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"Fruits are Ripe, WE are Fresh": The Rapper, The Emcee, The Cypher and the Participatory Spectrum of Hip-Hop

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“Fruits Are Ripe, *We* are Fresh”:
The Rapper, The Emcee, The Cypher
and the Participatory Spectrum of Hip-Hop

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Dedications & Acknowledgements

This Project is dedicated to the multitude of incredible artist friends and creative spirits that have enriched my life thus far. My Street Trash Panther crew, my Bard Bars family, my incredible partner Caroline – all of you helped me believe in myself as a human being and helped me believe in my pursuit of my personal Hip-Hop career. Through your love and friendships I have learned to respect myself and foster a healthy commitment to Hip-Hop as a way of life beyond my outlet of creative expression. Through my journey as a Hip-Hop artist, event organizer, and team member I have learned that patience, positivity, productivity, perseverance and personality are crucial to advance in one's career and to mold oneself into a better being. These values are important to reflect in all aspects of life—relationships, business, learning – and I am grateful to have stumbled into this life path that has given me purpose and provided me with invaluable skills and experience.

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Introduction

The Hip-Hop Elements & Language Reclamation

Hip-Hop was born of concrete, beat and stomping feet. Hip-Hop stands as a globally celebrated African American cultural movement of varied practices born out of the urban strife, racial oppression, and creative coping of the late 1970's Boogie-Down Bronx. This pressure produced diamonds as the economic destitution and racial climate inspired survivalistic, artistic innovation in the diverse borough, spawning the Hip-Hop cultural movement. Hip-Hop, as *The Gospel of Hip-Hop* says, written by legendary Hip-Hop artist KRS-One, provided a creative “neutral zone, an alternative form of recreation, an escape from street-violence, corruption and boredom” governed by the principles of “Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun” and made up of the ‘Five Elements’ (KRS-One, 2011). Hip-Hop pioneer and Zulu-Nation founder Afrika Bambaataa delineated these Hip-Hop principles and “Elements” early in the early 1980's. These Hip-Hop Elements consist of *DJin'*, *Emceein'*, *Breakin'*, *Paintin'*, and *Mind*; with *DJin'*, *Emceein'*, *Breakin'*, and *Paintin'* as the primary artistic disciplines. (Chang 2005)

The *DJ* is part turntable artist and part audio engineer, molding coherent sets out of catalogued vinyl and the break-beats within. Through the live mixing of records, controlled beat dynamics, and scratching techniques the DJ moves crowds to dance and sets the sonic stage for the Emcee or Rapper.

The “*Emcee*”, derived from the title of MC or Master of Ceremonies, performs rhyme over the beat provided by the DJ, expresses the self, and engages with the audience; this art is defined here as *Emceein'*.

Breakin' is the Hip-Hop art of breakdancing, derived from the reaction of dancers to break-beats provided by the DJ.

Paintin', otherwise known as Aerosol, is graffiti art done by Writers or Painters using aerosol spray paint and paint markers on buildings and infrastructure to make a mark on one's environment and express individuality in artistic visual style and the 'tag' or name painted.

All of these art forms have been used as alternative ways to solve violent conflicts between individuals in pressurized environments of urban destitution, and, at times, replaced criminal competition with creative competition conducive to community development and cultural progress. While graffiti has long been criminalized, and has been associated with the assertion of 'turf' by gangs using visual cues or signature 'tags', visual art in the form of aerosol art nonetheless acted as an outlet for self expression in communities otherwise bereft of arts programs (Chang 2005).

In order to expand Hip-Hop as an ideology beyond music, Afrika Bambaataa of the Zulu Nation emphasized a Fifth Element beyond the original Four. This Fifth Element, *Mind*, expresses Hip-Hop's commitment to knowledge, social awareness, and the pursuit of enlightenment. Both KRS and Afrika argue that through the study of the 4 primary Disciplines—Hip-Hop becomes a tool for self-enrichment, creative expression, critical analysis, and learning. This Element is echoed in KRS-One's full moniker of *Knowledge Reigns Supreme* (Chang, 2005) (KRS-One, 2011).

As Hip-Hop became a household name in the mid 1980's, its effects on pop culture, dress, media, and commerce were clear and KRS-One proposed an expanded framework by adding new Elements to reflect this change. The original 5 Elements were

expanded to Nine Elements by KRS-One as Hip-Hop's influence expanded beyond the 4 original artistic disciplines. KRS-One uses his own vocabulary while sharing his new 9 Elements, identifying *Break Dancin'*, *Rappin'*, *Graffiti Art*, *DJin'*, *Beatboxin'*, *Street Fashion*, *Street Language*, *Street Knowledge*, and *Street Entrepreneurialism*—with *Emceein'* as *Rappin'*, *Paintin'* as *Graffiti Art*, *DJin'* left the same, and *Breakin'* expanded to *Break Dancin'*. *Street Fashion* reflects the rise of companies like FUBU, ECKO Untitled, as well as the popularization of jeweled chains, Timberland boots, and backwards caps as visual tropes of Hip-Hop aesthetic intertwined with the Black ghetto image in popular culture. *Street Language* reflects the slang that arises from Hip-Hop vernacular and disenfranchised urban communities in symbiosis with Hip-Hop— slang terms like “word,” “dope,” emerged as a lexicon of re-purposed and reclaimed words. *Street Entrepreneurialism* reflects the rise of Black business as a result of the commercial successes of the Hip-Hop music as the Rap music industry/product and Graffiti aesthetics becoming mainstream market capital. Finally, KRS-One names a Discipline not mentioned in the original Five: *Beatboxin'*, the act of creating a rhythmic beat using one's mouth. *Beatboxin'* facilitates *Rappin'* and *Break Dancin'* alike in the Beatboxers ability emulate music heard on speakers. As these beats are produced by the human body, the Beatboxer makes beats easier to access; increasing the individual's agency in facilitating Hip-Hop moments without amplification technologies or instruments (KRS-One, 2011).

All of these terms are spelled the way they are in what may appear as slang format, however KRS-One argues that Hip-Hop's simplification of the English words to reflect the urban accent of Hip-Hop dialect is Hip-Hop's “reclamation of the

colonial/slave master language” (KRS-One, 2009). As English was thrust upon African slaves as the master’s tongue, Hip-Hop and Rap’s focus on speech-craft and individuality facilitates the repurposing of English nomenclature by African American communities to assert self-worth and self-determination in the post-Civil Rights Era. Similarly, KRS’s insertion of ‘Street’ before his offered Elements is to assert that these cultural and economic developments were derived from a culture spawned from inner-city communities. KRS-One brilliantly summarizes both points of reclaiming a generic phrase and injecting Street vernacular, as well as asserting the ‘cool’ factor of Hip-Hoppers by saying at a lecture “Fruits are Ripe, *WE* are Fresh.”

(KRS-One 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6m0wkns5hy0>)

Hip-Hop Beyond - Project Overview & Goals

Beyond being a quintessentially African American artistic cultural movement comprised of these Elements, Hip-Hop is dubbed “a metaphysical principle that ensures one’s health, love, awareness and wealth through the arts” by old-school Hip-Hop legend and founder of the Temple of Hip-Hop, KRS-One. His assertions build on the principles and Elements originated by Afrika Bambaataa, and broader implications of the Hip-Hop movement. Deconstructing how these Elements have manifested in Hip-Hop through the Rap industry is crucial in understanding the reasoning of this academic venture. I write this thesis with the belief that Hip-Hop, its cultural actors, as well as the attitudes and philosophies it has spawned have had a profound influence on American culture & media, the world’s populace, and many people’s way of life for better or worse. Hip-Hop and the Rap discipline have impacted the lives of many individuals who have gravitated

to the arts, teachings, and iconoclasts of Hip-Hop as they seek creative refuge, role models, and inspiration to find their own way. Who these individuals are, and how they engage in Hip-Hop—this analysis is my primary focus.

The goal of this project is to synthesize my experiences as a Hip-Hop scholar, listener, philosopher, artist, participant observer and event organizer into coherent arguments about Hip-Hop ideology, classifications of participants therein, and the grander implications of Hip-Hop culture as a cultural product. Drawing upon the scholarly writings of Tricia Rose, Jeff Chang, Michael Eric Dyson, Craig Watkins, and Akilah Folami I aim to link historical and sociopolitical realities of African Americans to the plight of Hip-Hoppers of Color in the 20th century. Part of my work will be to see how these realities interact with the Rap industry's relationship with mainstream media and see how that linkage effects subsequent perceptions of Hip-Hop culture at large. By rooting my paper in lyrics and literature, I will make the following arguments.

Rap is a capitalistic market category of Hip-Hop music performed by a category of Hip-Hop artist called *Rappers*. Citing lyrics and artist bios as evidence, I argue that Rappers profit off of tropes of ghetto Black experience they may or may not have lived, and capitalize on the aspirations of the impoverished towards hyper-wealth.

Positive activity in Hip-Hop is championed by a category of Hip-Hop artist called the *Emcee*. Also using lyrical content, I argue that the Emcee embraces Hip-Hop music as "the social awakening of rap into a form combining social protest, musical creation, and cultural expression" and embodies the essential Hip-Hop principles and ideals. (Dyson 2008).

Beyond this dichotomy, I argue that there is a spectrum of participation in the Rap discipline that includes a third layman category of Hip-Hop participant called the Spitter. By presenting the Spitter I argue that by practicing a Hip-Hop Discipline and respecting Hip-Hop principles, anyone regardless of race, class, ability, age or gender can participate in Hip-Hop. By participating in Hip-Hop one amplifies the voices of a silenced class of people—those denied acknowledgement of the depth and positive effects of their cultural product. This is made evident as these three categories of Hip-Hopper, I argue, culminate and gather into idyllic sites of social Hip-Hop musicking called *cyphers* that exist in multiple circumstances of performance, which I derived from Turino's *Music as Social Life*. The positive social behaviors and ideals made tangible in *cypher* circles make the broader *Cypher* philosophy of the interconnectedness of Hip-Hoppers as creative beings.

The Hip-Hop Elements, the principles of the Hip-Hop Cypher made evident by cypher circles, the difference between Hip-Hop and Rap, Emcees, Rappers and the role of the Spitter— by explicating these topics, providing scholarly analysis of historical and lyrical evidence, and sharing ethnographic data I argue that Hip-Hop at its roots is a deep ideology with profound influence on people and media. This ideology includes: an ability to participate at many levels of skill, self-actualization and growth in the practice of Hip-Hop Disciplines, innate human sociality, and democratic communal musicking. These aspects can be executed in a variety of contrasting ways to promote activities both destructive and constructive. I assert in practice that Hip-Hop's Elements are Disciplines, with *Rappin'/Emceein'* as a Discipline and verbal art form being my primary focus. I will assert Hip-Hop as a way of life and thinking that can be embodied and distinctly performed by defined archetypes in a spectrum of participation, and constructed

presentations of self. I will do so by differentiating the commodified, sensationalized form of Hip-Hopper—the Rapper—that acts in self interest using Hip-Hop as a platform; and the socially active, idealist form of Hip-Hopper—the Emcee—that more often acts in the public interest using Hip-Hop, reflecting Hip-Hop as a mindset and lifestyle of awareness. I will be making this distinction using their lyrical content and presentational attitudes as evidence. For as KRS one would argue “‘Rap is something you do, Hip Hop is something you live” (KRS One 1993 – “Hip-Hop vs. Rap”).’

Literature Review

As mentioned, my analyses and conclusions do not arise without a basis in academic writings by practitioner and scholar alike. As these previous paragraphs may reveal, KRS-One offers much of the base philosophy and opinions of this project with his lyrical content in tandem with his seminal text *The Gospel of Hip-Hop* (2011)—a five-hundred page tome full of Hip-Hop history and philosophy rooted in the celebration of the Hip-Hop arts and the utilization of Hip-Hop attitudes for self improvement and social activism. In tandem with Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, much of my understanding of early Hip-Hop history is based in KRS One’s autobiographical assertions. Based in his Christian values, KRS delineates the ‘proper’ lifestyle and life choices of the ideal Hip-Hopper, often presenting this in deference to God as the name of the *Gospel* reveals early on. However, for my purposes and as a fun experiment, I switched the word ‘God’ out and replaced it with ‘Hip-Hop’ as I was reading and the messages still remained the same based on our shared valuation of Hip-Hop. One could swap Hip-Hop in as a source for an all-encompassing way of being and set of principles resembling the values of the God

character. In the way KRS One speaks about Hip-Hop principles on their own, it rarely acts much differently than that of supposed purposes of the Commandments or other Abrahamic doctrine. KRS One sees Hip-Hop as a set of principles larger than a just culture or genre, positively governing the participant's behaviors and engagement with the outside world through positive psychology and belief that culture and art binds mankind together in a shared struggle. KRS One offers prototypical definitions of the Rapper, more fleshed-out assertions on the Emcee, and the overarching Hip-Hop philosophies that drive my work.

Part of my goal in building off of KRS One primarily is to amplify the legitimacy of Hip-Hop practitioners as commentators on their own culture. While there is a plethora of incredibly in-depth analysis and scholarly writing by scholars on the applications and occurrences of Hip-Hop all over the world, as well as critical analyses of Hip-Hop as market product and cultural phenomenon that I too will be citing—my main interest is on the philosophies and lyrics written by the creatives that have built the culture, primary sources in a sea of critique and academicization.

To this end, RZA's *Tao of Wu* provides another more biographical look into Hip-Hop's origins and its development in the 1970's through the 1990's. Where KRS One's understanding of Hip-Hop is in an Afrocentric-turned-global-culture-of-enlightenment attitude caked in Christian values, RZA's perspective takes that same attitude and stirs Kung-Fu sayings, Taoist tenets, and Five-Percenter Islamic philosophy into the mixture to further argue the universality and intersectionality of Hip-Hop principles. By looking through the eyes of the RZA in his childhood, adolescence, and eventual success with the Wu-Tang Clan as an adult, we follow the journey of a man saved by dedication to Hip-

Hop crafts and principles watching those around him suffer from a lack of discipline and direction in the New York City ghettos. RZA's rags-to-riches narrative in the development of his craft, the similarities of Hip-Hop and Islam in the taking of a new alias to represent one's commitment to an ideology or practice, and RZA's autobiographical recantation of experiences with Hip-Hop and the Rap industry enriched my text with first-hand experiential data.

However, in order to understand and fully engage critically with the moments in time both KRS One and RZA are speaking on, a general overview of Hip-Hop history was required. In order to get this background substance, I read Jeff Chang's (2005) overview of the origins and rise of Hip-Hop culture in *Can't Stop Won't Stop* where he provides background on the art forms that enriched it, the demographics and icons that populated it, and the cities in which it spawned in and eventually thrived. Chang deconstructs Hip-Hop's relationships with urbanity, police brutality, poverty, racial violence, and institutional oppression. Chang's assessment of the conditions that catalyzed creative movement in Hip-Hop to subvert that oppression provides an illuminating scholarly overview of both Hip-Hop's development and African American urban history. *Can't Stop Won't Stop* provides a detailed look into in modern African American history and how events interweave in creating each other through events of violence, local politics and the assertion by White America that urbanity and poverty were synonymous with Black & Hispanic crime. Chang works to establish Hip-Hop as a cultural and political movement of oppressed colored peoples expressing their individual experiences of this oppression through the artistic expressions of individuality, style, and a sense of 'cool' through the Hip-Hop Elements. Chang's focus on Hip-Hop's interaction

with cultural agents and the Hip-Hop citizenry of urban space fed into my discussion of the Emcee in Chapter II and aspects of social musicking as activism in the Chapter III on the Cypher. Chang's overview also gives insight into the inner workings of the Hip-Hop industry and White America's interaction with Hip-Hop culture in the form of the Rap music product—a crucial aspect of my research in Chapter I.

While Chang provides some critical analysis of these dense topics, most of his work goes toward providing a huge overview of Hip-Hop's development from the sound systems of Jamaica, to parks in the Bronx, to the main stage at Madison Square Garden. Tricia Rose's *The Hip-Hop Wars* (2008), deepened my understanding of popular debates surrounding the culture of Hip-Hop: how it is perceived, what effects it may have on communities according to political and social bias who is involved in producing that bias, and how that effects general public perceptions on the genre/culture. Rose addresses the top-ten arguments about Hip-Hop, with five from each side of the debate. From the side of Hip-Hop critics she addresses the arguments "Hip-Hop Causes Violence," "Hip-Hop Reflects Black Dysfunctional Ghetto Culture," "Hip-Hop Hurts Black People," "Hip-Hop is Destroying American Values;" and "Hip-Hop Demeans Women." In each chapter, she attempts to look into the potential truths of each claim while also examining the ways each argument serves a grander political purpose.

Rose acknowledges that there can be claims made for both a positive and negative perception of Hip-Hop as a whole, and this perception differs based on the consumer or social agent propagating their perspective for a grander cause. Rose addresses each of these five arguments with a defensive verve while also acknowledging the truths of each argument. However, her primary problem with many of the critiques of Hip-Hop lies in

the focus on the condemnation and vilification of a particularly marketed version of Hip-Hop and Rap music as representative of black youth reality as a whole. Rather than any focused concern for or effort against alleviating historically engrained systemic factors that inform the rationale behind the perpetuation of common negative behaviors associated with extreme poverty and disenfranchisement, media sensationalizing reigns. *Black Noise* also goes into these assertions, but as it is an earlier work, most of the arguments in *Noise* were modernized and refined in her later texts. Both texts delineate commercial rap as a market category expressing a certain set of capitalistic and problematic values that causes a fraught relationship between Hip-Hop and mainstream media culture. These texts and arguments were crucial for my work in Chapter I on the deconstruction of the Rapper form of Hip-Hopper and analyzing commercial forms of Rap music also argued by KRS-One.

Eric Dyson (2008) is another scholar who has popularly commented on the social applications and philosophies of Hip-Hop, and realities of the Hip-Hop industry. In the *Eric Dyson Reader*, Dyson offers comments on the state of affairs in popular Black cultural product and organization of Hip-Hop. Dyson stands as one of the only mainstream scholars to release a published work delineating the positive interpersonal and psychological effects of the Hip-Hop arts and self-expression through its disciplines. Dyson also presents assertions of Hip-Hop as the natural eventual product of the Civil Rights Era, reviving a revolutionary mindset in Black youth during the Reagan era and into the 90's. Dyson's views on the social applications of Hip-Hop and its promotion of social activism and awareness are crucial to understanding Hip-Hop as a movement beyond a genre of music. Dyson also offers comprehensive definitions of the terms in

Hip-Hop that proved useful in my arguments on defining the Emcee and my theory of the casual Hip-Hop participant Spitter.

