# An Intersectional Perspective on Hip Hop: Race, Gender, Class, Sexuality

Understanding the History, the Industry and its Political Potential

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Intersectionality of Multiple Identities

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The complexities and intersectionalities of Hip Hop begin with an initial attempt to define the subject. Hip Hop stems from a post-civil rights era subjugated African American culture and has permeated through every other American culture, morphing through the decades. This paper discusses its intersections amongst gender and sexuality, from perspectives of male and female rappers and male and female consumers (listeners). The concept of street credibility is defined along these concepts and how the Hip Hop music industry affects, is affected by and commodifies various raced, gendered and classed components. Finally, many of these issues are brought together by the concept of "conscious Hip Hop". There is much criticism of it as an entity, hope for its use in the fight for racial justice in the United States, and skepticism for its massive and potentially detrimental influence in the realm of social and political change.

What is Hip Hop?

Hip Hop is a culture, rap music is a linguistic expression of that culture. It is a culture and art form primarily occurring amongst youth, which is a critical component to its production, experience and resulting effects. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America,* Tricia Rose defines rap music as:

> *"Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America. Rap music is a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music… From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America… Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator… Rappers tell long, involved, and sometimes abstract stories with catchy and memorable phrase and beats that lend themselves to black sound bite packaging, storing critical fragments in fast-paced electrified rhythms. Rap tales are told in elaborate and ever-changing black slang and refer to black cultural figures and rituals, mainstream film, video and television characters, and little-known black heroes'" (Rose, 1994, p2-3).*

Hip Hop has a rich history stemming from centuries ago. "The Spirituals, Jazz, the Blues, Soul music and R&B [and musical expressions from far, far before then] have all functioned in constructive, therapeutic ways in black communities" (Dagbovie, 2005, p311). An important component to these genres is their initial creation and the development of their purpose. Many rappers "...recount their own personal histories of resilience, which mirror the overall theme of perseverance against the oppression that dominates the African American experience" (Dagbovie, 2005, p301).

They have also been exploited heavily and in the last decade, "rap has reached unprecedented levels of commodification and commercialization." This industry has disconnected from its roots as a Black urban youth influence to a billion dollar industry "...exploited by corporate capitalist and the petit bourgeois desires [and interests]" (Dagbovie, 2005, p311). The connotation perhaps expressed here is that Hip Hop has become a tool to further the wealthy White oppression of Blacks, however, as will later be discussed, many sections of society profit from this commodification.

African Americans born in from approximately 1965 to the mid-70s can be considered the Black Power era born hip hoppers, while those born in the late 1970s to early to mid-80s can be considered the post-Black Power era Hip Hop generation; the latter "socialized by 'commercial' Hip Hop culture" (Dagbovie, 2005, p303). The late 1980s to the early 90s is considered by many to be the 'Golden Age of Hip Hop', an era heavily promoting 'nation-consciousness', concepts of 'street' realities and overall analyses in Black consciousness.

> *"Kitwana uses the Hip Hop generation 'interchangeably with black youth culture.' He designates the Hip Hop generation as including those African Americans born between roughly 1965 and 1984 who share a common worldview concerning 'family, relationships, child rearing, career, racial identity, race relations, and politics.' Shaped by the rise of multinational corporatism, globalization, neo-segregation, racialist public policy, the expanding media, and an overall poor quality of life for black youth, members of the Hip Hop generation are linked mainly by the fact that we were born after the major struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and have collectively inherited a great deal from the battles waged by our elders" (Kitwana 2002) (Dagbovie, 2005, p302).*

The mid-90s to today is an era where rap tends to "share a general lack of concern for and knowledge of black history" (Dagbovie, 2005, p303-6). This deviation can be explained by the commodification of the genre. Commercially, as of 2008, the rap and Hip Hop industry was second to rock as the most financially significant musical genre, bringing in $1 to $1.8 billion annually from 1999 to 2008 (Recording Industry Association of America, 2010). Even films have transitioned from their original state as analytical, the difference being apparent in films such as John Singleton's 1991 *Boyz N the Hood* and his later film *Baby Boy* in 2001. All of that being said, both historical and present day components of American society are important and the style in which those stories are expressed has also morphed over time.

The Hip Hop realm has, however, extended beyond solely an entity of the Black American community. While Hip Hop is a genre and culture originated and dominated by African Americans, it is an area that goes beyond race: it is inherently intersected as a class issue as well. Often, that is the place in which the White rapper exists. Eminem, a White rapper with an extremely poor background initially struggle heavily to gain credibility in the Hip Hop world, but was eventually accepted and cherished due to his lyrical skill. Taking it a step further, Hip Hop has expanded beyond race, class *and* history to a degree to which lyricism is a primary force. MC (rapper) Kareem on the question of White rappers, "...said simply that race was immaterial because in rap 'if you're nice, you're nice'" (Newman, 2007, p137).

<u>Gender: Specific issues of content and identity within songs and their effects on the consumer</u>

A major component of rap music has been directed toward the condescension of women, most specifically women of color of all socioeconomic classes, but most prevalently in lower classes. Derogatory terms such as 'hoe' and 'bitch' are everywhere in the music made by both male and female entertainers. Many lyrics in the music deem women to be subordinate to men and sometimes other women: a tactic that Nicki Minaj and Beyonce frequently employ:

*"All these bitches is my sons*

*And I'm a go and get some bibs for 'em*
*A couple formulas, little pretty lids on 'em*
*If I had a dick I would pull it out and piss on 'em*
*Let me shake it off."*
-Nicki Minaj, Did It On Em.

In these instances, poorer women are subordinate to financially successful women, while all women are subordinate to men. Women are seen as accessories of men/wealthy women and displays/objects of male/female success in a fashion that could only be described as concubinage.

> *"Penetration equaled masculinity equaled agency and domination; being penetrated equaled femininity equaled powerlessness and subordination...However, this masculinity was aimed at potential competitors as much as if not more than actual females and feminized males. In that way, more than preserving patriarchal privileges, sex and violence functioned as idioms by which the MCs depicted themselves as successful in competition, and anyone challenging them as losers." (Newman, 2007, p140).*

Beyond the intent of the rappers themselves, 'the people' wanted to hear about and see beautiful, sexy women, so that's what the industry produced. The words portray the concepts of subordination and the music videos back the words visually. That being said, the phrase, "which comes first: the chicken or the egg" is of much importance to the subject: 'the people' wanted these images, so the money makers gave them to 'the people', which, with more and more exposure, exacerbates and frequently *creates* a desire for something that was not previously there (i.e. showing big butts on TV as desireable has a clear correlation with the public's attraction to big butts). The cycle perpetuates itself.

These images have extended into or extended from television, movies, magazines, and other forms of media. For example, reality shows like *Flavor of Love*, where women fight for a rich, incredibly unappealing man physically and seemingly mentally (though this does depend on one's taste); in an ironic way: the objectification of that man- the man is the money.

Many male rappers do in fact rap about their own personal experiences with women (there are many complexities in the overt and covert layers of these experiences, however: "Misogyny, violence, materialism, and sexual transgression are not its exclusive domain. At its best, this music draws attention to complex dimensions of ghetto life ignored by many Americans" (Dyson, 2004, p416).). Again, did the chicken or the egg come first: were emotionless gold digging women taking advantage of men, leading to men hating women for this particular behavior, or did the culture and men force them into these positions where one of the only ways they can achieve self- (and other) worth, relevance or money/power (a quality equally desire by men and women, on the whole) is through the gold digging game. General mistrust toward women can also be traced to their frequent role in street contexts as the bait to set up rival gangs. In *Sherane,* Kendrick Lamar falls in love with a woman - Sherane - who, after months of what he thought was trust-building, was working with a rival gang to set him up to be mugged/killed:

*"The summer had passed and now I'm liking her*

*Conversation we having probably enticing her*
*Who could imagine, maybe my actions would end up wifing her*
*Love or lust, regardless we'll fuck cause the trife in us*
*It's deep rooted, the music of being young and dumb*
*Its never muted, in fact it's much louder where I'm from*
*We know a lot 'bout each other, her mother was a crack addict*
*She live with her granny and her younger two brothers*
*Her favorite cousin Demetrius's irrepetible*
*Family history of gang banging - did make me skeptical*
*But not enough to stop me from getting a nut*
*I'm two blocks away, 250 feet*
*And six steps from where she stay, she waving me 'cross the street*
*I pulled up a smile on my face, and then I see*
*Two niggas, two black hoodies, I froze as my phone rang"*
-"Sherane a.k.a. Master Splinter's Daughter", Kendrick Lamar

Considering where we have come to on the subject of women in relation to the Hip Hop industry- both female rappers and non-rappers (could be called potential 'groupies), women are used sexually by these men, but they got 'in the room' (around the fame and famous people), so to speak, in the first place because of their physical appeal, so is that the trade off they choose to make for their own potential fame? Yes and no. Many of their insecurities and desires for this fame and attention are just the same as the next person's. But many are created from the Hip Hop culture and beyond that, the overall desperation from the oppression of the Black community- where fathers are not around, the general effects of poverty, etc. One can argue that the desire for fame and attention by all involved - men and women - stem from insecurities caused by poverty, etc. That being said, the desire for fame is one that has been seen from what we know to be the beginning of time. It seems most likely that it is a combination of both: the somewhat "natural" desire for fame and the insecurities caused from the circumstances of these primarily young people.

*"Ask her who I am to her and she yell 'God'"*
-Successful, Lil Wayne (Drake featuring Trey Songz and Lil Wayne)

Meanwhile, there has been significant evidence - both through studies and more importantly out of the laboratory, real life occurrences - that the direct and/or indirect effects of misogynistic lyrics extend beyond emotional damage of all involved and lead to attitudes that promote sexual violence against women. A 1995 study out of the psychology department at Kent State University sought to analyze the relationship between exposure to misogynist rap music and the potential for sexually aggressive behavior toward women. As hypothesized, the men in this specific study who were exposed to such music did express a significantly higher likelihood to entertain concepts of aggressive behavior toward women (*see study for further detail*) (Barongan & Hall, 1995). Much controversy came about with Rick Ross's verse on Rocko's song, *U.O.E.N.O.*:
*"That nigga sold you that re-rock, you ain't even know it*
*I'd die over these Reeboks, you ain't even know it*
*Put Molly all in her champagne, she ain't even know it*

*I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain't even know it"*

This direct reference to date raping a woman with a version of ecstasy (and referring to her as "that") caused Reebok to drop their sponsorship of Ross, stating, ""Reebok holds our partners to a high standard, and we expect them to live up to the values of our brand… Unfortunately, Rick Ross has failed to do so. While we do not believe that Rick Ross condones sexual assault, we are very disappointed he has yet to display an understanding of the seriousness of this issue or an appropriate level of remorse. At this time, it is in everyone's best interest for Reebok to end its partnership with Mr. Ross'" (Crook, 2013).
There is a commonly held debate on whether artists condone/believe/support what they say in their lyrics. This topic will be discussed in detail later.

