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Why Hip Hop Matters: The Political Impact of the MC

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Abstract

The way our identity is constructed affects the manner in which we as individuals interact with one another on the political and social spectrum. For this reason, the way we decide to present ourselves is of utmost importance. Your identity is tied to how you are allowed to express yourself in society and how you ultimately decide to express yourself. Specifically, you are bound to your identity and the limitations society places on the perception of the groups you decide to align yourself with. One way people construct their political identity is through affiliation with an ideology backed by a community. American ideology is fueled by notions of self-reliance and the promotion and worship of the individual. People who want a voice in political discourse must represent these American values, and this is why we look for elected officials and constituents to be virtuous. As a result, those who do not fit the criteria for displaying self-reliance and the ability to build capital are often omitted from political discourse and their issues are ignored by legislators. They are regarded as unworthy and social stigmas are created around those who cannot meet this criteria. Individuals who find themselves stuck in this political purgatory are typically those coming from marginalized and impoverished communities. In the United States, historically African Americans and in general people of color are the ones impacted the most by a lack of political representation and acknowledgment of the issues which plague their communities. Is there a way for people to find it within themselves to make their voices matter and express their concerns to legislators who don't prioritize their issues?

Keywords: Hip hop, poverty, discourse, community, change.

Why Hip Hop Matters: The Political Impact of the MC

Throughout history, one of the most common ways people have expressed themselves is through music. In America, hip-hop has dominated the music industry as of late as the consumption of its music has steadily risen since its inception in the 1970s. Hip-hop counters the omission of issues marginalized communities deal with and due to its dominance in terms of popularity, the influence of its musicians cannot be ignored. Lester K. Spence is a political scientist who explores the relationship between hip-hop and neoliberalism in his book *Stare Into the Darkness: the Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics* where he addresses critiques towards the hip hop culture and how it has evolved over time in interaction with the political spectrum. For the purposes of this paper, I will be looking at two forms of hip-hop music specifically described by Spence in his work, argumentative realism rap and descriptive realism rap. Argumentative realism rap is a form of rap that utilizes a third-person perspective where rappers act as either critical participants or journalistic witnesses to the realities of ongoing criminal activities occurring in their communities.¹ Descriptive realism rap refers to a form of rap where rappers are first-person participants of criminal activities occurring in their communities.² Hip-hop music allows individuals to construct a social identity for those living in circumstances that rappers are writing about through both argumentative and descriptive realism techniques. Rap music acts as a form of media influence that supplies people with information chosen by the rapper themselves through a process of selectivity where certain issues are emphasized while others are

¹ Spence, Lester K. *Stare in the Darkness: the Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011. Pg. 46

² Ibid, Pg. 46

deemphasized.³ I argue that hip hop gives individuals, specifically people of color and the African American community, the ability to present and impose their narratives within political discourse.

Throughout history, African Americans have used their music as a powerful vehicle for black political expression.⁴ Hip hop music is the latest example of how this historically marginalized and oppressed group have been able to have their voices heard. Hip Hop music is structured in a way where rappers (will be referred to as MCs) act as representatives for individuals coming from impoverished neighborhoods addressing often overlooked issues. The argumentative realism and descriptive realism techniques utilized by MCs allows the listener to experience the neighborhoods they come from on its own terms through first and third hand accounts. American constituents decide to vote for a politician who they feel as though they can trust as a reliable representative for their interests and issues. MCs define themselves as real thus becoming arbiters of blackness, in doing so they promote themselves as synthetic representatives who claim the right to define the needs, interest, and even identity of African Americans across the country.⁵ This of course lends into some of the backlash that comes with hip hop music as the subject matter of some of the songs composed by MCs oftentimes promote violence, misogyny, or drug consumption and production. These are subjects which do not encompass black political identity in America and even fuels harmful stereotypes against African Americans in general. While this critique on hip hop music does hold weight, another way of viewing the promotion of these subjects is that this is what these MCs coming from these neighborhoods are being exposed to. In my opinion, MCs being criticized for rapping about sensitive subject matter highlights just

³ Ibid, Pg. 79

⁴ Ibid, Pg. 19

⁵ Ibid, Pg. 21

how dismissive we are about issues plaguing the impoverished communities they come from. These areas riddled with poverty create the need for them to talk about the traumatic experiences they are going through, and in doing so MCs act as representatives for their communities.

In order for Hip Hop music to be taken seriously as journalistic entries into the realities of these impoverished marginalized communities, much like politicians, an MC's authenticity must be developed and secured. If an MC's audience cannot determine the legitimacy behind their rhymes, they cannot be taken seriously as they cannot say they truly represent the traumatic experiences members of these impoverished communities come from. One of the tools utilized by MCs to further cement their status as authentic representatives of urban black communities is done through music videos. Popular aesthetic choices in rap such as wide angled shots moving through the ghetto or a wide-angle shot of a large group of people work to establish the MC's street credentials as experts.⁶ The importance of an MC being authentic about what they rap about has its positive effects in terms of becoming legitimate representatives for these same communities, however it comes with its own drawbacks as well. A first step in indicating their status as authentic subjects of a space, MC's must show their audience in one form or another that they are or have been willing to engage in the same destructive crime fueled behaviors they rap about.⁷ In rap music, authenticity serves as human capital. Committing acts of violence in response to disrespect, in self-defense and in retaliation for another act of violence, is a necessary component for realist rappers conversing about their experiences.⁸