Craig Watkins's (2005) *Hip-Hop Matters: Politics Pop Culture, and the Struggle For a Movement* offers an in-depth critical analysis of American pop culture interactions with Hip-Hop culture. Watkins's offers an assessment of Hip-Hop culture's importance in African American communities, the problematic exploitation of Rap music product, and Hip-Hop's interaction with mainstream radio and media. Combined with an intersected perspective on Hip-Hop with contemporary race relations, Watkins argues the title of his book that *Hip-Hop Matters*. In the vortex of opinions on both sides of the coin, Watkins crystallizes that Hip-Hop's effect on society is undeniable in that American society has adapted to and been enriched by a dominant African-American originated culture; often propagating its excess and extremes when not so long ago the emphasis was on its origins in poverty, destitution, and crime. Watkins expresses the two forms of Rap music – conscious Rap and commercial Rap. In this deconstruction of the two attitudes of Hip-Hop, how they came to be, and people's reactions to each, Watkins's assertions assisted me in establishing the two primary categories of my analysis in the Rapper and the Emcee.

In order to understand the important racial aspect of Hip-Hop as it is rooted in predominantly African American male experiences of destitution, oppression, crime in diverse urban communities, and the art comes from ponderings of that chaotic experience; I turned to scholar Akilah Folami (2007) for an insight on sociological Black experience and African American interaction with the media through Hip-Hop. In '*Get Rich or Die Trying': Hip Hop, The Telecommunications Act of 1996, and the Black*

Public Sphere, Folami expands on assertions made by Watkins, using the Telecommunications Act of 1996 as crucial point of deviation for Hip-Hop and the Rap music genre. After the Telecommunications Act of 1996, more ‘conscious’ emcees dedicated to promoting social awareness and political activism participation were sidelined by major music industry players in favor of more capitalistic and problematic artists due to the deal’s stipulations that gave larger purchasing power to corporations. This Act is one of the crucial pieces of evidence when considering the theory of white media moguls purposefully slandering the Black image for political gain—as development projects that displace low-income Black families and local law enforcement practices can be altered based on public perceptions and fear mongering. Folami argues that the purposeful dealing of radio conglomerates with the music industry directly promoted the propagation of negative Rap music in order to defame a struggling class of people that White America stereotypically linked to crime and self-destruction. This reading was crucial in my opening chapter on the Rapper, providing a historical background of public opinion with which to base my analysis.

Beyond researching historical sources and cultural analyses, I am deeply invested in an ethnomusicological approach to studying Hip-Hop, citing Turino’s *Music as Social Life* (2008) for his definitions on presentational and participatory musicking. Turino offers ways to frame instances of musical experience in relation to audience and performer, analyzing the nuances of setting, tone, and practice and the interconnectivity of persons within a performance context. Turino’s analysis of musical events and the social frames within was crucial to analyze the Cypher as Hip-Hop socially manifest. Building off of Turino’s *Music as Social Life*, I present a third category

of musical performance that arises when researching forums of Hip-Hop in the internet community and television.

As I am also deriving theory from musicology, Christopher Small's term of "musicking" appears in this text in order to present a way to easily present the act of 'performing music' in verb form that includes the interconnectivity of other participants [listeners, other rappers, sound engineers, beat-boxers, producers, management etc.].

As I am primarily analyzing Rap as a vocal art form, much of my analysis also comes from the lyrical content of the artists discussed. Among them are Prodigy, Ice-T, Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z as my Rapper representatives; and Nas, Tupac Shakur, Chuck D, KRS-One, Queen Latifah, and Talib Kweli my Emcees. While I am focusing primarily on the content of these lyricists and the implications of their writing as verbal art, I do not have a sonic focus in how those lyrics are presented; however in my Cypher chapter, I draw on Turino to delineate the social and sonic spaces in which lyrics may appear and nuances of presentation and performance.

What is the Spitter?: Rapping, Individuality, and the Accessibility of the Spoken Word

The bulk of this work is based on the archetypes of Hip-Hop and the spectrum of participation within the Rap discipline. But what happens when a listener of Hip-Hop is inspired to go beyond their passive consumption or active analysis and fandom of the art form? What happens when the listener now wants to engage in Hip-Hop and the Rap more explicitly as a participant? Who is the casual Hip-Hopper? And what happens when listener becomes doer? When the listener decides to rap, they become a Spitter.

Hip-Hop music or Rap is unique in its quintessentially spoken nature and its reliance on the individuality of the performer; while some lyrics may be caked in metaphor or melody—the raw verbosity, personal expression, and density of Hip-Hop is unmatched by any genre. Speaking one’s mind and speaking one’s truth are essential to understanding the content and purposes of the Rap discipline. As RZA argues,

The second you pick up a mike, it’s about you. You’re telling people who you are, where you’re from, how you dominate and control with your words.
(RZA, 2009, *The Tao of Wu* pg. 88)

With this infrastructural essentialization of the spoken word as the expression of self by the performer, Hip-Hop music and the act of rapping is an attractive vector for creative engagement with self and surrounding. Rapping as verbal art is a format of crafted speech designed to communicate personhood and experiences via shared language through presentational means. Most human beings have the capacity for some sort of language or organized speech. Eventually, with many words and phrases under one’s belt, there are words in one’s language that share phonetic and syllabic similarity and that can be turned into rhyme. Because of the near universality of the experience of speaking and the utilization of vocabulary, my argument is that anyone who can speak a language can rap; and when one chooses to do so, one becomes a Spitter.

Eric Dyson defines ‘rapping’ as ”the act of speaking poetically and rhythmically over the beat” (Dyson, 2004). However, I would simplify his assertion by saying rapping is the act of speaking rhythmically with rhyme over the beat, as the quality of “poeticism” is more subjective. The tools to write or perform unique Rap verses are engrained within human dependence on and accessibility of language and vocabulary. There is no instrument to pick up and be trained to use, there are no lessons offered in school or by

flyer on a lamppost, there are no compositions or chords to memorize. Rapping and Rap song come directly from one's individual language, vocabulary, experiences, creativity, and one's engagement with rhythm and speech. Whether that is from singing/rapping along to songs or personal writing, a relationship with rhythmic speech is developed. Rapping is distinct from singing however, in that it is based on rhythmic *speech* often devoid of melody. Rapping, and becoming proficient at doing so in writing or freestyling, requires a personal disciplined creativity to link words at the disposal of the individual into a coherent and impressive sequence that can follow a rhythm or beat.

Besides being a vector towards capital gain, community engagement, or artistic recognition, as expressed in the journeys of the Rapper and the Emcee, Rapping can be used for more common purposes in daily life. As playing an instrument, writing songs, journaling or personal poetry can accommodate the sentimental expression of hidden or repressed emotion, the vocalization of opinion, self-love, self-loathing, the pining over dreams or love, the revelry in joy—Rapping can serve these purposes as a form of artistic expression. KRS One quotes Dr. Cornel West to argue the purposes of Hip-Hop are threefold in that,

[Hip-Hop aims to] provide playful entertainment and serious art for the rituals of young people, to forge new ways of escaping social misery, and to explore novel responses for meaning and feeling in a market-driven world (KRS-One, 2011, pg. 82).

However, where Rapping differs from journaling is it's distinctly vocalized and performed nature, often produced with the intent on being shared.

What differentiates a Hip-Hop fan from a Hip-Hopper, or a Hip-Hop listener from a Spitter, is the act of performance and vocalization. A Hip-Hop fan or casual listener consumes the culture, a Hip-Hopper lives the culture. A Hip-Hop fan or casual listener

may write rhymes, but a Spitter may perform them socially or for practice. The Spitter spits, to put it simply. If you rhyme, you rhyme; if you rhyme out loud you *spit*. However, regardless of the potency of fandom or cultural identification with Hip-Hop, regardless of the intent of the rhymes written or freestyled, any individual who participates in Hip-Hop by performing and vocalizing the Rap discipline in any capacity is in my definition, a Spitter.

The Spitter is the layman category of Hip-Hop participant engaging in the Rap discipline in a casual manner. A Spitter is unique in that they have not committed to pursuing Hip-Hop as a distinct artistic dream and engages in it solely for recreation socially or personally. Theoretically, one does not necessarily decide to become a Spitter, as one does not decide to become a Rapper or an Emcee; the reality is conveyed through consistent behavior and engagement with a set of actions. The Spitter may become a Rapper or an Emcee dependent on the effort, content, and agency of the Spitter and whether or not they desire to elevate themselves from hobbyist to artist. As such, one may consider the Spitter the hobbyist form of Hip-Hopper within the Rap discipline, as the Hip-Hopper is one that performs one of the Hip-Hop Elements beyond consuming it. As Hip-Hop is weighted with positive ideologies as well as societal stigma, it is important to give rank or name to those who participate in Hip-Hop and the Rap discipline to give them recognition for their participation, creativity, and open mindedness. The Spitter exists in the shadows of most of this work, but I wanted to establish an understanding for the reader of this layman class that sits amongst the consumers and practitioners analyzed herein.

Positioning Myself in the Project & Introducing the Methodologies

The perspective in this project, and my standpoint in the world, is from a cisgendered, heterosexual, tall, White, and financially well-off Middle-Class male-bodied individual from New York City. I am an American Studies Major at Bard College focused in African American history. I am a Hip-Hop artist practicing the Rap discipline, identifying as an Emcee. I perform at venues and bars in New York City as well as venues at Bard College. I am the co-founder and co-head of Bard's premier Hip-Hop Appreciation and Events Club entitled 'Bard Bars,' in which I organize and perform at events as well as facilitate community engagement with the Hip-Hop arts.

However, Hip-Hop is the premier cultural product of African American oppression, urbanity and poverty in America. While I hail from Hip-Hop's birthplace New York City, albeit in a different and more affluent borough than the Bronx, my early embrace of Hip-Hop was ridiculed by my predominantly White peer network. My peer networks didn't actively expose me to Black musics or Black cultural products. So why and how did I gravitate towards this essentially Black cultural movement while submerged in a sea of White-coded cultural activities? As a heterosexual, cisgendered, tall, White, imposing, Middle-Class individual—I do not experience institutional or systemic racism. So how did I come to the theories and beliefs am I writing about in this project? As a brief overview of my musical tastes overtime will show, and the contexts therein, my eventual commitment to Hip-Hop arose out of a resistance to both familial hegemony of culture in the home initially, as well as a direct rebellion to the dominant White-coded social spheres that surrounded me. Initially, I diverged from the dominant culture in my household, I then embraced otherness when faced with ridicule, but then in

maturity grew to understand the history and committed to the positive ideologies and social awareness that Hip-Hop fosters in my cultural participation and scholarly engagement.

I am the second child of two children, with my brother being the first-born. My mother had me when she was in her 40's, with my father being close to 50. My parents met initially singing Opera in New York City in the late 1970's. They would sing professionally until they decided to have children after their marriage in 1985. When decided on having children, both of my parents quit Opera to work tirelessly in suit-and-tie positions in Midtown Manhattan in order to go beyond just providing for their future children; making sure they were well-off and afloat in the ever-inflating New York economic bubble. They raised my brother after his birth in 1987, planning to have another child. I was later born in 1993 after a few failed attempts. My older brother would grow up being a performer as well with the direct guidance of my parents, first through the Metropolitan Opera's Children's Choir, then with show-tunes, and eventually with Opera in his adulthood.

I say all of that to assert that my parents birthed me during a weary time after a period of emotional hardship in losing potential children as well as raising my emotionally erratic older brother. I also say this to assert that my brother's like-interests dominated the attention of my parents as they sought to develop his talents and involvement. So when it came time to raise me, my parents were not absent but had grown too old to apply all their focus in raising me. My father became too limited in mobility to play sports so became an enabler to my transient interests instead, my mother acted disciplinarian and the 'strict' parent so I rarely connected with her as a child, and

my brother offered little to no mentorship in favor of incessant bullying. My parents had to work; my brother wanted me out of our shared space all the time as the older sibling. I had babysitters until late hours, stayed in after school programs, and found refuge in video games, as well as both comedic and aggressive musics from an early age. With this detachment from my family due to the business my parent's experienced with promotions, increased responsibilities, overtime, and my brother's increase dramatics during puberty—I was pretty much left to raise myself within the confines and safety of a nuclear family: finding my own sources of culture, while distasting show tunes and Opera as signifiers of the hegemony of culture my family had over the home.

Beyond my standard gaggle of boys into video games and being silly as I, my surrogate uncles/aunts became the African American faculty of the after school program at my middle school. They would chat with us, guide us, and often play clean versions of their R&B and Hip-Hop music softly in the room where we played with Legos, learnt to draw comic book characters, did homework, and the like. I remember befriending many more of these faculty and being interested in their lives more so than my fellow students, albeit of course engaging in the revelry and silliness of youth with my constituents. I remember being introduced to Destiny's Child and Mary J. Blige in particular very early on through this network. This exposure guided my interested towards child-ready rap like MC Hammer early on. Also during this period, almost too-perfectly given my eventual chosen art form, my 'favorite song ever' from ages 7-9 was "Play that Funky Music White Boy" by Wild Cherry.

While my first passion was Heavy Metal, the first CD's I would come to own personally and buy with my own money, would be 'All Eyez On Me' by 2Pac, 'Get Rich

or Die Tryin' by 50 Cent and 'The Eminem Show' by Eminem. After years of having the MC Hammer Greatest Hit's album in my CD-Book, given to me by a relative for the song 'Cant Touch This' which made its commercial rounds even in children's media; I eventually made this conscious decision to investigate this 'Rap' music further. I remember 2Pac's album reached out to me as he just looked like the aesthetic definition of a 'rapper' as I knew at the time—gold chain, rings, a cool look on his face while holding up a hand-sign. But as my first real experiences with Hip-Hop experiences beyond Hammer were viewing Eminem and 50 Cent during various MTV programming I watched with my brother's older friends, most notably the famous performance of 'Real Slim Shady' at the Video Music Awards in 2000 – I had to finally get those records.

Before I owned their albums, I always tried to find ways to listen to Eminem through friends and surfing on AOL-based internet browsing—often prevented by Parental Controls that screened for explicit materials. However, when I was 11 years of age my father decided that I could pick and choose the content I consumed, as I was getting older and more curious. Purchased in 2004, these albums would officially start my fandom of Rap, Hip-Hop, and rappers in general. I had only gotten the chance to listen to 'Ambitionz of a Ridah' and 'California Love' when my 2Pac CD disappeared. Whether my mother found it and disposed of it out of fear I will never know, but I managed to preserve my 50 Cent and Eminem albums till this day; all while expanding my Hip-Hop knowledge ever-so-slowly, dipping into The Notorious B.I.G, Wu-Tang Clan, Hieroglyphics and other artists and groups in tandem with my Heavy Metal collection.

My duality of fandom would be reflected in my garb, activities, and presentation. Throughout my teens there were times I would wear a 2Pac t-shirt and Slayer shoes, or a Metallica t-shirt with Eminem blasting in my ear-buds. I have videos of myself freestyling (speaking rhymes from my head) wearing a Megadeth t-shirt; and as I was more into comedy in my youth I would record freestyle tracks of myself rapping in different celebrity impersonations. Nestled between Metal and Hip-Hop I would exist in between two rebellious genres resisting mainstream ‘proper’ White American culture. I would exist in a state of flux, gravitating towards Metal predominantly until I reached high school.

High School would be responsible for the shift towards a predominantly Hip-Hop based sonic appetite, and my interest in performing and recording Hip-Hop. I slowly put the guitar down and lost interest in Metal music and instrument-based music in favor of words and rhyme. The kids who obsessed over Metal at my school were strange characters I didn’t vibe with, the alternative kids were comprised of social cliques and insularity, and while everybody had a relationship with Hip-Hop, as it was the dominant popular culture – nobody recorded or performed it in my school. Hip-Hop reigned over my playlists as I gravitated towards Rap as expression of individuality and rebellion that enriched my creative self even as a reject of the indie-rock dominated social spheres I inhabited. I was always interested and skilled at poetry, and had dabbled in freestyling in the past, but High School is when I buckled down, recorded and released my first project aptly and cringe-worthily named ‘Spectator to a Struggle.’

I released this album under the name P.T.P, a name I had been given in 6th grade as the only kid in my Episcopalian private school that rhymed, originally meaning ‘Peter

the Pimp.’ I stood by this moniker for a little while, and throughout high school I was bullied for this album, and my subsequent projects even as I changed my name to ‘Politically Tuned Poet’ and then ‘Peter the Poet.’ But the teasing and gossip only fueled my push to be an emcee and improve my craft in order to earn respect in the future. When I realized I was more respected for my guitar playing, I slowly stopped that out of spite; just so I could focus on getting better at what pissed off my peers the most. I have concluded that during my youth, I gravitated towards outsider cultures in direct rebellion to my surroundings; a self-sabotaging but pressurized environment that forced me to improve my craft or else my rebellion would go unjustified and without product or positive outcome. When I realized I could express my anger and isolation as well as my individuality and vocabulary, earn the respect of others outside my predominantly White and privileged academic spaces, and I could finally be totally different and individual from my peers by working on this craft and participating in this culture – I was hooked.

Over the next 8 years I went on to release 14 more Hip-Hop projects and the rest is history, bringing me to where I am today. I founded and help lead Bard College’s first Hip-Hop Appreciation, Cypher, and Events Club aimed at diversifying Bard’s predominantly White music scene and entertainment culture in *Bard Bars*; I am a member of an activist Hip-Hop collective aimed at unifying and uplifting people through Hip-Hop music called *Street Trash Panther*; I work regularly as an Audio Technician for predominantly Hip-Hop acts; I have been featured on multiple internet Hip-Hop platforms and blogs; and I have accrued over 40,000 hits on SoundCloud. I have been working 8+ years to get to where I am today. Through bullying, self-inflicted dramas, the tides of life, the transitions of adolescence and adulthood—Hip-Hop gave me direction,

Hip-Hop kept me sane, and Hip-Hop kept me alive. I believe in it's activist roots to resist oppression. I believe in the activity of deconstruction-of-self and environment through rhyme in order to more vividly understand reality and self. I believe in the incredible cultural uniqueness and unprecedented nature of the musical gifts and contributions to mass culture by African Americans inspired by African rhythms, catalyzed by strife, and refined into mass social intelligent movement through the Hip-Hop arts.

