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Parag Patel
University of Central Florida

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WE LIVE THIS SHIT: RAP AS A REFLECTION OF REALITY FOR INNER CITY YOUTH

by

PARAG PATEL

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ABSTRACT

Rap is an extremely popular form of modern music that is notorious for incorporating themes of guns and violence into the lyrics. Early rap was mainly party or dance music until the mid-80s when structural shifts in social conditions brought feelings of hopelessness and frustration into black inner city communities and youth culture. These feelings now find expression in rap lyrics. This thesis uses rap lyrics as qualitative data to understand the plight of urban black youth.   Rap music can be seen as a form of resistance for young African Americans who have historically never had such a medium to express their lived experiences and frustrations with society. The rap performance becomes a stage where the powerless become powerful by using the microphone as a symbolic AK-47 and words as weapons in the form of symbolic hollow point cartridges. This Thesis examines the contemporary African American experience, its reflection in the lyrics of rap music, and its fascination with guns, violence and death. A key theme is while rap lyrics sometimes seem radical and frightening to the mainstream, they often express lines of analysis and understanding that have been widely discussed in conventional sociological literature.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The problem concerning the following research is how do poor urban African Americans make sense of the world around them? This group is considerably disadvantaged and deal with contemporary urban social problems on a day to day basis. Their communities are greatly impacted by social inequality and it is important to understand how this is perceived and interpreted by members of the group in question. The lyrics of rap music can be considered qualitative data on these perceptions. Rappers are often residents in these disadvantaged communities and can offer sociologists a window in which to peer into the inner city struggle through lyrical depictions of crime, poverty, and violence etc. Sociologists can use lyrics as data direct from the source to understand the plight of African Americans in the inner city. Rappers offer a valuable perspective that sociologists should utilize as data on perceptions of reality from inner city black youth and consider these voices when studying contemporary urban social problems.

RAP AS REALITY

Rap music is often thought of as merely violent and lewd dance music by mainstream society, a genre full of machismo and fictitious content used to create a "hard" image for the rapper in order to sell more records. While this view does have credibility, the primary goal of this study is to illustrate how some rap music can be considered a reflection of reality and help sociologists gain insight into how this reality is interpreted by inner city youth. This study is not presenting the entire art form of rap as based on reality, but simply suggesting that selected lyrics of rap music can serve as a mirror image of life for youth in poor urban communities. Lyrics can be considered first -hand accounts of life on the streets of American inner cities.

The theory guiding this research is taken from *Blues legacies and Black Feminism* (1998) by Angela Davis. Applying Davis's theory to rap would suggest that the music is a response to economic restructuring caused by the policies of Ronald Reagan which severely impacted poor urban youth. Rap music would then be considered collective contemporary social and historical consciousness for African Americans. I n this sense Davis's work encourages one to believe that the content of rap music is based on reality.

The previous sociological research on the lyrics of rap music from Kelly (1997), Kubrin (2005), Martinez (1997) (2008), and Stephens and Wright (2000) among others implies that particular lyrics of rap music can be taken as real first hand experiences. Once again, no generalizations are being made about the potential for the entire genre of rap

music to be taken literally. Previous analysis of lyrical content by sociologists assumed lyrics were "real" and report findings in conjunction with academic literature. The sociological community has no problem identifying at least some of the lyrics of rap music as based on reality.

The selected lyrics of rap music used for this study echo time and again reoccurring themes in the sociological literature. The content of the lyrics presented in this study are verbal illustrations of what respected sociologists like William Wilson (1987) and Elijah Anderson (1999) have been studying and reporting for decades. Themes of race, crime, incarceration, and violence have all been well documented in sociological research and at least in this study are found to be reproduced in rap lyrics. This is yet another piece of mounting evidence to consider the content of rap music as a genuinely presenting an accurate image of inner city life.

Rapper's themselves use the art form as a vehicle to communicate that they are indeed real people, with real problems, living in the real world. Rapper Mos Def illustrates this point in his song "Life is Real"

Listen
My whole life is real, morning news and nights is real
What I spit and I write is real, cuz my life is real
My own life is ILL!!
filled with magic's strife to scale

Sun bright, no time to chill, got all type of bills

I got seeds I gotta feed with this

They be needin shit, I got ex-wife beef and shit

That's how deep it get

My whole life is real, my whole life is ill

A fantastic, a beautiful mess

And life nigga in America: the usual stress

I do it to the up, low, the east and the west, I

Do it to most, I do it to death

I do so it good they don't know what to do with theyselves

Well do this: MOVE!

Back, forward, mo'

Life is real, let's move on…

My whole life is ill, my whole life is real

Mornings, noon's, nights

Birthdays, workdays, holidays, funerals. the usual

Life is real!

Sunday to Monday, school, your gunplay, politics, bullshit

Life is real!

Shootings, stabbing, free tray, arrest

crush, kill, destroy, cheques

Death. rebirth

Reach the world but touch the street first

Life goin in every direction but rewind

Niggaz is waiting for the light to dive down

On a park a hustler plays the hide out

Somebody's gotta notice it's a matter of time before the world fine out

The earth dry out and push the hintin to high ground,life style--Hostile

Real, life real real

So real, too real, news real--edited

The close up block out the rest of it

True evident, false measurement

Crunk superstar, thug president

Tricks allegiance, M-def payment ship

Scribe lively, so timely,that is timeless

And is lovely, and is ugly, as it must be

Rapper Guru suggests in the introduction to his hip hop/jazz fusion album Jazzmattaz

> *Hip hop, rap music is real…it's cultural expression based on reality*

Rapper Nas describes the creative process for creating rap music in his song "Nas is Like".

> *I'm the feelin of a millionaire spendin a hundred grand*
>
> *I'm a poor man's dream, a thug poet*
>
> *Live it, and I write down and I watch it blow up*
>
> *Y'all know what I'm like, y'all play it your system every night*
>
> *Now..*

Rappers also suggest that music is a voice for African Americans. Rapper Gift of Gab raps in his song "Shallow Days".

> *and hip-hop is a voice, so we enlist that*

to express how we be feeling about this and that

Interviews with rappers concerning their actual life or content of their lyrics also serve to link rap music to an interpretation of reality. Consider a 1991 interview with rapper 2pac discussing the source of inspiration for his 2pacalypse now album from which a sizeable portion of data is drawn for this study.

Davey D: What's the concept behind your album 2Pacalypse Now'?

2Pac: The concept is the young Black male. Everybody's been talkin' about it but now it's not important. It's like we just skipped over it.. It's no longer a fad to be down for the young Black male. Everybody wants to go past. Like the gangster stuff, it just got exploited. This was just like back in the days with the movies. Everybody did their little gun shots and their hand grenades and blew up stuff and moved on. Now everybody's doing rap songs with the singing in it.. I'm still down for the young Black male. I'm gonna stay until things get better. So it's all about addressing the problems that we face in everyday society.

Davey D: What are those problems?

2Pac: Police brutality, poverty, unemployment, insufficient education, disunity and violence, black on black crime, teenage pregnancy, crack addiction. Do you want me to go on?

Another piece for consideration is this 2006 interview with rapper Ice Cube who makes significant contributions to the data in this study.

TS: What made you start making music?

IC: What really affected me a lot was being bussed out of there -- I got bussed out to the Valley to go to school, then I realized how poor we really were. At first when we were all just in South Central we felt like we wasn't living too bad but then when you compare it to people who don't have to deal with the things that I had to deal with, I started realizing that nobody knows about this world I'm living in. So I'm always going to rap about it.

TS: What was it like growing up in South Central?

IC: Well, you got up, you looked out the door and you figured, ok, what kind of a day was it going to be: was we all gonna have fun, was it a day when we was all gonna fight, was it a day when somebody was gonna come through here and shoot? Being unpredictable is dangerous, about as dangerous as Iraq is now. You had to be affiliated with somebody because just by living where I lived, people was going to clump me over with this gang, period, so I might as well hang with them, run with them, know what they're about and use them as protection.

In another interview conducted in 2008 Ice Cube makes references to the content of his

music being genuine and rap as a voice for poor disadvantaged African Americans.

AC: Do you see any contradiction in recording a raw gansta track one day and shooting a G-rated family film the next?