Mainstream media portrays MCs and people engaged in the same activities they rhyme about as devoid of any rationality and in doing so strip these individuals of their political

⁶ Ibid, 34

⁷ Ibid, 36

⁸ Ibid, 37

autonomy. More specifically, black people encompassing these spaces are treated with social stigmas and are depicted as having no work ethic, prone to irrational violence, and being unproductive. The image of the ‘hustler’ is one promoted in rap music and encompasses traditional American ideals surrounding the ability to gain capital which hold value. The ‘hustler’ is someone who is constantly working to meet the needs of the people he cares about or even to generate more.⁹ In our capitalistic society, neoliberal subjects who have the agency to build capital are valued the most. MCs counter these depictions primarily through the use of the drug economy as a tool to show that they do have a work ethic, are disciplined, and are entrepreneurial.¹⁰ Despite the way they are depicted through the mainstream, MCs re-establish black people coming from these neighborhoods as neoliberal subjects in uncommon ways (it is through the use of crime). Rap music gives individuals the ability to cultivate their own identity in different ways. The ability to create your own identity as an authentic agent is a powerful tool which MCs possess as it is difficult to question and belittle an MCs legitimacy and experiences.

The cultivation of an identity is a determining factor to an MCs success and follows their ability to engage in political discourse as a valued representative. Tupac is an example of a rapper who was able to utilize both descriptive realism and argumentative realism rap throughout his career to shed light on the realities of the black experience in urban areas. From an early age, Tupac has moved across the country multiple times primarily due to his mother's role as part of the Black Panthers. He has seen the form of poverty that is disproportionately the case for people of color in America and informs his audience of the experiences these impoverished communities provided him as a child. Tupac’s impact within the music industry is acknowledged

⁹ Ibid, 38

¹⁰Ibid, 43

through his thug persona and yet it is also appreciated for the simple fact that he tried to send a positive message through his music for the sake of the children.¹¹ Tupac made an effort to prioritize the future of black youth which is why he is considered one of the more forward thinking rappers who were able to grace the mic. His past experiences of his troubled childhood allowed for him to not only depict what he had to go through in order to illuminate to the public the realities of living in poverty but to also paint a better future is what makes him an iconic MC with quite possibly the greatest impact.

The construction of a MCs identity is crucial as they operate through a duality of consciousness much like Tupac did in order to serve as a valued political representative yet claim their roots. Tupac is a figure in hip-hop who operated through a duality of identity involving a gangster persona, yet also a radical due to being the son of a member of the Black Panther party. Double consciousness is a divide by how you are seen and how you perceive yourself. An issue for viewing MCs as purely political subjects with value as representatives is that the manner in which they build their value through street credentials usually lies behind criminal activity. MCs are portrayed with excessive jewelry or are villainized for their activities outside of rapping, and this plays a disservice in their role as a legitimate voice for their community. Individuals who aligned themselves with the ideology of the Black Panthers view Tupac's excessive description and promotion of materialism and self-indulgence argue that it leads him to being incapable of holding a credible political conscience for not fitting traditional revolutionary ideals.¹² The dependence of building capital through the perpetuation of a gangster persona is also criticized by older generations of African Americans. This criticism from members of the same race brings

¹¹ Dyson, Michael Eric. *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. Basic Civitas Books, 2001. Pg. 3

¹² *Ibid*, 48

up a flaw in framing MCs as illegitimate representatives as most rappers enter mainstream fame while they're young.¹³ It is unrealistic to place the burden of being the voice of a community on these young MCs. Rappers such as Jay-Z and Meek Mill for instance changed the subject matter of what they rhymed about later on in their careers after their authenticity was cemented.

Hip hop lets you grapple with double consciousness as artists are able to selectively cultivate their own narratives and present it to their audience. They deal with their public persona and the political platform that comes along with it through their listeners alongside their own personal identity. Tupac's variety when it came to producing songs is shown through his music with songs evoking social consciousness such as *Brenda had a Baby*, yet he can also produce an aggressive song littered with violence and sexually suggestive themes such as with *Hit 'Em Up*. One song highlights the struggles of black single-motherhood in the ghettos and the other still displayed his gangster persona in a song with an aggressive and discourteous attack on another rapper. For this reason it is difficult to place MCs in a singular box as solely entertainers or gangsters devoid of political expression. Just like they are capable of making music for the purposes of entertainment in a club or for a concert they can also create a message intended to strike a cord with their audience and spark public dissent. A notable example of this occurring is with the popular western rap group N.W.A with their song *F*ck the Police*. Back in the 80's this song caused enough civil unrest to lead to the government issuing a cease and desist order towards the notorious rap group against playing their song. The song speaks about police brutality and the injustices carried out by the LAPD, a situation members of impoverished communities are familiar with which is why the song resonated so much. The delinquency with

¹³ Ibid, 49

which rappers are viewed has started to dissipate. In recent years, MCs have been gaining the respect of prominent writers as now courses are held where professors analyze the lyrics of rappers such as Jay-Z, Tupac, and Nas. Other writers such as Toni Morrison understand the value of the genre despite its critiques. In reality, “Morrison understands how in some cases rap music can be viewed as a bad influence but yet as an art form it plays a crucial role for the youth as it transmits important information”.¹⁴ Dyson writes, “Tupac is deeply attractive to millions of young people because he articulates the contradictory poses of maturing black identity with a gravitating energy and pure honesty”.¹⁵ Hip hop is able to resonate with younger audiences coming from impoverished communities because they can relate to the struggles MC’s articulate within their music. This relatability is what makes hip hop a powerful vehicle for political activism if used correctly and is the reason why MCs are so influential in today's age.