Through an immersion into this culture, subsequent production and scholarly engagement, I hope to bring about some sort of amplification of the positive ideologies of the Hip-Hop cultural movement.

Thus, my research position is that of a practitioner making efforts to deepen his understanding of his guiding lifestyle choice in Hip-Hop and the Rap discipline by defining archetypes in Hip-Hop for analysis. I am also a participant observer engaging in ethnographic study of the spaces and artists associated with Hip-Hop. I am a fan and disciple of the Hip-Hop cultural movement attempting to synthesize these positions into scholarly writing, in order to help those with little experience with Hip-Hop understand aspects of Hip-Hop that interest with me through these lenses. I am performing cultural analysis, ethnography, and historic research to meet these goals.

Why am I Writing This?

One purpose of this project is to amplify the academic contributions of Hip-Hop practitioners to Hip-Hop Studies by acknowledging their analyses and memoirs of experience that color our knowledge on the culture they helped create and sustain. The lyrics, testimonies and contributions of famous Hip-Hop artists are too often flown-over

in Hip-Hop Studies in favor of cultural and literary analysis surrounding the artists. By citing KRS-One and the RZA, and analyzing the lyrical content of artists, I assert that studying Hip-Hop requires the voices of Hip-Hoppers to be present.

Another goal is to offer a provisional taxonomy of Hip-Hop archetypes in order to help the reader understand the ways in which different attitudes of Hip-Hopper manifest in the Rap discipline. The Spitter, the Rapper, and the Emcee categories are efforts to provisionally delineate the spectrum of participation in the Rap discipline in the context of the broader Hip-Hop cultural movement and market of Hip-Hop music product.

In order to provide an example of where these archetypes converge, I offer a series of Cypher formats based on Turino's theories on social music in order to analyze the structure of artist presentations within and community utilizations of social performance of the Rap discipline. Within this analysis, a positive philosophy of social order and symbiotic growth emerges from the phenomenological realities of Cypher experiences. I am also addressing gaps in academia specifically on the subject of the Cypher, where the word itself rarely appears in text and the concept is never explained in-depth.

Finally, an overarching goal I have in this project is to assert the magnitude of importance that Hip-Hop has in mass culture and in the lives of listeners and practitioners alike in offering aspirational figures and lifestyle doctrines; as well as assert Hip-Hop's crucial relationship with perceptions of Black culture and arts. I also assert that Hip-Hop has the capacity to influence behavior for better or worse, educate the listener, speak truth to power, and provide a meaningful channel for creative and emotional expression through spoken verbal art.

Chapter I: The Rapper & Rap as a Market Category

Instead of broadcasting how we smoke them trees
 On the radio we need to hear more local emcees.
 Where you at? C'mon where you at?
 This is the difference between emceeing and rap:
 Rappers spit rhymes that are mostly illegal
 Emcees spit rhymes to uplift their people
 Peace, Love, Unity, havin' fun
 These are the lyrics of KRS-One
 KRS One – Kanye West's "Classic" (2007)

While Hip-Hop stands as an artistic social movement for social justice and cultural preservation united by artistic pillars of expression in the Four Elements, the manifestation of these disciplines takes different contrasting forms – forming a spectrum of embodiment and participation. With these Chapters I will be focusing on the Rap Discipline as the fundamental representation of Hip-Hop philosophies and activity in material reality and abstract theory. In my analysis, I have identified three distinct archetypes of participation within the Rap Discipline: The Rapper, The Emcee, and the Spitter. These distinct categories stem from definitions put forth by KRS-One in his music of the Rapper and Emcee as two distinct contrasting categories of Hip-Hop performer, as KRS One asserts,

The emcee is a cultural spokesperson. Technically, the emcee is a creation of one's community whereas the rapper is a creation of corporate interests. (KRS-One, 2011)

This argument is the basis for much of my analysis. My conclusions and theories come from my personal analyses of general Hip-Hop media, experiential knowledge as a navigator of the industry and a practitioner of the Hip-Hop Elements. By understanding *who* is responsible for the manifestation of these attitudes of Hip-Hop—their motivations,

character traits, and lifestyles—we can understand the full scope of Hip-Hop participation, the forms Rap music can take, and the individuals responsible for the propagation of Hip-Hop culture and Rap music product. How do these attitudes represent Hip-Hop at large to the populace?

A ‘rapper’ is the professional or occupational title of to someone who produces Hip-Hop content primarily showcasing their proficiency in the Rap discipline and presenting either an honest or artistically embellished narrative of their life and identity; both the Emcee and the Rapper are rappers in the verb sense, but I argue that the Rapper is a Rap Artist and the Emcee is a Hip-Hop artist based on message, vocabulary, personality, and intention. This assertion is based on the assumed paradigm of Hip-Hop as an inherently conscious and socially aware endeavor, and Rap as the sensationalized consumer product form of Black experience. In this way, with the help of Tricia Rose and others, I am distinguishing Rap as a market category, and the Rapper as it’s capitalist actor.

The Rapper, motivated either by coin or megalomania, often latches on to the ignorant and absurd - endorsing a “no-new-friends” insular tribal mentality often accompanied by violent, capitalistic, and misogynist posturing. The Emcee presents a more inherently conscious and self-aware posture – often striving for a grander Hip-Hop purpose of spreading awareness of sociopolitical reality, promoting engagement with community over these issues, or urging listeners to grapple with existential questions in order to improve critical thinking and galvanize self-actualization. The Emcee is the artistic reaction to the original conditions of poverty and oppression, promoting awareness and education within a system aimed at depriving their community of these

tools of resistance. The Emcee acts a keeper of culture, the originator, the party wizard, the scribe, the artist-activist hybrid. The Rapper is the reinterpretation, the vocational form, the seeker of profit through the sensationalizing of Black American experience, and a more stark subversion of the nice & clean façade of the White American narrative through the propagation of hyper-masculine posturing, violent lyrics, criminal inclination, and vulgarity. While the Emcee seeks to dismiss racial stereotypes and empower people through the seeking of and dispersion of knowledge, the Rapper capitalizes on the fears of White America by embodying their racial and class-fueled nightmares with posturing and illicit behavior. I will begin by presenting the first archetype in this duality of these primary essential Hip-Hop essences – the Rapper.

As Hip-Hop developed in the late 1970's and mid-late 1980's, it could be characterized as being dominated by two forms of Rap music – party Rap and political Hip-Hop. Melle Mel, Run-DMC, Whodini, Paris, and Public Enemy, amongst a multitude of others, represent a potent portion of political or 'conscious' Hip-Hop focusing on sociopolitical reality, revolt, lyricism, and vivid narratives of Black struggle—efforts that would inspire later artists that that would collectively contribute to the Emcee argument. Earlier emcees like Kurtis Blow, the Sugarhill Gang and others pioneered the proto-Rap dominated by the disco sound of the 70's that promoted partying, self-reverence, and sexual innuendo. Out of this sound arose artists like Kool Moe Dee and Big Daddy Kane, icons that began to form the archetypal essence of the 'Rapper' (Chang 2005). With emphasis' on the presentation of self, gold chains as status symbol, delusions of power and grandeur founded on material ownership, the seducing of female fans made easy thus, the bragging on lyrical ability, and the demeaning of

competing artists in the music business—the prototypical form of the Rapper figure had been given foundation and it's various forms would mirror this initial precedent formula. These Rappers would largely be largely more 'PG' than their inspired from 2000's and onward.

The Rapper is an ever-developing essence based on this posturing of wealth, status, and capability. As Rap music becomes a possible source and fame/notoriety for artists moving into the late 80's as Rap music is legitimated by radio and music television, the Rapper becomes a reinvention of the Hip-Hop Emcee with distinct marketing purposes based on fun, shock, and ego (Ide 2013). While the Emcee and the Rapper differ in lifestyle and philosophy, the Rapper and the Emcee share the objective to pad their purse if fortunate enough to be paid for their skills, as any artisan would like to be compensated for their efforts. However, the contrast lies within the presentations and motives that earn that capital, as Rappers are producers of Rap as commodified and constructed media product.

Moving forward, I will be using evidence from scholarly literature as well as lyrics from Hip-Hop songs to argue the distinctions of the Rapper category. But I want to emphasize that the Rapper category is my own theory, and part of my intended contribution to Hip-Hop Studies.

As Tricia Rose and Eric Dyson also argue in their analyses of Rap music product, the Rapper aims to attain levels of fame or notoriety through the projection of a brand or public personality that often propagates a profitable aesthetic or set of behaviors dictated by popular trends in Rap music and media as shocking, provocative, absurd, or humorous. The Rapper is often observed making a point to wear specific high-cost luxury

brands like Rolex (frequently mentioned in almost all modern Rap music, but most recently boasted by Meek Mill in his beef with Drake), Gucci, and Louis Vuitton (paraded by artists like Yung Thug and Rich Homie Quan). The Rapper may also wear high-cost streetwear brands like BAPE (often associated with Kid Cudi), Supreme (known to be worn by Drake, Young Metro, Bun B), and Air-Jordan – arguably the largest brand in the Hip-Hop aesthetic hype machine. The Rapper can also be observed writing lyrics about expensive automobiles like Rolls Royce, Lamborghinis, Ferraris, and Mercedes as well as liquors like Hennessy (now partly owned by Nasir Jones aka Nas), Ciroc (now partly owned by Bad Boy Records founder Puff Daddy) and Grey Goose.

A quick sift through YouTube when searching these artists, and one can observe that all of these brands and products are then flaunted in music videos often in tandem being photographed or recorded in intimate proximity to members of the opposite sex. This is all enacted for the purpose of bragging about the grandiose, ecstatic nature of the Rapper's purchases and lifestyle in their music and public presentation of personal life. Combined with a rag-to-riches narrative that sensationalizes the grandeur further, activities of the Rapper can earn financial backing for tours and business ventures from these aforementioned sponsors. Association with luxury brands earns notoriety and spectacle audiences beyond the musical ones, provides aspiration to those with little in material terms, and further develops the narrative associated with the chosen moniker of the individual. In this way, the Rapper is a constructed identity based in a origin of rags-to-riches narrative that relies on a set of larger-than-life behaviors as well as aesthetic and musical trends to persist and remain marketable to the media and audiences surrounding the artist, but also profitable thus to both the marketed and the marketer.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that all actions by the Rapper are solely for profit; there is creative value to these individuals as human beings expressing themselves. There is of course the possibility that these presentations may be genuine expressions of ecstasy in success and not just market-constructed egoist facades or megalomania. Rappers and their personas may be more positive projections of a super-self in order to represent a self-aspiration or progress that has been made possible by music originated in historical oppression and destitution of African Americans—as per the purpose of Hip-Hop Disciplines as expressions of agency. But given Rap’s development as a huge media market and the nature of celebrity it is not unfounded to theorize Rap posturing as a reality embellished into an act for profit.

Either way, underlining all of this posturing, whether it be a genuine expression of self or a purposeful construction, is the assertion by the Rapper that the Rapper is ‘the realest.’ This implies that the lifestyle and behaviors of the Rapper are the closest one can get to the genuine experience of a rag-to-riches Hip-Hop entertainer exchanging criminality for celebrity through musical endeavor, or the upgrading of that previous criminality through the access that accompanies status. In regards to the aspect of criminality and bombast in the essence of the Rapper, other behaviors that gain attention or shock-value and feature prominently in lyrical content include the glamorization of violence, objectification and hyper-sexualization of women, and the promotion of capitalistic illegal tendencies including robbery, drug-sales, drug-use, and weapon ownership often associated with criminal male identity. This all takes place crucially the context of a vivid systematic racial and economic oppression enforced lethally by law

enforcement—the Rapper is tough, relaxed and confident in a state of chaos and indulgence while representing his locality.

Lyrical content is essential to understanding these arguments. Rappers like Prodigy of Mobb Deep, Snoop Dogg, Ice-T, Jay-Z, and more recently Drake and Rick Ross exemplify this fearless, cool, collected façade in a life narrative of violence, substance use, or self-aware use of braggadocio for gain. Whether it is an act or posture, or a representation of legitimate lifestyle, there is a universal code of being “real” in the face of those who “pose” or hide their real selves and present falsely. The celebration of illicit behavior and raw feelings is an effort to be transparent, while in some cases it may also be for show.

Ice-T lyrically expresses the chaos of the Rapper lifestyle in Los Angeles often accompanied by problems with women as a ‘player,’ issues with law enforcement, and the dramas of a pseudo-criminal lifestyle in his song “99 Problems.” Ice-T spits “*I’ve got 99 problems, but a bitch ain’t one*” to reflect that reality. Here we have a misogynistic undertone accompanying the braggadocio of an illicit, chaotic lifestyle in stating that he has tons of problems to face as a person of color, and a derogatorily referred-to woman to distract him or annoy him “*ain’t one*.” This speaks to the Rapper resistance to acknowledging deeper substantial relationships with women, relegating them to a choice or annoyance.

New York’s Prodigy of Mobb Deep echoes the sentiments of a negative outlook on ‘posers’ that pretend to be more pronounced in their debauchery or power than they are in reality in the song “*Shook Ones Pt.2*” saying “*For all of those who wanna profile and pose/Rock you in your face, stab your brain with your nose bone*.” Prodigy states

clearly that claiming to be involved in criminality or urban areas one is not actual engrained in is deserving of physical punishment—a violent policing of ‘real’ in lyric, with perhaps an untold real life engagement behind it.

Snoop Dogg projects the other side of this realness and transparency. In between songs of violent altercation and identification with Long Beach California street life, Snoop Dogg revels in "*Gin and Juice*," focusing on the social revelry and indulgence that comes with being a Rapper with a supportive squad. Snoop can be seen "*Rollin' down the street, smokin' indo, sippin' on gin an juice/Laid back/with [his] mind on [his] money and [his] money on [his] mind*" clearly stating his desire to take a break from the chaos of illegal connections in favor of focusing on the goals at hand—to relax, to enjoy one’s gains, and to look forward to the further chase and accrument of capital. I want to suggest that these three Rapper examples conform to a sub-category of Rap persona called the “gangster” popularized in the 1990’s. The ‘gangster’ can be identified as associating with criminality and violence in their communities, but their catalogue would also often show an emphasis on recreation with their social circle, in the words of Snoop Dogg, “smoking indo” amongst other activities. This period of the ‘gangster’ is also a time in which the Rapper’s lyrical content matched up more with the actuality of their origins and lifestyle before eventual fame – something that fades as the Rap industry developed in the 2000’s.

Miami’s Rick Ross exemplifies the Rapper archetype in what I would consider the purest sense. Rick Ross potently represents a subcategory of Rapper called “the boss.” The boss is often a heavy-set Rapper that presents lyrically as leading organized criminal activity, a claim substantiated by the presentation of toughness and the actuality

of physical size. The boss may over-compensate for his weight by emphasizing his sexual capabilities and access, affluence, and access to luxury goods. However, like many modern Rappers, the boss often does not come from the life he claims to be leading and has taken up the narrative as an adopted attitude that would assist in substantiating presentations as a Rapper and catalyzing capital gain; all while claiming to be ‘the realest.’ Humorously, in the case of Rick Ross, he used to be a correctional officer in Florida—coming from the same law enforcement he claims to resist and evade criminally. Out of the numerous examples of this ‘boss’ mentality in Ross’s catalogue, this line from ‘*Hold Me Back*’ stands out.

*Fabricate 'bout your fortune, all my fabric's imported
Fornicate in my fortress, 40K still my mortgage
24K my toilet, all my taxes reported.*

In this symbolically dense lyric, Rick Ross states the doctrine of ‘real’ in accusing competitors of fabricating the reality of their wealth, brags on his access to luxury goods in exotic fabrics, claims access to sexual activity in an impressive homestead with an expensive mortgage, the toilet he uses is 24-karat solid gold, and *yet* he is a tax-paying citizen like the rest of us. In this way, Rick Ross presents a potent albeit somewhat paradoxical example of the Rapper archetype in modern Rap music from the mid 2000’s to the 2010’s: full of braggadocio, yet complicit with the law at the end of the day. This decade is period where the Rapper attitude, especially ‘the boss,’ has crystalized in the mainstream largely because of artists like Rick Ross, Drake, and Lil Wayne.

Canadian Rapper Drake, modern Rap’s most monetarily successful and Billboard-topping artist at the time of writing in the 2010’s, has exemplified most of the behaviors and attitudes of the Rapper as he has developed into a multi-platinum selling artist. With

songs like “*Started From the Bottom*” that playfully brag on his affluence and meteoric rise, to songs like “*0 to 100*” that offer a more aggressive posture when it comes to the fabric of his clique, Drake is a great example of an artist formally known as a more sensitive singer-type that profited from the Rapper presentation. Drake has reached new levels of success by drawing upon attitudes of both ‘the boss’ and ‘the gangster’ in emphasizing his wealth, locality, frequent relationships with women, and large social clique like in his featured lyrics for ‘*Maybe She Will*’ by Lil Wayne:

*Do it for the realest niggas in the fuckin’ game right now [she will]
Maybe for the money and the power and the fame right now [she will]*

Drake emphasizes ‘the real’ and the potential criminality/toughness of his crew to substantiate his new attitude, but he too, like Ross, did not come from the life he claims—Drake used to be an actor on the Canadian drama series *Degrassi*, living in his mother’s basement for a while and transitioning into music from there with help from his acting money (See *Degrassi-Unscripted*). Drake echoes Rapper sentiments of the pursuit of wealth and representing place of origin by developing Toronto Hip-Hop artists in founding his OVO record label and naming his latest project ‘*Views From the 6*’ referring to Toronto as ‘the 6’ (as it’s primary area codes are 647 and 416). Drake shows a commitment to cash and Canada, shouting out his desire to invest in Toronto’s scene by saying “*All I care about is money and the city that I’m from*” in ‘*I’m On One*’ by DJ Khaled; a track that features the 3 artists I cited as pushing the Rapper agenda most in the 2000’s/2010’s.