IC: Music and film are totally different. As far as my music, I don't have A&R or anything like that, so my music is totally self-inspired. Movies are put together by hundreds of people, so it's not one man, one thought. It's a whole different thing. Me acting in a movie is not what I'm becoming; it's a job. Records is what I love to do. I've made a lot of money, and as far as me and my family, we're fine. If I was thinking about that, I wouldn't even be doing records. I'm more concerned with people who

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ain't got it like me and still live in South Central L.A., like friends and family who are still caught up in the day-to-day grit and grime of life. They don't have a voice. No one speaks for them

One final piece of evidence encouraging looking at rap lyrics as a reproduction of perceived reality is qualitative interview data provided by the Stretesky and Pogrebin (2007) study which interviewed prisoners.

I basically carried a gun for protection. Just like you have a best friend. You and your best friend go everywhere. I got over ten thousand dollars of jewelry on me. People see all this jewelry and may try and beat me up. There may be two or three and just myself.

Rapper G-Unit expresses a similar perspective about the gun in his song "My Buddy".

My buddy, my buddy

Wherever I go, he go

My buddy, my buddy

You can run for your life I'll stick 'em out the window

My buddy, my buddy

I lay your ass out mothafucka is simple

Stay in your place I recommend or say hello to my little friend

Bring your buddy when it's time to roam (why?)

Cause I got hit the last time I left mine at home

The arguments made in this section were designed to establish credibility for considering rap lyrics a suitable source for qualitative data to understand how reality is perceived by inner city black youth. The lyrics are verbal expressions and interpretations of

conditions in inner city communities that are remarkably close to how sociologists interpret

that same reality. While many rappers rhymes are based on fictitious content and rhymes

are often molded to be more conducive to record sales there is plenty of genuine rap lyrics

that can be considered someone's lived experience. The academic community has largely

ignored rap lyrics as credible real life experiences. All Rap lyrics should not be dismissed by

sociologists as commercialized rubbish designed to only entertain, instead, rap lyrics have

been shown to provide a window into the marginalized existence of poor inner city

residents.

THEORY

I will be using Blues legacies and Black Feminism (1998) by Angela Davis as the theoretical component of the study. Davis argues that blues music as a form of African American cultural expression forms a collective social consciousness for this group. The blues becomes an oral text which highlights the African American struggle in context with the period in question. Lyrical themes of blues music engage in social protest in response to the aftermath of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. The blues as sung by African American females provided a vehicle for feminist consciousness to cross racial and class borders. Blacks as an oppressed group used music as a form of resistance to the dominant culture. The music is considered sad but with an undercurrent of hope and determination.

Blues music has been deemed primitive by the prevailing dominant culture and the lyrical themes alienated the black middle class which was more concerned with assimilation. The term of "low culture" had been applied by the dominant culture to this form of cultural expression because the music was a product of poor and working class black communities and the content often defied literal interpretation. Protest in the lyrical themes was expressed in code which was difficult for those outside that particular social space to decipher. The language of English was forced upon African American slaves in the United States and blacks have since appropriated the language which then permitted coded resistance through metaphors.

Rap music is the evolution of African American cultural expression. Rap, like earlier forms of black music can take individual experiences and transform them into a contemporary collective social tapestry for this group. The music has been labeled violent, misogynistic, materialistic etc. by mainstream commentators possibly because the real message is veiled under vulgarity. The slang used by rappers can often be indecipherable to many in the larger culture, thus encouraging dismissal of the music as lacking substance. Rap music is likely to be filled with social protest in response to the conditions of its emergence. African Americans occupy a subordinate position in the contemporary picture of American society and will surely use rap as a means of resistance by communicating their frustrations with the social structure that works to confine them to this position. Even rapping about themes such as drugs and guns can be considered resistance because the social structure limits opportunities which allows drug dealing and resulting violence (often with firearms) to flourish in these communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

William Wilson's The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public

Policy (1987) address changes in social organization of the inner city. The text describes the

exodus of the black middle class out of the inner city and the resulting detrimental effects

on the communities they left behind. This group exited the inner city along with the

valuable resources they possessed such as social capital. Wilson argues that citing racism

would be an easy way for most to apply blame for the problems of the inner city but serve

only to mask complex issues. The racial division of labor is rooted in historical discrimination

and thus those in the low wage sector of the economy are more vulnerable to the effects of

economic shifts in the advanced industrial society. Blacks have been the group most

affected by deindustrialization as they make up a significant proportion of the automobile,

steel, and rubber industries.

During this period the youth population of the inner city expanded and was

accompanied by a rise in social problems. Job development was mainly concentrated in

industries requiring higher levels of education. The rise in the sheer number of youth in the

area combined with the simultaneous decline of the low education job market resulted in

massive unemployment for young people in America's inner cities. Another factor to

consider is the distance from home of employment opportunities for urban youth. Most of

the low education/low wage job opportunities were to be found outside the inner city in

suburban communities. These structural shifts led to an increase in violent crime and set

the stage for mass imprisonment of young black males. African American violent crime is concentrated in urban areas and homicide is the leading of death for black men and women age 25-34 (Wilson 1987: 22). Wilson links bias in the criminal justice system to the elevated rates of black imprisonment during the 1980's.

Kelly (1996) is considered the seminal work in the area and he is cited in most if not all successor studies. This work provides the foundation for the emergence of gangsta rap in the late 1980'-s and-early 1990'-s. Kelly illustrates how the economic policies of Ronald Reagan resulted in structural shifts that significantly impacted African Americans in the inner city. He echoes what Wilson (1987) presents but links selected arguments with gangsta rap lyrics.

Kelly describes the resulting police repression citing specific examples in urban California working class communities. The streets of urban Los Angeles became war zones as part of an increasingly militarized landscape. Abuse of power by law enforcement during this period was common which ended up alienating the black community by generating feelings of distrust. Specific well known incidents of police brutality against Rodney King and Eula Mae as well as police rebuttal are examined in a later chapter. Rapper Ice Cube's song "who's got the camera" is cited as reflecting themes of police brutality. Kelly also cites Ice Cube's song "the product" as linking disadvantage and police repression to incarceration.

Mcann (2010) deals with ideology and gangsta rap. The famous rap group N.W.A. (which stands for niggaz with attitude) music and videos are cited as barometers of ideology. This crew was a rap super group and released the landmark album "Straight out of Compton" which contained the infamous single "fuck the police". This songs content can be considered to echo the collective perspective of urban African American youth concerning the police. Police are regarded with disdain and viewed as instruments of oppression within the black community.

The negative media attention the song received sparked a first of its kind response by the FBI. The bureau sent a letter in hopes of intimidation directly to priority records. N.W.A.'s album was demonized for inciting violence against police. The letter paints the picture of law enforcement as noble protectors heroically risking their lives in the name of justice. This letter makes no mention of any misuse of power by police.

Anderson (1999) focuses more on the transformed inner city environment birthed from the devastating structural changes described by Wilson. The text describes a "code of the street" emerging in the inner city as a cultural adaptation to lack of faith in the social structure. Witnessing and perpetrating acts of violence becomes second nature to youth in urban areas resulting from limited access to jobs paying a living wage, the stigma of race, and the fallout from the drug trade. Respect is central to the code of the street and it is earned by making a name or building a reputation through violent means. Inner city youth

slowly learn the social order through displays of violence that demonstrate who is toughest. Manhood correlates with respect and avoiding confrontation will yield limited opportunity for social advancement among peers.

Anderson argues that those that cannot adapt to the changes brought upon by deindustrialization and lack trust in mainstream institutions are likely to engage in criminal activity and rely on the underground economy out of desperation. The allure of the drug trade is the result of a combination of inadequate economic opportunity and the imperatives of life on the street. Selling crack is a more attractive option to inner city youth than working humiliating service sector jobs such as those at McDonalds. The drug trade requires social control which is satisfied through threats and displays of violence. The gun becomes the dominant means of social control and is utilized by those involved in the underground economy. The conditions in the inner city caused by economic restructuring forcing many residents to find salvation in the sale of crack lead to an increased likelihood of incarceration. Anderson cites a study by the sentencing project which revealed that 33% of young black males in their twenties are under the supervision of the criminal justice system.