<u>How do women, specifically of color, feel about these issues</u>

When both men and women hear certain misogynistic song lyrics - whether they be one time or being surrounded by it over the course of one's lifetime - they begin to see those women, who are primarily Black (of all classes), in the discussed manor. Negative self-images have damaging effects on the women who become categorized in these ways and, in the long run, the men who miss out on the majority of half of their population's value. There are many women (particularly the ones considered to be most attractive), however, who do not feel victimized by what other's consider to be misogynists or their lyrics- they see themselves as sexual beings who hold great power over the men who desire them. This perceived misogyny can often be used as a force to the female rappers themselves: is Hip Hop's perspective on women an expression of female freedom in their sexuality or a prison in which they must be sexual beings?

In 2004, *Essence*, a Black women's magazine created a dialogue/campaign around the around the subject of misogyny in Hip Hop culture. The posts from African American women respondents honed in on a specific issue that is not frequently discussed: the intersection of race, gender *and* class: "These respondents necessarily imply that the Black women on television who are willingly displaying 'their most valuable treasure' are unworthy of being treated like 'queens.' Not all women are valuable. Lower-class women's bodies are devalued. It is often the middle-class Black woman who most clearly fits the characterization of the 'Black queen'… it is clear that the 'Black queen' is painted with the brush of middle-class Black femininity" (Reid-Brinkley, 2008, p248). This is in interesting accordance to the concepts behind *The Cult of True Womanhood*, which, though focusing on White women, expressed an highly specific focus on the ability of primarily middle class women to achieve proper womanhood. "Social allegiances are made difficult across lines of class and sexuality… Black women who perform Black femininity inappropriately in today's society become disloyal agents who diminish the physical and psychological sacrifices made by Black female ancestors who were 'raped and violated.' Black women who violate this identity construction become unworthy of acceptance into Black women's safe spaces because of their rejection of normative performances of Black femininity" (Reid-Brinkley, 2008, p255-6). If there is no union, it seems the division in such Black female communities will be catastrophic.

Additionally, Black women who speak out against sexism in the Hip Hop community are looked at as men *and* Black haters, often derogatorily called "lesbians".
"Black men and women need each other for racial solidarity, but racial solidarity sometimes conflicts with the experience of gender. In other words, Black women are often required to choose which of their subject positions- race, gender, class, or sexuality - is more important at

particular moments where those positions are in conflict" (Reid-Brinkley, 2008, p251). For these reasons, considering such issues from an intersectional perspective is paramount.

A lack of leadership in the female Black communities is also of significant issue, as these women do not have the guidance that may be necessary for them to healthily adapt to their world: "'seems like we need to get back to the days of sitting on Grandma's porch where some real logic can infiltrate our minds' (Ryemondia 2005)... 'The women are the first teachers in our community; if they are psychologically destroyed, then what chance do we really have?' (Hale 2005)" (Reid 252-54).

The study of the role of women in Hip Hop has in certain realms moved beyond the reaction to misogyny by male rappers, heading in the direction of proactively focusing on the subject of women independently. "Using culturally and generationally relevant frames of reference, hip-hop feminists are able to make large systemic issues such as racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, etc. intelligible to black women and girls, just as second-wave black feminists were able to do in the 1970s and '80s with mainstream White American feminism. It's the legacy of unmasking the specificity of women's experiences with marginalization at the intersections of race and sex that continue to make black American feminism an indispensable mode of analysis and activism for many women today. Hip-hop feminists draw on the strength of that legacy while simultaneously drawing on the strength of movements of the contemporary moment such as hip-hop" (Peoples, 2008, p47).

<u>Specific songs on gender</u>

It is important that all lyrics be taken with varying skepticism, as the African American Vernacular English/Ebonics is not in direct correspondence with what might be considered "traditional" English. These are also varying art forms that cannot necessarily be taken "literally" and certainly never taking an analysis as fact- subtle irony and sarcasm are sometimes difficult to see. That being said, this is one analysis of these songs and videos.

Potentially/clearly disrespectful songs about women:

Beyond Ross's particular verse, there are truly infinite additional examples. The ones given here are randomly chosen and barely skim the surface.

*Drunk in Love (Remix)* -Beyonce featuring Jay-Z and Kanye West

In Kanye West's verse, he discusses his relationship with Kim Kardashian, his wife and the mother of his child, but still manages to achieve incredible levels of objectification while setting a precedent - to a significant degree (as heard by male and female listeners) - for women to allow men to ejaculate in their mouths if they want to have a chance at getting married:

*"Let me remind you, you got a, you got a great future behind you*
*...you reverse that cowgirl*
*You reverse, you reverse, and I impregnated your mouth, girl, ooooh*
*That's when I knew you could be my spouse, girl."*

Jay-Z had a highly controversial verse in which he references the abuse of Tina Turner by her husband Ike Turner when Ike publicly humiliates her by forcing cake down her throat:

*I'm Ike Turner, turn up, baby, no, I don't play*
*"Now eat the cake, Anna Mae," said, "Eat the cake, Anna Mae!"*

(The meaning of which is that swallowing Jay-Z's sperm (and, if going off of his own metaphor-forcefully) is a requirement for Beyonce, his wife and the mother of his child, to do.)

Interestingly, Beyonce's bridge in the song follows suit, "*I've been drinking watermelon,"* which is a metaphor to her drinking Jay-Z's sperm and it is something with which she clearly does not have a problem. Is she contributing to the objectification of women by this expression next to the men who are using it in an objectifying manor or is it empowering that she is uninhibited and can express her own sexuality the way she pleases?

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A clearer cut example of misogyny in rap is the famous example of Nelly's *Tip Drill* song and video. The video was one of the first to consist entirely of mostly naked women, mostly showing only their breasts and butts.
*"It must be ya ass cause it ain't ya face"*
(This is not to say the given woman's face is ugly, but that it is irrelevant to his attraction to her- the epitome of the objectification of a woman for her body).

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Next is Kanye West's song and video *Monster* featuring Rick Ross, Jay-Z and Nicki Minaj. Kanye used to and is sometimes still considered to be a "socially conscious rapper" (this essays use of quotations around the terms "conscious" and "gangsta" are due to there being a lack of consensus in their definitions), but seems to play the role of an opponent to societal progress just as often. Kanye's line, *"Less talk, more head right now"* is his expression that he does not want the woman to use her mouth to talk, he wants her to use it to suck his penis. This is a clear-cut misogynist line.

Jay-Z's line *"Murder, murder in black convertibles; I kill the block, I murder the avenues; I rape and pillage your village, women and children"* has almost identical words from the song *Uncommon Valor: A Vietnam Story* by R.A. The Rugged Man who is making a commentary on the way that American soldiers abused their power in Vietnam. Why he is making this point here is unclear and perhaps just points back to the initial interpretation of the line as him wanting to rape and pillage his territory (village- likely referring to his home town of Brooklyn)- women and children included, which, as a monstrous act, gives him the power he desires.

Nicki Minaj is also featured on this track, and her role in it brought her much attention and favor for her assertiveness and lyrical skill. While she also discusses sex like the other two rappers, it is in a very different light. She discusses her own sex appeal, degrades other women from the perspective of competing with them and discusses, like the others, her financial success (*"If I'm fake, I ain't notice cause my money ain't"* in reference and response to criticism of her butt implants and breast enhancements), but, in stark contrast to the other two rappers, distinctly does not comment on her own sexual exploits. She does, however, offer herself in a threesome with Kanye West and his girlfriend at the time, Amber Rose. Throughout the beginning of her fame, she frequently referenced her bisexual identity which increased her ratings- appealing to both men and women. A more favorable/empowering line in her verse is, "*You can be the king, but watch the queen conquer."* Nicki Minaj is known for her mostly surgically made body, and while she frequently makes subtle, ironic commentary on the misogyny of the rap game, she capitalizes on it heavily. A significant degree of her success can be pointed back to her physique: nearly every song she comes out with has a music video, because so many people are infatuated with her body. This behavior can certainly be seen as empowering in that it takes advantage of an industry and society that is corrupt and otherwise gives her and other women very limited power, however, because of her fame, she is a public

figure and inadvertently a role model to young girls and women. The effects of her behavior can be devastating in that respect.

The struggle of the female rapper herself is significant and clear; understanding, let alone resolving this struggle is unclear. Many of the best female rappers lyrically are considered to be too “butch” to gain popularity. The overwhelming majority of successful female rappers are physically attractive and one can easily make the assertion that physical attractiveness is a necessity in the success of the female rapper. Some, however are able to overcome this limitation out of sheer talent. Examples of older female hip hop artists who at least sometimes express female empowerment include Missy Elliot, Eve, Lauryn Hill, TLC, Queen Latifah; newer examples include: Angel Haze, Beyonce, Nicki Minaj and M.I.A., Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys, Erykah Badu, Keyshia Cole, Solange Knowles, and Jessie J. Many of these examples, however, create songs that are very much not, at least on the surface, in support of gender equality, but that is the price that often must be made in order to sell records in an industry that subjugates and objectifies women. It is often difficult to differentiate what songs made by female artists are in fact degrading to themselves and other women, because of all of the complexities of being a sexual and sexualized being: if a woman exposes her body, she could a) be considered to be degrading herself, b) expressing her sexuality as separate from “the man”, or c) using her sexuality as a tool to be more attractive to consumers. Beyonce’s song *Cater To You*, for example, could be considered sexist because of the concept of a woman catering to a man (which assumes that the man does not reciprocate this behavior), but could also be considered to be a partner in a loving relationship. When men make music, it is far easier to distinguish its position in relation to sexism.

Enter the *Monster* music video, which is incredibly complex. It opens with White women mutilated and hung, all of whom are dead, completely pale and the few who are not naked are in fancy lingerie and high heels. Kanye sits in bed with two of them and robotically touches them and moves them around a bit, at some point putting one of their heads on his lap. This could certainly be seen as the ultimate treatment of the objectification of a woman- she is an object if she is dead. Meanwhile, the Black women are either monsters, eating other women, or are being eaten alive. The only body parts shown of the remaining living/vampire women are in grabbing all over Kanye’s body, which, along with Jay-Z’s, is entirely clothed. In summary, “The Black women in the video aren’t dead like the White women are, rather they’re evil, cannibalizing, Kanye attacking, man-eating, demons. So let’s recap, White women: eroticized, mutilated and dead. Black women: animalistic, savage demons” (Kanye West’s Monster Misogyny, 2011).

Somewhere in the midst is a dead Black woman sprawled across a table, and Rick Ross is shown entering the room and closing the door behind him- perhaps in accordance to a pattern of his dealing with engaging sexually with unconscious women.