Drake and Rick Ross provide us with more contemporary examples of the Rapper, and exemplify another aspect of the Rapper in the hyper-masculine “hustle” mentality of being perpetually in pursuit and acquisition of capital gain, and sexual

opportunity, putting one in positions of boasting that add to the narrative of masculinized hard work and relentless grind, providing further lyrical content.

The Rapper in lyric, attitude, and presentation is a primarily dominant masculine identity. Rap music is often associated with homophobia by the mainstream media and Hip-Hoppers in the industry itself (see critiques of homophobia in Hip-Hop from everyone from Jay-Z, Kanye West, The Game, A\$AP Rocky, T-Pain Common, Macklemore). Amongst many older artists (Busta Rhymes amongst others) and contemporary gangster rap there is a common belief as a Rapper that so-called feminine behaviors like sensitivity and vulnerability are undesirable and femininity as a whole is weakness. A majority-male ‘gang’ or ‘team’ surrounding the Rapper as the epicenter often makes the misogynistic hyper-masculine mentality more concrete; this provides the Rapper a utopic space of reward for their self-destructive or hedonistic behavior based on the consistent social reaffirmation that accompanies a ‘gang’ mentality and the stereotypical masculine trait of seeking pleasure and dominance.

Rappers, while at first a more independent chaotic variable associated with street life (like Snoop, Ice-T, and Prodigy), are now more often associated with or signed by major labels interested in disseminating brutal or shocking images of Black community for profit or Black-owned labels that realize the marketing potential of this stance in music and choose to profit from it (like Rick Ross to Maybach Music Group, and Drake managing his OVO label). Labels do not often influence the lyrical content itself, but profit from this convenient representation of the Black ex-poor by their chosen representatives. While it is important that major labels and large media conglomerates did

indeed give Rap music and unprecedented platform and thus gave a more widespread exposure of a crucial Hip-Hop discipline, it did not come without cost.

Time argued capitalism allowed for "rap music's market strength [to give] its artists permission to say what they pleased." [Coates 2009] Indeed, some argue that one's ability to market a product in a capitalist society is what has allowed rap music to flourish and become as large of an industry as it is today. [Drake 2009] This simplistic view, however, ignores one crucial aspect; the culture has been manipulated by a handful of industry executives for capital gain. (Ide 2013)

The Rapper is the modern market product and fetishization of the Emcee, simplifying the format in order to make Rap music product. Commodified Rap music focuses on similar topics propagated in popular TV and Film—crime, sex, money, and violence. This makes it easier to consume by the general public due to simple vocabulary and cadences combined with sensational and absurd lyrical content and behaviors. Due to the shock value, the simplicity, the rawness of expression of a sensationalized urban Black experience, as Jeff Chang writes, "Rap proved to be the ideal form to commodify the hip-hop culture. It was endlessly novel, reproducible, malleable, and perfectible. Records got shorter, raps more concise, and tailored to pop-song structures" (Chang 2005). With catchy hooks, more common vocabulary, and the literal featuring of pop artists as guests, Rap carved out a niche in the mainstream.

Crucial to this argument about the Rapper recognizing the profitability of ignoring important sociopolitical and racial issues in music and simplifying the formula is a famous lyric by arguably the most recognized name in the contemporary Hip-Hop lexicon: Jay-Z. In his song '*Moment of Clarity*' Jay-Z brags

*If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be, lyrically, Talib Kweli
Truthfully, I wanna rhyme like Common Sense
But I did 5 mill' -- I ain't been rhyming like Common since*

Jay-Z, while simultaneously praising his competition, openly acknowledges that appealing to the market, one that dictates the essentializing of braggadocio in wealth and pseudo-criminal behavior is more profitable. Rappers thus turn their newfound wealth into an alchemical process of turning brutal Black experience in the ghetto, then the possible capitalistic successes beyond, it into commodified entertainment engineered by the industry.

However, entertainment executives are majority white due to historical accesses to education, funding, and networks of hyper-wealth. Examples like LiveNation Entertainment and huge international music labels like Warner Music Group, Universal Music Group, and Sony Music Entertainment are made up of over 90% White executive staff. (See 'Staff' Section of Websites) Companies like Def Jam, a historically Black label, are a rarity in that two of the three executive positions are ran by Black entrepreneurs. Often times, White entertainment executives are producing Black content for the class of people that has the purchasing power to consume its product. Due to racial and class disparity in North America, marketing and content creation is geared towards White consumers, while also providing free visuals/music videos to advertise the product to a larger audience and provide hit-singles for propagation and emanated consumption. Due to this skewed economic reality, it is beneficial for labels and artists to propagate content that is so alien in its imagery/reality (i.e. a wealthy black man surrounded by women, cars, and flashy clothing) and so simple in it's delivery (i.e. Chief Keef, Young Thug, Fetty Wap, etc.) that it can be easily consumed and viewed as entertainment spectacle in its distance from White physical reality in music video media.

While this marketed form of Hip-Hop serves as a vector for profit by record companies pushing the Rapper agenda, it also serves as fodder for further critique and scrutinization of Black arts. Tricia Rose argues that critiques of Hip-Hop arise from the focus on the condemnation and vilification of this particularly marketed version of Hip-Hop and Rap music, rife with malice and vulgarity, as though it is representative of black youth aspiration and Hip-Hop reality as a whole. Rather than any focused concern for or effort against alleviating historically engrained systemic factors that inform the rationale behind the perpetuation of common negative behaviors associated with extreme poverty and disenfranchisement, entertainment is made of embellished narratives of Black experiences of both crime in poverty and the excesses of success. She writes,

Black ghetto gangsta-based sales are the result of marketing manipulation and the reflection not only of specific realities in our poorest black urban communities but also of the exploitation of already-embedded racist fears about black people. (Rose, 2008)

Rose argues that the negative construction of popular perception of Hip-Hop and rap music comes from this *commercial* Hip-Hop. Commercial Hip-Hop, or Rap, perpetuates narratives of violence and capitalistic frivolity contrasted by a context of a socially aware cultural product born in the vulnerable communities experiencing the strife of inner-city life. It is odd that the racially oppressed and economically segregated urban sectors that Rap music stems its escape from are the very places where the legitimacy of the Rapper is derived from. The Rapper simultaneously distances himself symbolically from that reality with bling and glitz and often physically with re-location to cities with celebrity-status lodging. As Tricia Rose and contemporary Hip-Hop will show, the Rapper and the industry backing this archetype have a clear focus on capital over craft. In this way, the Rapper is the Commercial Emcee; with that commerciality

undermining and often erasing a more socially activist propagation. This formula is so clear and prevalent in commercial rap, that gangster-rap originator (albeit more Emcee in his awareness) Raekwon of the Wu-Tang Clan states in the unreleased documentary “Who Killed Hip-Hop,”

Everybody want to be heard, but everybody want to rock Maybachs and shit; I don't really see nobody really coming in really trying to master they art. I just see a bunch of copycats saying what everybody else is saying.
(Raekwon 2007)

The theory of media slander of the Black image for profit by the music industry has larger consequences than a few egocentric artists gaining wealth and enriching the labels. With the fame of these figures and behaviors comes the popular consciousness assigning these constructed personalities as aspirational figures for inner-city youths. And while these negative behaviors may be self-destructive to those who would emulate, so to can some of these images act as aspirational fuel for young entrepreneurs looking for their vector of mobility. Record labels and moguls know it is sexier to promote narratives of rags-to-riches based in drug trafficking and violence than responsible investment and patient work in the labor market; thus profiting from the enticing danger of the former. While an Emcee may promote education and mastering the Rap discipline in craft, the Rapper offers a more impatient route instead—glamorizing a tough attitude and criminal involvement as a fast-cash alternative that could eventually fund those eventual artistic dreams. However, more often than not, in the pursuit of that extravagant wealth through initially illegal means, those dreams can be interrupted due to gang violence or police intervention. As Jay-Z's lyrics acknowledge, and Tricia Rose's analysis affirms, Rappers are given rewards for being provocative. As getting educated, getting a job, working until promotion, building one's estate over time etc. are associated with White American

heteronormative reality and made difficult to obtain by African Americans—let alone near-impossible for the impoverished and the criminal due to income inequality, white privilege, institutional racism, and the prison industrial complex (Halberstam 2011).

The Rapper in Rap music is complicated as one is both a constructed persona of self-aggrandizing bravado but also a storyteller. The successes and ego one touts as a Rapper are the exact opposite conditions compared to their past squalor and struggle within a racist society. The Rapper is problematic in its propagation of excess capitalism, hyper-sexuality, violent tendencies, and ignorance as analogous to ‘cool’—but simultaneously is the product of Black individuals who have escaped historical oppression, environmental desolation and personal austerity. Through their music and funding Rappers are celebrating a new status of wealth, freedom, and influence they have found through those freedoms. Private jets, expensive vehicles, music videos in exotic locations, multitudes of women and sexual partners; all of this reflects a rebellion against past Black experience during slavery, post-Reconstruction oppression, and the contemporary privileged white capitalist patriarchal hegemony that mirrors those conditions.

Angela Davis reflects on this idea, albeit in a different historical and musical context, in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, stating that after centuries of direct sexual exploitation of African women slaves “forced to copulate with [other slave] men... for the sole purpose of producing valuable progeny” Black men and women were able to reclaim their education, mobility and sexuality in post-Reconstruction America. “Emancipation radically transformed their personal lives: (1) there was no longer a proscription on free individual travel; (2) education was now a realizable goal for

individual men and women; (3) sexuality could be explored freely by individuals who now could enter autonomously chosen personal relationships.” (Davis 1998) The scheduled, mechanical sexuality and forced sedentary living of the Black slave experience is the exact opposite of the realities Rap artists are expressing through their capitalistic egoist behaviors. As Blues women of the early 20th century subverted the then-recent brutal conditions of slavery by owning property, choosing sexual partners, and living lavishly as music celebrities—it is understandable that the male Rapper would exercise the exact same form of rebellion in newfound conditions access and affluence during and after the racial turmoil of late 20th century America. After the destitution and alienation of the Bronx, wrongful indictment of the Central Park Five, the police beating of Rodney King, and subsequent Race riots amongst thousands of other cases—the Rapper stands as a pillar of cultural Black male rebellion through art and monetary success through that rebellion. Freedoms and property earned by predominantly Black men in a State built upon the systematic oppression of Black people.

Rap has its merits in its creation of Black business and entrepreneurship, a subversion of projected White American normalcy, its promotion of self-reverence that could be construed as self love, and its celebration of new-found Black wealth as escape from systematic oppression. However, some of its problems outweigh this heroism and is often implicit in the promotion of self-destructive behavior and ignorance. While the writers I have drawn upon do not distinctly define this category of Hip-Hop artist as I have, including respected scholars such as Tricia Rose, I argue based on the essence of KRS-One’s lyrics and philosophy in *The Gospel of Hip-Hop*, the opinions of the RZA in *The Tao of Wu*, and Tricia Rose’s critical analysis of Rap music product, that the Rapper

is a market category with a formulaic approach to the industry. The Rapper doctrine of 'real' developed from an old-school association of Rappers and legitimate criminal elements and origins in contexts of poverty and urban decay. However, Rappers have come to sometimes contradict the doctrine of 'realness' by pushing a façade that inflates and propagates their presented persona while conflicting with the reality of their origins; all while claiming to be 'the realest.' The Rapper is 'unconscious' in that the musical content they produce and the image they construct often purposefully stays away from the critical analysis of serious topics like socioeconomic realities, sociopolitical realities, and institutional racism—crucial aspects of the Black American experience. Instead assisted by an exploitative Rap industry, the Rapper produces music product essentializing narratives of Black experience that pertain to media tropes in entertainment that include crime, sex, money, and violence for the purpose of career elevation and the pursuit of capital.

Chapter II: The Emcee

The previous chapter delineated the original environmental conditions and the marketing pressures of the Rap industry influencing Hip-Hop artists into commodifying brutal, often Black American experiences, and generally illicit behaviors as mainstream entertainment. I have theorized a definition of the practitioners of the Rap discipline that partake in that production line and cultural exploitation as the archetypal ‘Rapper’ — building off assertions made by KRS One, Tricia Rose, and the opinions of Hip-Hop legends. In this chapter, I will present another theorized category of Hip-Hopper within the Rap discipline called ‘The Emcee’ — expanding upon the terminology already in place, building off assertions made by KRS One, and establishing my own dichotomy of practitioner participation in order to understand the agents at work and the ideals they propagate.

The Emcee is a contrasting category of Rap practitioner that I am presenting based on assertions made by RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan and KRS One. If the Rapper is an actor and profiteer within the Rap discipline for the Rap commercial industrial complex, presenting problematic tropes and behavior for gain, the Emcee can be seen as the antithesis. KRS One defines the art of the Emcee as follows,

Emceein’: The study and application of rhythmic talk, poetry and divine speech. Commonly referred to as rappin or Rap, its practitioners are known as emcees or rappers. I. The emcee is a Hip Hop poet who directs and moves the crowd by rhythmically rhyming in spoken word. The emcee is a cultural spokesperson. Technically, the emcee is a creation of one’s community whereas the rapper is a creation of corporate interests. II. The word emcee comes from the abbreviated form of Master of Ceremonies (M.C.). In its traditional sense, M.C. referred to the hosting of an event—the master of a ceremony or an event. (KRS-One 2011)

Here, KRS reiterates the power and influence of Hip-Hop practitioners by putting forth his belief that rapping is a form of “divine speech.” Building off KRS One’s Christian background that influences his word choice—just as there is a New and Old Testament with both wrathful and loving versions of God, one could orientate the Rapper and Emcee in a similar dichotomy. As the Emcee is the “creation of one’s community” as their respect is earned socially by their ability move, teach, and inspire; the Rapper can also influence the consumer youth with fads, the propagation of negative behaviors, and the dictation of what has social and market capital through Rap media. Both vocalize using the Rap discipline as “divine speech” in its power to influence people’s behaviors and values. However, using this power of influential rhythmic language, the Emcee is primarily responsible for grassroots nudges towards the critical analysis and understanding that Hip-Hop can provide; and quite literally responsible for moving the crowd with “rhythmically rhyming in spoken word.”

In its powerful language and disciplined craft, the Emcee recognizes Rap as a mechanism of Hip-Hop that empowers the disenfranchised to de-construct and understand their lives and surroundings with creativity and drive while subverting oppressive systems through an amplified voice and artistic agency. Hip-Hop music as a cultural product derived from the origin state of destitution and survival reflects the desire to be, to understand, cope, and rebel. As KRS and other Hip-Hoppers argue, Hip-Hop is the ‘hip’ (aware, knowledgeable, savvy) hop (motion); implying that Hip-Hop in its linguistic construction and cultural purpose of artistic knowledge-seeking and knowledge-speaking, is thus inherently *intelligent movement*. The Emcee recognizes that Hip-Hop is derived from the struggles of Black American experience. To the Emcee, the

way to overcome is to create smart art, Hip-Hop, in order to intelligently move through the mire—to subvert unfortunate realities of Black experience through knowledge and practice. In this promotion of productive activity, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of one’s surroundings, community, equality, and truth – the Emcee is the embodiment of Hip-Hop as intelligent movement, operating within the context of the Rap discipline.

However, though KRS One and I may share a definition of the Emcee as a quasi-mystical pillar of positivity and higher consciousness— the Emcee is indeed human and demonstrates the fallacies and emotions commonly experienced. Prominent examples such as Tupac Shakur, Chuck D of Public Enemy, and Nas demonstrate the capacity to rap about more violent or aggressive approaches to life, activism, and music. However, this expression of anger or distaste for enemies or oppressors more akin to the Rapper archetype is in itself is a natural rebellion accompanying repressed Black experience and the environments in which many of these artists were raised. The Emcee resists these environmental conditions more than the Rapper; using narratives of brutal experience for parabolic purposes rather than embracing the negativity.

While the Emcee’s interests do not lie in the amplifying of the negative behaviors, wealth, coarse sexuality, ignorance, or violence that accompany the Rapper stance; the Emcee may present aggressively to appear superior to music industry adversaries or detractors. The Emcee may use violent imagery or metaphorical supernatural violence to express intention to lash out against the perpetuation of oppressive authority, disrespect, or ignorance using skills in lyric; but the Emcee is not characterized as an actor legitimately engaging in violence against peers. More often, the Emcee may use stories of

their own past mistakes or outbursts as lessons or ballads of self-belief to offer the audience as a guide to addressing their own hardships—humility and transparency not for the solidification of stoic ‘realness,’ but as an educational tool.

In the Emcee’s commitment to these ideals, skills, and awareness, the Emcee is a cultural spokesperson, philosopher, teacher, student, poet, activist, and performer all rolled into one. The Emcee in natural progression propagates the ideals of the Hip-Hop movement by practicing and performing their craft in the Rap discipline--staying true to Hip-Hop as intelligent movement. As a usually self-aware, ‘conscious’ practitioner of the Rap discipline—the critical analysis of topics like racial inequality, gender inequality, self-love, ego death, community building, familial respect, and collective political action make up the lyrical content of the Emcee. As such, the Emcee embraces Hip-Hop music "the social awakening of rap into a form combining social protest, musical creation, and cultural expression." (Dyson 2008) KRS delineates the differences in disciplinary attitude and lyrical focus shortly after defining the Emcee (in his estimation) for the reader.

Most emcees rate themselves on their ability to rock a party, speak clearly and/or tell a good story. Emcees seek the mastery of the spoken word. For in the mastering of emceeing we also express our inherent understanding of rhythm, linguistics, physics, mathematics, memory, logical reasoning and high communication skills....The *emcee* expresses through rhyme what is already on your mind, whereas the *rapper* tells you all about his or her self. (KRS-One 2011, pg. 72)

While the Rapper raps from a self-aggrandizing, often the façade of persona makes the expression of sentiment harder to gauge. The Emcee is raw in their presentation of self and life narrative, more capable of pro-social and empathetic content. In the nature of performance and art there is the presentation of alias or persona, but Hip-Hop is a platform for this rawness that amplifies the tale, rather than a distraction from

the genuine substance of the human artist in motion. The Emcee reaches out and asks questions that resonate deep in the minds of the common man, or tells it how it is from their perspective. Either way, the Emcee is committed to the community finding their own way through the music—not committed to prescribe a way of life as the Rapper may in their bravado. This populist performer, philosopher artist definition as such derived from definitions of the emcee or ‘Emceein’ by KRS in *The Gospel of Hip-Hop* provides a good basis to understanding the role and set of skills that encompass the Emcee category of participant in the Rap discipline and Hip-Hop movement at large.

