang-bang?  
 I never ever ran from the Ku Klux Klan  
 And i shouldn't have to run from a Black man  
 Cause that's self-destruction

By identifying the prevalence of racism, discrimination and nihilistic behavior in the African American community as a means to expose the influence of underlying power relations therein, rap music artists such as KRS One give voice to those socially isolated individuals whose voices have previously been muted. Thus, rap involves exposing “values” and “truths” by directing attention to a different set of values and truths adhered to by the silent voices of many urban youth. Similar to Ryan (1971), rap artists are rejecting the “blame the victim” ideology, or the social construction of “a” set of values and truths, in favor of a paradigm that does not suggest that the “victim[s] of social problems [are] identified as strange, different” (10) and unable to abide by the norms of middle class America. As such, the specific historical “truth” narratives shared in rap, which rely upon multiple ways of capturing reality, go far beyond the traditions of qualitative and quantitative research. Rap music artistry, the hip-hop CNN, investigates, reports, interprets, evaluates and makes critical recommendations for social change. For example, Mystikal, in “Ghetto Child” (1997) evaluates the current state of urban African American life and exclaims that:

It's real when you can do what you want to, when you wanna do it  
 Ain't too many niggaz out there living like that  
 That's why the rest of ya'll niggaz ain't never gone do it  
 How many niggaz in the pen, how many niggaz in the cemetery  
 Don't know why, how many strikes ya'll niggaz need  
 How many innocent children in the ghetto gotta lose their lives  
 Now tell me why! why you gotta make your mamma cry?  
 HUH! She tell you stay outta the streets cause that's where you gonna die  
 But you don't listen cause your mind is wandering and your head is hard  
 And you're getting flipped and your talking back acting straight up off the wall  
 Let me talk to ya'll don't think it's too hard to fall and I done saw it all  
 It was cool when it started off, Now Nigaz ducking bullets like dodge ball  
 Niggaz got me scared to plant my seed, fear of how it's gonna grow  
 Living in a messed up world in a messed up time  
 I'm telling ya you can't do shit no more  
 It's bigger than us, It's outta my hands, That's why I'm praying to God  
 Oh, heavenly father keep my head above the water  
 It's your world but we your children, your sons and your daughters  
 We struggling trying to get out the ghetto  
 They constantly try to get to the malls

The essence of Mystikal's message, we argue, is that in a world in which he, and others like him, struggle daily to maintain a meager existence, most Americans are more concerned with gaining material possessions and living within the comfort of their own environment than trying or desiring to help those in dire need of assistance. Hence, as Lusane (1993) notes, a number of rappers “see themselves as ghetto revolutionaries voicing the only consistent radical urgings from a black America in crisis” (37).

In most socially and politically conscious rap songs, discourse is shared and performed through a social mirror that reflects the anguish and pain of young African American rappers who offer implicit recommendations for social change. In “Ghetto Child,” for example, note how rapper Master P critiques American society and suggests a few possible solutions for the problems he identifies:

I feel like a bird nigga with no wings  
 I’m stuck in this ghetto trying to have a little change  
 My homies killing up each other cause we gotta eat  
 And i ain’t tripping cause i’m running from the police  
 I done seen little kids in the projects starving  
 I done seen more ho’s messier than Marvin  
 See in the ghetto the sun it barely shines  
 But so many niggas and kids in the welfare lines  
 Then all my life i thought Bill Clinton ran the country  
 Until i found out Bill Gates had all the money  
 And the media is starting east and west coast wars  
 I’m from the south where they prejudiced on us all  
 Come outta the powder milk and eggs. . . don’t fill us up  
 But why the government sold us drugs then charging to clean us up  
 Gave us rehabs and high interest student loans  
 Four dollar minimum wage and section eight we call it home

In the last three lines of the song, specifically, Master P critiques the institution of government as a rhetorical strategy to suggest a better life opportunity for poor African American families. From this it can be assumed that the government must eliminate the drug trade in the inner-city, make college more affordable, and increase the minimum wage. It is our contention that rap artists such as Master P are not merely “talking loud and saying nothing.” Rather, what they are in fact doing is presenting to society some possible solutions to pressing problems, such as gang violence, that are faced by many young African Americans who are living on the edge.