Nicki’s place in this video is perhaps the most compelling: there are two replicas of her character in the same scene: one as her alter ego Roman Zolanski in skin tight, revealing clothing as a dominatrix and the other - her Harajuku Barbie alter ego - with her tied to a chair wearing what could be considered a more “innocent” dress and the stylistic change in her voice of a little girl. The former is in complete control of the latter and puts her hand over her mouth or a black bag over the latter’s face when she tries to rap. The idea is that when the two are not on camera, the dominatrix is torturing the innocent barbie. That being said, when the black bag is removed from her head, she does not seem afraid and instead defends, in her lyrics, her musical talent.

This whole song/video could be an example of complete misogyny, a commentary on gender relations, an ironic criticism of gender relations, an ironic perspective on people’s

criticism of the rappers themselves as monsters, or simply a ploy/artistic choice for an attention grabbing visual. The answer likely lies somewhere in between. Kanye stated, “The following content is in no way to be interpreted as misogynistic or negative towards any groups of people. It is an art piece and it shall be taken as such,” and claims that it is, in fact, an ironic, exaggerated commentary on gender relations. Some question whether it is an ironic depiction of him, a Black man, as a monster and a predator toward White women, possibly in reference to his accost toward Taylor Swift, a White woman, at the VMAs in 2009.

If nothing else, this video and its responses show the complexities of a Hip Hop song that seems simple and horrible on the surface, and while it could potentially maintain that meaning, it also has the potential to have something of far deeper significance- commentaries on the intersection of race and gender.

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In 2012, rapper 2 Chainz released a song called *Birthday Song*. Featured on it was, again, Kanye West:

*“It's my birthday, I deserve to be greedy huh*
*She holding out, she ain't giving to the needy huh*
*You go downstairs and fall asleep with the TV on*
*Ya'll been together ten years, you deserve a ménage*
*Especially if you put that BMW in the garage*
*Especially if you paid a couple payments on her Mamma crib*
*Went to her niece's graduation, man I hate those kids*
*Last birthday she got you a new sweater*
*Put it on, give her a kiss, and tell her do better*
*She said how bout I get you jewelry from the West End*
*How bout she hit the Westin and get her best friend*
*I'm joking, I'm just serious, I asked her*
*Don't be acting like no actress, if we preaching then we practice*
*Don't be reaching, don't be touching shit*
*We in Kanye West's Benz*
*Cause I will turn you back to a pedestrian”*

In this verse, Kanye discusses how this fictional man’s girlfriend of ten years does not want to have sex with him, but that he “deserves” a threesome, especially because he is wealthy and because he puts up with her family who he does not like. She got him a gift for his birthday which he is ungratefully for and rejects; she offers to get him jewelry instead and he says that he wants a threesome with her best friend instead. The verse ends with him threatening to “turn [her] back [in]to a pedestrian” if she keeps touching things in his expensive car. It is a clear disrespect of what is supposed to be a loving, romantic relationship and instead turns into threats and, in effect, calls her a gold digging prostitute. If she does not do what he wants, he will take her gifts away.

Examples of sexist songs made by male rappers that are not quite as controversial are nearly endless.

Constructive songs on gender:

Luckily, there are also a *plethora* of songs that are supportive of women, that empower women; songs about equality and then there are songs in some way of ultimate freedom that women write that do not always have to be about being a woman. There are many songs here that are classified under the category of gender with a focus on women, but really these are *all* songs that belong in the category of Hip Hop, because these are issues that affect everyone. Beyond that, these are issues that affect Americans in general, indiscriminate of race, gender, sexuality or class; the issues are neglected by many because they do not necessarily deal with them directly. Indirectly, however, there are no divisions among these issues. There are many, many men who take it upon themselves to help with issues that many others do not find to be their own responsibilities and that is a beautiful thing. So much of this section is about the pressure that young women feel to have sex before they are ready, a phenomenon shown through the significant ratio of lower class Black girls to middle class White girls. These girls and their children frequently do not have the resources they need to take care of themselves or their children and fall victim to the same cycle of oppression their mothers (and sometimes fathers, if they know them and usually even if they never knew them) did.

*Yes* by Destiny's child expresses the pressure that women feel to have sex before they are ready; it is inspirational for young women, particularly of color, who need to know that they are not alone and can have the strength to say no. *16 at War* by Karina Pasian, written when she was 16, similarly delves into the struggle of coming into womanhood and the pressure to be sexual before she is ready. *S.E.X.* by Lyfe Jennings, at the time 27 years old, is about a very similar topic- his concern for young women particularly of color and low class who feel so many pressures. *Pretty Hurts* by Beyonce illustrates the struggles that all women experience with their bodies and the self-hatred that comes with that territory. So much of these songs are about letting these girls know that they are not alone in their struggles- that they are part of a community that ideally they will be able to lean on. In a similar but different vein, Beyonce's *Me, Myself and I* works to develop self-dependency in women when no one can be there to support them in the way they feel they need. That they, and no man, are their own rock which will never abandon them. Kendrick Lamar's *No Make-Up* tries to get women to see the beauty they possess behind the make-up with which they cover themselves. *A Woman's Worth* by Alicia Keys expresses what a healthy relationship should consist of and how special each woman is and the importance of honoring oneself:

*"You will lose if you choose*
*To refuse to put her first;*
*She will and she can*
*Find a man who knows her worth."*

Both Kendrick Lamar and Drake directly addresses their appeal for young women of color in Kendrick's *Poetic Justice*. The title of the song is a reference to the 1993 movie *Poetic Justice* starring 2Pac and Janet Jackson and is also a phrase synonymous with the concept of karma. In his verse, Drake is particularly interested in an East African girl who he compliments on her natural, Black features:

*"Your natural hair and your soft skin, and your big ass in that sundress, ooh."*

While such things could frequently be said more subtly (and female objectification could be seen as an issue here), it is a declaration of the Black beauty.

So many of these struggles are ones that virtually all humans experience to a degree, but living in a country with systemic economic oppression leaves people of color in a state of desperation which leads to all kinds of eventually untraceable other problems. Those problems build on each other, one after the other, and at some point it is difficult to trace the place from which they originated. One of the results of this collective struggle is a burden that falls on women who are the child bearers- the ones who cannot run away from a child, for example, especially when there are issues with a lack of birth control education (for both the girls and boys). Upward mobility once in a certain place can be close to impossible to achieve. This music is a release from some of the stress and can sometimes lead to community building amongst these women (and, ideally, men as well)- it is a way to connect with one's community and its collective struggles.

Angel Haze, an incredibly brave young woman, released a breathtakingly vivid and disturbing freestyle to Eminem's *Cleanin out my Closet* about the sexual assault and rape she experienced as a child. Mary J. Blige and Ludacris made a song called *Runaway Love*- each verse told the story of a different little girl who is going through hell. The music video showed the girls of various races but of the same class experiencing similar horrors. In it, Ludacris expresses that he cannot imagine what these girls are going through, but he wants to support them however he can:

*Ludacris: "Little Erica is eleven years old*
*She's steady tryin to figure why the world is so cold*
*So she pops X to get rid of all the pain*
*Plus she's havin sex with her boy who's sixteen*
*Emotions run deep as she thinks she's in love*
*So there's no protection, he's usin no glove*
*Never thinkin 'bout the consequences of her actions*
*Livin for today and not tomorrow's satisfaction*
*The days go by and her belly gets big*
*The father bails out, he ain't ready for a kid*
*Knowin her momma would blow it all out of proportion*
*Plus she lives poor so no money for abortion*
*Erica is stuck up in a world on her own*
*Forced to think that hell is a place called home*
*Nothin else to do but get her clothes and pack*
*She says she 'bout to run away and NEVER come back, ah!"*
*Mary J. Blige: "...Runaway love… I know how you feel, I've been there. I was runnin away too. I'll run away with you, if you want me to..."*

Mary J. Blige is known for exposing the sexual and emotional abuse she experienced as a young person which developed into physical and emotional abuse in adulthood. She is known as an inspirational singer in the Hip Hop/R&B realm.

Enter Kendrick Lamar, the incredibly emotional, complex and analytical lyrical genius of the last few years. He has two songs for and/or about specific women in his life on his latest album. *Keisha's Song (Her Pain)* is the story of a very young Black girl who has to prostitute herself to make ends meet. In this verse he discusses the disturbing overt racist police corruption in Compton in regards to prostitution:

"*Undercover the dummies that look like decoys*
*Remember the sergeant let her slide, said if he seen*
*What's between her thighs he'd compromise, to no surprise*
*She took the ultimatum 'round the alleyway and gave him*
*A warm welcome to fill him right below the navel*

*Though he was wired up like a pair of jumping cables*
*His eyes was closed shut, prior charges, he had waived 'em*
*It was a block away from Lueders Park, I seen a squad car parked*
*And in her heart, she hate it there but in her mind, she made it where*
*Nothing really matters, so she hit the back seat*
*Cause Rosa Parks never a factor when she topping off police.*
*...She suddenly realized, she'll never escape the allure*
*Of the black man, white man, needed satisfaction."*

In *Hey Mama*, Kanye West details the love, appreciation and respect he has for all that the strongest figure in his life has given him- his mother. *Keep Ya Head Up* by 2Pac, one of Hip Hop's most famous characters speaks directly to issues of inequality and the support he is giving out to the women suffering from such oppressions. *Lost Ones* by J. Cole articulately portrays a dispute that he has with his girlfriend about her pregnancy and his desire for abortion because he is not ready to be a father and knows what it could mean for that child and how many children grow up without fathers, like he did. Nas's *Daughters* is a song made for men who have daughters and the value and honor it is to raise an angel, in the wake of so many fathers who go missing from their children's lives*. Double Standards* by Ab-Soul describes the double standards placed on women and men in romantic-related relationships and how hypocritical his role models were for him:

"To my niggas having bitches, it's what you just do
To the bitches having niggas, this what a slut do
My auntie told me always treat my lady right
My uncle told me only love 'em for a night
You can see the immediate disconnection
Between a man and a woman, the reason for regression"

In Kendrick Lamar's poetic song *Opposites Attract,* he speaks in an ironic voice from the perspective of a man in a relationship with a woman who loves him with love he is too insecure to accept. He can only accept mistreatment and games by women and, in turn, hurts the only one whose love he in fact does want but cannot admit to, espcially to himself:

*"And so he said "Why you gotta be so kind hearted?*
*Why you couldn't be a con artist? Why you couldn't?*
*Why you couldn't be mischievous or just a lil devious*
*The moment that we first started?*
*Why you never ask for nothing, just a lil time?*
*Why you let me use yours cause I don't got mine?*
*Why you always lift me up, when I'm completely giving up*
*Or when niggas holla, "What's up?" you give a dry response?*
*Why you giving me your last knowing you ain't got it?*
*Why you always buy me something when you going shopping?*
*Why you tell me that you love me, Why you always thinking of me*
*Want my company rather than going club hopping?*
*Why you treating my momma like she your momma too?*
*Why you making promises that you'll forever do?*
*Whatever just to make me happy, wanting us to have a family*
*These are exactly the reasons why I cheat on you."*

He proceeds from the perspective of the female counterpart who allows her man to mistreat her in this way for very similar problems to the ones that he has: they are both so damaged and hurt that the only relationship they know how to have is one of devaluing and rejection.