Growing up in public housing in the Brooklyn area I have always been exposed to hip hop culture and its influence. The genre was invented in the southside of the Bronx and its influence can be felt throughout the city. I craved music that exposed the realities of what I had to endure and see as a child due to my surroundings. Realism in hip hop draws audience members together who share the same experience or are curious as to what it's like growing up in an impoverished community. There is a bilateral relationship between MCs and their audience as the listener validates a rappers claim for authenticity while they provide us with a release by depicting and understanding where we come from. If the audience member can not believe what the rapper is talking about, he stands no chance of becoming popular in the mainstream as a conscious political actor. It always perplexed me how someone outside of my community would

¹⁴ Ibid, 115

¹⁵ Ibid, 118

be able to connect and enjoy rap music depicting where I'm from and this is a sentiment felt best when talking to someone about Jay Z. How can you enjoy something you cannot relate to? What I didn't understand is that rap music is also a leisure people enjoy due to the feelings involved behind it and the cleverness of wording behind the songs. All the while someone is enjoying hip-hop music they are also digesting the life experiences and persona of the rapper who is speaking. Hip-hop's popularity allows it to spread the experiences of the minority throughout the country.

MCs such as Jay Z are able to guide the voices of individuals living in impoverished conditions into political discourse through storytelling. An MC is only able to serve as a political actor in this role if he carries with him authenticity. A sense of authenticity mixed with mainstream popularity allows for an MC to establish his/her platform. Traditionally, the authenticity of an MC requires they engage in criminal activity. Jay Z was born and raised in New York City living in public housing around the Marcy area of Brooklyn. Throughout his discography, Jay-Z recalls stories of the violence he had to endure in his area growing up and how he played a role as an actor in the criminal activities that engulfed his neighborhood. The restrictions placed on people of color, African Americans specifically, are highlighted in Jay-Z's work as he exposes how the lack of social mobility, economic prosperity, employment opportunities, and housing prospects influence choices made by political actors operating in these impoverished spaces.¹⁶ On his second studio album, Jay Z meticulously describes for his audience what it was like growing up in his neighborhood in his song *Where I'm From*:

¹⁶ Dyson, Michael Eric, Everett Dyson, and Pharrell Williams. *Jay-Z: Made in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019. Pg. 19

*I'm from where the hammer's rung, news cameras never come
 You and your mans hung in every verse in your rhyme
 Where the grams was slung, niggas vanish every summer
 Where the blue vans would come, we throw the work in the can and run*

The opening lines to this song begins to unravel a disturbing reality which is the case for many urban impoverished communities. There is an excess of violence and little to no coverage of it signifying that the rest of society does not care for the wellbeing of people living in these neighborhoods. As if their life was forfeit. Jay-Z juxtaposes this lack of public attention and remorse with the fact that instead of news cameras coming to his neighborhood usually only police activity was warranted in his area. There is a subtle criticism formed here about the lack of interest in the safety of these individuals and a priority in incarcerating them instead.

*I'm from where the beef is inevitable, summertime's unforgettable
 Boosters in abundance, buy a half-price sweater new
 Your word was everything, so everything you said you'd do
 You did it, couldn't talk about it if you ain't live it*

Jay Z emphasizes the violence he is exposed to by claiming how “beef is inevitable” within his rhymes. Beef is a term that references disagreement amongst individuals in a community and he outlines the summertime as a season where violence ensues the most in his neighborhood. The acknowledgement of the “inevitable” disagreements amongst his peers further pushes the narrative that there is a lack of security and attention given to members coming from these impoverished neighborhoods, typically termed as the ghetto in political

discourse. Jay Z also reveals the underground economy and how it is employed in these neighborhoods with the abundance of boosters who steal and sell merchandise at a lower price. The underground economy is an area African Americans find themselves in due to shifts in the economy of manufacturing, displacement of human labor, and the segregation alongside lack of funding which plague the public school system.¹⁷ As a prominent MC, Jay Z understands the importance of maintaining a degree of authenticity behind his word as a man. Without the actual experience of living in these impoverished neighborhoods and living a life engaged in criminal activity, a person cannot claim the authenticity and legitimacy required to speak on said life.

Lost Jehovah in place of rap lords, listen

I'm up the block, 'round the corner, and down the street

From where the pimps, prostitutes, and the drug lords meet

We make a million off of beats, 'cause our stories is deep

In the opening lines Jay Z emphasizes the role rappers play as being the voice within their own communities. Jay Z engages in hyperbole in his comparison of the word of an authentic rapper in comparison to the word of God himself. Rappers are viewed as heroes in their own neighborhoods and given divine connotations for not only being able to represent their neighborhoods but for acting as a model of hope for the younger generation. He continues to develop the scene for his audience about his neighborhood by detailing the close proximity he was from criminal activity as it was only a block away. There is even an acknowledgement in how the success of rappers is tied to the stories they tell. These narratives of what it's like struggling in impoverished communities enter the mainstream and garner attention due to their

¹⁷ Ibid, Pg. 20

popularities once placed behind a beat. There is a fascination about dealing with the realities of living in the struggle that is the ghetto. Jay Z understands the allure as it is a situation that is stigmatized and ignored in society, thus when an MC the caliber of a Jay Z exposes the harsh realities of these neighborhoods it becomes compelling for the audience whether or not they can relate to the experiences themselves.