Bogazianos' (2008) work describes how rap has addressed the drug laws that disproportionately affect African Americans. There is a sentencing disparity for cocaine and crack in the United States with the punishment for the later much more severe than the

former. These two substances are essentially the same drug in different forms correlating to a specific market segment. Cocaine is the more expensive pure form of the drug and caters primarily to upper middle/upper class customers while crack is the cut or diluted form of the drug which caters to the lower class. The sentencing disparity between crack and cocaine can be considered a form of institutional racism because its implementation ensures that African Americans as part of the lower class are more likely to end up in prison for non-violent drug crimes.

Charis E. Kubrin (2005) has multiple pieces exploring rap music. This work mainly deals with increased violence in the inner city but also points to the changes occurring in criminal justice policy during the 1980's. The policy at this time was becoming increasingly more punitive which led to unparalleled levels of incarceration. What was once a misdemeanor is now classified as a felony concerning firearm use and gang membership. Mandatory minimum sentences for crimes were implemented and longer duration sentences were common.

Kubrin's research illuminates the street code within rap music. She uses Anderson's work on the code of the street as the foundation of her study and builds upon it by presenting the reflection of the code of the street in rap lyrics. Rap music can be seen as lyrical expression of the code of the street. An environment rampant with disadvantage combined with easy access to firearms work together to create fertile ground for the street

code to emerge. This code regulates social relations among inner city residents. The code of the street instructs listeners how to react to any given social situation and provides a manual on how to survive the streets. Social status can be a scarce resource in the inner city and the avenues to that commodity are augmented by factors in the immediate environment. Building a violent reputation is key to maintaining status as well as deterring future victimization.

Martinez (1997) argues that rap music is a form of resistance for African Americans. Bonnie Mitchell and Joe Feagin (1995) build on the work of Hechter (1975; 1978) and suggest that non-European groups under domination draw on cultural resources to resist the dominant culture. Valued aspects of their culture such as music become viable forms of oppositional culture (Stuckey 1987; Scott 1990). Martinez selected lyrics from the examination of 6 albums produced by well-known gangsta or political rappers emerging in the late 1980's to early 1990's. The lyrics and not frequency of any type of theme was the focus of the analysis. Results of the study found the themes of distrust of police, fear of a corrupt system that plans genocide, disillusionment with health care, anger at racism and lost opportunities, action in the face of oppression, and a plea for recognition. These themes were discussed with lyrical content and constitute what Rose (1994) would call disguised criticism of the powerful.

Martinez (2008) reveals the stark contrast of how the media presents poor urban

black youth to society and their representations in rap music. Media depictions of inner city

youth as violent criminals is quite common in American society but rappers portray inner

city youth as victims of a racist system just trying to survive. Martinez lays out an analysis of

media depictions of crime and the disproportionate attention received by black offenders

and then uses rap lyrics from various rappers to illustrate the differences in portrayals of

inner city black youth. Martinez suggests that rap is a culture of resistance and links lyrical

critiques to critical race theory. Martinez's work is a pilot study that evaluates the lyrics of

well-known politically conscious rappers.

Stephens and Wright (2000) suggest using rap lyrics as a qualitative data source.

Rappers become like critical participant observers which, they argue will allow them to

communicate their lived experiences directly to sociologists for analysis. Lyrics describing

the daily lives and concerns of poor urban disadvantaged African Americans are presented

and discussed. Wright touches on issues of the prison industrial complex, police brutality,

drugs, and family structure. Wright cites insider research performed by (Davis (1959),

Becker (1963), Wiseman (1979), Anderson (1990), and Vaughn (1990) in the argument to

consider rappers as critical theorists. Wright argues that rappers can be considered critical

theorists due to their alternative critiques of American society and commentary on the

current state of African Americans. This study was done by examining self-selected lyrics

from rappers who were instrumental in the development of this art form over time. The

frequency of lyrical themes was not the focus of the study, but instead simply the occurrence to use as a source to understand reality from the perspective of youth on the street.

Political rap is a form of rap music that is politically conscious. The themes in this genre of rap music were explored by Beighey and Unnithan (2006). Subordinate groups create cultural forms that communicate their loneliness, exclusion, and injustices endured (Lipsitz 1994; Nelson 1992). The study examines political rap lyrics to understand the consistency and context of themes that constitute oppositional resistance. Political rappers identify with both black and working class orientations and placed the situation of their community within a broad context of historical race and class based oppression (Lusane 1993; Mcdonnell 1992; Rose 1991). The study used an ethnographic content analysis and briefly explored the themes of the redefined black family, lost economic opportunities, educational bias, health care inequality, criminal justice discrimination, police brutality, mass media representations, and racial genocide conspiracy.

Educational themes in rap music have been studied by Au (2005) and Gosa (2008). These studies explored educational bias vocalized by rappers in songs. The studies found rappers voiced that the education system was not preparing them for success in the real world. The cultural disconnect between African Americans and school curriculum is also explored. History taught in the classroom to youths of color is presented from a white

European perspective. Whiteness is taught and enforced by the school system to black youth.

An area of rap music lyrics that has received much attention is misogyny (hatred of women). Armstrong (1997), Adams and Fuller (2006), and Weitzer and Kubrin (2009) have all explored this topic within the lyrics of rap music. This seems to be the most obvious avenue of research for rap lyrics due to the prevalence of the theme in the music. I am aware of these studies but they are of no concern to the content for this study.

The literature presented here addressing themes of social inequality in the lyrics of rap music builds the foundation for the emergence of gangsta rap in the late 80's early 90's. The existing literature fails to link the education system within the larger structure as a primary means of upward mobility in society. This study aims to build on the seminal work in the area of Kelly (1996) and also Kubrin (2005). Kelly touches on themes of incarceration, drugs, limited economic opportunities, and police repression but his work was produced over a decade ago which is a wealth of time for ongoing cultural production from rappers. Kelly is a historian not a sociologist and can only discuss the themes presented as such. Kubrin's work is also expanded upon in the aspect of gun violence as produced by the code of the street. This study aims to offer increased analytical depth concerning the lyrics of rap music compared to existing research. This work provides a more comprehensive examination of the social structure in conjunction with rap lyrics.

METHOD

For this study rap music was examined as one of the most significant forms of popular culture appearing from the African American community in recent decades (Rose 1994; Baker 1993a, 1993b; Austin 1992; Toop 1991). Previous research concerning rap lyrics use mixed methodological approaches such as content analysis to uncover themes in the lyrics or simply intelligent self-selection of lyrics to illustrate desired points. This study's methodological approach mirrors the latter and is modeled after the Martinez (1997) study. A content analysis was dismissed in favor of allowing the "respondents" to speak for themselves providing an overall tone rather than a random selection of words (Babbie 1992). In other words, my "method" has been to search selectively for lyrics that illustrate particular themes. I make no claims about statistical representativeness or generalizability.

Rappers often state in their rhymes and interviews that their music has a message and that they simply want someone to listen (Beckman and Adler 1991; Ice-T and Glenn 1990; Ridenhour et al. 1991d). This "listening" was done by critical analysis of rappers lyrics consisting of actually listening to the music for context instead of just reading the lyrics. This study focuses on the lyrics themselves and songs emerged thematically. Lyrics from rappers who are identified with the socially conscious sub-genre of rap were chosen for examination in an attempt to find examples of social inequality and the rappers interpretation of such phenomena. Rappers 2pac and Ice cube make up a large portion of

the data and were chosen because they are popular artists known to use socially conscious

lyrics. These two artists arguably represent the face of gangsta rap which contained

elements of social consciousness. This sample of rap lyrics is not meant to be representative

of the views of all inner city residents or rap music as a whole. This study will however, link

popular culture to our understanding of the social structure following in a long line of

sociological research that examines this linkage (Coser 1971; Benjamin 1969; Becker 1976,

1982; Rose 1994; Bourdieu 1984; Pratt 1990).