J. Cole, in a similarly ironic way, recounts a story he may or may not have had with a woman he met while on tour in *Is She Gon' Pop*:

*"We talked about her dreams you gotta start off with somethin'*
*Her momma went to college but yet her father was hustlin'*
*Found it funny cuz now they daughter is stuck in*
*A similar predicament, I'm askin' where her nigga went*
*She said your guess is good as mine*
*Dropped outta school now he run the streets like all the time*
*Left me alone with this baby I don't hear from the nigga...I'm in a small ass town with a superstar chick*
*This is superstar dick*
*Girl, how could you not taste it?"*

This is an expression of the realities that take place between celebrity rappers and non-celebrity women. He somewhat gets to know her and perhaps cares to a degree, but ultimately just wants sex from her. J. Cole's awareness of this experience and his willingness to bring it to light is what makes this a positive contribution to gender relations.

*SpottieOttieDopalicious* by Outkast (Andre 3000 and Big Boi) is another song directed toward men and discuss the "being a man" (responsible adult) concept of the value of taking responsibility for oneself and standing by one's women and family. In *The Light*, Common raps about respectful, equal and loving relationships, while Wu-Tang Clan's *Camay* adds the components of not pressuring a woman into sex. They also explicit discuss relationships between a Black male and a Black female, expressing the need to dignify each other and their community.

Alicia Keys in *You Don't Know My Name*, both in her lyrics and through her music video express her desire for a man and her assertiveness by initiating contact with him- something that few women feel comfortable doing, under the strict stereotype that women are desperate and therefore should not seek but rather be sought after. In *Ring the Alarm* by Beyonce, she expresses her anger and hysteria over feeling that her man is cheating on her. She disregards the stereotypes of women as crazy and overly emotional, and goes all out in her feelings, which are in fact based on reality. Gas-lighting (primarily done toward women) is a mentally and emotionally violent tool that is difficult not just to overcome but also to identify in the first place due to its subtle and manipulative nature, but she is able to have confidence in her concerns about his faithfulness to her and does not doubt herself.

In Lauryn Hill's Doo Wop, she talks about young Black women's desire to try to fit into media stereotypes of beauty- those images often being White/"European": "'Doo Wop' deals with men and women equally, arguing that neither sex is blameless for the terrible state of gender relations. She admonishes men for not being man enough to stick by a woman and raise a family, but she devotes a lot more time to calling out women for encouraging the problem. She admonishes women for putting too much time and effort into their looks and not developing their personality and intelligence. She tells women to play by their own rules; not by a man's" (Music.Mic). Going off of a similar theme, in a very moving performance, Beyonce's *I Was Here* expresses her presence as a woman in and of herself- unrelated to any man- and the effect that she wishes to have on the world. *Listen* is in some way a turning point where, while she is speaking to a man, she is really coming to a realization that she has her own voice and is her own incredibly talented and worthy individual:

*"Listen to the song here in my heart;*
*A melody I've started but I will complete;*
*Now I'm done believing you,*
*You don't know what I'm feeling;*

*I'm more than what you've made of me,*
*I followed the voice you think you gave to me,*
*But now I gotta find my own."*

Lastly, Lupe Fiasco, a rapper well known to be "conscious-minded", has two songs in particular that pertain to the term "bitch". In *Hurt Me Soul*, he tells the story of a boy's introduction to Hip Hop and misogyny (whether this is autobiographical to Lupe is irrelevant to his music):
*"I used to hate hip-hop, yup, because the women degraded*
*But Too $hort made me laugh, like a hypocrite I played it*
*A hypocrite, I stated, though I only recited half*
*Omitting the word 'bitch', cursing - I wouldn't say it*
*Me and dog couldn't relate, till a bitch I dated*
*Forgive my favorite word for hers and hers alike*
*But I learned it from a song I heard and sort of liked."*

Years later, Lupe releases a song that got a lot of play called *Bitch Bad* and is his explanation of the confusion and complexities of the use of the term 'bitch'.
*"The little boy meets one of those little girls*
*And he thinks she a bad bitch and she thinks she a bad bitch*
*He thinks disrespectfully, she thinks of that sexually*
*She got the wrong idea, he don't wanna fuck her*
*He think she's bad at bein' a bitch, like his mother*
*Momma never dressed like that, come out the house hot mess like that*
*Ass, titties, dressed like that, all out to impress like that.*
*Just like that, you see the fruit of the confusion*
*He caught in a reality, she caught in an illusion*
*Bad mean good to her, she really nice and smart*
*But bad mean bad to him, bitch don't play a part*
*But bitch still bad to her if you say it the wrong way*
*But she think she a bitch, what a double entendre."*

While this does not come close to fully uncovering the complexity of the term, it brings light to a subject that has not discussed enough and at least comes closer to truth than not discussing it at all. It is a confusing topic and he certainly exposes one experience of it.

Sexuality

This paper goes into limited analysis of the role of sexuality within Hip Hop, though they are all very intertwined. Homophobia is a widespread, commonly held belief in the Hip Hop community, primarily toward men who identify as gay or men who other's identify as gay. For many, that is a clear-cut hatred and for others it is less so. When asked on the subject of homophobia in Newman's 2007 study, he states, "Sega is capable of calling an imaginary antagonist 'faggot,' but he is also capable of rhyming, when battling an MC named 'Hate,' that he 'will stop the Hate like a gay rights group'" (Newman, 2007, p142). This is a phenomenon of complexity in rap that extends to realms beyond sexuality. In J. Cole's *Crooked Smile,* he, in less than one stanza, uses words and phrases that are traditionally known to be degrading toward women, but somehow his message in the end is still positive:
*"I keep my twisted grill, just to show the kids it's real*
*We ain't picture perfect but we worth the picture still*
*I got smart, I got rich, and I got bitches still*

*And they all look my eyebrows: thick as hell*
*Love yourself, girl, or nobody will"*

Artists including transgender rapper Mykki Blanco discuss LGBTQ and women's right issues and Frank Ocean's disclosure of his mixed sexual identity stirred up quite a lot of chatter. Frank Ocean was deemed as one of GQ Magazine's Men of the Year and when asked in an interview if he is homosexual, Frank Ocean poetically replied, "You can move to the next question. I'll respectfully say that life is dynamic and comes along with dynamic experiences, and the same sentiment that I have towards genres of music, I have towards a lot of labels and boxes and shit. I'm in this business to be creative-I'll even diminish it and say to be a content provider. One of the pieces of content that I'm for fuck sure not giving is porn videos. I'm not a centerfold. I'm not trying to sell you sex. People should pay attention to that in the letter: I didn't need to label it for it to have impact. Because people realize everything that I say is so relatable, because when you're talking about romantic love, both sides in all scenarios feel the same shit. As a writer, as a creator, I'm giving you my experiences. But just take what I give you. You ain't got to pry beyond that. I'm giving you what I feel like you can feel. The other shit, you can't feel. You can't feel a box. You can't feel a label. Don't get caught up in that shit. There's so much something in life. Don't get caught up in the nothing. That shit is nothing, you know? It's nothing. Vanish the fear" (Wallace, 2012, p3).

Kendrick Lamar in *Tammy's Song (Her Evils)* and Angel Haze's *Cleanin Out My Closet (Freestyle)* both tell stories of young, poor, Black women who are perpetually mistreated by the men closest to them.

*"Then I grew up and I wasn't within a reach of these men*
*But that didn't keep out of motherfucking reach of my sin*
*And psychologically I was just as fucked as they come*
*I was confused I had to prove I wasn't fucked from the jump*
*I was afraid of myself I had no love for myself*
*I tried to kill I tried to hide I tried to run from myself*
*There was a point in my life where I didn't like who I was*
*So I create the other people I would try to become*
*Sexuality came into play and with as scarred as I was*
*I was extremely scared of men so I start liking girls"*
-Angel Haze

In Kendrick's song, the woman, Tammy, is cheated on by her boyfriend in each of the three verses. In the first two, she retaliates by cheating on him with another man. In the third, she feels that men have treated her too poorly despite her general loyalty and gives up entirely on them as she begins an affair with a female friend.

<u>"You don't even know 'bout the shit that I been through" (Drake): Street Credibility</u>

Street credibility can be defined as "...a reputation gained through acts of street crime and adherence to street codes in poor urban settings" (Bennett, 2012, p1017), as well as, "'authentic origins in street life', 'the acquisition of power', and the 'width of the gap between the one's origin and one's current level of power'" (Bennett, 2012, p1017).

It has been shown that young people who are not from the inner-city see the concept as an exotic fantasy in entertainment (Bennett, 2012). For the inner-city youth, "To be 'street credible,' a rapper must relate to a specific experience or locale, and, more importantly, tie his/her identity with the ghetto and its presumed norms. Despite the fact that the majority of mainstream rap music is consumed by people outside of black and Latino communities, being

street credible as Watkins (2005) argues, implies that a rapper has been approved by inner-city blacks from within his/her own region. Building street credibility is a major aspect of hip-hop's cultural production and commodification, and, as a result, corporate labels have to be savvy in how they produce and market rappers as real" (Balaji 2012, p317). A perfect description of this phenomenon is Yo Gotti's *Errybody*. Yo Gotti is a "gangsta" rapper, not someone anyone would consider to be "conscious" (discussed later). Yet in this song he does something incredibly uncommon and combines the "fuck bitches, get money" idea with something deeper. He, also, discusses being "real" and the desire to be street credible:

*"Errbody wanna be a dope boy*
*Errbody wanna be a coke boy, errbody gotta choppa*
*Errbody get money, errbody say they from the hood*
*Errbody real but they not boy*
*Err'bitch say that she a bad bitch*
*Errbody on Instagram lookin like they mad rich but they not*
*Errbody say they started from the bottom now they at the top*
*...Errrbody Famous, ain't regular people left."*

Consumers, who want to feel authentically street credible, need to feel that what they are consuming, the artist and their music, is authentic and not produced, even though this is exactly the opposite of what is actually occurring. Because of that, corporations rely heavily on local influences.

<u>On the commodification of Hip Hop</u>

On the subject of the corporate side of the music industry and how to make a globalized successful rapper, some believe in a clear cut fashion, such as K. Negus (2004), that White music executives are the individuals controlling what becomes successful, as what are considered to be Black labels such as Def Jam, Bad Boy, Death Row, Cash Money, So So Def and Roc-A-Fella, are jointly owned with corporations like Universal, Sony and Warner Music Group. Many of those theorists believe that label founders such as Sean 'Puffy" Combs, Jermaine Dupri and Russell Simmons are on payroll more than anything else and do not wield nearly the power that they are believed to. Early on, independent labels particularly in the South were able to be successful because the primary audience they sought was their local communities. When the major labels of Los Angeles and New York saw a money-making opportunity, the independent labels and their artists agreed to, in effect, "sell out", because of the significant financial opportunity. These labels attempted to maintain the image of being small and local in order to maintain an authentic, non-corporate appearance.