In order to further understand the distinctions between a Rapper and an Emcee, it is fruitful to delve into the lyrics of notable emcees in Hip-Hop to provide a direct lyrical contrast that the reader may use in comparison of these two categories. As I mentioned a few notable artists who may fall under the category of Rapper due to a consistency of behaviors and lyrical expressions and proceeded to present their lyrics as to provide evidence for my claims on Rapper attitudes, I shall do the same for the Emcee.

Emcees we can use for the purposes of this cross-analysis are Queen Latifah, Talib Kweli, Melle Mel, Nas, and most notably 2Pac of the Outlawz and Chuck D of Public Enemy. These artists fall in line with the rubric of characteristics laid out by KRS One and myself that encompass the Emcee category, those artists unafraid “to describe and analyze the social, economic, and political factors that led to [Hip Hop’s] emergence and development: drug addiction, police brutality, teen pregnancy, and various forms of material deprivation” (Dyson 2008). These artists exemplify this aware, contemplative, activist stance within a context of urban depravity, systematic racial oppression, and in Queen Latifah’s case a distinct brand of gender inequality. Similarly to the Rapper

context the universal code of being “real” in the face of those who “pose” is enforce here as well, albeit for different ends. To the Emcee, those who are “keeping it real” are those unafraid to express self-critical analysis on the facts of Black American oppression by predominantly White institutions and police, and overtly critique capitalistic attitudes that breed jealousy and violence. Those who “pose” are those who sugar coat or commodify Black experience as entertainment, glorify capitalistic behavior, and often literally pose for cameras and media. Some of those one may consider “real” are as follows.

2Pac – ‘Changes’ – 1998 & Kendrick Lamar – ‘Alright’ – 2015

2Pac is the quintessential Emcee. He is rebellious, honest, committed to spreading social awareness, and promoting the critical deconstruction of Black American experience and oppression by White government. As an Emcee, 2Pac saw the Rap discipline, its market value, and his skills in combination as his opportunity to educate and relate to the world. In his song ‘Changes’, 2Pac sums up what it means to be an Emcee in three verses, taking up the responsibility of promoting grassroots enlightenment and political/social engagement to the Hip-Hop listener by tackling the pressing issues facing Black America. 2Pac, consistently throughout the song in a rapper-preacher tonality, starts off by engaging with the epidemics of depression, criminality, and hopelessness surrounding impoverished African American males saying

I see no changes, wake up in the morning and I ask myself: ‘Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?’ I’m tired of being poor and, even worse, I’m black. My stomach hurts so I’m looking for a purse to snatch.

Right off the bat, we can see why 2Pac is the quintessential Emcee. No sugar coating, no self-aggrandizing narrative in which this message could be gleaned subtly. The message is right there clear as day, unabashedly honest and poetically delivered. This honesty and

clarity is the Emcee in stride, and echoes sentiments that the Emcee is “created by his community” in that instead of running away from the realities of his people through capital gain, he addresses them head on.

As 2Pac demonstrates, one consistent contrast between the Rapper and the Emcee is that the Emcee is a conscious agent of self-analysis while the Rapper maintains an attitude of showing by unconsciously presenting oneself as a product of conditions. The Emcee would rather show by enumerating the realities of the conditions with fact and feeling. This also presents another contrast between the Emcee and the Rapper that is consistent in most examples—the Emcee is unafraid to show weakness and vulnerability. Instead of hiding contemplative dissatisfaction under a guise of cool anger or calmness in chaos as the Rapper might, the Emcee is raw in admission and presentation of the issues of self and environment.

Further in ‘Changes,’ 2Pac critiques the brutal policing of urban communities and deconstructs the cultural propping-up of law enforcement by saying “*Cops give a damn about a negro. Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero.*” 2Pac then proceeds to delineate the entire narrative of Reagan’s role in the Crack Epidemic and the subsequent fracturing of Black communities by saying,

*Give the crack to the kids: who the hell cares?
One less hungry mouth on the welfare!"
First ship 'em dope and let 'em deal to brothers
Give 'em guns, step back, watch 'em kill each other.*

Already, in half a verse, 2Pac has laid out the psychological effects of Black disenfranchisement, the institution by which that disenfranchisement is enforced, and crack as the most pressing modern development that further concretized the cycle of mass Black incarceration, death, and poverty. 2Pac ends this thread of deconstruction by citing

the last revolutionary period where individuals were vividly addressing Black oppression, and what the outcome of that was, referencing the Black Panthers by saying "*It's time to fight back!*" *that's what Huey said. Two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead.*" In probably the most dense, vivid verse in Hip-Hop history, 2Pac paints a bleak picture of the Black American experience—deprived, beaten, poisoned, and manipulated; with the most potent moments of revolt extinguished by assassinations in the form of Huey Newton, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X amongst the hundreds of Black Panthers hunted down by Hoover's FBI.

However a portion of the Emcee's responsibility is not just to be the reporter, the presenter of fact; the Emcee is also responsible for using Hip-Hop disciplines to present theories for solutions. 2Pac suggests an alternate form of relationships bereft of turmoil and selfishness saying "*I got love for my brother, but we can never go nowhere unless we share with each other.*" 2Pac urges that "*we gotta start making changes*" saying that by learning "*to see [2Pac, people] as a brother instead of two distant strangers*" we can reach a shared ground of understanding and compassion, "*how it's supposed to be*" according to him.

This understanding and compassion comes from shared issues that cross racial divides, because as 2Pac points out "*both Black and White are smoking crack tonight.*" As both races are entrenched in the same problem of substance abuse during the early late 1980's 1990's, there are grounds for a common problem to be collectively addressed as a united people. 2Pac expresses that while there has been deep racial hate, trepidations, and fear of integration between Black and White communities it shows a greater strength to put that aside and grow collectively instead of violent disdain by saying "*the only time we*

chill is when we kill each other It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other." 2Pac expresses that by honestly addressing and being ware of the problems facing America and abroad honestly as a collective people, only then can we attempt to heal. Moreover in the lyrical content and delivery of the song, 2Pac acts as a community organizer, activist, poet, philosopher, reporter, and journalist all at once. This versatility, purpose, and attitude is an essentially Emcee stance—knowledge, awareness, community, and understanding coming together to diagnose the problem and forge a possible solution: an opportunity to move forward.

This Emcee stance of an acknowledgement of the issues, calling on the listener to act, and calling on the lyrical subject to believe that there is a chance to overcome and survive those issues are echoed today in Kendrick Lamar's track off of 2015's *'To Pimp a Butterfly'* titled *'Alright'* in which Kendrick states

*When you know, we been hurt, been down before, nigga
When my pride was low, lookin' at the world like, "where do we go, nigga?"
And we hate Popo, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, nigga
I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak and my gun might blow but we gon' be alright*

*Nigga, we gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
We gon' be alright
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright*

No doubt influenced by 2Pac as a West Coast emcee (and as he frames a post-mortem interview with 2Pac on this album and has acknowledged his influence before) Kendrick acknowledges the extreme pains experienced in African American history that have been vividly brought to light in the age of social media. These pains are derived from intense conflict with Black communities and the police based on race and class, causing the destruction of many Black families by wrongful deaths by shooting and absence by

incarceration. As an ex gang-member from Compton once surrounded by this reality, Kendrick calls upon his memory of the two contrasting tropes of Black survival and coping with oppressed reality – gangs/guns and God. While acknowledging the missteps of oppressed youth moving towards violence, he points out that there will come a point where the oppressed may accept a more dignified road, rise up, and make a change to overcome. Kendrick does not lay out this roadmap distinctly, but he acts as a coach urging his people on – chanting that despite it all, ‘*We gon’ be alright!*’ ‘*Alright*’ ended up befittingly becoming the anthem for the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, with videos of large groups chanting the chorus at protests often going viral. This development stands as an example of Hip-Hop culture and Rap lyrics tangibly impacting social justice activism. Because of this impact and the reality of the lyrics alone as unafraid to educate and inspire action, Kendrick stands as a potent modern-era Emcee.

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five – Melle Mel – ‘The Message’ – 1982

This later in-depth deconstruction and catalyzing of Black awareness in Hip-Hop would not have been possible without Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five’s famous track ‘The Message’ in which Melle Mel’s verse provided a prototypical framework for what the Emcee could be. Interestingly, as the prototypical disco-themed Rappers had proved in this era, ignoring the issues and making ‘party rap’ was more profitable. As such, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five had reservations on recording a "preachy" rap song as a self-titled "party group." However, Melle Mel, the lead rapper of the group, decided to go ahead with the song as he felt it was too important (Watkins 2005). Melle Mel helped to pioneer the aforementioned formulation of Hip-Hop music as “combining social protest, musical creation, and cultural expression,” stated by Dyson (Dyson 2008).

Like 2Pac would later on, Melle Mel paints a bleak picture of urban life that vividly sets the scene and communicates the severity of urban poverty.

Broken glass, everywhere!//People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care./I can't take the smell, can't take the noise./Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice./Rats in the front room, roaches in the back./Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat./I tried to get away but I couldn't get far./Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car!

While presented in a synth-heavy 80's airy-stroll of an instrumental, Melle Mel presents the very concrete and real feelings and conditions of many living in conditions of urban poverty in the 1980's—there is little to no literal and figurative mobility, and no escape from the crime that arises from disenfranchisement. Beyond that, similarly to 2Pac's verse, there is an admission of psychological vulnerability and distress due to the sheer severity of these conditions.

*Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge/I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes/Makes me wonder how I keep from going under*

Those who live in these conditions do so because there is no alternative, they do so to survive no matter the repercussions on oneself or one's community. The Emcee, by enumerating these raw experiences and missteps, acts as a reporter and teacher presenting the facts of the matter to the listener and asking them to ask themselves whether this seems comfortable or acceptable to them.

Talib Kweli – 'Get By' - 2002

Talib Kweli is a staunch Black activist and Hip-Hop solo artist, as well as a member of the duo Black Star with Mos Def aka Yasiin Bey. Talib Kweli's hit solo song 'Get By' speaks to his plight and title of the song as it relates to urban Black experience;

further expressing the conditions of the Black impoverished and working class as they ‘Get By’ and asking the listener to react and contemplate.

*We sell crack to our own out the back of our homes
We smell the musk of the dusk in the crack of the dawn
We go through episodes too, like Attack of the Clones
Work till we break our back and you hear the crack of the bone
We're gonna get by, just to get by
Just to get by, just to get by*

Is it right for communities to accept this reality? Should people be just “getting by” and accepting circumstance or should they actively resist? By stating the facts, the Emcee Talib Kweli asks these questions without a question mark. By critiquing the culture that stands in opposition to the pursuit of knowledge and revolt against systemic racism and poverty, Talib Kweli further stokes the mind to realize what has been distracting the people from the issues. Throughout the song we see a direct attack against the Rapper culture of music and behavior as a means to distract from the issues facing society—with the presentation of intoxicants and the myth of a stress-free party lifestyle directly promoted by those of the Rapper archetype feeding into apathy.

*We keeping it gangster say fo shizzle, fo sheezy and staying crunk
It's easy to pull a breezy, smoke trees and stay drunk
Yo, I need activism - attacking the system
The Blacks and Latins in prison
Numbers have risen, they're victims; lacking the vision
Shit and all they got is rapping to listen to.*

Talib Kweli critiques the main ethos of the Rapper archetype, and indicates that if all Black and Latino prisoners who get trapped by the system have to listen to is Hip-Hop music, then why use the genre they love to propagate the same behaviors that got them behind bars in the first place. Talib deconstructs the vicious cycle, speaks truth to power, and asks questions that inspire action without asking them. Although it is usually clear

what alternatives and opinions the Emcee has on the issues, by stating the realities in a creative framework that can promote memorization and re-playability; the messages instill agency in the listener to take these facts and ideas and alchemically produce activism or critical thought from the art. The ability to do so poetically as 2Pac, Melle Mel, and Talib Kweli all do in these tracks is an essential Emcee quality.

Public Enemy – Chuck D – ‘Fight The Power’ – 1989 & Nas – ‘I Can’ - 2002

Another essence of the Emcee that delineates their sense of responsibility as cultural ambassadors, teachers, and reporters is the more straightforward brand of promoting awareness and activism. Instead of a poetic inception of ideological revolution or progress in common thought, this form of Emcee activism is blunt with a commanding tone that inspires the listener to self-actualize and act. Instead of suggestion, the message is directly in the face of listener as to beckon them to act in immediacy with facts littered throughout the verse as the gasoline for this mind spark of activism and productive behavior to come. I attribute this form of Emcee and Hip-Hop activism primarily to Chuck D of Public Enemy who pioneered this unapologetic sound. I urge the reader, if they are interested in true revolutionary Afro-centric Hip-Hop to commit a week to listening to Public Enemy and then tell me if you don't want to grab a dashiki and beret and go marching regardless of your skin tone.

On *‘Fight the Power’* off the potently titled album *‘Fear of a Black Planet’* Chuck D yells in a cacophony of synths and drum machine accents *“Fight the power! We've got to fight the powers that be!”* directly urging the listener to toss away any acceptance of their current circumstances of oppression or disenfranchisement and take direct action against those conditions by fighting against systemic racism and corruption. In fact, the

music video for this song is in itself a Black Power, Neo-Black Panther march/parade with Afro-centric regalia and colors through Brooklyn populated by hundreds of African American youths from the surrounding communities. With pictures of Malcolm X, Dr. King, Jackie Robinson, and other Black icons, Public Enemy is sending a clear message of resistance and united community action against systemic racism through the organization and unity of Black communities previously fractured by the crack epidemic and police brutality legitimized by the State. In the title of the album, and the chorus of the track, Chuck D is calling on his people to act; knowing that the thing America's government fears most is a unified Black populace together in resistance. Activism, community organization, community action, and artistic engagement and collaboration with community are all exemplified here and crucial aspects of the Emcee.

On the other side of this call-to-action flavor of Emcee endeavor is an example from Nas's track '*I Can*'—a direct retort to White racism and media stereotypes suggesting Black communities are incapable of certain achievements or status and are trapped in a ghettoized, feared existence perpetually even when escaping financially. Nas promotes dignity and hope in this song, speaking directly to youths not yet mired by societal assumptions that have the chance to rise above the negative psychologies and media tropes fed to them. Nas speaks directly opposite to the fast-money criminality of the Rapper archetype by promoting self-belief and discipline as keys to conquering a system that has historically excluded them. Nas calls to Black youths imploring

*Be, B-Boys and girls, listen up
 You can be anything in the world, in God we trust
 An architect, doctor, maybe an actress
 But nothing comes easy, it takes much practice*

Instead of Nas attempting to trigger revolutionary activism with his lyrics, Nas promotes revolutionary thinking in the context of the Black impoverished. By amplifying the possibility of dreams and success to those with little aspiration due to the decay of their environment, Nas promotes a psychological revolution of self-belief, another essential aspect of the Emcee.

Queen Latifah – ‘U.N.I.T.Y’ -

Besides activism in the context of Black American poverty and urban decay, the Emcee can address all sorts of topics that require awareness and action at the discretion of the listener. In the case of Queen Latifah, she is a female Emcee promoting not-only African American dignity, resilience, and agency but also shining a light on the unfair treatment of her personally, and particularly of women in communities of color. In her song ‘U.N.I.T.Y’ she promotes a dialogue of respect between men and women, focusing on the abuses of men towards her in daily life as an opportunity to normalize discussions on sexual harassment between the genders. Her goal by speaking out creatively is to empower women to resist harassment and see ways out of toxic relationships. This stance speaks to the intersectionality and importance of the Emcee as a cultural ambassador, teacher, reporter, journalist, and activist for all sorts of issues effecting people.

Queen Latifah begins by making a stance against one of the key missteps by men in reference to women, the use of the word “bitch” and “ho.” Queen Latifah expresses that “*Instinct lead [her] to another flow / Every time [she] hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho/trying to make a sister feel low*” in that she gets angry when she hears her fellow woman referred to with derogatory slurs. Like other Emcees, Queen Latifah shows that she is not just an all-talk activist, but has had legitimate altercations and experiences

that have led her to feel this way. After being called a bitch by a cat-caller in the park she “*punched him dead in his eye. And said, ‘Who you calling a bitch?’*” She expresses that the use of bitch and harassing women “*gots to go*” because it devalues the strong women that support communities and often provide affection to troubled, abusive, men. Again, speaking from experience Queen Latifah defiantly states

*I hit the bottom, there ain't nowhere else to go but up
Bad days at work give you an attitude and you erupt
And take it out on me but that's about enough
You put your hands on me again I'll put your ass in handcuffs
I guess I fell so deep in love I grew dependency
I was too blind to see just how it was affecting me*

Queen Latifah is aware that the situation with her man was dire, and that she put up with it because she thought she knew what love was in the moment. But she then recognizes that she has the power to resist with the help of the law and her own willpower. She tells the listener with her lyrics and defiance that this horrible relationship in her life is just a jump off point for more learning and growth, that mistakes are opportunities to do right by oneself. Just like 2Pac’s experiences as a troubled African American male provided him with the tools to teach others, just as Talib Kweli’s experiences growing up in Brooklyn equip him to teach by example, Queen Latifah’s experiences with domestic abuse and public harassment teach the listener a variety of lessons. The male listener heeds that he should treat women with kindness, as his catcalling or abuses are heinous; the female listener hears that there is hope, a way to empower oneself and escape harm. And as Queen Latifah succinctly states in good advice—“*A man don't really love you if he hits ya.*”

While the male Rapper would distance themselves from effeminate feeling or the praise of the resiliency and strength of females in patriarchal society dominated by misogynistic music genres, as this would compromise their independent hyper-masculine posturing, the male Emcee is unafraid to praise femininity and the strength of mothers and women in general. As misogyny and the objectification of women is the commonplace behavior in the marketed form of Hip-Hop, respect and praise for females is a form of activism in Hip-Hop as it goes against the stereotypes and grain Rap music product. Talib Kweli expresses this succinctly in ‘*Get By*’ by praising his grandmother’s independence and determination to provide and care for her children by rhyming

*Mi abuela raised three daughters all by herself with no help
I think about her struggle and I find the strength in myself.*

Talib Kweli has no problem comparing his own strength to that of a woman, praising the sacrifices and considerations of motherhood.