Jay Z on his third studio album continues to illustrate the struggles he faced hustling and making a name for himself as a rapper despite the violence that plagued his community. Violence in rap music is a two way streak where you are either the actor or the participant. Being a part of the rap industry is a competitive endeavor that at times requires individuals to go at one another through music. MCs are able to claim their political autonomy through their platform only if they are deemed as authentic story tellers. On the track Hard Knock Life Jay Z explores his ascension to fame and reminisces about how he had to hustle growing up in his environment.

I don't how to sleep, I gotta eat, stay on my toes

Gotta a lot of beef, so logically, I prey on my foes

Hustling Is still inside of me, and as far as progress

You'd be hard-pressed, to find another rapper hot as me

There is a sentiment of restlessness in these lines as Jay Z's life revolves around the underground economy as his means of providing for himself. Being in a state of poverty where your sole focus is determining where your next meal will come from gives rise to a drive MCs refer to as hustling. The term carries with it negative connotations especially when used to describe members dealing with the underground economy like Jay Z. An interesting transition has occurred in the MCs's life where he is now making legal money yet the spirit of hustling which he was brought under remains inside of him. African Americans in this country are viewed as

disposable when coming from these impoverished communities, and so involving yourself in the underground economy becomes a viable and oftentimes sole option.¹⁸ The underground economy is a way to ensure a degree of financial stability for those partaking, however it comes at the expense of the community. Hustling is fueled by the hopelessness individuals feel due to a lack of opportunity and it feeds off of the hopelessness of those engaging in the substances being moved.¹⁹ Jay Z does not shy away from his shortcomings growing up as he reminisces within his music and instead of denouncing the underground economy completely, he admits his was his only escape providing a criticism to the state of impoverished communities across the country. Jay Z begins the song by illustrating to his audience just how much his platform has grown and how his life has changed.

From standing' on the corners boppin'

To drivin' some of the hottest cars New York has ever seen

For droppin' some of the hottest verses rap has ever heard

These lines represent the dichotomy of the mobility present for someone living in the ghettos of America versus the lavish lifestyle the wealthy get to enjoy. Jay Z is fully aware of how his talent has guided him towards a more fulfilling life. Oftentimes, rappers are unfairly placed at a position of political authority early on in their careers when they are only beginning to understand the magnitude behind the platform they hold. Mainstream rap music is fueled by younger audiences and likewise younger artists. To rely on teenagers to be the political voice of an entire community when they are only beginning to understand their influence is irresponsible and a quixotic view on their political impact. Luckily, Jay Z is a rapper of prominence who understands that his success supersedes his own interests and that he is a representation of the

¹⁸ Ibid, 25

¹⁹ Ibid, 27

African American community, a role he embraces as not everyone makes it out of the ghettos. He is not shy about being the representative for his community despite the stigmas attached to the individuals living there.

I flow for those 'dro'ed out, all my niggaz

Locked down in the ten by fo', controllin' the house

We live in hard knocks, we don't take over we borrow blocks

The drug dealing hustling trope is not the only subject matter Jay Z is accustomed to writing about. He also touches on sensitive topics concerning the African American community such as the issue of single-motherhood in the ghettos. Black single-motherhood is an issue the rapper can relate to with his father leaving him at an early age as a child. This is a subject that is largely criticized by right wing politicians and serves as a talking point for well meaning liberals. Jay Z addresses the topic on his seventh studio album *The Blueprint 2*. Inspired by the Ben Stiller movie *Meet the Parents*, Jay Z explores the sensitive topic by starting off with another issue plaguing impoverished urban communities, violence.

Rain, grey skies, seems at the end of every

Young black life is this line, "Damn, him already?"

Such a good kid, "got us pouring Henn' already"

The ominous scene of rain and grey skies preludes the harsh story of a mother losing her child, a reality all too real as members coming from impoverished communities are disproportionately affected by gun violence in the United States. Rappers are not hesitant to speak on the gun violence they have experienced in their communities growing up as friends, family, and loved ones are referenced in different songs with young lives being taken away too soon. Jay Z subtly

identifies this issue as the phrase “Damn, him already” showcases there is a short life expectancy for those a part of these communities. Communities serve an important political role in regards to how individuals interact with the larger society. The song *Meet the Parents* exposes unspoken white class privileges not afforded to members of these impoverished communities. Alongside dealing with the issue of black single-motherhood comes the problem of a lack of positive male role models to relate and look up to coming from these environments.

He was just some thug that, caught some slugs

And we loved him 'cause, in him we, saw some of us

He walked like us, talked like us

His back against the wall, nigga fought like us, damn

“In him we saw some of us” shows how violence is continuously perpetuated as we as people are drawn to others who we can relate to. It is part of the appeal of hip hop. Although a lot of the male figures around Jay Z’s life were considered “just some thug”, he had to look up to them growing up. Their actions and mannerism is all that he had to replicate and follow within his own community. He attributes the similarities to the way this hypothetical role model spoke, moved around, and fought for his principles. These actions help an MC claim their authenticity by embodying the regulations of their community. A defining characteristic behind any leader of a political movement is the authenticity to mean what they say.