I argue along with Stephens and Wright (2000) that rap lyrics can be used as a

trusted source for qualitative data. Social researches have multiple methods available in

researching any given phenomenon. A sociologist can take a hands off, non-biased

quantitative or qualitative approach to research which does not involve direct contact with

subjects. Another approach to research is becoming a participant observer by doing

research "in the field" while still possessing "outsider" status (i.e., Mitchell Duneier's (1992)

Slim's Table, Charles Keil's (1966) Urban Blues, Elliot Liebow's (1967) Tally's Corner, and Lee

Rainwater's (1970) Behind Ghetto Walls) . This type of researcher engages in observation

and then interprets data from subjects existing in the specified "field". Another method of

research is researching from the position of an "insider", that is researching "in the field"

while simultaneously being "of the field" which allows the researcher to communicate

experiences from the perspective of a member of the group in question. Rappers possess

this "insider status" and the oral texts they produce as critical participant observers can be

used as a credible source of qualitative data to understand how urban black youth interpret

or "make sense of" their plight. While rappers may employ a valuable perspective for

sociological inquiry Mannheim (1968) brings awareness to the fact that individuals with

similar lived experiences can possibly have different interpretations of that experience.

Massey and Denton (1993) state

"although participant observer studies and rap lyrics illustrate the harsh realities of black street life, they do not "prove" the harmful effects of growing up in the ghetto. Hard evidence... requires statistical studies using nationally representative data." (178).

This statement suggests that rappers as part of the much investigated urban poor do not

possess the cleverness needed to articulate, or as Massey and Denton would say, "prove"

the realities of poor disadvantaged youth. I argue along with (Stephens and Wright 2000)

that rappers do indeed possess the mental acuity needed to communicate their thoughts

worthy of sociological evaluation. Statistical studies of nationally representative data can

only define in numbers the economic and social conditions in America's inner cities. This

analysis can offer texture and imagery concerning urban social problems that the

aforementioned type of study cannot. Statistics can help sociologists define the problems

but only offer a limited understanding of the implications of these problems. Lyrics from

rappers offer depth and insight into the realities behind what the numbers in statistical

studies are communicating to researchers. The type of research presented in this study in

combination with statistical studies on the inner city can provide sociologists with a much

more comprehensive understanding of the social problems of American inner cities.

FINDINGS

Rap is an extremely popular form of modern day music that is notorious for incorporating the themes of guns, crime, and violence into the lyrics. Early rap was more of a party or dance type of music until the mid 80's when structural shifts brought upon feelings of hopelessness and frustration within the black inner city communities which then became the basis of rap lyrics. The lyrics can be used as qualitative data to understand the plight of urban black youth. Rap music can be seen as a form of resistance for African Americans who have historically never had a medium on such a large scale to express their lived experiences and frustrations with society (Martinez, 1997). The stage provides a venue where the powerless become the powerful by using the microphone as a symbolic AK-47 and words as "weapons" in the form of symbolic hollow point shells. Rappers can be considered perceptive "street scholars" or perhaps "street sociologists". This paper will examine the contemporary African American experience and its reflection in the lyrics of rap music.

The lyrics presented in this study deal with urban social problems of the postindustrial inner city. Rappers are often actual residents of the inner city and can therefore relate firsthand accounts and lived experiences of these communities. Rap lyrics provide us a window into the inner city struggle. Rappers simply provide verbal illustrations

of what respected sociologists like William Wilson (1987) and Elijah Anderson (1999) have

been documenting in the sociological literature for decades.

The social and structural context of the emergence of gangsta rap in the late 80's

and early 90's must be analyzed to understand the lyrical depictions of crime and violence

in the music. The generation of African Americans that came of age during the

Reagan/Bush era was the product of destructive structural changes such as economic

restructuring that dated back to the late 1960's. Deindustrialization led to the

establishment of high tech firms like aerospace and Lockheed in less populated areas of Los

Angeles along with the closing of manufacturing facilities in the inner cities which led to the

flight of the black middle class out of the inner city and into the suburbs (Kelley 1996:192).

Accelerated expansion of technology and the outsourcing of American jobs overseas

contributed to the decline of a manufacturing oriented economy and the rise of a service

oriented economy (Kubrin 2005:436). This shift created an increased demand for highly-

skilled workers along with a decrease in demand for low-skill workers which were

previously employed in meat packing, chemical, rubber, auto, and steel industries (Kubrin

2005:436). Humiliating service sector jobs that did not pay a living wage were many times

the only option available to poor uneducated black youth. These youth lacked the

education and skills necessary to compete in the new economy and became the "working

poor" which can be described as being underemployed and/or working from paycheck to

paycheck to make ends meet.

The era of Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980's brought about devastating changes that further depressed the black inner cities. The Regan years were characterized by a pronounced pro-business economic policy that favored market deregulation, targeted tax cuts for upper-income households, an antagonist posture toward organized labor, soaring investments in the military, and sustained budget cuts for social programs (McCann 2010:80). Historian Howard Zinn documents the national toll of Reagan-era policies on the African American community as a whole:

> *At the end of the eighties, at least a third of African-American families fell below the official poverty level, and black unemployment seemed fixed at two and a half that of whites, with young blacks out of work at the rate of 30 to 40 percent. The life expectancy of blacks remained at least ten years lower than that of whites. In Detroit, Washington, and Baltimore, the mortality rate for black babies was higher than in Jamaica or Costa Rica (Zinn 1995:569)*

African American youth in the inner city are hit on multiple fronts with inferior opportunities for upward mobility. Public schools receive a majority of their funding from local property taxes and because the inner city is depressed schools located within it are unable to afford sufficient materials such as textbooks and computers along with the inability to attract high quality teachers. There is an obvious cultural disconnect present between African Americans and the education system. Education is thought to be a key component of achieving the American dream but African Americans are at a disadvantage due to funding and the public school curriculum being created and taught from a white male perspective. Standardized tests such as the SAT often carry high stakes with regards to

college entrance but the test is more of an indicator of cultural capital than college success. The weight this test carries transforms it into a type of societal gatekeeper that regulates upward mobility and access to the American dream. The test deems that African Americans don't possess the "right" kind of cultural capital that aligns with white middle class values and when concepts in the questions can't be understood they are at a significant disadvantage. GURU from gang starr raps in the song "conspiracy"

> *"The S.A.T. is not geared for the lower class*
> *so why waste time even trying to pass*
> *The educational system presumes you to fail*
> *the next place is the corner then after that jail"*

This cultural disconnect contributes to African Americans historical distrust of white institutions which leads to an oppositional attitude towards school among black urban youth. The peer group looks to the street for education as opposed to the classroom and encourages young urban black males to ask "what can I learn in school that I can't learn on the streets?" in the inner city the peer group dominates attitudes towards school and let its position be known by encouraging sanctions against its members. Often when blacks talk properly they are stigmatized for "talking white" or they may have to hide their books or intelligence to fit in because their actions don't align with the values of the peer group. Alternative means of upward mobility have replaced education in the form of playing

basketball, drug dealing, and rapping. Urban black youth see these activities as more realistically facilitating upward mobility than a diploma would.

During the 80's the United States imposed a "get tough on crime" policy. Criminal justice policy since the 1980's has become increasingly more disciplinary with each administration calling for tougher penalties, mandatory minimum penalties, lengthier sentences, and more prisons (Kubrin 2005:436). In 1993 the U.S, senate passed a $23 billion dollar crime bill which made being a member of certain types of gangs a federal offense, expanded the death penalty to include fifty two additional offenses, and made crimes committed with a firearm a federal offense (Kubrin 2005:437). This bill also contained the "three strikes and you are out" provision which imposed mandatory sentences for those convicted of three or more felonies.

Under President Ronald Reagan the "War on Drugs" was also put in to action. Controlled substances had been criminalized for some time before the 1980's but the war on drugs served as a tool to increase the severity of sentencing guidelines for drug offenses which included longer sentences, mandatory minimums, reclassifying some drug offenses from misdemeanors to felonies, (Smith, Earl and Hattery 2008:81). Supreme Court cases like Gates vs. Illinois made it easier for police to obtain search warrants based on anonymous tips and the United States vs. Leon allowed police to use defective and partially false warrants in obtaining evidence (Parenti 2001:22). These measures directly led to the

drastic increase in prison populations. More than half of all incarcerated men and women were convicted of a drug offense and they are likely to be disproportionately African American with white men the least likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses (Smith et al. 2008:82). Drug laws and street crimes are likely to be perpetrated by African Americans due to concentrated disadvantage. With viable tools for incarceration like the war on drugs and get tough on crime policy in place disproportionally affecting African Americans as part of the marginal working class, the desired type of inmates and their ever growing numbers in the prison system were guaranteed.