2Pac also echoes Queen Latifah’s empowerment of women by offering the advice on ‘*Keep Ya Head Up*’

*And when he tells you ain't nothin', don't believe him
And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him
... I know you're fed up ladies, but keep your head up*

2Pac recognizes the struggles of women of color in impoverished communities, as he understands the intersectionality of African American male poverty and lack of opportunity with abuse and depression. Compounded by skewed notions of relationships propagated by Rap market product, this leads to a vicious cycle of objectification and abuse on women by men not given a chance to feel emotion and progress in society. Similarly with his track ‘*Dear Mama*’ he recognizes that the troubles of crime, incarceration, and substance abuse also effect women of color in urban communities

when he says “*even when you was a crack fiend, mama; you always were a black queen, mama.*” With these songs, Talib Kweli and 2Pac reject the stereotype of male Rap art and Hip-Hop music as inherently misogynistic or patriarchal. Many Hip-Hop artists were raised by single or widowed women, but only a certain kind of Hip-Hop artist goes out of his way to recognize the strength in femininity and motherhood in masculinized environments of poverty, violence and crime.

Lyrical evidence provides potent examples that concretize Emcee and Rapper distinctions by exemplifying the attitudes of each artist and their artistic goals within. The content starkly contrasts, and the messages are clearly different shades of Hip-Hop. Dyson and KRS One provide a scholarly groundwork for who the Emcee may be and what Hip-Hop can accomplish through a socially aware and activist practitioner; but the lyrics speak for themselves in terms of the Rap disciplines power to use language as a tool for teaching, inspiring, community and civic engagement, and the inception critical thought in the listener. These principles are essential to understanding Hip-Hop and the role of the Emcee

**Chapter III:
The Cypher - Hip-Hop Socially Manifest**

Nature centres into balls,
And her proud ephemerals,
Fast to surface and outside,
Scan the profile of the sphere;
Knew they what that signified,
A new genesis were here.

Ralph Waldo Emerson - "Circles" (1841)

September 25th, 2015.

Students, friends, rappers, emcees, photographers, spectators; sporty aesthetics, girly aesthetics, artist aesthetics, street aesthetics, high-fashion, Old Navy, J-Crew, Bard College; shorts, pants, denim, tights, old sweaters, jackets, sneakers, dress shoes, boots, leather, patterns; tall, short, medium, athletic, skinny, husky; African American, Latin American, White American, Indian, Jewish; twenty unique humans stand in a circle and give their attention the individual holding the microphone. This outside space is usually bereft of a context in which all of these minds and bodies would gather - some were called upon to gather prior; others heard a beat, they heard rhyming, they heard laughter, they saw smiles and appreciation - they deviated from their itinerary to join the circle, this liminal space of safety and temporary family. Magnetized by the innate human desire to be social, to experience something new, they joined the participatory and supportive space of social musicking and communal love. When moved, individuals are welcomed to spit a bar, introduce themselves, and share a piece of themselves and their identity unto the circle. No matter the skill-level, no matter the content, no matter the person, all

receive applause and a vocal expression of affirmation. This is Hip-Hop. This is the Cypher.

The purpose of this chapter is to engage with a gap in scholarship concerning the Hip-Hop Cypher, and explore Hip-Hop cypher circles as where the aforementioned archetypes of the Spitter, Rapper, and Emcee converge in social performance of the Rap discipline; by approaching cyphers ethnographically as a participant observer and analytically as a critically thinking scholar and consumer I hope to address this gap. I identify three distinct forms of cyphers in an effort of crafting a path to arguing the higher principles of participatory cyphers born out of a history of Black destitution and survival, and exemplifying positive human behaviors.

While there are indeed articles sprinkled through the internet matrix of academic journals, I have ascertained that there is a gap in public scholarship about the higher principles observed in the Hip-Hop Cypher and the formats of event-based cyphers. While there has been general discourse of the Hip-Hop Cypher at the basic level of social reporting and cultural critique, there is not a widely published ethnographic report on the structures and purpose of the Hip-Hop Cypher. Even in the entirety of KRS-One's *Gospel of Hip-Hop* – the self-proclaimed seminal tome of Hip-Hop knowledge, philosophy, and learning – the word 'cypher' appears *once* in passing and with the spelling 'cipher.' KRS describes the 'cipher' as "a circle" where KRS 'philosophizes' and rhymes with his constituents. In the *Tao of Wu* RZA defines the cypher using the same spelling 'cipher' as a circle in the exact same vein of simplicity as KRS's definition. As essential Hip-Hoppers and my primary sources, this is notable. However, Hip-Hop at large usually refers to the cypher in the 'cy-' spelling, and expands the cypher's central role in the

growth of a Hip-Hop artist in their freestyling skills, performance courage, and network building. The omission of a rudimentary description of these aspects of the cypher by my primary sources and scholarly sources alike, also bereft of something close to the grander philosophical or symbolic analysis I am offering, speaks to this gap of scholarship further. Similarly, neither Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* or her *Hip-Hop Wars* text contains the word cypher in either spelling throughout the text.

In the academic realm, Tricia Rose, Jeff Chang, Michael Dyson, and others serve an important purpose as learned cultural commentators on the broader Hip-Hop movement. Within their historical overviews, each unanimously expresses the important sociality and communal aspect of the Hip-Hop Cypher as an artistic outlet for disenfranchised Black youths engaging in lyrical and breakdancing battles to solve conflict or to express themselves artistically sans confrontation. However their analyses of the Hip-Hop Cypher stay in this historical and sociopolitical realm, without approaching it ethnographically and analyzing it in a broader sense of Hip-Hop philosophy and the marketing of Hip-Hop music. In this chapter I present myself as a participant-observer of Hip-Hop experience in the context of Hip-Hop cyphers as a physical musicking experience that have lead me to notions of the Hip-Hop Cypher as a broader ideology within the Hip-Hop movement.

The Hip-Hop Cypher is one of the key pillars of Hip-Hop experience and the day-to-day of the Emcee and the Hip-Hopper. The Hip-Hop cypher circle that manifests the Cypher is an organized or spontaneous liminal space between reality and art where the discipline of Rap is honed and practiced through freestyle 'off-the-dome' rhyming, written vignettes spat without the context of the origin song, and the open work-shopping

of written pieces within a circle of participants and spectators engaging in this shared musical experience. Rapping, rhythmic vocal performance with rhyme, is done either accapella or over a Hip-Hop instrumental supplied by portable speaker, smartphone, or the oral talents of a beatboxer – another musical discipline that often operates symbiotically within the Hip-Hop Cypher and the Rap discipline being performed in tandem. Rapping is interchangeable with the word “spitting” - to “spit” is to vocally perform any piece, off-the-dome or written, of poetic or rhythmically spoken language. While there is a cultural emphasis on coming to the cypher to express yourself and spit off-the-dome as to showcase one’s virtuosity and show respect to the original culture that existed before the note-pad or iPhone Note rapper, written rhymes are often employed when one is a stranger to the group in order to establish one’s talent and identity as a Hip-Hopper. Courage to jump in, the trial and error of performance, persistent participation, and conquering any trace of social anxiety or stage fright are inherent in participation in the Hip-Hop Cypher. This pressurized, yet liberating environment leads to grander reinforcements of the individual through this practice. Self-discovery, presentation, constructive critique, practice, persistence, perseverance, community, sociality and expression are all characteristics of the Hip-Hop Cypher, its purpose, and its product.

This chapter uses ethnographic data in my capacity as a participant in the Grind Mode, TeamBackPack cypher formats, as a participant and orchestrator of Bard Bars cypher series, in tandem with analytical data as a Hip-Hop consumer of the BET Cypher series’. My primary sources of ethnographic data are from TeamBackPack’s Mission Underground 2015 Los Angeles and the Bard Bars Cypher series.

The Bard Bars Cyphers at Bard College are a recent phenomenon. Orchestrated by myself and a few other Hip-Hoppers on campus, our goal has been to bring Hip-Hop and Rap music to the forefront of our arts community. We have been committed to spotlighting Bardian practitioners of the Elements of Hip-Hop, with the Rap discipline in focus, and providing a space for Hip-Hop fans and disciples to engage in the communal revelry of Hip-Hop and create utopic spaces of free expression using the philosophical tenets of Hip-Hop. Our condensed description statement reads as follows:

Our mission is to foster, focus, and formally organize the Hip-Hop community on Campus in order to diversify the music scene at Bard. We primarily operate in the form of a "Cypher"- Hip-Hop's democratic forum of free speech, off-the-dome rhyme, and mutual respect/praise... By instilling awareness and incorporating students of all backgrounds, faiths, ethnicities, and walks of life, we hope to exemplify a model of social and artistic cooperation that inspires camaraderie and community.

Our view of the Hip-Hop Cypher, penned by SPASM founder Ananthan Ajit aka Art Baby and myself, reads:

The cypher is a spot in the universe where every single expression is possible. The cypher is a convergence of narratives locked in a centrifugal cycle, and the frictions of the contradictions of language, identity, consumerism, capitalism, sex, misogyny, drugs, society, money, etc., are investigated lyrically. The identity of the rapper is transparent, transient, and transcendental and the cypher is the experience of that identity. Rap is one of the most important innovations in American poetry from the past 30 years. The cypher is Hip-Hop socially manifest; awareness, self-love and community expressed through the discipline of rapping.

To clarify before you read further, let me notate the linguistic distinction I am making between *the Cypher* and *a cypher*. By forwarding this opinion I am expanding on the arguments of linguistic distinction made by KRS One in *The Gospel of Hip-Hop* that the capitalizing of Hip-Hop vernacular into pronoun forms and honoring the specificities of the vocabulary gives Hip-Hop more power and legitimacy in the realms of academia and cultural intelligentsia. Also, Hip-Hop scholarship by Hip-Hoppers defining the

culture's own terms adds more weight and substance in the face of cultural belittling by the majority White spaces of academia and music publication. Such representations produce sensationalized images of Black poverty and violence that have put Hip-Hop cultural development in a narrow frame of White journalism.

Hip Hop is the creation and development of Breakin, Emceeing, Graffiti Art, Deejaying, Beat Boxin, Street Fashion, Street Language, Street Knowledge, and Street Entrepreneurialism [The Modern Hip-Hop Elements]. It is what we call ourselves, and our activity in the World. Hip Hop is the name of our culture. hip-hop is Rap music product and those things and events associated with Rap music entertainment—hip-hop is a music genre.

(KRS One 2009: pg. 49)

Thus, following KRS One, the Hip-Hop Cyper is the higher unifying principle of practice of the Rap discipline and the interconnectedness of Hip-Hoppers, based on the physical cypher circle as tangible evidence that humans grow by engaging in practice, community, love, and affirmation through social rapping. A Hip-Hop cyper is a derivative physical interpretation of the higher principle that informs the existence of the higher principle. The Cypher concept in capitalization has a particular Hip-Hop coding expressing Hip-Hop as an ideology and way of life rather than *just* a genre or *just* the act of gathering in a circle. The cypher in the lower-case noun form is any circle gathered to engage in the performance of some sort of social art such as *Rappin'* or *Breakin'*. In the history of Hip-Hop culture, the cypher came before the Cypher; for the fact of formation of initial cyphers in distressed communities made the higher principles of the Cypher evident – the Cypher came, as the Hip-Hop adage goes, like “a rose from the concrete.” To this end, in order to understand the Hip-Hop Cypher on a deeper philosophical level, it is essential to engage with the various formats and purposes of *cyphers* as demonstrated in the original context and as they have developed into today's Hip-Hop media. How is

the Hip-Hop Cypher made culturally manifest within cypher contexts? What does it mean that the Cypher can be formatted into consumable media?

Participatory, Presentational, and Performative Cyphers

In my experiential research as organizer of Bard Bars, as participant in both Grind Mode and TeamBackPack events, and critical Hip-Hop consumer of BET Cypher media, I have observed that the Hip-Hop Cypher takes three primary cypher forms – the *participatory*, the *presentational*, and the *performative*. In suggesting these categories I am drawing upon and extending on Thomas Turino’s fields of music as he defines in *Music as Social Life* (2008).

Distinct from the presentational frame, Turino defines ‘*participatory*’ musicking as “music-making as social intercourse and activity among face-to-dace participants; emphasis on doing among all present” where between participants there is “little or no artist-audience distinction, only participants and potential participants; few or no physical barriers or markers distinguishing participants although activities within can vary.” In other words, everyone is doing the act of musicking together. Within this moment of *participatory* musicking “focus is inward among participants is on the act of doing and is in the moment.” Participatory music is social, focused, communal and prioritizes the “maximum sonic, kinesic participation of all present” (Turino 2008, pg. 90).

Distinct from the participatory, Turino defines ‘*presentational*’ musicking as “music as an activity and object created/presented by one group for another group in face-to-face-situations; emphasis on the doing (by the artists) and listening (by the audience).” Unlike the *participatory*, there is a “clear artist-audience distinctions; artists and audience mediated by physical markers such as stages, lights, mics, video cameras,

and screens within a face-to-face situation” where the “focus for musicians is on themselves, the audience and the sound... and the musicians” performing the sound (Turino, 2008: pg. 90). *Presentational music* is in the titling, it is presented and packaged, recorded and displayed, and delivered to an audience in a constructed and orchestrated manner; often accompanied by recording and projection devices. (Turino, 2008: Pg. 59).

However, Turino doesn't account for a '*performative*' class of musicking that I theorize is a hybrid of the two categories delineated above that appear in cypher media and performance. While Turino does distinguish *presentational* musicking as having the “physical markers” of the video camera, stage, or microphone in between audience and performer—I believe there is another layer to be found on top of this that complicates the social media era of the documented everything. Presentational musicking in the cypher context includes live and video productions of live *participatory* musicking presented unto a web-audience in an attempt to document moments of integrity or rawness present more-so in a participatory cypher setting. Beyond just broadening the “presentational”, I think this particular *presentational display of participatory practice* complicates Turino's binary in that there is a grey area where the participatory and the presentational merge—albeit mostly in the context of the Hip-Hop cypher and other jam-based music mediums.

I have called this format '*performative*' musicking where a participatory ritual is presented to an audience either on stage or through recorded means – making it a fusion of participatory and presentational formats. The presentational cypher format is the recorded cypher format, while the performative cypher format is the presentation of a pseudo-participatory moment unto a live audience. I argue the articulation of “performative” in the essence of Judith Butler's distinctions on performativity as

constructed identity, as the performative format is a constructed enacting of a participatory ideal in a presentational format in order to package and deliver an idyllic representation of the Cypher moment. (Turino 2008: pg. 59 pg. 90-91).

Participatory Cyphers

The participatory cypher is the no-frills original orchestration of the Hip-Hop Cypher born from the social musicking traditions of New York City communities of color that were inspired by the social music traditions of Southern descent. The Hip-Hop cypher derives from Jazz and Blues traditions of communal music in the involvement of multiple participants engaging in improvisation in a social and musical context. One could also link the Hip-Hop cypher to Barbershop and Spiritual traditions in their occurrence in public spaces of work, commerce, and travel—in other words, like Barbershop quartets, participatory cyphers often happen in spontaneous or organized spaces in between work shifts, on the street, in the park, or near public transit. Important to note, however, is that a cypher can happen *anywhere* there are willing participants. These casual participants in the Rap discipline of Hip-Hop are called ‘spitters’, as ‘to spit’ in Hip-Hop and poetry means to verbally perform rhyme. I have concretized this category as the Spitter – the third category in my spectrum of Hip-Hop participation alongside the Rapper and the Emcee.

Any individual who participates in Hip-Hop by performing and vocalizing the Rap discipline in any capacity is in my definition, a Spitter. I argue that Spitter is the formalized layman category of Hip-Hop participant, usually called a spitter or rapper, engaging in the Rap discipline in a casual manner. A Spitter is unique in that they have

not committed to pursuing Hip-Hop as a distinct artistic dream and engages in it solely for recreation socially in the cypher or personally in practice. Theoretically, one does not necessarily decide to become a Spitter, as one does not decide to become a Rapper or an Emcee; the reality is conveyed through consistent behavior and engagement with a set of actions. The Spitter may become a Rapper or an Emcee dependent on the effort, content, and agency of the Spitter and whether or not they desire to elevate themselves from hobbyist to artist. As such, one may consider the Spitter the hobbyist form of Hip-Hopper within the Rap discipline, as the Hip-Hopper is one that performs one of the Hip-Hop Elements beyond consuming it. The Spitter primarily appears in the participatory cypher context.

The Hip-Hop Cypher in the participatory form is primarily *circular* in shape – with Emcees, Rappers, and Spitters on the inside circle awaiting their turn to rap, and spectators and passers-by making up the outer circle. The participatory cypher is the original format in which the larger ideals of the Hip-Hop Cyphers were gestated - championed by the original South Bronx scene, KRS-One, RZA, amongst many other Hip-Hoppers known and unknown that came up during the genesis of Hip-Hop culture in New York's disenfranchised outer boroughs in the 1970's. The cypher circle provided a space for inner city youths to express themselves and showcase their Element, most likely in the forms of *Breakin'* and *Emceein'/ Rappin'* – dancing and rhyming. By engaging in this ritual of free expression and performance in a climate of racial and economic oppressions, these individuals established cultural and physical voice for their struggle by showing agency through their wealth of talent and character in an otherwise destitute circumstance. This convergence of oppressed creatives and layman alike forged

communities of affirmation and showcase that engaged persons unafraid to be themselves – coping and growing with their environment through the Hip-Hop arts. With these liberating and communal notions in mind, we will be focusing on the Cypher as the social stage of the Rap discipline.