When taking a closer look at different historic black political leaders there are similarities between them and influential hip hop artists. The book *Black Prophetic Fire* revolves around a dialogue between Cornel and Christa Buschendorf as they discuss different prominent black leaders throughout history the likes of Frederick Douglas, W.E.B Dubois, Martin Luther King Jr. , and Malcom X. Cornel Ronald West is an American philosopher, political activist, social critic,

author, and public intellectual. West has taught in distinguished universities across the country and has written over 20 books over the course of his intellectual career. West is an advocate for keeping alive the memory of these prominent leaders in facing the systemic racism that plagues the life of the American political sphere. MCs play a similar role as these black leaders as they have the ability to use their platform to lead their audience towards a focused message. The limitations and strengths of MCs are compared at times to these different prominent leaders as parallels can be drawn between the two.

Throughout history, black political expression has been promoted and pushed to the forefront of political discourse through esteemed black leaders. One of the earliest prominent leaders of black political expression is Frederick Douglas who had a lasting influence on subsequent freedom fighters past his time. Douglas is a political leader whose sublime influence changed public perception of African Americans during the time of white supremacist slavery.²⁰ One of the criticisms held against MCs as legitimate black political leaders is based on the content of their music at times and the way they carry themselves. However, even leaders such as Douglas have their own criticisms held against them and this should not take away from their overall message. West offers a critique of Douglas saying that he is so tied to the machinations of the Republican Party and willing to make vulgar compromises, and he is relatively silent against Jim Crow, and his refusal to speak out boldly, openly, publicly, courageous against barbarism in the South is troubling.²¹ Despite acknowledging the positive impact Douglas had on the perception of African Americans and their plight against white supremacy, West illuminates that he has his own shortcomings. Should this take away from his impact as a leader? I believe this should not be the case.

²⁰ West, Cornel, and Christa Buschendorf. *Black Prophetic Fire*. Beacon Press, 2015. Pg. 13

²¹ *Ibid*, 14

Artists such as Jay Z and Tupac have been able to reinvent their platforms and delve into deeper political issues as their music careers matured and I believe their earlier content pertaining to colloquial matters such as drug dealing, violence, and gluttony should not deter from their influence as political leaders. Painting rappers under the same brush and dismissing their message is dangerous as it absolves the same institutions that create the environments that create the experience they talk about within their own music. MCs were recently able to showcase the strength of their platforms by supporting movements such as Black Lives Matters. On how Douglas was able to express his political autonomy, West states that he is an intellectual who was shaped by a movement, the abolitionist movement, one of the greatest social movements in the history of America, maybe even of modern times, the nineteenth century certainly.²² What is often overlooked when comparing individuals to prominent black leaders is that their voices were shaped around their time in history. Slavery and Jim Crow laws are now a thing of the past, however systemic racism is still alive and in this way rappers exposing the realities of their living conditions and lack of opportunities is the manner in which they express themselves politically. On the topic of the Obama presidency, Cornel West believes that black america needs a figure the likes of a Frederick Douglas who could put pressure on the president to give recognition to the issues plaguing the African American community and this is where rappers step in.²³ We've seen instances of Kanye West for example meeting with president Trump and songs with political connotations addressing the very nature of politics in America.

Rappers are able to illuminate the distressing conditions they were brought up in. Issues which tend to be ignored in public discourse and never get resolved thus continuing the

²² Ibid, 26

²³ Ibid, 31

perpetuation of internal violence and lack of opportunity within a community. Exposing the harsh conditions one deals with in these impoverished communities is only one step of the battle. These stories must then ignite political action once they've entered the domain of political discourse. West begins to speak about W.E.B Du Bois and his intellectual impact on the plight of African Americans as he shares a similar view as to the most efficient way to shift attitudes regarding prejudices held against black people. West says that , "in the beginning, he thought you just have to teach people; you just have to tell them the truth and they will accept it and they will change. But then he acknowledged that there was irrationality, that there was a habit you have to cope with".²⁴ The conversation then turns into talking about black political expression within music. More specifically, the impact of jazz musicians and how they were able to demonstrate ideals of resistance within their own music. West says, "When you look at the forms of agency of those particular brothers and sisters, the music has been central, and it's not spirituals for the most part, because they are unchurched, most of them; most of them are unmosqued and unsynagogued; they don't have any religious institutions at all."²⁵ Music is a way in which people are able to express themselves without external influences. Your voice and music are unique to you thus giving a level of credibility to your individualized story.

Black people place an authority on the discourse of their experience through performance and this is seen through hip hop today. There is an expression of suffering that is seen throughout history. Hip hop in some ways tries to flip the suffering endured into showing the good side of life.²⁶ Rappers expressing themselves and the plight they endured to reach the point they're at is a form of taking ownership for their experiences. People can relate to the

²⁴ Ibid, 45

²⁵ Ibid, 48

²⁶ Ibid, 51

experience of one another which is why it is so important for the historically under-represented African Americans to continue to rise and speak about their struggles in their daily American lives. One of the principal concepts Du Bois is known for is the idea of the Talented Tenth who according to him are a group of African Americans, well educated and able to claim elitist status in America, who are able to guide the country and their view on the black community forward in a progressive manner debunking held prejudices and stigmas. Rappers would be considered a part of his Talented Tenth as they are pillars in their communities and are able to spread the narrative of what it's like coming from impoverished communities while also exposing the racial stereotypes held against them. This is an ironic view as many of the most prominent rappers may not be the most traditionally educated when thinking about the standards that Du Bois was thinking about in drafting his concept of the Talented Tenth, however the expression of suffering is one that not many people can match in terms of the impact rappers have with their given audience.²⁷ Given the popularity of hip hop music in the 21st century, the impact these individuals such as Jay-Z and Tupac have are profound.