"The gatekeepers directly involved in the production process are the creative intermediaries, whose task is to ensure that the cultural product yields the highest return on investment (Ryan, 1992)" (Balaji, 2012, p318). Block Spencer, the founder of Block Entertainment of Atlanta became the intermediary between the local scene and the New York-based Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group's "decision makers". He is an example of an intermediary who was able to succeed in this role because of his known credibility in the local/regional hip-hop scene. "He acts as the father figure or big brother to the artists he signs, claiming to have their interests at heart and shielding them from the directives of New York decision-makers" (Balaji, 2012, p318), though it seems that this is, from a perspective with distance, a manipulative farce. This position, however, requires a unique creative skill to put one at ease which, if it was entirely manufactured, would be transparent and lose all credibility. Without this character, neither the local Southern rappers nor the money making machines of

New York would profit. He legitimizes (to one another) both the local Atlanta label as well as the New York corporations. Spencer is the initial gatekeeper between an up-and-coming rapper and his or her commodified position and identity. Gatekeepers are those "…whose responsibility is to maintain control and standards previously established within the larger institutional environment (Post *et al.,* 1997; Rindova, 1997; Rindova and Kotha, 2001)… New players that survive this process are eventually accepted. In effect, through their actions, gatekeepers facilitate the development of reputations of those being evaluated. Some have referred to this as the 'two curve' problem where firms must simultaneously address issues that reinforce existing reputations, while attending to other issues that both contradict existing reputations and are critical to emerging trends that may enhance future reputations (Morrison, 1996)" (Lucas, 2011, p178).

There are four additional gatekeepers that a rapper must pass through "before they are viewed as legitimate for wider consumption: media manager, street teams, strip club DJs, and local radio hosts/program directors" (Balaji, 2012, p319). The process is what builds the story of the artist in complete opposition to what the desired image is. An ideal example of the trajectory of a specific rapper is Gorilla Zoe of Atlant. "Part of Zoe's appeal as a rapper is his ability to project a manly image in his rap videos. He is husky and has a deep baritone voice, which resonates in the hook for 'Hood Nigga.' Zoe also raps in a cadence, allowing his delivery to keep pace with a hanging bass. His deep tone and his big boy image- which contrasts with the slender dope boy personas cultivated by fellow trap artists such as T.I., Jody Breeze, and Yung Joc- made him marketable as a gangsta rapper in a music scene that was teeming with 'dope boy' rappers in the mid to late 2000s" (Balaji, 2012, p320).

The first (after Spencer) gatekeeper is Tahira Wright, Zoe's independent publicist hired by Block in 2008 expanded "the brand" of Zoe into a more "consumable product". Among many other pursuits, she made an effort to expose "the more affluent and educated 'hipsters' in Inman Park and Decatur who consume the local hip-hop scene to acquire cultural capital among their peers" (Balaji, 2012, p321). Wright is a player in this game just the same as her artists, as her own potential future employment rests on the success of the artists she chooses to represent, regardless of whose responsibility that success ultimately comes from (the artist's inherent talent or her marketing abilities).

The second gatekeepers are the "street teams", groups of teenagers and young college students who are not employed by the label go out into their communities in an attempt to build a grassroots following for the artist (a concept that is inherently counter-intuitive, as the definition of a grassroot product or movement is that it is created naturally). They take on this role in the hope of entering the music industry, themselves. This tactic is cleverly termed "guerilla marketing". Associations with known local rappers and producers greatly increases street credibility. "Branding the artist as being part of a famous *local* label is not a new practice in hip-hop, but in the South it signifies the power of the role that kinship- being a member of a hip-hop family plays in rap production and consumption" (Balaji, 2012, p322). The importance of street credibility is paramount, and terms such as "underground" and "street" are thrown around strategically to comfort consumers that this artist is not of the mainstream and is "untainted by commercialism" (Balaji, 2012, p322). The label of "old school" often gives a rapper legitimacy- history is relevant somehow, but also considered to be "too deep" to sell (see above, Jay-Z's *Ignorant Shit*). This discrepancy could be due to the current era of instant gratification; newer rappers can "rep" or *briefly* refer to certain "old school" or "historic" issues, which is done succinctly enough for them to gain faux respect from their listeners as authentic and street credible, while in fact not actually have a full understanding of the issues.

The third gatekeepers are the Strip Clubs: “The [Black, primarily lower-class] strip club, becomes a validation of the rapper’s authenticity if he/she is able to successfully get the women to request his songs and ‘p-pop’ and ‘twirt’ to his music… Strip clubs such as Magic City, which cater mostly to Black men, become sites of cultural production, as they turn into unofficial gatekeepers… ‘Part of their culture’ might seem like a generalization, but in the South the strip club is an important litmus test for a song’s hotness and an artist’s viability… [such strip clubs] feature mostly African-American dancers and play Southern ‘booty music’ that emphasizes a woman’s ability to ‘pop that thing’” (Balaji, 2012, p323-4). In such clubs, the DJs are in complete control of what they choose to play and therefore have enormous influence. These DJs are, for lack of a better word, often bribed into playing certain songs, but a dancer, ultimately, is the one who must request the song in order to have it played. If she makes money off of that song, she will continue to request it, thereby giving the club goers further exposure to it. Because this is not a mainstream base, it exacerbates street credibility and “provides Bad Boy/Atlantic/Warner Music Group with the foundation they need for wider distribution” (Balaji, 2012, p324).

The fourth and final gatekeepers are Local DJs/Program Directors. Due to their community base, local radio stations inherently come with street credibility and are therefore prime sources for the continuing process of the quest for the artist’s street credibility.

Gorilla Zoe, particularly through his hit *Hood Nigga,* successfully passed through the five local gatekeepers. The expansion of the internet (specifically sites such as YouTube, WorldStarHipHop, etc.) has in some cases expedited the climb to mainstream recognition, surpassing some gatekeeping benchmarks. However, these benchmarks have been far from replaced, as the internet is a generally unreliable source for “going viral”. Additionally, “Before we buy into recent internet-inspired successes… as signs of the diminished role of intermediaries, it might be worth noting that as cultural industries change and new gatekeepers emerge, cultural production is and will continue to be a mediated process (Balaji, 2012, p328). Contrary to what such gatekeepers would like to expose to others and possibly admit to themselves is their willingness (understated) as participants in commodification. The entire process of creating street credibility and local authenticity is a means to the end for the corporations and everyone else involved to commodify the “product” (formerly known as a human artist) into the mainstream. Otherwise, there would be no reason for these corporations to invest.

To complete the circle which is a pattern and not a science that is applied in every instance, without the investment of these corporations (primarily White), these musicians would never gain the success and prominence they have been able to. Here exists the “selling out” or commodification of everyone involved: the non-literal and sometimes literal prostitution of just about everyone- the rappers, the groupies, the gatekeepers, the corporations and everyone in between. While these are all conscious players in the artist’s rise to fame and fortune (not necessarily a praiseworthy quality in and of itself), few, if any, artists would have the influence they do if not for the primarily White-run corporations and in that sense, the artists - primarily Black and from impoverished communities - are owned. The following lyrics are from the entirety of the song *Hollywood Divorce* by Outkast featuring Lil’ Wayne and Snoop Dogg. This song is the metaphor of the Hip Hop music industry and a tragic marriage. While it does not acknowledge all of the complexities of the industry in what has just been described - particularly the responsibility of the artists - it beautifully and poetically portrays the commodification and appropriation of the Hip Hop art form:

*[Chorus]: Andre 3000]*
*It arts off like a small town marriage*

*Lovely wife and life, baby carriage*
*Now all the stars have cars, success of course*
*But it ends in Hollywood divorce, Hollywood divorce*

*[Verse 1: Lil Wayne]*
*And I'm a start*
*Yea, and I don't have to go to Hollywood*
*'Cause Hollywood come through my neighborhood with cameras on*
*I really think they're stealin from us like a sample song*
*I really wish one day we'd take it back like Hammer's home*
*The hurricane come and took my Louisiana home*
*And all I got in return was a darn country song*
*This whole country wrong*
*What would you write if you just put a little ice on*
*And cut your mic on*
*But you don't even write songs*
*But Hollywood make you spit like a python*
*I meant Cobra, I'm so not sober*
*I'm high like a Hollywood coffee or soda*
*You can call me a roller*
*Your grill's glistenin'*
*Spent a hundred thousand on mine to feel different*
*What's the real sense of it?*
*Bling bling, I know*
*And did you know I'm the creator of the term*
*I just straightened the perm*
*Aint let it sit too long, they just makin it burn*
*And make a movie of our lifestyle*
*But they earn like a dead body burned on a mantlepiece*
*That's why I try not to lie on wax like this candle grease*
*And I be's the little nigga*
*Cooler than anti-freeze defrost on your window pane - Lil Wayne*
*But in Hollywood it's Litt-le Wayne*
*Don't make me nut*
*So that's why I got a pre-nup*
*I do*

*[Verse 2: Andre 3000]*
*Yeah, Yeah*
*A is for Adamsville*
*B is Bowen Homes*
*See if I give a fuck if you like me you know I don't*
*If she ain't got a good head on her leave that ho alone*
*If she do got some good head on her let her sing a song*
*D is for what I serve, I don't be on no curb*
*She ain't no junkie neither, I ain't no dope dealer*
*But she keep comin back three stacks must be some crack*
*Put that pipe in her lap, she ain't know how to act*
*Now that I've got your undivided attention I'm*
*Gonna say this and run under condition one*
*Promise me you gon' stack, promise me you gon' ball*
*Promise me you'll invest three fourths of it all*
*For what? So your kids, kids, kids can have some cheese*
*Can't get with it? Get get get get get on your knees*
*Cause wealth is the word*
*Rich is round the corner from the curb*
*Don't like what I write? Shoot me a bird*

*[Verse 3: Big Boi]*
*(Starts off)*
*Tenth grade, the way was pave for me and Dre. to create*

*Like Dr. Frankenstein the arts and crafts*
*Now could we make a difference*
*Antoine Patton and Andre Benjamin*
*Been jammin for you crabbing rap niggaz and journalists*
*That's quick to misprint public and private business*
*Then retract back for deaf ears and think it's dismissed*
*Part two the sequel all new 'Kast*
*Just ain't the same gang of nerds on the internet*
*Slanndering your name behind that screen name*
*They're lame and their life is pretty plain*
*M&M's with no nuts*
*Won't show up face-to-face straight bitch made*
*Like puppies on the nipples of a mutt*
*Address it on a case-by-case basis like the judge*
*What about these lyin' ass hoes tryin to plot*
*Or these niggaz on the block who want the queen (Nigga please)*
*But even she can walk we'll miss her we ain't gon' fake it*
*But God don't make mistakes must be something bigger waiting*