Homicide represents one of the leading causes of death for black males 15 to 24 years of age (Mercy and O’Carroll, 1988). Selected rap artists, serving as ghetto reporters and newscasters, inform the public of the prevalence of these social ills as well as the systems failure to adequately combat the problem. While rapping about an attempt by someone to murder him, Tupac Shakur in “Only God Can Judge Me” (1995), states that:

I hear the doctor standing over me screaming i can make it  
 Got a body full of bullet holes laying here naked  
 Still i can’t breath somethings sticking in my iv  
 Cause every time i breathe i think they killing me  
 I’m having nightmares homicidal fantasies  
 I wake up strangling tangled in my bed sheets  
 I call the nurse cause it hurts to reminence  
 How did it come to this, i wish they didn’t missed  
 Somebody help me tell me where to go from here  
 Cause even thugs cry, but do the lord care

Try to remember but it hurts  
 I'm walking through the cemetery talking to the dirt  
 I'd rather die like a man than live like a coward  
 There's a ghetto up in heaven and it's ours, black power!  
 Is what we scream as we dream in a paranoid state  
 And our fate is a lifetime of hate  
 Dear momma can you save me  
 And fuck peace cause the streets got our babies, we gotta eat  
 No more hesitation each and every black male strapped  
 And they wonda why we suicidal running round strapped  
 Mr. police, please try and see that's it's a million motherfuckers  
 Dressing just like me  
 Only god can judge me

These powerful lyrics not only provide the listener with a first-hand account of an attempted murder, they also indicate that even the “hardest” rappers (of which Tupac was one) possess an inner goodness and spirituality that screams to be heard and acknowledged. Additionally, Tupac, similar to other rappers, suggests that despite the unpleasantness of his lived reality, he hopes for better days even though mainstream America does not understand him and others like him. To that end, Tupac Shakur charges that “only God can judge me” as he struggles to maintain a meager existence in this world through the possible violation of state and federal laws.

Through song-lyrics about muggings, burglaries, carjackings, drug abuse, and gang-related drive-by shootings, rap artists share “grassroots” narratives about acts of resistance that detail both the circumstances and the events that result in the possible death of innocent victims and by-standers in urban, suburban and even rural communities. Similarly, in songs that explain why and how brutal acts of violence are committed by the police, rappers, in songs such as NWA's “Fuck tha Police” and Ice-T's “Cop Killer,” ask questions that address why those practices are allowed to take place.

We suggest that if the voices of urban youth are not taken seriously, and soon, the violent lyrics penned by many of today's rap artists may manifest into acts of rebellion. We can take this debate a step further by asking if the cries for social change that many rap artists write and sing about are not recognized, will there be any surprise when a major urban uprising occurs in the United States as Gunnar Myrdal (1944) predicted more than fifty years ago in his classic work, *An American Dilemma: The Negro in a White Nation?* In the song “Pump Ya Fist,” west coast rapper Kam comments on, what he perceives as, oppressive living conditions in the United States and, we suggest, a possible insinuation at rebellion by stating:

If livin' in america got you pissed, then pump your fist like this  
 And if you ever had handcuffs on your wrist, then pump your fist like this  
 If you hate seeing Black people get dissed, then pump your fist like this  
 And if you tired of being caught up in that twist, then pump your fist like this.

This song is a candid example of the desire of some urban African American youth to be heard and taken seriously by the powers that be. How beneficial could it be for social and political leaders to seriously recognize and listen to the voices of their fellow citizens and the people that they, supposedly, represent?

## 2. Conclusion

The major objective of this paper has been to argue for the use of selected rap lyrics by selected rap artists as qualitative data sources. We believe that this objective has been accomplished through our analysis of various rap songs by selected rap artists that vividly depict the lived experiences of some urban African Americans. We also insist that not all music produced by rap artists are violent and misogynistic displays of male bravado. Although it is true that a vast section of rap can be described as such; that is not the specific area of rap that we have chosen to direct our focus. Instead, we suggest that the lyrics of certain rap artists can prove beneficial in our understanding of the condition of some urban residents. Coupled with other methodologies, rap music has the potential to have enormous social policy implications if utilized in a serious and academic manner. However, despite our championing of the use of rap music as a data source, we are aware that there are limitations to its use. The most glaring limitation to the use of rap music as sociological scholarship is the difficulty in deciphering which rap artists are truly depicting the real life conditions of some urban residents. This is a methodological problem, one of trusting your data source, that many qualitative researchers have encountered when conducting interviews. Can one ever truly know if their subject is telling them the truth? The answer to this question is tenuous and subject to lengthy debate. However, in recognizing the truthfulness of rap artists, we suggest that academics utilize the same meticulous research methodology that go into any other study. Consequently, an in-depth background check of the selected artist would represent a starting point. Additionally, a wealth of rap artists label themselves as voices of the people, thus, serving as another point of departure for scholars interested in the investigation of the lyrics of rap artists as legitimate sociological data.

Rappers confront the harsh realities of urban life that relate to issues of alienation from mainstream society and their inability to achieve the American Dream. In so doing, they share their concerns with the public through a complex rhetorical code that articulates a lack of trust in authority figures such as the police, the government and the judicial system. Over the past two decades rap artists have been depicting and detailing the realities of their world through the articulation of multiple subjects (Rose, 1994; Lusane, 1993; and West, 1993). Many of the subjects these young African Americans have addressed have also been the focus of “intellectual” discussions in urban residences long before the academic community caught wind of the same issue (Henderson, 1993). Thus, the only question that remains is, how long will sociology undervalue, and in some cases ignore, the timely articulations of a marginalized people?

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