A key example of how African Americans are disproportionately affected by drug laws is the famous 100-1 sentencing disparity of crack/cocaine. Cocaine is a drug in pure form which comes from and is marketed towards the upper and middle classes while crack is a diluted form of the same drug that is used by the lower class from which many African Americans are from. Despite crack being a diluted version of cocaine it is punished 100 times more harshly than cocaine and is the only drug with a mandatory minimum for the first offense of five years for five grams (Bogazianos 2009:50). Sentencing commission reports to congress have consistently denounced the sentencing disparity between crack and cocaine (Bogazianos 2009:50). The sentencing disparity has not escaped the attention of rapper MURS in his song "The Science"

> *See our government seems to think that there's a difference*
>
> *Between powdered cocaine and crack, for instance*

You get five years for five grams of crack

But in the powdered form you'd have to have a hundred times that.

Now who has the rock, and who has the powder?

Who's the oppressed and who has the power?

They want you to fail so you wind up in jail

You know how much they make while you sitti'n in that cell?

Billions of dollars for inmate facilities

You sell yourself back into slavery willingly

In August 2010 president Obama finally reduced the disparity from 100-1 to 18-1 which can be considered progress. 2 Pac suggests "the war on drugs is a war on you and me." Poverty is a disease and those in positions of power have diverted attention from the disease to its symptoms which consist of crimes of desperation such as drug dealing. 2pac raps "Instead of war on poverty, they got a war on drugs so the police can bother me."

Joblessness and inferior educational opportunities for African Americans lead directly to an increase in crime and violence. Drug dealing became a tool for survival and in the eyes of the law survival has now become a crime. 2pac raps in his song words of wisdom that N.I.G.G.A. means never ignorant getting goals accomplished which would suggest that he is aware of the structural mechanisms in place to limit his social mobility and acknowledges that drug dealing among other activities will put him in a better position to accomplish his goal of rising up out of the ghetto and achieving the American dream. Ice

Cube reflects upon his situation as a young black male in the inner city in his widely cited

song "Bird in the Hand".

Fresh outta school cause I was a high school grad.

Gotsta get a job cause I was a high school dad.

Wish I got paid by rapping to the nation,

But that's not likely so here's my application.

Pass it to the man at AT&T.

Cause when I was in school i got the AEE.

But there's S.C. for this youngster

I didn't have no money, so now I got to punch the

Clock, gotta slave and be half a man

But whitey man says there's no room for the African.

Always knew that I would clock g's, but welcome to McDonald's.

May I take your order please?

Gotta serve you food that might give you cancer,

Cause my son doesn't take no for an answer.

Now I pay taxes that you never give me back.

What about diapers, bottles, and Similac?

Do I hafta sell me a whole lotta of crack

For decent shelter and clothes on my back?

Or should I just wait for help from Bush?

Or Jesse Jackson and operation P.U.S.H.?

If you ask me the whole thing needs a douche.

A Massengill. What the hell

Crack'll sell in the neighborhood

To the corner house bitches.

Miss Parker, Little Joe, and Todd Bridges.

Or anybody that he know.

So I cop me a bird better known as a kilo.

Now everybody know I went from po,

To a nigga that got dough.

So now you put the Feds against me,

Cause I couldn't follow the plan of the presidency.

I'm never gettin' love again.

But blacks are too fucking broke to Republican.

Now I remember I used to be cool,

Till I stop filling out my W2.

Now senators are getting high.

And your plan against the ghetto backfired.

So now you gotta pep talk.

But sorry this is our only room to walk

Cause we don't want to drug push,

But a bird in the hand is worth more than a Bush.

In his song "Love's Gonna Getcha" rapper KRS-One communicates a similar story of experiencing poverty due to lack of economic opportunities and using drug dealing as a tool for survival and upward mobility.

See there in school see i'm made a fool,

With one and a half pair of pant you aint cool,

But there's no dollars for nothing else,

I got beans, rice, and bread on my shelf,

Every day i see my mother struggling,

Now it's time i've got to do something,

I look for work i get dissed like a jerk,

I do odd jobs and come home like a slob,

So here comes Rob he's cold and shivery,

He gives me two hundred for a quick delivery,

I do it once, i do it twice,

Now there's steak with the beans and rice

The lethality of crack trade was causing an intensification of violence in which the gun became the method of problem solving. Incidents used to end in an assault and now were ending in a homicide (Kubrin 2005:362). There was a spike in the homicide rate from the late 1980's to the early 1990's due to the crack trade (Bogazianos 2009:61). This rise in lethal violence required a new police response in the form of increased harassment of black youth by police engaging in searches, arrests, questioning of perceived buyers and sellers, intensified foot patrols of subways and housing projects, and complex surveillance (Bogazianos 2009:62). The inner cities were becoming an increasingly militarized landscape with housing projects resembling minimum security prisons along with helicopters in the air and tanks with battering rams on the ground (Kelley 1996:193). Increasing media coverage associating urban black youth with drugs and violence also contributed to police repression

(Kelley 1996:185). In 2pac's song "Trapped" he reflects upon police harassment and

brutality while encouraging the legitimate response of self defense under the circumstances

for a young black male in his community.

> *They got me trapped*
>
> *Can barely walk tha city streets*
>
> *Without a cop harrassing me, searching me*
>
> *Then asking my identity*
>
> *Hands up, throw me up against tha wall*
>
> *Didn't do a thing at all*
>
> *I'm tellen you one day these suckers gotta fall*
>
> *Cuffed up throw me on tha concrete*
>
> *Coppers try to kill me*
>
> *But they didn't know this was tha wrong street*
>
> *Bang bang, down another casualty*
>
> *But it's a cop who's shot there's brutality*
>
> *Who do you blame?*
>
> *It's a shame because tha mans slain*
>
> *He got caught in tha chains of his own game*
>
> *How can I feel guilty after all tha things they did to me*
>
> *Sweated me, hunted me*
>
> *Trapped in my own community*

African Americans have a historical distrust of the police and have been known to

use police and brutality as synonyms in their community (Kubrin 2005:362). Few blacks in

Los Angeles could forget the 1979 killing of Eula Mae Love who was shot a dozen times by two white LAPD police officers after stabbing a tree in her own yard (Kelley 1996:184). The fifteen deaths caused by LAPD chokeholds in the early 80's along with police chief Darryl Gates infamous explanation are hard to ignore: "we may be finding that in some blacks when [the chokehold] is applied the veins or arteries do not open up as fast as they do on normal people" (Kelley 1996:184). The Rodney king beating was the most publicized incident of police brutality due to it being caught on film. This matter was a case of reverse surveillance in which ordinary citizens were using surveillance against the police. Ice Cube reflects upon police brutality in his song "Who Got the Camera" with inspiration from this specific episode in which he is instructing the police to hit him one more time so he can get the incident on tape .

> *No lights no camera no action*
>
> *and the pigs wouldn't believe that my slave name was Jackson*
>
> *He said don't lie to me*
>
> *I'm lookin for John, Matt, or Spike Lee*
>
> *The motherfucker called for back up*
>
> *I guess they planned to beat the mack up*
>
> *He called me a silly ass thug*
>
> *and pulled out his billy ass club*
>
> *Tearin up my coupe lookin for the chronic*
>
> *goddamn nobody got a panasonic*
>
> *Found an empty can of old gold*

came around and put my ass in a choke hold

Fucked around and broke my pager

then they hit a nigga with the tazer

the motherfucking pigs were tryin to hurt me

I fell to the floor and yelled lord have mercy

Then they hit me in the face ya'll

but to them it ain't nuttin but (a friendly game of base ball)

Crowd stood around I said goddamn ya

Who got the camera

Oh please, oh please, oh please, just gimme just one more hit

Oh please, oh please, oh please, just gimme just one more hit

who got the camera?