MCs are representatives of black culture and the mainstream influence of hip hop music helps this culture into the American social world. Music is essentially a way for people to connect with one another despite cultural differences and more importantly it is a way to show resistance for those marginalized and oppressed in the country. Arguably the most famous voice and representative for black rights is Martin Luther King Jr. who is most notably associated for his role in leading the Civil Rights Movement. West decides to speak about after Du Bois. West and Buschendorf West speaks on how black culture was sustained even throughout the centuries

²⁷ Ibid, 52

of slavery stating that, “So that during slavery we could keep the Black prophetic tradition alive by lifting our voices - music was fundamental in sustaining Black dignity and sanity - and families still had networks, even given that the slaveholders attempted to destroy Black families”.²⁸ The sustainment of black dignity and sanity was essential in making sure that people were able to express their suffering while having hope for a better tomorrow. Descriptive rap music is able to portray this same type of suffering while letting people know that they are not alone in the pain they endure no matter where they’re living throughout the country. A key factor which determines the success of any social movement not only lies behind its leader and the message he/she spreads, but the unity of the community of people rallying behind the message of said leader.

The most commonly ignored group in America are members of the impoverished communities which rappers spoke about. Malcolm X believed that America is willing to unjustly treat members of a lower economic class and especially people of color.²⁹ What made Malcolm X so appealing as a political figure for the black community was that he was able to speak about the issues that defined the plight of African American without sugar coating the realities of the situation.³⁰ X was about to speak from a level of authenticity which allowed for people to gravitate towards him and his message. This also sparked resentment of course from other individuals who felt as though X was a bit rash and he was accused of reverse racism in his discourse. His approach to conveying the realities of the racially oppressive system African Americans found themselves in is similar to that of an MC. MCs are first judged not solely on their artistic talents conveyed through their music, but also through their display of authenticity

²⁸ Ibid, 74

²⁹ Ibid, 113

³⁰ Ibid, 114

as it relates to being credible members of the same impoverished communities they speak about. An MC who is not being authentic to their own experience and what they wish to convey to their audience cannot find success and this is a similarity they share with black political figures trying to push forward a progressive ideology for African Americans.

The way we conceive of freedom differs based on historical context surrounding society. The dynamics and external factors which may influence oppressive systems changes and evolves in different ways over time. In thinking about oppressive systems and evoking change, Michael Dawson is a political scientist who explores contemporary African American politics over time in his book *Black Visions: The Contemporary African American Political Ideologies*. Throughout history there have been different conceptions of freedom which play a role in shaping the political attitudes of African Americans.³¹ Black political thought is not a stagnant ideology as it has evolved and has been warped in conjunction to how political discourse has been managed throughout history in America. The views of someone the likes of Frederick Douglas differ from someone like Du Bois as the circumstances revolving around African Americans change over time. This brings us to the present day with the abolition of slavery and Jim Crow laws, black political figures once again find themselves in a unique role in comparison to past prominent figures the likes of MLK or Malcom X. Freedom for MCs talking about their impoverished communities is directly tied to the accumulation of wealth. This is the reason why I believe rappers are so caught up with materialistic subject matter in their songs, the likes of having exotic cars and expensive jewelry. Ideology informs political action.³² This is the reason

³¹ Michael C. Dawson. "Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African American Political Ideologies." *Contemporary Sociology* 32, no. 2 (2003) Pg. 2

³² *Ibid*, 5

why it is important to take into consideration the historical context surrounding political discourse. Ideologies shift over time, thus the way political action is carried out shifts alongside it. If hip hop music was around during the eras of slavery and the Jim Crow laws the subject matter would be different in terms of understanding how freedom is associated with the black community thus the subject matter within the music itself would change as well. We must take a step back and understand how ideologies surrounding MCs inform the manner in which they view freedom and the continued social perception of African Americans coming from impoverished communities. What is applied to African Americans can also be said of people of color in general living in these marginalized areas.

Ideologies that inform political action for African Americans differ from other groups due to the communal approach to politics associated with them. Communal politics refers to the presumption that there is a linked fate associated with African-Americans based on their political networks.³³ The idea that an action taken by a member of your own race affects you as well. This leads to issues in terms of thinking about how to best represent the community. An entire race can be fighting for the same rights but have different views on how to go about this type of change. Traditionally, MCs are critiqued for the manner in which they promote their race as freedom through the lens of a rapper coming from an impoverished community lends itself the best ways in which they can accumulate wealth. The typical MCs view on how to best go about ensuring freedom within American society echoes the voice of conservative black leaders who were also hesitant about engaging in the politics of the nation as the way of liberalizing African Americans. There was a point made by these leaders that political strategies were seen as inferior

³³ Ibid, 11

to economic strategies for the advancement of African Americans.³⁴ The thought process behind this is that the first steps towards obtaining freedom is to ensure that the black community is strong and can hold their own without assistance from external groups. MCs are able to form their own sub-communities centered around the audience of their music. They are able to get people under a common message they like to promote as many fans are usually drawn to an artist based on either what they sound like or what they stand for. MCs much like their black conservative forefathers saw that the one way to ensure freedom is to exploit our capitalistic society and build wealth within your own respective community.