Today - Emcees, Spitters, Rappers, organizers, and spectators gather this way in a spontaneous or organized manner in order to experience each other's off-the-dome or written rhyming and expressing praise, affirmation, or dread depending on the individuals performance and respect for the cypher space – the cypher circle is this idea manifest. The rhyming that does ensue over beats produced by portable speaker, crowd claps, or a beatboxer can be accompanied by a microphone and light stereo projection in order to attribute more importance to the participant and establish the 'one-mic' policy of listening respectfully. However, often times a microphone is not present as to represent the origins of the ritual practice and the poverty in which this activity was gestated within. Without a microphone, the vocal projection and presentation of the performer is more free and focused-on without the handicap of the microphone and is often considered the true expression of one's individual character as there is no barrier between the participant and the cypher, no symbol of power to elevate them over the other participants. This format has the democratized nature of Hip-Hop in practice. But Mic or no mic, the participant presents themselves, their skills, identity, bravado – all to entertain and have fun putting their craft into practice. Whether they exemplify a Rapper, Emcee, or Spitter attitude of Rap engagement, by participating positively one puts the Zulu Element of Hip-Hop "Having Fun" into practice while inherently and simultaneously sharpening mind and tongue as the 5th Element "Mind" suggests; with other Elements

being the Arts/Disciplines of Hip-Hop – *Breakin'* (Dancing), *Deejayin'* (DJing), *Paintin'* (Aerosol), and *Emceein'* (Rapping).

What is unique about the participatory cypher is its openness – anybody who is moved to spit and speak is encouraged to do so regardless of their notoriety or proven skill. In this way, the participatory cypher is an essentially extroverted space that relies on the courage and willingness of the participant to assert themselves in the cypher circle. For in the participatory cypher there is no order to the proceedings, if you have words to say and the confidence to spit them, you are encouraged to capitalize on in-between-Spitter silence and do so within reason. However, if one raps nonsense for an extended period of time when the flow runs dry as is common with any participant, or one spits offensively against another member of the circle, you will be gradually motioned to cease and be replaced by another participant. Often times, if someone gets out of line and goes as far as to explicitly state offensive notions such as rape or racism, another participant will interrupt and counter the offensive remarks with critique also in rhymed format. However, subtler motions to move on are either actively enforced by an Emcee who has made the cypher come to be as the organizer or supplier of beat, or the circle generally agrees it is time to move on and communally vocalizes this with hand gestures or ideally polite vocal suggestion. Just as Jazz bands have an innate understanding of when a solo goes on too long and the bandleader or band signals the next solo with head nods and the like, so does the cypher act as a self-policing space of expression.

New voices are prioritized by performer, spectator, and participants who have already spit if individuals attempt to hop-in and begin to spit over each other. As mentioned earlier often times there is an organizer or focal-point Emcee that mediates

potential conflict or moves the proverbial microphone on to the next participant.

Spectators are optional and naturally occurring based on the location of the cypher and the individual interest as they pass by or are informed of the cypher's happening. Their presence establishes a larger sense of community and spectacle to the proceedings; contributing to the physical mass of the circular cypher, applying increased pressure on participants to impress, and adding to the general volume of affirmations and rhyme-reactions.

With these concentric circles of gradient engagement with Hip-Hop and the Cypher, the cypher remains a permeable membrane that welcomes the movement of spectators from the outside inward to become Spitter in the cypher moment. This constant churn and shifting of spectators turned Spitters and vice versa characterizes the democratic and cosmopolitan nature of the participatory cypher. The ethnic and socioeconomic make-up of the cypher is as in flux as the bodies that populate it. The cypher and its acceptance crosses lines of class and race because the artistic desires and social courage present align with Cypher principles and accompany the essentially extraverted-creative desire to be recognized in a performance-based setting. Spitters want to be heard, so they welcome outsiders to watch, outsiders want to watch so they enrich the Spitter, the Spitter returns the favor if the spectator becomes Spitter, and so the cycle goes. Hip-Hop's cultural reach beyond racial lines and the formatting of the participatory cypher itself as fluid speaks inherently to a multicultural reality and the cypher as an integrated space of social, participatory musicking. Examples of this flavor of cypher are the Legendary Cyphers in Union Square, the BARD BARS community cyphers, and

cyphers that occur outside of Hip-Hop events like TeamBackPack's Mission Underground and the Grind Mode Cypher.



TeamBackPack's Mission Underground 2015



Bard Bars, Bard College, 9/25/15



Grind Mode Cyphers, Croton Park, 9/27/15



Legendary Cyphers, NYC, 10/23/15

Figure 1. – Participatory Cyphers

Presentational Cyphers

The *presentational* Hip-Hop Cypher is the recorded, packaged product-form of the Cypher. The presentational cypher is a distinctly organized affair, often including a purposeful line-up participants from a particular 'set' of popular Hip-Hoppers, a particular region, or in less homogenized groups in order to express the stylistic diversity of the Rap discipline. These cyphers aim to emulate the participatory, communal nature of the participatory cypher in the number of individuals participating. But the presentational cypher is the pre-written, recorded, rendered, and media-released form of

the Hip-Hop Cypher that is bereft of layman participants and is instead packed with proven artists. Often disseminated and made popular by YouTube and Facebook video ‘views’, reposting, and re-uploading - BET, TeamBackPack, and Grind Mode are a few media outlets that produce the most circulated presentational cyphers – with BET’s cyphers at much higher viewership due to the status of the artists that are enlisted to present and the size of the brand.

The shape of presentational cyphers is that of a semi-circle of artists facing the camera lens—opening up the traditional cypher circle to the gaze of the audience behind the lens—with a beat either playing pre-recorded in the rendered video, or being projected from a DJ station often manned by a notable producer or turntablist who has produced the beat being rapped over. Artists participating come with a written verse over a beat they have been supplied beforehand for the video recording; sometimes the other artists are aware of what they have written and show their team-membership or camaraderie by finishing the lines with the artist as they rap. However, most of the time artists are unaware of what other artists have written in order for the reactions to be genuine and present that communal atmosphere that makes up a cypher. In most media that presents a cypher, the hometown of the artist, along with their name is projected alongside them as they begin to perform in order to emphasize locality and brand recognition.

The three formats of presentational cyphers I have observed are as follows, in order from most well known the least known. BET is the media juggernaut touting itself as representative Black media. TeamBackPack is an LA-originated web-based Hip-Hop blog, label, platform for underground Hip-Hop talent, and content producer focused on

Hip-Hop cypher media. Finally, Grind Mode Cyphers as a smaller Rhode Island parallel to TeamBackPack almost identical in basic structure and mission albeit bereft of the larger internet infrastructures and made up of primarily White, East-Coast participants.

The BET structure has the camera crew record the live audio of both the DJ's sound system and the rapper's vocal audio sans-microphone in high fidelity to broadcast an organic, original interpretation of the cypher without any post-production besides artistic angle-cuts. The artist delivers their rhymes directly to the audience on the other side of the lens without the microphone detracting from their bodily performance and physical presentation, they present that it is indeed their mouth rapping and not a pre-recorded, mistake-free, mixed or mastered verse but a raw representation of style in *this* moment on *this* beat. This rawness presents an authentic view of the artist as a performer not just a set of lyrics or distinct utterances – the content of lyric and character and the skill to translate that lyrically presented in a live-presentational format. The artists are all present in the space as the beat loops and each artist presents themselves one after the other, with an order being decided on beforehand most likely based on content, artist dynamics, and star power. The camera cuts between focused shots of the rhyming artist and the group present in the room. These cyphers are then played live at the BET Awards, and then subsequently released online in BET video players. In the brief BET x PNC Bank series of internet cyphers showcasing underground artists, a handheld microphone is passed between artists due to often outdoor locations, and perhaps to add another element of “underground-ness” to the proceedings by having it as a live handheld microphone performance in contrast to the crisp presentation of the BET Awards

cyphers – the raw microphone audio indexing live performance and the diminished audio quality broadcasting the physicality of recording vocals.

The TeamBackPack format of the presentational cypher is nearly identical, perhaps closer to the BET x PNC model, with a line-up of often unknown artists being chosen to spit on a particular instrumental with pre-written verses without an audience present, being recorded by high-definition cameras, and then the videos being rendered and released afterwards on YouTube. However, while these performances are also ‘live’ in that the artists are culpable for their mistakes in the final product and their verses are not pre-recorded, they are made to record directly into a high-quality condenser microphone with the intent of releasing that audio recording on iTunes or elsewhere. This microphone-stand rapping format limits the physicality and bodily expression of the performer, but gives them a symbolic importance as they are standing up to a stationary microphone podium-style—rather than passing a handheld microphone that can allow a more performance-style presentation. Viewers of the videos are encouraged to engage on social media on whose verse was the “best” of the group.

The Grind Mode presentational cypher format fuses elements of both the TeamBackPack and BET cyphers. There is a pre-determined line up of artists being chosen to write to and then spit on a particular instrumental without an audience present, being recorded by high-definition cameras, and then the videos are rendered and released on YouTube. However, these cyphers are almost always pre-recorded affairs. The artists participating record their verses on the beat they are assigned with their own home studio devices, and then send in their raw audio recordings to be mixed and mastered by the Grind Mode media team. When they show up to record the video for the cypher, all of the

artists have heard their constituents' verses already as the recorded track is sent out prior to the video recording date. Artists then perform their verse accompanied by their cypher group on-camera as the recorded cypher track is played on an incognito portable speaker so artists can follow their recorded cadences. Often times these cyphers are recorded in two takes in order to have multiple angles to cut to in the produced video. The most common Grind Mode format of presentational cyphers is more akin to that of a music video shoot than a live performance recording.

Let me be clear that the TeamBackPack and Grind Mode cypher formats are the ones I have observed ethnographically as a participant observer and the BET example acts as a sort of 'control' example. However, there are plenty of other media examples that I have consumed that I will mention as to urge the reader to investigate beyond my chosen examples and delve further into presented cyphers. Prior to these more modern social media-centric outlets, MTV had championed the presentational cypher form originally with their 80's/90's programming *Yo! MTV Raps* that included famous rappers spitting on-mic for a camera crew and live studio audience. After its cancellation due to the rebranding of MTV, BET took up the reigns with its 'Rap City' series that showcased the lyrical ability of up-and-coming Hip-Hop groups and artists in a music-studio setting – with artists rapping into a condenser microphone and performing for a camera lens, a obvious precursor to the TeamBackPack format. When Rap City faded away for unknown reasons, the BET Cyphers took Rap City's place as BET's commitment to presenting the Rap discipline, albeit only as a pillar of their annual BET Awards show. The Sirius XM station Shade 45, hosted by notable Hip-Hop radio personality and ex-MTV News anchor/journalist, Sway, is renowned for in-depth interviews and their 'Five

Fingers of Death' (a challenge that calls on the emcee's lyrical flexibility to freestyle over five beats thrown at the artist at random intervals). There are also a plethora of standard format radio cyphers that spotlight the freestyling talent of an artist on the rise, an already established icon, or the spectrum in between. New York City radio program, Hot 97, with notable radio personalities Ebro and Peter Rosenberg also host similar interview-cypher pairings. Across the Atlantic, due to the rise in popularity of Hip-Hop, particularly in the Battle form and the Grime genre, in England – the BBC has also had famous DJ's like Tim Westwood host radio interviews, freestyles, and in-studio performances for BBC Radio One with many notable Hip-Hoppers. While these radio-based presentations are based more in the individualist freestyle tradition more-so than the Cypher tradition, their contributions to normalizing the propagation of the Rap discipline as a skill to be shared is important to note.



BET Cypher 2014, Eminem, Slaughterhouse



TeamBackPack Cypher, Final Outlaw, 2015



Grind Mode Cypher, NY Edition Vol. 2, P.T.P



The Diplomats on Rap City, 2003



Xzibit, TimWestwoodTV, BBC Radio One, 2010



Lupe Fiasco, Sway in the Morning, 2014

Figure II. – Presentational Cyphers

Performative Cyphers

The 'performative' Hip-Hop Cypher is the enacting of a Cypher in the context of a stage-based performance accompanied by a stereo system that projects the vocal performances of each individual participant as they rap over chosen instrumentals or beatboxer offerings also projected. Like the presentational cypher, participants take the stage in a line or semi-circle and remain present on stage for the duration of the open cypher as to evince community and togetherness. What differentiates the performative cypher from purely presentational or participatory forms of Hip-Hop cyphers however is the presence of a live show audience. They experience participatory rapping in a presentational format. In other words, the performative cypher is the public emulation, presentation, and sample of the participatory cypher in the context of a live show, making it a presentational *performance* of the idyllic participatory cypher, thus making it a 'performative' cypher.

The important distinction between a performative cypher and a presentational cypher is that a presentational cypher is more associated with recording and presented media. A presentational cypher is the recorded video presentation of an isolated participatory cypher moment or the recording of a live performative cypher. I argue that this distinction is important and is not addressed sufficiently by Turino's binary where there is only music played on stage in a presentational form offered unto an audience, or music that is bereft of a presentational context and done in a communal mode. The performative cypher is somewhere in between, and I argue this speaks to a larger philosophical reality of Hip-Hop as having accessible disciplines and a distinct sociality.

The performative Hip-Hop cypher can be a loose and open affair, with participants usually assured in their skill-set passing off a handheld stage microphone one-by-one in no particular order and rapping to the crowd with an emphasis on off-the-dome rhyme; although some choose to spit written verse without the context of the original song in order to ‘show up’ and not have to worry about the pressure of conjuring impressive off-the-dome lyrics. While those with less experience are encouraged to conquer their stage fright and are guaranteed affirmation, as in the participatory format, the high-pressure performance aspect usually scares off potential spitters who have less experience. The performative cypher usually occurs after underground shows based around a small community of friends or artists that know each other personally – often in the form of an ‘open cypher’ where anyone who has the confidence to freestyle for the audience that has stuck around until the end of the show has the opportunity to. I have observed this phenomenon at Hip-Hop shows in the King’s County and Bushwick neighborhoods in Brooklyn with the Black God Pantheon and Brooklyn Wildlife grassroots Hip-Hop and arts movements, and have made this a staple of BARD BARS show structure; these movements share the notion that Hip-Hop is a communal arts movement and that the cypher is an important social aspect of Hip-Hop music. Just as arts movements and concerts use this format to bring people together and express notions of community, Hip-Hop cypher outlets produce and package performative moments to evince communal size and social affirmations.

To this end, an important pillar of Grind Mode and TeamBackPack content is the release of performative cyphers in a presentational format that usually act as documentation and promotion of their larger, live events. Grind Mode and

TeamBackPack employ the format of the performative cypher by performing these cyphers live in front of an audience, but apply the presentational model of a pre-determined line-up, pre-writing, and a high-fidelity, stationary condenser microphone to capture the verses of each artist to be packaged and released on the web later. Artists take the stage in a line or semi-circle and remain present on stage for the duration of the cypher like in the video-based presentational cypher. As each artist steps up to take their turn they interact with the crowd, and proceed to deliver their pre-written verse to a live audience while being recorded by high definition cameras akin to the presentational cypher format. The condenser microphone is set where the performer's vocals are prioritized but crowd reactions can be heard in order to evince the electricity and vibe of a live environment. This mixture of presentational and performative is an odd mixture to say the least, for the physicality and presentation of live performance is made rigid by the requirement that the microphone stay stationary. While it does even the playing field in a competitive sense by making the focus more so on the lyrical ability of the artist rather than their stage performance, I find that this form is limiting to the performer and essentializes their words rather than their whole identity as a Hip-Hopper. However, this seems to be the point of the TeamBackPack and Grind Mode performative cypher formats – to showcase lyrical ability and content above all else.

Now, you may be saying “Wow, thanks Pete, that’s a ton of info, but what gives?” My hope is that the preceding details of some observed cypher formats act as a taxonomy of variations that situate the reader in a broader context of Hip-Hop *cyphers* in order to engage further with the ideally more principled space of the Hip-Hop *Cypher*. By understanding the original format of the *participatory* cypher, then how it is packaged as *presentational* or *performative* cyphers in media, one can further ascertain the aspects of the participatory cypher that these brands and formats are trying to elevate and simultaneously commodify. Individual skill, the one-mic policy of the cypher, the Cypher



TeamBackPack's Mission Underground 2015



Grind Mode Cypher Featuring Joell Ortiz, 2015

Figure III. Commercial Performative Cyphers

ideals of affirmation and the social showcase of style and identity by the performer are all present in these formats. Inherently in their existence they amplify a broader voice of Hip-Hop cultural product originated from oppressed groups of urban peoples, by being social and accessible in most cases they forward some Cypher principles. However, I argue that the participatory form holds more salt and substance than the rest and represents the Cypher as a structural pillar of Hip-Hop philosophy.

The Participatory Cypher as the Core of Hip-Hop

Although there are a variety of forms that the Hip-Hop Cypher takes when presented as a product, showcase, or event cypher, the form I am invested in and believe is the nexus of higher Hip-Hop principles made manifest in social, human reality are the *participatory cyphers*. For I believe that the purely participatory format regardless of whether the rhymes presented are written or off-the-dome, embodies the principles of Hip-Hop that are beneficial to social organization, community, self-actualization, mental health, creativity and notions of practice/self-improvement in an ideal environment. My faith in the conventions of Hip-Hop music and culture as bastions of human improvement and social development resonates with the anthropologist John Blacking's notion of "Soundly Organized Humanity" from "*How Musical is Man?*" (1973) Echoing sentiments of music having a higher power to move and organize people in a positive way with structural rhythms as a physical guide and melodies as social refrain.

When one presents oneself in a participatory Rap cypher whether it is as a Rapper, Emcee, or Spitter, one is agreeing to be critiqued for one's abilities and practice of the Rap discipline. Due to the social nature of a cypher and the Cypher, one is inherently conquering social anxieties and stage fright by making an attempt. If one enters the cypher and fails to impress or raps foolishly on sensitive issues, embarrasses themselves in other ways etc. – it is up to the individual to practice hard and try again next time, the true Hip-Hop way and the path of the Emcee - give up then and there and see no potentiality for improvement, an understandable although negative reaction depending on the level of embarrassment - or accept that they aren't that great at rapping and just like having fun attempting to rhyme words and hope to improve, the positive

mentality of the layman Spitter. Any path taken when interacting with the Cypher is a character building exercise with little consequence due to the affirming and re-welcoming nature of the Cypher, making an ideal cypher a quality space to work through these neuroses. All product of these experiences comes from within, emphasizing a code of self-actualization and self-reliance that gives agency to cypher participants.