*[Verse 4: Snoop Dogg]*
*I do, love you but you hate me at the same time*
*Lights, camera, action, it's game time*
*Do you take this here as your lovely wife?*
*To love her and cherish her for all your life?*
*I solemnly swear to dare share take you there*
*And me and you together baby we a lucky pair*
*It's been a long time, we walked a thin line*
*Others say they got you but you been mine*
*As I sit back and watch all them cat fights*
*Domestic violence - is that right?*
*But you love the dogg, gave me the spotlight*
*And now I'm growin up, showin up, blowin up*
*I never ever thought that we would separate at all*
*But you played me like a game of football*
*Used to feed me, need me, dress me*
*Now it's so messy straight cut out and left me*

*[Andre 3000]*
*Hollywood divorce*
*All the fresh styles always start off as a good little hood thing*
*Look at blues, rock, jazz, rap*
*Not even talkin about music*
*Everything else too*
*By the time it reach Hollywood it's over*
*But it's cool*
*We just keep it goin and make new shit*

*[Snoop Dogg]*
*Take our game, take our name*
*Give us a little fame*
*And then they kick us to the curb that's a cold thang"*

The generally believed theory and hope is that what will make a musician famous is his or her talent (the lyrical geniuses like Kendrick Lamar, Angel Haze, Andre 3000, Lil Wayne, etc.; the musical aesthetics and phonaesthetics like 2 Chainz and Yung Thug). This section shows that while one hopes that is generally the case, it is certainly not always the case and in the realm of Hip Hop, perhaps rarely the case. If nothing else, having musical merit alone with none of these other financially-driven components will make it incredibly difficult to succeed, but that is part of the capitalism with which we all choose to live and is a part of many, many other

production realms as well, most notably, fashion. The open-ended question is left: do the people decide their own taste or do the people above with the money decide? As always, the answer likely exists in the grey area.

Conscious Rap

"Conscious rap" can be defined as a straight-forward lyrical approach to everyday occurrences. Rappers talk about a variety of topics from trouble paying bills, overcoming stereotypes, relationship problems or the uphill battle of people born into poverty. "Conscious rap is a sub-genre of hip-hop that focuses on creating awareness and imparting knowledge. Conscious rappers traditionally decry violence, discrimination, and other societal ailments. It's propelled by the conviction that radical social change comes through knowledge of self and personal discovery" (Adaso). A "conscious rapper" devotes, "...his/her lyrics to discussing 'empowerment through politics and knowledge,' social change and/or non superficial aspects of black history, and the problems facing the black communities in critical areas" (Dagbovie, 2005, p304).

Many examples of "conscious rappers" were named above, as music with the subject of women and gender in and of themselves is considered "conscious". Other examples of older artists include Public Enemy, KRS-One and Boggie Down Productions, De La Soul, Brand Nubians, Ice Cube, A Tribe Called Quest, Jungle Brothers, Goodie Mob, Paris, X-Clan, Black Star, Poor Righteous Teachers, Ludacris and Nas. Examples of newer artists who could be classified as "conscious" are Talib Kweli, Dead Prez, 2Pac Immortal Technique, Mos Def, J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, Lupe Fiasco, and many more. None of these rappers are always activists in their music, but at least some of their music involves raising consciousness in the Black American and American community.

In her song *No More Drama*, Mary J. Blige expresses the pain that all people can experience in phases of their lives. J. Cole's *Crooked Smile* is for both men and women who have insecurities that they must love themselves and that "we ain't picture perfect but we worth the picture still." Kendrick Lamar's *ADHD* sheds light on the generalized "crack babies" of the 1980s Ronald Reagan Era (as he often refers to it) and of Section 8 housing (government projects) dealing with issues of self-medicating under both the reality and guise of disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This story is intertwined with the main character- a young woman who, in a single scene, is in between being intimate with Kendrick and being distracted by the drugs around her. In *All Falls Down*, Kanye West, from earlier in his career, explicitly illustrates struggles so prevalent in Black America due to systemic racism going back to the slave ships.

Kendrick Lamar's style of rapping is more of a philosophical variety than anything else. He discusses his life and experiences, but mostly his analyses of his own thoughts. In *Kush and Corinthians* he struggles poetically with his self-understanding:

*"To the meaning of life, what's my purpose?*
*Maybe this Earth is ain't a good place to be*
*How far is heaven? Let's see*
*Is it in the clouds like they said it would be?*
*I wonder when I die will he give me receipts?*
*I wonder will the eyes of the lord look at me?*
*Look at me, look at me, I'm a loser, I'm a winner*
*I'm good, I'm bad, I'm a Christian, I'm a sinner*
*I'm humble, I'm loud, I'm righteous, I'm a killer*
*What I'm doing, I'm saying that I'm human, now people just*
*Ride to it, ride to it, cause you never know*

*When a bullet might hit and you die to it, die to it*
*Die to it, die to it, live your life, live it right*
*Be different, do different things*
*Don't do it like he did, cause he ain't what you is*
*But we can win, wait, let's get straight to the point"*

Though very few people listened to the words of the Kendrick's hit song *Swimming Pools* due to its catchy beat, it was about drinking problems rather than how it was perceived as the glorification of drinking. *Fuck Your Ethnicity* by Kendrick Lamar is a commentary on Hip Hop and the modern day intersections of race, class and - for him - music, within our country. He makes the striking statement:

"*Now I don't give a fuck if you*
*Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, goddammit*
*That don't mean shit to me*
*Fuck your ethnicity, nigga.*"

Kendrick makes his stance clear that, while racism is still alive, everything can be poetically lost within music, which is made evident to him by, among other reasons, how diverse his fan base is. If people can focus on music, art and God, Kendrick believes racism will disintegrate. He does not discriminate against anyone. The previous quote is the epitome of the concept of being "colorblind" without the stigmatic connotation of "colorblind racism".

In his 2006 song *Slap*, Ludacris expresses his dire situation as a poor, Black, male, American citizen in America and the anger he feels. Despite its seeming specificity, speaks to a diverse audience. Similar to concepts stated previously, this is not with the intent of supporting anger, but rather comforting those who are angry by making them feel that they are not alone in their struggles:

*"Yesterday my best friend died*
*Somebody came and took his life*
*Now I'm looking up at the sky*
*Have you ever seen a grown man cry?*
*And I'm asking why did you take him away?*
*--*
*...I need some money please*
*I can barely make it on these streets*
*Cause I got a couple mouths to feed*
*My baby's in dire need*
*--*
*...Baby mama's at home and fussin'*
*Callin up my mobile cussin'*
*Always yappin about this and that*
*But she really don't be talkin bout nothin*
*Somebody take my pain away*
*--*
*...Gas prices are way too high*
*Rich people are way too fly*
*And I'm where I wanna be in my life*
*But why am I so behind*
*Is it cause I'm wasting my time away*
*--*
*...My grandmama's nerves are bad*
*And everybody in the hood is mad*

*Cause President Bush could give a DAMN about our ass*
*So I don't wanna hear shit that he has to say*
*--*
*...Troops gone and we still at war*
*Nobody even really knows what for*
*Even more I'm scared to find what the world really has in store*
*Cause you know that tomorrow's not promised today."*

In his song *Let Nas Down,* J. Cole acknowledged that he 'sold out' in his song *Workout*, a club banger but a song without deep meaning, and let down his idol, the rapper Nas.

In Kendrick Lamar's song *Real*, he articulates the importance of being real to oneself and the world and having pride in that reality. His chorus says:
*"I do what I wanna do*
*I say what I wanna say*
*When I feel, and I...*
*Look in the mirror and know I'm there*
*With my hands in the air*
*I'm proud to say yea*
*I'm real, I'm real, I'm really really real."*

In the first verse, he tells a narrative from the perspective of a fictional woman. He claims he understands her well, and it seems he most certainly does. He expresses the struggle of a young woman who is likely living in an underprivileged and subjugated community without many options for her life. She turns to the love of others (men, mostly) instead of turning to herself for love:
*"I promise that I know you very well*
*Your eyes never lie even if they tell*
*Sweet lullabies that come with a smell*
*Of a dozen roses flippin' down the green hill*
*You living in a world that come with plan B*
*Cause plan A never relay a guarantee*
*And plan C never could say just what it was*
*And your plans only can pan around love*
*You love him, you love them, you love her*
*You love so much, you love when love hurts*
*You love red-bottom and gold they say queen*
*You love hand-bag on the waist of your jean*
*You love french tip and trip that pay for*
*You love bank slip that tell you we paid more*
*You love a good hand whenever the card dealt*
*But what love got to do with it when you don't love yourself."*

In the second verse, he tells a narrative from the perspective of a man who lives in a similar community and the struggles that come with the pressure of 'being a man' and not knowing how to love himself.
*"I promise that I know you very well*
*Your eyes never lie even if they fell*
*Out the sky and your optics? turn stale*
*Where they mow that's green*
*I can see you fit the bill*
*Of living in a world that come with Plan B*
*Cause Plan A only can make another mistake*

*And you can't see success coming from plan C*
*When it all breaks you, you still say you love me*
*And love them and love when you love her*
*You love so much, you love when love hurts*
*You love fast cars and their present is old*
*You love fast women*
*You love keepin' control*
*Of everything you love, you love beef*
*You love streets, you love runnin', duckin' police*
*You love your hood, might even love it to death*
*But what love got to do with it when you don't love yourself?"*

The third verse is from Kendrick's own perspective and struggle to love and understand himself and his life. He relates to the two other characters and the listeners as humans "we have the same eyes, can't you tell?" He comes out and says that the material things do not make a person real to the world and more importantly to themselves:
*"The reason why I know you very well*
*Cause we have the same eyes can't you tell*
*The days I tried to cover up and conceal*
*My pride, it only made it harder for me to deal*
*When living in a world that come with plan B*
*A scapegoat cause plan A don't come for free*
*And plan C just an excuse like because*
*Or the word "but", but what if I got love*
*I love them, I love when I love her*
*I love so much, I love when love hurts*
*I love first verse cause you're the girl I attract*
*I love second verse cause your the homie they packed*
*Burning like a stove top, they love cooking from scratch*
*I love what the both of you have to offer*
*In fact, I love it so much*
*I don't love anything else*
*But what love got to do with it when I don't love myself*
*To the point I should hate everything I do love*
*Should I hate living my life inside the club*
*Should I hate her for watching me for that reason*
*Should I hate him for telling me that I'm season*
*Should I hate them for telling me ball out*
*Should I hate street credibility I'm talkin' about*
*Hatin' all money, power, respect in my will*
*I'm hatin' the fact that none of that shit make me real."*

*Poe Mans Dreams (His Vice)* by Kendrick Lamar is a song that discusses his experience growing up as a Black boy in a poor, dangerous neighborhood overrun by gangs and violence. He begins with, "*I used to want to see the penitentiary, way after elementary; thought it was cool to look the judge in the face when he sentenced me*," explaining his skewed perspective on prison being 'cool', but continues, "*Since my uncles was institutionalised my intuition has said I was suited for family ties*." In this track, Kendrick speaks from a perspective of when he was in the hood, the extent to which he truly relates to it and even his appreciation for so many components of the culture; it makes him who he is, but his awareness of some of his skewed visions is exposed and is truly educational to anyone who listens to it.