Dawson believes that “core concepts of black nationalism include not only support for African American autonomy and self-determination, but various degrees of cultural, social, economic, and political separation from white America”.³⁵ There is a clear divide drawn between the white and black community which has been exacerbated through historical occurrences and any modern day racial issues which may provoke racial tension. Most notably the issue of police violence has reinvigorated racial tension throughout the country with the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner. MCs play a unique role in American society of describing the plight of their community without holding back or sugarcoating what their experiences were like through their music. This exposes the realities of the racial tension still present in American despite all of the progress made over the years. More specifically, it illuminates the systemic oppression of African Americans through lack of economic development and violence within impoverished communities inhabited by marginalized communities primarily. Hip hop music for this reason is very popular with people of color and it helps form a sort of alliance. On the topic of alliances

³⁴ Ibid, Pg. 20

³⁵ Ibid, Pg. 87

Dawson writes, “Alliances, black nationalists argue, must be built between groups that have roughly commensurate levels of power”.³⁶ Rappers help to cultivate an identity for African Americans.³⁷ Although this is a strength, it also comes with critiques amongst other black political figures when dealing with songs that have little to no substance or subject matter relating to the black struggle. Some rappers alongside their music are criticized for their perpetuation of misogynistic views and or negative portrayal of violence within the community.

Dawson defines a nation as, “a group of people who are defined by their own community who are bound together in a natural way similar to that of a family structure”.³⁸ Poverty and the plight of those coming from impoverished communities helps people come together when listening to descriptive rap songs from artists the likes of Nas. When an MCs audience can relate to their music, a bond is formed between fans who can relate and enjoy the music of the rapper. MCs are helping build a community which was essential to the goal of liberation outlined by past conservative prominent black leaders. Black nationalism can be found within not only the music of the community but also in different mediums such as journals, magazines, and even the online networks of the black community.³⁹ The black agenda is inherently tied to the promotion of hip hop music. With its roots deriving from the South Bronx area hip hop has always been a way for people of color to express themselves and even have fun while doing so. While criticism can certainly be made about certain rappers and the substance of their rap songs, the political messages put forward by the likes of Tupac, Jay Z, and Public enemy cannot be destroyed nor distorted. An artist like Jay Z resembles the philosophy of black nationalism as he has always

³⁶ Ibid, Pg. 88

³⁷ Ibid, Pg. 91

³⁸ Ibid, 93

³⁹ Ibid, 133

placed himself willingly as a voice for the African American community. From endorsing presidential candidates to instructing his peers to stay away from certain brands Jay Z buys into the idea of communal politics and the building of businesses within black communities. Jay Z echoes the sentiment that there is a real need for the black economy in America to become self-sufficient as his recent lyrics talks about the importance of ownership and creating for your own.

Music is a unique medium in terms of being able to send a political message to audience members due to its ability to elicit an emotional response from listeners. Even as one of the more popular art forms within the black community, the efficacy of hip hop's political influence is challenged primarily by members of the older generation. Dawson writes, "Just as ideology can sustain oppressive regimes, ideology can sustain the resistance that is developed out of counterpublics such as the black public spheres of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries".⁴⁰ Rap music's popularity makes it the largest forum in black media in terms of spreading a message. Critics and skeptics do a disservice by dismissing rap music impact as even if they claim there is a negative impact associated with the message, its influence cannot be ignored. More energy should be placed on changing the actual message itself instead of trying to dismiss rap music altogether. A valid critique of the genre is that although there are certainly rappers who devote themselves towards spreading a positive message through their music, a majority of rappers especially in recent years make music for the purposes of a melodic allure. Rappers are now more concerned with the way their music sounds and less so about the actual content of their lyrics. Only certain rappers engage in black political speech directly in their music. Much like

⁴⁰ Ibid, 51

prominent black leaders in the past, MCs are judged by their authenticity as people will not follow someone's lead if they feel as though there is an element of duplicity behind their words. Dawson believes that, "The worthiness of black political speech has often been judged by the claims of the speaker to have engaged in political action".⁴¹ A speaker with influence must be someone who embodies the same ideology they want others to believe in or else their message will be lost.

Examining the role the MC plays is critical to understanding the gravity hip hop has in terms of the attitudes held towards it as a political tool. MCs who like to reflect and talk about their past experiences can still be found, however as mentioned before due to hip hop's popularity there is a shift towards melody being more important than lyrics themselves in songs. The danger of this is that it will weaken hip hop's influence and even legitimacy as a political tool. Not all MCs have the same political agency as one another. It is difficult to find a new MC who is able to resonate the same way MCs like Jay Z and Tupac were able to leave their imprint. I'd say it is unfair to try to equate all rappers and their political expression the same way as not everyone's platform is the same. There is now a divide amongst rappers between the old school, those who value lyrics and storytelling, and new school rappers who focus more on the sound. I am not here to argue over one side over the other as I believe they both play a crucial role. Dawson writes, "Rappers would argue themselves that they are both serious providers of needed knowledge for the black community and as inspiration for the black youth listening to their music".⁴² Even if a rapper is not always talking about the trials and tribulations they had to endure coming from impoverished communities, they still serve as a source of inspiration.