N.W.A was a very influential rap group whose record straight out of Compton was one of the first gangsta rap albums released. The song "fuck the police" deals with the group's critique of the police in their community and encourages violence against them. Within the domain of the city of Compton slaying a police officer can be considered a heroic act .The video for the song portrays the police as intruders on their turf while the camera highlights economic depression such as bail bonds and other crisis centers (McCann 2010: 124).

In response to the song the FBI made the first intervention of its kind when it sent this letter to priority records:

A song recorded by the rap group N.W.A. on their album entitled Straight Outta Compton encourages violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer and has been brought to my attention. I understand your company recorded and distributed this album and I am writing to share my thoughts and concerns with you.

Advocating violence and assault is wrong, and we in the law enforcement community take exception to such action. Violent crime, a major problem in our country, reached an unprecedented high in 1988. Seventy-eight law enforcement officers were feloniously slain in the line of duty during 1988, four more than in 1987. Law enforcement officers dedicate their lives to the protection of our citizens, and recordings such as the one from N.W.A. are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers. Music plays a significant role in society, and I wanted you to be aware of the FBI's position relative to this song and its message. I believe my views reflect the opinion of the entire law enforcement community. (Chang 2005)

The FBI sent this letter to use intimidation as a way of getting Priority records to change their practices, policies, and distribution of the record. When the letter is analyzed from the opposite perspective the question becomes whose violence and assault is wrong? The letter also makes no mention of police brutality towards the black community but instead makes a case for brave officers being killed while "protecting" citizens. The response is more about the police department being concerned with the undermining of their authority to wage violence against urban black youth than police officers being killed.

Over time the United States of America has slowly become a nation that is addicted to incarceration. The growth of the prison population has skyrocketed since the 1980's due to increasing severity of punishments for drug laws and crime. Along with the rise in this population comes a need to build more and more prisons to accommodate their housing needs. The United States has thus adopted a philosophy of mass incarceration in which

African Americans and people of color are disproportionally affected. David Garland (2001)

suggests:

> *"Imprisonment becomes mass imprisonment when it ceases to be the incarceration of individual offenders and becomes the systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population. [When] . . . imprisonment ceases to be the fate of a few criminal individuals, and becomes a shaping institution for whole sectors of the population".*

 When most Americans think of mass incarceration stereotypes of certain third

world countries usually come to mind, but in relative terms the United states incarcerates a

higher proportion of its population than all other developed countries and most in the

developing world (Smith et al. 2008:80).There are many motivations for mass incarceration

such as removal and regulation of low wage and low skilled labor competition, maintaining

social hierarchies, exploiting prison labor, and increasing revenue for the local economy

through prison building and the jobs that come with it.

Not only does mass incarceration regulate immediate low skill job competition, but

also has long term goals to limit low skill job competition in the form of a record that

follows prisoners convicted of a felony. One of the biggest obstacles to reentry into society

for felons is finding a job (Western, Kling and Weiman 2001:412). Employers are much more

likely to give attention to those without criminal records than those with one. A stigma has

been attached to those that have been incarcerated and employers are weary of extending

trust to them. Erving Goffman used the term stigma to refer to any discrediting act that receives negative attention from society (Henslin 2004:138).

The long periods of time spent behind bars may also exacerbate preexisting mental or physical illness and has negative consequences for skills acquisition (Western et al. 2001:413). Prisoners have not had adequate opportunities to build their job experience or skill set compared to those that have been on the outside competing for jobs. The often violent behaviors prisoners used to adapt to prison as a survival mechanism may not be applicable to the real world work setting. The human capital gained through education and experience as well as the social capital gained through social contacts of felons takes a hit while in prison considering many jobs on the market today are often acquired by social contacts. Prisoners have not been able to make any real connections on the outside, but instead make social connections within prison that facilitate further criminal activity after release (Western et al. 2001:413).

Since the mid 1980's there has been a trend of fiscal downloading in the prison industry by transferring the costs of incarceration to inmates and their families. Correctional facilities bill prisoners for room and board, charge for meals, and also charge a 'co-payment' for access to the infirmary as well as other supplemental charges for use of various amenities. These shifts, combined with the transition to lower levels of service, living standards, and eliminating certain 'privileges' like education programs, sports,

rehabilitative services like job development and counseling signify the end of the

'rehabilitative' model for imprisonment and a shift to a 'medical model (Lebaron 2008:67).

The ideology of lesser eligibility seems more plausible as the force guiding prison operations

than the ideology of rehabilitation. Lesser eligibility suggests that prisoners are a lesser class

that don't have the same rights and protections as regular citizens and are thus suitable to

exploit. With this ideology in place the prison system seems more concerned with making

profits than reforming its population to re enter society.

   In recent years multi-national corporations such as McDonalds, Dell, and Victoria's

secret have taken the lead from the earlier convict lease system and have moved at least

part of their operations into prisons. More recently there has been a trend to contract

prisoner's labor to do manufacturing, factory work, data entry, and even telemarketing for

profit businesses (Smith et al. 2008:85). The 13th amendment reinvented slavery in the new

legal environment by abolishing slavery or involuntary servitude except for conviction of a

crime. This transition to prison labor allows corporations to drastically cut labor costs with

an accompanying increase in profits similar to the plantation economy of earlier times.

Inmates are usually paid less than minimum wage and it's not uncommon for them to be

paid less than one dollar per hour (Smith et al. 2008:85). The prisoners are then required to

pay a large chunk of that paycheck back to the prison to pay for their own incarceration and

other debts they owe to the state like child support. Vinnie Paz from the group Jedi Mind

Tricks reasons with the same means but to a somewhat different conclusion when he raps

"It's one point six million people locked in jail

They do new slave labour force trapped in hell

They generate over a billion dollars worth to power

And only getting paid twenty cents an hour

They make cloths for McDonald's and for Apple Bee's

And working fourteen hour shifts in prison factories

And while we sit around debating who the wack emcee is

They have to work when arthritic pain attack the knees

Slavery is not illegal, that's a fucking lie!

It is illegal, unless it's for conviction of a crime

The main objective is to get you in your fucking prime.

And keep the prison full and not give you a fucking dime

But they the real criminal keeping you confined

For a petty crime but they give you two-to-nine

Corporations have no obligation to pay benefits to the prisoners and conflict management and supervision duties can be outsourced to the prison staff. The extraction of the surplus value of inmate labor allows prisons to reduce operating costs and make huge profits that would be unimaginable if they were confined to the non-institutional pool of labor (Smith et al. 2008:86). With increasing numbers of prisoners comes the building of more and more prisons to house the rising prison population has significant economic benefits in the form of state revenue from job creation and prison building contracts. A 1986 Department of Justice survey concluded:

"Private sector involvement in prison-based businesses is an idea in good currency with key policy-makers at the state level. Survey results show that the concept of private sector involvement in prison-based businesses is endorsed by the overwhelming majority of governors, legislators, and directors of state correctional agencies, who favor public/private ventures because they expect that private sector participation will provide ongoing revenue for the state" (Department of Justice :1986:11)

Incarceration has become the first response to social problems that burden the impoverished. These social problems are conveniently veiled under the umbrella of crime. Problems of illiteracy, drug addiction, unemployment, mental illness, and homelessness among others disappear from public view when the people dealing with them are confined to prisons. This strategy can manipulate the public's perception of these social problems and underestimate the severity of the situation. The dismantling of the welfare state and the rise of mass incarceration has taken place at the same time and are interconnected. The political economy of prisons depends on radicalized assumptions of criminality such as images of a black welfare mother reproducing criminal children to justify incarceration and on well documented racist practices in arrest, conviction, and sentencing to make good on profitable black bodies (Davis 1998:150). The prison system simultaneously produces and conceals racism from public view. The abstract character of the public perceptions of prisons militates against an engagement with the real problems affecting the communities from which the prisoners are extracted from in such disproportionate numbers such as joblessness and inferior educational opportunities. The prison does the ideological work of

relieving us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of late capitalism (Davis 1998:152).