The hope for “Conscious Hip Hop”

There is a lot of hope amongst many post-civil rights activists and theorists that rap music can be the tool to penetrate the wall of a generation with a lack of political, social and historical engagement, specifically amongst poor Black youth. The highest priority on the list of topics in which to engage is the destruction (though if nothing else, the understanding of) racial oppression. Many feel “we need to embrace, engage, and speak to the young in the Hip Hop generation, whose culture is at the present time defining and directing youth cultural movements around the world” (Dagbovie, 2005, p317). As rapper KRS-One said, “History inspires. History teaches. History also guides… We, as a Hip Hop people, must come out of the past and into our present. We, as a Hip Hop people, must re-create ourselves. True freedom for us Hiphoppas is to create and live a lifestyle that uniquely empowers us… True freedom is self-creation.. We hiphoppas will be busy at work creating a history that simply works better for our children” (KRS-One, 2003).

More specifically, Scott Heath believes that Hip Hop is “...an area where we might see theory and practice coming together inside African American intellectualism, where we might see an attempt to develop innovative approaches to using Hip Hop as a method for organizing African American youth around issues that are important to their survival” (Heath 2004). Beyond that, “...rap music and Hip Hop culture have the potential to ‘revitalize American culture’” (Rose, 1994, p185). In its current state, “Hip Hop culture is the single most widespread preoccupation among today’s African American and African diasporan youth and has the potential to play an important role in rejuvenating the modern black history movement and raising the Hip Hop generation’s cultural and historical consciousness” (Dagbovie, 2005, p300).

Stark criticism of the perceived backhanded meaning behind “conscious rap”; what does it mean to uplift a subjugated community and whose responsibility is it?

Meanwhile, and often in direction contradiction with the previously stated hope, some are offended by the concept of “conscious rap” as a sub-genre (in comparison to “gangsta/hard-core rap”), with the belief that all rap is conscious. Both “conscious” and “gangsta” rap come from the same foundation in the history of Hip Hop, as explained earlier- the storyline of a marginalized and oppressed poor, Black America. The “gangsta” rap can be equated with “fuck bitches, get money” genre, which some believe paints a portrait of exactly what they believe to be the current state of oppressive African American affairs and bringing attention to that is simply a reflection of reality. While this *content* may not in and of itself uplift anyone or be a meta-commentary, that is frankly not its intent. Additionally, putting aside its catchy (to put it lightly) sound- beats, poetic form, etc., included- the realistic reflection of the struggles many are going through along with the “catchy” sound is a point of cultural, communal and prideful bonding. In this line of thought, the distinction between “conscious rap” and “gangsta rap” implies a lack of intelligence and awareness of the latter artists. However, unfortunately and importantly, this portrayal of perceived reality is often filled *to a significant degree* with the ulterior motives of solely financial interests (not just by the rappers themselves, but by the previously discussed corporate involvement). Beyond that, this portrayal is often not only inaccurate but can also *create*, perpetuate, glorify and attract people into a culture that will bring them little else but disappointment, danger and perpetuated poverty (examples include the glorification of drug dealing for men and stripping for women).

However, a major concern amongst insiders and outsiders of the Hip Hop arena (as well as in the blaming of African Americans for their own poverty from many conservative Republicans) is the materialism and seemingly shallow messages portrayed in the music- that it is entirely apolitical. This analysis, however, is strikingly hypocritical when one looks at the issue

from a capitalist perspective. In his book *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture,* Bakari Kitwana explains that, "...achieving wealth, by any means necessary, is more important than most anything else, hence our obsession with the materialistic and consumer trappings of financial success" (Kitwana, 2002, p3). Following that train of thought, "[Many figures in hard-core rap] are unapologetically capitalists, equating the struggle for equality with the ability to get paid. Their rationale is that America is a capitalist society that runs on money, thus those who have the money (regardless of how it's obtained) are those who rule. Their ethos is summed up by Lil' Kim on the song, "Money, Power and Respect," In that song, money is said to precede the power, which in turn precedes the respect" (Bynoe 2004, p151-2). And, as discussed previously, gender relations - a subject that many feel has lacked "consciousness" in the Hip Hop arena and supported the degradation of women - can be considered a realistic stepping stone in the acquisition of "money, power and respect", even in the words of a female artist.

Contrary to the previously mentioned frequent outsider interpretation of Black Hip Hoppers (not just rappers) who are lazy and want hand-outs, many do not consider poverty as an issue to be addressed socially or politically, but individually with responsibilities that lay in the hands of that individual. If one is poor, it is their job to relinquish themselves from that poverty- in line with many libertarian meritocratic concepts. As a result, "There [is] no sympathy for the individual who ends up poor" (Newman, 2007, p141). In a personal communication (K. Pincus, November 23, 2014) with the New York City rapper Chinx Drugz, he expressed his lack of an interest in uplifting the impoverished community from which he came, so long as he was able to get himself and his family wealth. Perhaps this mentality, in and of itself, is the "uplifting"- developing a community of previously subjugated people who have pulled themselves from that position of subjugation on their own two feet.

Many young people, "find this ideology attractive because it supports their dreams and expectations of a successful and prosperous adulthood. By contrast, conscious rap paints them as victims whose only hope is a massive and unrealistic social change" (Newman, 2007, p131). That being said, a major problem arises when, "the teachers or other conscious rap artists condemn violence, sexism, homophobia, and materialism in lyrics, they effectively attack formulas artists use to boast of success. Moreover, they suggest replacing those motifs by a political analysis that highlights the artists' victimization as members of an oppressed class" (Newman, 2007, p140). An inherent contradiction exists for the listeners of "conscious" rap: "Note that beneath the adolescent hyperbole lurk two classic criticisms of the left: that opposition to enrichment leads to impoverishment and that a person's economic welfare should be his or her own responsibility" (Newman, 2007, p142). While "conscious rap" does not necessitate an opposition to materialism, it very frequently hints at it and certainly contradicts much of the messages in "gangsta" rap ("formulas artists use to boast of success").

A generally new technique has been attempted in schools across the country to try to use Hip Hop as a way to engage students in academia. While this effort has been praised by some, it has also come under great scrutiny, "...Are we asking students to use hip-hop culture to 'cross over' to academic literacy while some schools and teachers have yet to value or validate hip-hop culture as it is? ...If schools and classrooms are unaccepting of 'organic' hip-hop culture (language, style, dress, and its resistance to the status quo) can hiphop be used substantively in schools?" (Brown, 2005, p1). Brown is worried that the process is "...jumping on the 'get them to write using rap' bandwagon" (Brown, 2005, p1) before actually appreciating the art form and the history of Hip Hop itself and undercutting its merits. In contrast and out of the formal, intellectual educational realm, artist David Banner "...has honored [Emmett Till] by 'launching a line of jerseys in the boy's honor.' A pragmatist, Banner rationalizes this act of homage: 'To get

information out to our people sometimes means we have to get down to a level they're at. And in Hip Hop that means you got to thug it out'" (Dagbovie, 2005, p312).

To add yet another layer, rapper Lupe Fiasco, a rapper known to be "conscious" (an therefore lacks a significant amount of street credibility- previously discussed), gives a meta-meta- parody commentary in his song *Hip Hop Has Saved My Life* of the phenomenon of a fictional up-and-coming rapper's climb to success by any means necessary- "conscious", "gangsta", anything- and the most important point of all being the reasons why he is willing to do whatever it takes to 'make it'. In the song, the rapper is not performing well and makes a fool of himself at every chance he gets. The more he fails, the more his self-esteem drops. He wants to:

*"Get his momma out the hood, put her somewhere in the woods*
*Keep his lady looking good, have her rolling like she should*
*Show his homies there's a way other than that flipping yay*
*Bail his homie out of jail, put a lawyer on the case*
*Throw a concert for the school, show the shorties that it's cool*
*Throw some candy on the Caddy, chuck the deuce and act a fool".*

The happy ending is that he eventually turns his feelings of self-worth around, finally performs well, and does achieve the success he desires.

Additionally, it is incredibly difficult to sell "conscious" records or be considered a "conscious rapper" because of the sub-genre's bad reputation as, among other things, condescending and lacking in street credibility in the eyes of local hip-hoppers. For this reason and others, rappers on the whole do not want to put in a classification close to "conscious"- with the title brings the likely end of one's career. Even multi-millionaire and world-renowned rapper Jay-Z (who had too much fame to have a few songs destroy his popularity) has made an attempt to put out music of the more "conscious" variety and feels he was struck down. In response, he wrote a song called *Ignorant Shit*, expressing his confusion and lack of support of the materialistic mentality:

*"Y'all niggas got me really confused out there*
*I make "Big Pimpin'" or "Give it to Me" one of those*
*Y'all hail me as the greatest writer of the 21st century*
*I make some thought provokin shit y'all question whether he fallin off."*

Unfortunately, and to the point, while this libertarian meritocratic perspective has its underappreciated merits, it leaves out all of the factors involved in the history of the oppression: who started out poor, who did not, why that is so, and how systemic racism will continue to oppress this division of individuals no matter how hard any one individual can try, which complicate this simplistic yet commendably stoic mentality.

<u>Back to the commodification of rap: leadership and hypocrisy in the entertainers</u>

Along with both the potential for Hip Hop to make a social impact (see section "The hope for 'Conscious Hip Hop'") and the criticisms previously discussed of the various forms of rap comes the reality of the massive influence that this genre has. There is a concern about the qualifications and intentions of such figures *to* make a positive social impact in the ones who say that they wish to do so.

On the subject of qualifications and potential for successful social impact: In the late 1980s and early 90s, "conscious rap" was very popular unlike the way it is often perceived today as unrelatable preaching. Many artists were able to, despite a lack of significant education,

expose realities of the times. But with no political and organizing experience, agenda, strategy, and often simple education on the history of the issues in general, in addition to not being taken seriously in the way their civil rights activist predecessors, the messages that these potentially well-intentioned Hip Hop artists were delivering carved no path to accomplish tangible goals in the continuing pursuit of racial equality: “Because racial oppression has become increasingly sophisticated and dangerously subtle to the layperson, critical thinking is needed more than ever before… Those African Americans born after the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement need to study Black history in order to understand their unique status and position among African people in the world and in the evolution of African America’s struggle for advancement” (Dagbovie 2005, p306). Malcolm X believed that the lack of historical understanding in the African American community “contributed directly to their oppression” (Bagdovie, 2005, p319). Beyond that, even the acknowledgment of what issues are most important to be focusing on is lacking, examples such as “...police brutality; attacks on affirmative action; environmental racism; educational equity; and juvenile justice system abuses” (Bynoe, 2004, xii).