As New Paltz Hip-Hop artist Art Baby and Bard Bars delineate the cypher as “a convergence of narratives locked in a centrifugal cycle where the frictions of the contradictions of language, identity, consumerism, capitalism, sex, misogyny, drugs, society, money, etc., are investigated lyrically” – the cypher as a circle becomes a literal communal centrifuge and open mixing pot for all content and personalities to explore sensitive topics, realities of the self, and practice the Rap discipline in a safe, liminal space between the comforts and freedom of art and the harsh realities of every day life. Ideally, if the cypher circle adheres to the higher principles of Hip-Hop and the Hip-Hop Cypher of community, affirmation, support, love, and constructive critique over brutal judgment or ridicule, one will not necessarily commit ‘error’ or be embarrassed but simply achieve a less honed form of the Rap discipline and be urged to keep practicing. To support someone else in the progression of their craft no matter how cringe-worthy it may be in its current state is being a good human being; but being honest about the reality of their quality is Hip-Hop. I argue based on my experiences and scholarly research that this supportive energy while remaining honest is inherently Hip-Hop.

However, while support is inherent to the Hip-Hop attitude as it is a vocalized call for a person to grow further, maintaining the respects of the Cypher ideal is paramount. As mentioned earlier in my delineation of the participatory cypher format, there are

indeed cases when someone's free form lyrical expression missteps and approaches realms of overt offensiveness and ignorance. When this occurs, oftentimes the leading Emcee or those with higher proficiency for off-the-dome spitting in the circle will emerge to question and call out the person on their misstep in a rhyming format. On December 11th, 2015 during a participatory cypher occurring after a Bard Bars Presents showcase, one such incident occurred. A wildly intoxicated gentleman with decent-enough lyrical ability, but uncomfortably vulgar presentation/subject matter, made the mistake of following an off-the-dome thread of rhyme that had him utter lyrics speaking on how he had the capacity to rape. While it was garbled in his drawl, and wasn't exactly clear whether he was explicitly expressing he had this power of heinous violent dominion over a fictional hapless female or otherwise, or whether he was using it as a off-color and general expression of his proverbial masculine powers as a male spitter, either usage was deemed unacceptable to the group in the cypher. Indeed while the Cypher principles that guide physical cyphers include "sex, misogyny, drugs, society, money, etc.... investigated lyrically," using rape as subject in this way alienates female participants in particular, limiting the democratic and open nature of the forum. This act also reflects poorly on the participant rhyming, as rape is not a positive activity to champion in any context. Cypher principles dictate that all should try to support growth of their peers, but direct vocalizing of offensive subject matter calls more-so for direct remonstrance than a pat on the back and a cringed face to other peers.

Thus, this individual was directly addressed by the more experienced cypher participants in this moment, with their rhymed lines expressing that referring to rape as a way to self aggrandize was a weak, shameful, and inappropriate way to do so. Other lines

included softer, more general critiques on if one is going to spit in a cypher, one has to respect the space and not just use it as your place to be offensive. While the Cypher principle to accept and support all efforts to spit in the cypher context is important, one cannot expect to learn the error or ignorance of one's ways if not made conscious of the error itself. Just as the participatory format of the cypher facilitates individual learning after the failure to impress lyrically by listening to other more proficient Spitters and taking note, so does it facilitate growth and learning communally when one offends and the cypher responds to that offense. Just as one cannot expect love and support if love and support is not given, one cannot expect to have fun at the party if one breaks the original law of the Zulu Nation block parties "Don't fuck up the party!" as this unfortunately unaware participant had while under the influence.

But just as those Bronx-native pioneers in the early 1970's used the sociality of the Hip-Hop cypher and block party as an escape from destitution and oppression by enforcing positive engagement and learning, Hip-Hoppers worldwide engage in Hip-Hop and the social Cypher aspect of Hip-Hop as a rest stop in time enriched by human passion for the Hip-Hop movement made up of positive principle. By engaging in the Cypher and performing the Rap discipline, one transcends the confines of race, gender, and status lyrically by becoming a powerful orator of self, knowledge, and self-affirming ego. One amplifies the voices of oppressed African American people and celebrates their cultural product; asserting the idyllic forms and practice over the commodified, sensationalized form. One reinforces that Hip-Hop is built to entertain and help engage positively with their fellow humans – learning from one another, learning to listen to one another, teaching others one's experience, having fun being silly or outlandish in rhyme, playing

with language – one’s experience in the cypher manifests from their intentions and the random produce of off-the-dome spitting. No matter the outcome: Experiment! Show off! Release! Recite! Live! The cypher is shared, cross-pollinizing, experience. Even in the circular construction of a cypher itself, there is an open, symbolic power to the circle as the cypher’s base formation.

Circles and the Cypher Philosophy

Circles are essentially a gathering of points forming a round shape with the suggested focal point being the center of the circle. The center point of the circle almost unanimously is the central psychic focus in contexts where it appears – the fighting octagon, the circus ‘ring,’ the skating rink, all of these activities occur within or orbiting the center—this applies to the cypher as well. Rhyming takes place on the circumference or closer to the center if the Spitter steps in, but in my experiences the attention is psychically central in the circle with the participants focused not only on the performer but on the whole vibe—reactions, those hungry to hop in next, people dancing to whatever beat that may be present. Take a campfire—with its literal flame providing the only light in the dark and source of warmth in the chill of night, the flame becomes the nexus of gaze and musing in the dark. The heat and light emanate from a central point but smoke and heat and light disproportionately appear in different sections of the circular organization depending on the wind and the construction of the woodpile. A Hip-Hop cypher operates in the same way; rhymes and expression appear disproportionately depending on where the winds of inspiration and courage to hop into the cypher appear. The metaphorical light and warmth of the cypher in the form of the sounds, smiles, and

atmosphere emanate all over to attract potential participants and passers-by and retain those present and participating. I say this to emphasize the cypher as a social art space that acts as a proverbial bonfire in the gritty banal of urban reality. The circular construction of a cypher naturally incorporates all peoples willing to participate to join. Participants enter because they love Rap or Hip-Hop at large, they want to air themselves, they want to be heard within the conventions of a cypher through spitting, they want to be respected and acknowledged within the principles of the Cypher before returning to the life of a speck on Earth—a communal truth and agreement to *be* glows at its center. The ideal intention of the cypher to have all leave the circle with a new perspective, enriched by new patterns of language, the styles and identities of their peers. Cypher participants, no matter their skill level or quality of performance, their course in life is nudged and cultured by fellow Spitters and both the Emcee and Rapper attitudes present in their rhymes. As every day provides another opportunity to learn and discover, so does the cypher provide another tangible experience to reflect on, engaging with one's surroundings other participants' perspectives. Learning overtly or subconsciously, together. As American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson writes,

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.

Ralph Waldo Emerson - "Circles" (1841)

To this end, in principle there is no *wrong* way to rap, no wrong way to perform the Rap discipline and contribute to the cypher unless one's negative or disruptive intentions are clear as in the example of the intoxicated male on December 11th. If you are there, and you are respecting the cypher, you are one with the group, temporary family.

As long as one is rhythmically speaking and occasionally rhyming, you are rapping and you are a Spitter/spitter in motion, you are participating in Hip-Hop culture and enriching oneself and those around you. There is a meritocracy and spectrum of skill and mastery that accompanies any craft and discipline, as one usually receives praise proportionally to the skill level performed – this applies to the Hip-Hop Cypher in any form as well. But on the flip side, those who rap way better than expected get more if not equal vocal praise in the cypher context to the master – as it is expected the master Emcee will spit with aplomb, but it is unclear whether another unknown participant will spit well or at all if they have no prior social reputation. When they choose to participate in the cypher and become Spitter, their entrance and participation are made more impressive if they perform some level of competency without prior experiences with the participants present.

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced the Bard Bars cypher series and provided a poetic ethnographic vignette to speak on what I have experienced in my ethnographic study of the Bard Bars cyphers on Bard College's campus, but also more broadly on my experiences of Hip-Hop cyphers in general.

A particular moment that stands out to me when I consider the power of the Hip-Hop cypher speaks to this argument directly. At some point in the evening of the Bard Bars Cypher on September 25th, an Indian girl in flip-flops, shorts, and a sweater who had just come to America to study at Bard introduced herself, loudly yet bashfully stating “Hi, this is my name, and my accent is a little weird and I don't know how to rap; but this is really cool that we do this at school! Ah! I guess I can rhyme a little bit.” Like all who had engaged in spitting prior, she received a loud vocal response to her participation and

energy. She had seemingly never rapped before, nor had she participated in a Hip-Hop cypher; but most likely perceiving the positive energy of the space and taking wind in her sails due to the freedom and excitement of college life in America, she had the courage to introduce herself and participate without fear of embarrassing herself, not ‘measuring up,’ or any of the anxieties one might have when joining a group of artists in their craft. From what I could gather, she ascertained that the core of rapping is just rhythmic speech and connecting words that come to mind, participating in a cypher was just expressing oneself freely within that discipline/form, and most importantly – having fun. In this moment, she became a Spitter.

There are valuable insights to glean from this spontaneous act of participation. What are the implications of a girl who has just immigrated to America to study at Bard College from India, somebody who probably has not delved deep into Hip-Hop or even African American cultural pillars more broadly in her lifetime, participating in a Hip-Hop cypher? The popular stereotype may be to think Hip-Hop and the Rap discipline as Black male dominated arenas of baggy pants or tough posturing, but a female Indian student of casual-sport aesthetic swatted that aside and spat most likely without a grander awareness of this paradigm. Her attitude could be seen as intrepid and courageous from an outsiders point-of-view but natural from a Hip-Hop perspective. Her perception of the Cypher as a welcome environment where there was low risk of negative outcome is key to my argument. The ideal Cypher is welcoming, but challenges newcomers to step out of themselves and commit to an offering—those of distinctly uncommon American ethnicities and subjugated gender categories may find this leap into the Hip-Hop Cypher more difficult due to the subconscious programming of oppressions and media, but the

reality of Hip-Hop philosophy welcomes them with open arms. This philosophy was communicated socially through vibe and personage rather than lecture or preface, which makes these bits of data compelling to me when considering how exactly to normalize and propagate ideology.

Another participant that embodied this courage and substantiated my beliefs in the open, accepting principles of the Cypher and conventional cypher that day arrived in the form of a female, Jewish Theater major in overalls. She too had been watching the Cypher as a spectator in the cypher circle for a little bit of time, and she too gathered the energy to hop in. Prefacing her offering with “I have never rapped publically before” she proceeded to rhyme socially positive and self-aggrandizing phrases put together with impressive rhythmic speech patterns. She too received the same, loud response from the circle that all the other participants, veteran and novice, had received. Unlike the previous example— this short, stocky, Jewish/White Theater major in overalls continued to participate in the cypher repeatedly. Dashing away any inhibitions of gender, appearance, or experience, this participant chose to engage socially with the other Spitters and prioritized having fun and experimenting lyrically in this moment with her peers.

The more common cypher sight in Bard, Los Angeles, or New York City is an experienced male rapper in hipster or urban attire taking the microphone, rapping proficiently and projecting their artistic super-ego for all to experience and enjoy and also getting that communal response—but Hip-Hop, the Rap discipline, and the Cypher ideal are accessible to any human being that has the spark to participate. Regardless of skill, regardless of aesthetic presentation, regardless of race, regardless of social class, regardless of previous engagement with Hip-Hop, regardless of even knowing the people

in the circle; all are given the same platform and level of respect to express themselves and participate when they enter a Bard Bars cypher or cyphers abroad.

Universally, whether it be a small group of artists stepping out for a frigid January smoke-and-spit in Lower Manhattan, a sea of artists filling a warehouse lot in Los Angeles in the May heat, or a Bard Bars meeting on a balmy Bard night in September, I argue that the higher principles of the Hip-Hop Cypher are made manifest in all spaces of genuine engagement with a Hip-Hop cypher of the Rap discipline in the participatory format.

I argue that by manifesting these positive principles by rapping communally in these circles of speech inherently enacts human behavior that breeds trust, community, mental health, creativity, camaraderie, and provides safe forums of artistic free speech. By choosing to engage in the physical cypher and proverbial Cypher one is choosing to socialize with others who's interests lie in this set of behaviors and normalizing positive sociality, one is choosing to use one's brain actively, one is choosing to harness their identity and character and share it with others in the form of rhyme and performance in order to communicate and connect with their fellow man. We as Hip-Hoppers are embodying creativity, diversity, positivity, and acceptance through the ritual act of the Hip-Hop cypher. We as Hip-Hoppers are harnessing a potent cultural product of African American strife and oppression, Hip-Hop, using its convention of verbosity to speak individual truths in an effort to formulate a communal one. Hip-Hoppers amplify the voices of the oppressed and harness their narrative and cultural products sociality manifested in sites of communal musicking. To simplify it to nursery rhyme, Communal musicking in the Hip-Hop Cypher context is the literal embodiment of "Sharing is

Caring.” While understanding this may be problematic due the phrase’s origins in Salvation Army propaganda (Justia Trademarks) – the essence of the phrase is my thrust. For if one shares one’s self in the Hip-Hop Cypher context, one shows care for the Culture and movement by engaging. By sharing one’s skill set or lack thereof confidently, one’s show your peers you care to enrich this moment of collective art and trust they will listen. By sharing this moment with one’s peers, one shows they care about the preservation of fun in the shared human experience in an often-tumultuous social climate. By sharing in a context of listening, one shows they care about one another. Whether you are a Rapper trying to flex your aesthetic and swagger, an Emcee speaking on serious issues, or a Spitter challenging oneself to practice in the Rap discipline publically – you are accepted, heard, and catalyzed towards the next step in your personal development. This attitude is innately Hip-Hop.

Conclusion:

In this project I have presented a theoretical taxonomy of archetypes of Hip-Hop participation within the Rap discipline in the Rapper, Emcee, and Spitter using literary analysis and lyrical content to argue my delineation. I have also presented a taxonomy of Cypher formats to explicate the variety of forms that Hip-Hop socially manifests and how Rap is performed socially; expanding upon Turino's *presentational* and *participatory* frames of performance with the *performative* category in order to further understand presentational motives of Hip-Hop media product surrounding the Cypher. Within this taxonomy and analysis of the Hip-Hop Cypher I have also revealed a positive social philosophy that emerges from the social practice of the Cypher in the inherent behaviors and conventions of a cypher circle.

Through the scholarly analysis of Rose, Chang, Folami, Dyson, and Davis in combination with the lyrical analysis of Prodigy, Snoop Dogg, Ice-T, Drake, Rick Ross, and Jay-Z I have concluded that the Rapper occupies a fraught space within Hip-Hop. The Rapper is a Hip-Hopper within the Rap discipline that produces music product essentializing narratives of Black experience that pertain to media tropes in entertainment that include crime, sex, money, and violence for the purpose of career elevation and the pursuit of capital. The freedom, affluence and success of some these artists may provide aspirational features that appeal to the disenfranchised as it resists previous conditions of African American captivity and mass poverty. However, often times their lifestyle choices and lyrical content create a problematic tension of whether or not their cultural contribution has lead to a fetishization and commodification of criminal and

impoverished Black experience by the music industry, and whether the attitudes present produce sound states of mind and positive behavior.

Through the literary analysis of KRS-One and the RZA, and the lyrical analysis of 2Pac, Kendrick Lamar, Melle Mell, Chuck D, Talib Kweli, and Queen Latifah, I have concluded that the Emcee is a Hip-Hopper within the Rap that produces music unafraid “to describe and analyze the social, economic, and political factors that led to Hip Hop’s emergence and development: drug addiction, police brutality, teen pregnancy, and various forms of material deprivation”(Dyson, 2008). The Emcee exemplifies an aware, contemplative, activist stance within a context of urban depravity, systematic racial oppression and expresses this stance through the Rap discipline. The Emcee exemplifies the belief that Rap discipline has the power to use language and lyric as tools for teaching, inspiring, community and civic engagement, and the inception of critical thought in the listener.

Through ethnographic analysis of the Bard Bars Cyphers, the BET Cyphers, TeamBackPack Cyphers, Grind Mode Cyphers, and Legendary Cyphers, I have argued that the cypher is “a convergence of narratives locked in a centrifugal cycle where the frictions of the contradictions of language, identity, consumerism, capitalism, sex, misogyny, drugs, society, money, etc., are investigated lyrically” (Art Baby, 2015). The cypher as a social art circle is a communal mixing pot for all content and personalities in which participants explore sensitive topics, realities of the self, entertaining rhyme schemes, and practice the Rap discipline in a safe, liminal space of social musicking. The cypher circle often adheres to the higher principles of Hip-Hop and the Hip-Hop Cypher of community, affirmation, support, love, and constructive critique over brutal judgment

or ridicule. I have used Cypher philosophy evident in cypher circles to conclude that these positive attitudes are quintessential to Hip-Hop and to being a Hip-Hopper.

My assertion of these archetypes and frames of Cyphering may seem authoritarian to some, drawing lines in the sand on a culture with a deep history. But in the case of the spectrum of Hip-Hop participation within the Rap discipline I believe I have done my best to justify my assertions using the scholarly contributions of legends KRS-One and the RZA, and by acknowledging the provisional and theoretical nature of this presented spectrum. In the case of expanding Turino's theories of social musicking, I believe that internet Cypher media specifically reveals evidence for an in-between category linking the participatory and the presentational together. And in using literature written by Hip-Hop practitioners, and in participating in Hip-Hop as an ethnographer, I believe I have accomplished my goal in providing evidence for my claims that are rooted in the doing of Hip-Hop more so than the analyzing of Hip-Hop academically.

If I were to continue this work, I would do a larger survey of academic writing on Hip-Hop and become more involved with the Journal of Hip-Hop Studies that I discovered late in my process. More specifically, I would expand upon ethnographic studies of Hip-Hop performance and the Cypher to flesh out assertions of the positive philosophies of social organization and the fostering of interpersonal respect and community awareness derived from Cypher experiences.

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