Mass incarceration is one part of a vicious cycle that serves to maintain the social hierarchy by keeping the dominant group in control and the subordinate group made up primarily of African Americans in a marginalized position. As mentioned earlier African Americans are disproportionately affected by the law and incarcerated at a higher rate than other groups. Social and human capital is mostly lost once in the prison system and individuals come out with a stigma attached that significantly limits their opportunities to climb the social ladder. After incarceration, an individual almost undergoes a civic death by excluding them from the political, social, and economic realms of society (Johnson 2008:99). Along with loss of job opportunities the consequences of a felony conviction include banishment from public housing, barriers to obtaining welfare aid, and limited assistance for higher education.

Political disenfranchisement is one of the most severe consequences of incarceration because it has far reaching implications. Today, felons and ex felons represent the single largest group of American citizens that are legally unable to take part in the democratic process. By inextricably linking the criminal justice system to the electoral system, felony disenfranchisement laws ensure that any discriminatory biases within the arrest, trial, and/or incarceration procedures are automatically translated into political and

social disempowerment (Johnson 2008:106). Because Africans suffer disproportionately from felony convictions the communities of color loose valuable political ammunition to fight for change. With such a big chunk of their electoral base behind bars, African Americans struggle to elect those with their interests in mind.

With 1 of 3 African American males ages 20-29 under the supervision of the criminal justice system, incarceration is a shared social experience for African Americans as a group (Kubrin 2005:437). These experiences are shared and vocalized by rappers such as Ice T who says "they say slavery has been abolished except for the convicted felon." Felony convictions are thought to be a form of bondage to blacks because of its imposition of limitations on upward mobility. Ice cube asks "why are there more niggas in the pen than in college?" which can be explained by the cultural disconnect and oppositional attitude of African Americans towards school which leads to crime as an alternative. 2pac says "too many brothas headin daily to the big pen niggas commin out worse off than when they went in" suggesting that prisoners come out of prison more violent and with depleted human and social capital.

Blacks consider prison a violent environment in which survival is the only option. 2pac voices his attitude towards prison in his song "trapped".

Ran through an alley
Still lookin' for my getaway
Coppers said Freeze, or you'll be dead today

Trapped in a corner

Dark and I couldn't see tha light

Thoughts in my mind was tha nine and a better life

What do I do ?

Live my life in a prison cell

I'd rather die than be trapped in a living hell

They got me trapped

Ice cube discusses his experiences in prison in his song "the product".

Sent to a concrete hoe-house

Where all the products go, no doubt

Yo momma, I gotta do eleven

Livin in a five by seven

Dear baby, your man's gettin worn out

Of seein young boys gettin they assholes torn out

And then he got shanked with a spoon

And he was 'sposed to get out soon

Is it my fault, he was caught in production

Where a young black life means nothin

Just because, I didn't want to learn your grammar

You say I'm better off in the slammer

And it's drivin me batty

Cause my little boy, is missin daddy

I'm ashamed, but the fact is

I wish pops let me off on the mattress

Or should I just hang from the top bunk

But that's goin out like a punk

My life is fucked!

But it ain't my fault, cause I'm the motherfuckin product

In this song ice cube refers to himself as "the product" of joblessness, an inferior and racist

education system and police repression (Kelley 1996:207). He suggests that prison is the

inevitable conclusion for black males who refuse to conform to the dominant culture. Ice

cube uses a "scared straight" approach in describing prison life but the descriptions are not

intended to deter African American youth from crime as that would imply an acceptance of

prisons as primarily institutions to punish and reform "criminals" (Kelley 1996:207). The

descriptions of prison life in this rap song are intended to paint a picture of inmates as

human beings trying to survive under inhuman conditions.

Concentrated disadvantage and isolation of the inner city combined with quantity

and potency of drugs and the availability of guns has created a "code of the street" (Kubrin

2005:363). Adolescents in the inner city have few avenues to obtaining types of social

status available to youth in other communities and so displays of physical power or

domination, verbal agility, or displays of material wealth become alternatives to

conventional social status (Kubrin 2005:362). The street code expresses powerful norms

and governs social relations among residents of the community. The code of the street is an

inspiration for rap lyrics and can be considered a "substitute teacher" while the street becomes the "classroom".

In disadvantaged communities residents value violent reputations as a method of survival and deterrence of future attacks. Rappers often refer to themselves as gangstas, thugs, soldiers, or killas to imply toughness. Rappers instruct listeners on how to build reputations which equal respect in the community such as when the Notorious B.I.G. raps "kickin niggas down the steps just for rep" (Kubrin 2005 :370). They allude to the fact that they are capable of extreme violence because of mentally instability and are thus not to be "tested" such is this line from snoop dogg "Here's a little something about a nigga like me / I never should have been let out the penitentiary / Snoop Dogg would like to say / That I'm a crazy motherfucker when I'm playing with my AK [AK-47 assault rifle]" (Kubrin 2005:370). The code in rap lyrics instructs listeners on what is an appropriate response or reaction to any given situation such as when Nas raps "Must handle beef, code of the street / Load up the heat, if these niggas think they could fuck around / Real niggas do real things /By all means, niggas knowin' how we get down" or Dr. Dre raps "Blunt in my left hand, drink in my right, strap [gun] by my waistline, cause niggas don't fight" (Kubrin 2005:370). These songs are instructing listeners to respond with a gun as it has become the dominant means of social control in the community. Rappers acknowledge a rise in gun use by showing how times have changed in the inner city due to crack trades intensification of violence such as when the Notorious B.I.G. raps in his widely cited song "things done changed"

47

Remember back in the days, when niggas had waves,

Gazelle shades, and corn braids

Pitchin' pennies, honies had the high top jellies

Shootin' skelly, motherfuckers was all friendly

Loungin' at the barbeques, drinkin' brews

With the neighborhood crews, hangin' on the avenues

Turn your pagers to nineteen ninety three

Niggas is getting' smoked [killed] G, believe me

Another example is from Dr. Dre in his days with the group N.W.A. when he raps in the song "Days of Wayback"

Now let me tell you a little something about Compton

When I was a kid and puttin' my bid in.

Yo, Compton was like still water - just strictly calm.

Now it's like muthafuckin' Vietnam.

Everybody killin', tryin' to make a killin',

Niggas stealin', muthafuckas willin' to dealin'.

With so many ways to come up

The average nigga didn't give a fuck

About another muthafucka in this game

Guns can be a useful tool for African American males to achieve goals in the inner city. Kubrin (2005, 363) argues that "The gun becomes a symbol of power and a remedy for disputes" .Guns are instrumental in building a violent identity. They have become the

dominant means of social control in the inner city and serve to regulate behavior during

social interactions among residents.

African American men are likely to encounter barriers in obtaining legitimate

employment that would allow them to adequately provide for themselves and their

families. This group of men faces reduced opportunities for expressions of conventional

masculine status in society in the form of status/prestige attached to work positions and

also in the home due to the resulting lack of financial security to be the breadwinner. With

the limited opportunities presented to African American men to demonstrate masculinities

and achieve upward mobility through employment or education many of them resort to

making a living on the street in which the gun plays a key role (Spraggins 1999:50). The

disvalued embodied power of black men can be expressed by possession of firearms as one

way of demonstrating masculinities (Spraggins 1999:45).

African American male unemployment and incarceration often concludes in a

fragmented family structure in which females become the head of the household

responsible for socialization of children. The Spraggins study (1999) reports African

Americans men are likely to report gun socialization and acquisition among peers, while

white men acquire and learn how to use guns through their fathers. The absence of a male

head of household places added responsibilities on the female counterpart to be the sole

provider for the family resulting in a significant reduction of supervision of children. Rapper

Mopreme from the group Thug Life raps about these issues in the song "Cradle to the

Grave"

From the cradle to the grave

since a little bitty child

I've been known to get ill and kinda buck wild.

Pop pop! just like the part that's in my walk with street talk

I'm runnin' up the block in the dark with less spark.

Survalience on a nigga every day,

Waitin' on my daddy just to take his ass away.

Now Mama always workin' tryin' to make ends meet.

So now a young niggas bein' raised by the streets.

And then the on other one that ever showed me love

Was my dope fiend uncle strung out on drugs.

These lyrics suggest that there is a declining influence of the family on urban black

youth which has been replaced by the values of the street and the associated peer group.