A strong articulation of this comes from Bynoe: “The commercial success of ‘conscious’ rap artists along with the laziness of mainstream media helped spawn the *raptivist*. The raptivist [connecting with disenfranchised urban youth] is essentially a rap artist who dabbles in activism on the side. The media, instead of identifying the emerging leadership of the post-civil rights generation [Black churches or traditional civil rights organizations], simply deemed rap artists, the most visible young Blacks in society, the new political spokesmen” (Bynoe, 2004, ix). Bynoe continues by identifying the significant difference between Hip Hop and politics and why they cannot be merged in the way they have been: “Where Hip Hop seeks to define a specific group reality within society, politics seeks to define society in general. In basic terms, raising awareness about police brutality through a song or performance is Hip Hop, but actually motivating the masses to force changes in police department procedures or the laws used to prosecute corrupt cops is politics. Hip Hop culture, as we currently know it, cannot adequately foster a political movement” (Bynoe, 2004, xi). Additionally, a simple lack of fluency by musicians (not just rappers) in the way government is run is paramount to change-making in a democracy which seeks to create change through legislative reform, and this is where political activists come into play. While not all issues can be addressed in the political sphere, the most crucial ones have the overwhelming potential to be, such as those listed above. “The challenge for post-civil rights generation leadership is to learn the lessons of the past and apply them to the realities of the present. Other ethnic groups like the Irish and the Italians understood early on that in this country power is never relinquished voluntarily. These groups and their leadership used the existing political system to advance themselves through control of local economic resources… post-civil rights leaders must… use similar tactics to revitalize urban centers and to prepare people of color for the new, global, information-based world” (Bynoe, 2004, xiii-xiv).

That being said, “Rap artists and other entertainers are not inherently unfit to become political leaders, but they cannot be both simultaneously. If a rap artist becomes an elected official or proclaims himself a leader, he cannot subjugate the concerns and needs of his constituents to tour schedules or recording sessions… a rap artist would have to become an *ex-rap artist* before the post-civil rights generation should begin to take him seriously as a political entity...Political activism is a full-time, contact sport, requiring players who are fully dedicated to learning the rules of the game, then play to win” (Bynoe, 2004, xiii). In general,

For Hip Hop artists who wish to support social causes but are not interested in engaging in the political sphere can use their financial success to donate to political causes, and many (it is currently believed and hoped) do, such as such as B.O.B., Nas, Eminem, Dr. Dre, Snoop

Dogg, Diddy, 50 Cent, Kendrick Lamar, Birdman, Wale, J. Cole, Game, Ludacris, and many more..

This phenomenon, however, is lost on many: In 2010, the Kanye West Foundation spent $572,383, “with the majority going to salaries and other overhead expenses,” (Newscore 2012), and $0 went to charity. “In 2010, Jay-Z only reportedly donated $6,431 of his $63 million earnings to his own Shawn Carter Scholarship Fund” (Victorian, 2012). Along with Jay-Z, “Out of the $87 million she earned in 2010, not a single penny went to her husband’s foundation” (Victorian, 2012). In an 2013 interview with Elliott Wilson, Jay-Z said, “My presence is charity. Just who I am. Just like Obama’s is. Obama provides hope. Whether he does anything, the hope that he provides for a nation, and outside of America is enough. Just being who he is” (Jay-Z, 2013). *That being said*, many performers, including Jay-Z, do benefit concerts, where, although they donate none of their own funds to charity, the funds from the concert are donated. In that sense, their presence *is* charity.

Jay-Z is clearly making an attempt to redeem his actions, however. In what seemed to be in response to accusations of racial-profiling incidents against Jay-Z as well as the publication of his charity schemes, he donated over $1 million to his Shawn Carter Foundation charity which provides scholarships for underprivileged youth to go to college (Otis, 2014).

Unfortunately, these charity shams continue to surface, including one involving Mary J. Blige (cited earlier for her inspirational, “conscious” music for young women) for stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from her “charity” (Vincent, 2012).

And one cannot talk about the music without talking about who and what makes the music. With all of the dissension on the meaning of “conscious rap” and contributing the social issues comes a more overarching question: considering that many rappers are willing to “sell-out” in order to achieve capital gain (see section “On the commodification of Hip Hop”), how can we trust that their agendas to uplift subjugated communities are genuine and leading us in a direction that is constructive? Beyond that, when so many artists directly connect themselves with their music; they sell themselves as their music, how do we make sense of their identities and contradictions in their music? Do we need to know who they are in order to trust them to lead us? How do so many educated people feel so personally connected to these musicians, willing to defend them at all costs? Ultimately, the answer to all of these questions can be summed up in that they are entertainers, which is a profession, which is ultimately done for the sake of making money. The more attention an artist receives, regardless of how they attain it, the more money they make.

Beyonce is a great example of an artist who has directly connected herself to her music: she does not sell music, she sells “Beyonce”, the product- inclusive of a human, a song, a music video, and an idea. Her latest album (termed a “visual album- every song with a corresponding music video) was entitled *Beyonce*, leaving the subject of the album up for little discussion. She initially released a single called *Bow Down, “I know when you were little girls, you dreamt of being in my world. Don’t forget it, don’t forget it. Respect that; bow down, bitches.”* After receiving significant flak for it being anti-feminist and subsequently losing a large sector of followers, in her 2013 album *Beyonce*, she used that segment as half of the song and added an entirely different second half of the song, “*We flawless, ladies tell 'em; Say I look so good tonight”.* In between the two sections, is a segment of a woman (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), speaking with a Nigerian accent:

“*We teach girls to shrink themselves*
*To make themselves smaller*
*We say to girls,*
*‘You can have ambition*

*But not too much*
*You should aim to be successful*
*But not too successful*
*Otherwise you will threaten the man.'*
*Because I am female*
*I am expected to aspire to marriage*
*I am expected to make my life choices*
*Always keeping in mind that*
*Marriage is the most important*
*Now marriage can be a source of*
*Joy and love and mutual support*
*But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage*
*And we don't teach boys the same?*
*We raise girls to see each other as competitors*
*Not for jobs or for accomplishments*
*Which I think can be a good thing*
*But for the attention of men*
*We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings*
*In the way that boys are*
*Feminist: the person who believes in the social*
*Political, and economic equality of the sexes."*

This segment is uplifting and powerful and in combination with the second half of the song made the first half almost an ironic commentary on feminism. It gained Beyonce back her feminist fans and then some- almost as if the initial *Bow Down* never existed on its own, and yet, it did. She released a song telling young girls to bow down to her and then completely changed her tune after receiving negative feedback, all the while never addressing this sudden change to irony. Beyonce can make any song she chooses to make and any person can appreciate any of those songs. The problem lays in the lack of awareness of the hypocritical nature of her music. She is deemed a feminist and a leader of women, while she releases songs called *Cater To You*, where she illustrates her desire to serve her man. This song, entirely taken out of context, is perfectly healthy and inoffensive: a woman wanting to lovingly take care of her man. In societal context- in a world where women are subjugated and made to be the subordinates of men - there is, in fact, no song in which her actual man, Jay-Z, expresses his desire to cater to her. While this may be a criticism of Jay-Z rather than Beyonce, it is a recognition of - if we are to give these entertainers the title of "leader" - the necessity for them to remain consistent in their message. Or, if we as listeners allow these artists to remain as musicians, they can say and do whatever they want. A given song, for example, can uplift the subjugated Black female community, and another song by the same artist can tell them that they are worthless because they are poor. These discrepancies, to put it lightly, are not just common, but true with nearly every Hip Hop artist.

Hip Hop artist Jhené Aiko has catchy music but represents herself in her lyrics and music videos as the beautiful, skinny, laid back, carefree, loving yet hard-to-get girl-woman whose appeal caters to almost any man in existence. Female listeners like her because they want to be her because they see that men like her. The focus here being the artist as the product as opposed to the song; her music is entirely wrapped up in her image. This is a phenomenon prevalent among female artists (but not male artists)- it is extremely rare that Jhené, Beyonce, Nicki Minaj, etc. release songs that do not have nearly nude music videos attached. The song is not about the song; it's about the person who makes it.

That being said, not all artists do this and it is in fact a phenomenon that is most prevalent among women. Kendrick Lamar, for example, can make a song in which he is or is not a character: everyone knows it's Kendrick's song, but he is not the subject of the song. This gendered point is relevant in that it is either more necessary for women to connect their personas with their music in order to be as relevant as men or that it is a leg up that they have over men in the industry, as listeners and watchers are far more engrossed by the female body in contrast to the male. More likely than not, it is the former, but can at least sometimes be the latter.

The overall point here being that artists do what they do based on the feedback they receive from listeners (something they are allowed to and should do as it is their job) and therefore they - as people - are not accountable to or reliable in conducting uplifting, intentional social change. As listeners, we need to understand the difference between the creator and the product and not be blinded by the manipulation to combine the two, somehow overlooking all of their human flaws and following the lessons they seem to be preaching. "It is not too dramatic to recall what countless African-Americans gave up their lives, literally and figuratively, in order to have this country acknowledge us as full citizens. Continuing this farce called Hip Hip politics does a disservice to the important work done by our elders and ancestors, and obscures the real work that this generation needs take on and move forward… The cult of celebrity that permeates American society has helped the post-civil rights generation lose sight of its priorities, thus it views politics through a pop culture lens" (Bynoe, 2004, xiii-xiv).

For a more straightforward and slightly less gendered intersectional example, in 1992, rapper Ice-T released the song *Cop Killers* and, after mainstream media attention protested the message, the rapper's reputation escalated. What is concerning about the acceptance of Hip Hop or any form of entertainers as social or political leaders is that they are entirely liable to having their messages morphed based on whatever suits their greatest financial needs, the results of which could be devastating. "...Social critic Adolph Reed Jr…. gauged this new group of performer/activists as politically naive or worse, disingenuous" (Bynoe, 2004, x).

## Conclusion

Hip Hop is an incredibly complex and inherently intersectional subject. It encompasses the culture, the listener, the genre, the artist, the industry, the music. It encompasses race, class, gender, sexuality. It encompasses social issues on so many fronts that are nearly impossible to keep up with all at the same time, so many of which were not covered in this paper. Ultimately, Hip Hop is a subject of great history, meaning and of infinite potential for further unraveling. It is a subject with music that has shaped lives in ways that few other genres have come close to, originating from its African American roots and extending itself to affect people all around the world. Whether or not Hip Hop should or should not be used as a political tool is a question that has not been answered in black or white (so to speak), but it is unquestionably an arena with an unusual source of power that needs deeper analysis.

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