Anderson (1994,1997) argues that some youth fall prey to socialization by the "street"

orientation that is opposed to mainstream middle class values which works to govern their

behavior in public spaces especially among peers. The street and peer group does not value

staying out of trouble, success in the classroom, working a legitimate job, or going to

college, but instead allocates respect to those who aren't afraid to pull the trigger

(Fagan,Wilkinson 1998:147). Young children that spend their childhood playing outside on

the street can be exposed to conflicts solved with firearms which are met with social approval. These children in the inner city slowly learn that there is contention for scarce resources such social status, respect, and material goods in which the gun is used as the primary tool of resource acquisition.

Gun carrying can assist in identity formation and impression management (Stretesky, Pogrebin 2007:108). The unstable environment of the inner city makes projecting a tough and violent image essential to survival and failure to do so will likely result in stigmatization and victimization by the peer group. Adolescents in the inner city must negotiate with social identities such as being a "punk" described as struggling for survival and exposed to frequent harassment and victimization, the "holding your own" identity described as willing to confront a challenge when presented with physical violence but only using a gun when absolutely necessary, and the "crazy" or "wild" identity described as being mentally unstable and capable of lethal violence with a firearm without regard (Fagan, Wilkinson 1998:149). Depending on the identity, inner city youth may deter victimization due to an established reputation or attract challenges to knock them off the valued identity they possess (Fagan, Wilkinson 1998:149). The "wild" or "crazy" identity sits at the top of the identity hierarchy and the individuals with this identity are granted a level of respect that individuals from opposing identities cannot easily acquire (Fagan, Wilkinson 1998: 151). The gun can be a useful tool for navagating identities by being used in building a violent reputation that allows an individual to ascend into a more valued identity. In his song "I

Gave You Power" rapper Nas expresses from the perspective of the gun how the object can empower the user and aid in establishing the "crazy" or "buck wild" identity that resides at the top of the hierarchy.

> *How you like me now? I go blaow*
>
> *It's that shit that moves crowds makin every ghetto foul*
>
> *I might have took your first child*
>
> *Scarred your life, crippled your style*
>
> *I gave you power*
>
> *I made you buck wild*

Shelly and Wright (1995) found that gun carrying seems to enhance feelings of safety and self efficacy among teenagers. The study also found that "self defense" was reported by teenagers as the most important reason for carrying a firearm. The need for protection with a gun in the inner city is an essential part of daily life for many residents. Crime rates in inner city communities are elevated due to the abundance of hard drugs among other things. Users of highly addictive drugs such as crack available in the inner city often resort to robbery to fund their addiction. Society at large deems the police the dominant means of conflict resolution while criminalizing those who take the law into their own hands, but the black community has historically viewed the police with suspicion in addition to an instrument of oppression. The frustration caused by inadequate police response has

allowed the gun to fill the void left by the illusion of safety provided by law enforcement.

Rapper sir mix a lot illustrates these points in his song "No Holds Barred"

Self-defense is what I'm claimin, let's squabble

I pick up a pipe to take plenty of quick swipes

One grazed his dome and sliced his eye whites

I don't give a DAMN bout a stupid ass burgular

It's all circular

The dope dealer sells dope to the dope smoker

The smoker breaks in and tries to choke ya

But I ain't the one to run from ya son

This is MY HOUSE, and it's FULLA GUNS!

When my house got robbed, a top notch job

Cops laughed while my mom just sobbed

9-1-1 only works for the rich ones

So I collect GUNS!

So what's up when the criminals can't be stopped?

The only one with guns are the COPS

But it's hard for a brother to trust police

Huh, so the shit don't cease

So I go downtown to buy a hot gun

I hated criminals, and now I'm one

The proliferation of drugs in the inner city and the resulting police repression has encouraged black youth to carry a gun to combat harrasement and brutality perpetrated by

law enforcement. The police are seemingly in a position of dominance due to their stopping

power but African American males in the inner city often carry glocks as well which are

constantly referenced in the lyrics of rap music as if to suggest that the gun becomes "the

great equalizer" and levels the playing field between them and law enforcement. 2pac's

lyrical depictions of police brutality in his song "violent" communicate how society deems

urban black youth violent for simply protecting themselves against crooked police officers.

> *They claim that I'm violent, just cause I refuse to be silent*
>
> *These hypocrites are havin fits, cause I'm not buyin it*
>
> *Defyin it, envious because I will rebel against*
>
> *any oppressor, and this is known as self defense*
>
> *Now I'm against this cop who was racist*
>
> *Given him a taste, of tradin places*
>
> *And all this, cause the peckerwood was tryin this*
>
> *frame up, but I came up*
>
> *Now they claimin that I'm violent*
>
> *As I was beatin on a cop, I heard a gun click (uh-ohh)*
>
> *Then the gun shot, but I wasn't hit*
>
> *I turned around it was my homie with the gun in hand*
>
> *He shot the cop (damn!) now he's a dead man*

The gun in the inner city can also be used in matters of property acquisition or

property protection. Black youth lacking a dual income household are more likely to use a

gun to obtain material possessions or "gear" other youth are wearing out of jealousy (Spraggins 1999: 54). As previously presented, Nas suggests that a gun can "cripple your style". In a society focused on consumerism and more specifically in an area rampant with disadvantage money and displays of wealth can breed jealousy among the have nots.

2pac raps about his plan to resist robbery in his song "Definition of a Thug Nigga"

> *any nigga trying to take what I got'll*
>
> *hafta deal with the sixteen-shot Glock (huh)*

The gun has an important role in everyday life for urban black males. The gun has ultimate power over life and death in the inner city and for this reason often encourages the owner to form a more intimate relationship with the piece. Male Gun owners often eroticize guns as feminine by attaching human like qualities to the inanimate object (Kohn 2004:12). From this perspective, guns can be viewed as objects of beauty and desire as well as satisfying the human need for intimacy and companionship as expressed by 2pac in his song "Me and My Girlfriend".

> *Our first date, couldn't wait to see you naked*
>
> *Touch you in every secret place, I can hardly wait*
>
> *to bust freely, got you red hot, you so happy to see me*
>
> *My girlfriend, blacker than the darkest night*
>
> *When niggaz act bitch-made she got the heart to fight*

Nigga my girlfriend, though we seperated at times

I knew deep inside, baby girl would always be mine

Picked you up when you was nine, started out my life of crime

wit you, bought you some shells when you turned twenty-two

It's true, nothin compares to the satisfaction

that I feel when we out mashin, me and my girlfriend

We closer than the hands of time, deeper than the drop of mankind

I trust you dearly, I shoot blind

All I need in this life of sin, is me and my girlfriend

Down to ride to the bloody end, just me and my girlfriend

At the end of 2pac's song "words of wisdom" he speaks directly to America in the context of the defendant in the courtroom and presents a case to the jury for the crimes America has committed against African Americans. 2pac charges America for robbery and false imprisonment among other things. America robbed 2pac and black Americans of their history and limits the avenues of escape from the ghetto through inferior economic and educational opportunities. 2pac states that just as America rose by his hand (slave labor) it will also fall by his hand as well. He suggests that he and other young angry black rappers have become America's worst nightmare because of long term suppression and the hate the country instilled in him. America is charged with making urban black youth what they have come to be which is angry and violent and artists like 2pac have given this marginalized group a voice with which to resist and fight back. He suggests that America is

now reaping what it has sewn and should be trying to silence him but the country can't

escape its fate.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Rap music can be a very powerful form of resistance for marginalized African Americans. The lyrics in the music symbolize a contemporary response to poverty, joblessness, and repression. The music can be considered a form of education for youth when the context of the lyrics is truly understood. The contemporary African American experience from inferior economic and educational opportunities which lead to crime and violence to police repression and mass incarceration is reflected in the lyrics which make the case for rap music as collective social consciousness for African Americans as a group.

This research provides insights into the realities of marginalized groups as interpreted by the medium of cultural production. Rap music has been proven to be more than a form of entertainment and providing African Americans a way in which to resist oppressive forces in society. The findings of this research suggest that African Americans use rap music to provide an alternative narrative to critique dominant institutions. Rappers create an alternate world in which their perspectives are valued and dominate discourse in contrast to the world in which they truly reside in.

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