⁴¹ Ibid, 53

⁴² Ibid, 78

Detractors of hip hop music argue that the genre is actually detrimental to younger audiences, and this is a sentiment that is held particularly in the African American community by the older generation. One of the reasons they make this claim is because certain MCs within their music promote violence against others. Hip hop is thus viewed as a mechanism promoting negative aspects within impoverished communities. The African American community in particular pushes the argument that this promotion of violence helps to validate racist stereotypes that plagues different parts of the country still. While I acknowledge this viewpoint, I disagree and believe this is an argument held by those who aren't true fans of hip hop. The violence which exists in the neighborhoods is certainly depicted within the music of certain MCs, however on a closer listen what is illuminated is exactly how violence within these communities manifest themselves. The hustle for money in order to meet ends meet in a poverty-stricken environment manifests different vices of people as everyone is trying to survive. Hip hop music is able to expose the harsh realities of living in these environments and how it affects behavior. Instead of criminalizing the MCs themselves, the criticisms need to be geared more towards the conditions these people are living in as argumentative and descriptive realism rap is just about talking and expressing what it was like to live in the struggle of their respective neighborhoods.

Michael Dawson attributes four different attributes to hip hop music that allows it to be a vehicle for political change despite its limitations. One of Dawson's first claims is that rap music is responsible for shaping contemporary black America.⁴³ Dawson writes, "One function of a critical public sphere is to provide the timely and accurate information necessary to make informed political decisions".⁴⁴ Rappers disseminate information about the communities they

⁴³ Ibid, 79

⁴⁴ Ibid, 79

grew up in with a “pro-black” attitude as Dawson puts it.⁴⁵ The second claim Dawson makes is that rap music “contributes to the political education of the black community”.⁴⁶ Even if there are critiques surrounding the subject matter most MCs rap about, it cannot be denied that they speak on issues plaguing their environment. The solution to solving known issues is to take a course of action towards change. The third claim made about rap music is that it provides an accurate “source of commentary on the economic devastation of the black community” as there is a bit of a limitation as to how rappers can go back to their neighborhoods and fully address the issues of poverty which affects those who reside in the area.⁴⁷ The final claim expressed and evaluated by Dawson is that there are gendered politics as to how women are portrayed in rap music which puts a limit on who can be a part of the “black public sphere” due to the levels of homophobia and misogyny in songs.⁴⁸ The fourth sentiment pushed by Dawson has seen development as one of the most popular rappers is openly gay with Lil Nas X and some of the biggest names in the industry are women such as Nicki Minaj and Meg the Stallion. Hip hop itself is evolving from within and this is the reason as to why it can be used to reflect change in the public sphere. The music itself is a representation of the voice of the people, primarily people of color and the black community, and historically when people are given a voice this incites change to the political order of society.

Hip hop has an innate ability to inspire action within its audience members which is what allows it to be a power tool for political activism. Ideally, I see hip hop as a gateway for those who are voiceless to be able to have their issues heard throughout the country. Hip hop is one of

⁴⁵ Ibid, 79

⁴⁶ Ibid, 79

⁴⁷ Ibid, 79

⁴⁸ Ibid, 79

the view forms of media we consume in the 21st century which has taken so many impoverished youths across the country and has given them a platform to reach audiences on a national level. Not just in the United States but overseas as well. My political fantasy for hip hop music revolves around its power to attract younger audiences, who are always viewed as a means to change traditional norms, to step up and be more active within their communities. MCs thrive on their credibility by telling stories about the places and situations they've been in growing up. MCs with credibility are thus more relatable and this relatability for those looking up to them allows them to reach the youth in ways a typical political activist the likes of Malcom X or Martin Luther King could not do in the 21st century. Their role as entertainers allow them to have the attention of the public, sometimes whether you want to pay them any mind or not, and engage people in conversations once they have it. One critique which applies to politicians and not MCs is that politicians are stereotyped as liars and a lot of the public oftentimes cannot believe what a politician says. MCs at the very least are transparent about the past and there are enough of them for the public to choose which ones they would want to support unlike a politician who may hide certain things about their past and thus diminish their credibility in comparison to that of the MC.

I would love a world where an MC is able to run for public office at any level. We've seen MCs come out to publicly support presidential candidates or even offer critique to certain candidates but never one holding a public office. A prototypical politician's story is that of rags to riches as there is an American ideal tied to self-reliance which we value so much. MC's typically have this same type of rags to riches story, however it would be easier to relate to an MC than a politician due to the probability that there would be less deceit on what they're about

and the level of education would resemble that of an ordinary American. Most politicians are educated and coming from prestigious Ivy League schools which helps form a bit of a disconnect towards the general public. It wouldn't just be any influential MC however, it would have to be one of the more iconic ones in the game such as Jay-Z who is known to stand up for the African American community and speak his truth. I personally would trust Jay Z more in a public forum than any other politician. Primarily for the simple fact that I grew up in the same neighborhood and attended the same school as the rapper thus I have a connection and can relate to him a bit more. The one flaw I see in this ideal world of mine is that the story behind what makes Jay Z the man he is today may not resonate with the rest of the American populous. While rappers are able to spread a political message within their music, this does not mean that this is the route most of the entertainers decide to take. This is the very reason as to why most MCs are labeled solely as entertainers. For every politically charged song or lyric Jay Z produces, he has twice as many songs dedicated for the club or for entertainment's sake.

In the United States, all men are regarded as equal and are attributed the same rights. This does not mean that everyone's voice is taken into consideration equally within political discourse. MCs act as a deterrent to the omission of underrepresented communities within political discourse through their accounting of real life experiences caused by the conditions attached to living in impoverished communities. In a democratic society the majority rules and this leads to an issue of the minority being silenced or feeling invisible. It is harder to silence the minority when they have a medium of entertainment like hip hop music which thrives on real life experiences. This effect is compounded once taking into consideration that certain songs are intentionally politically charged and try to spread a message for change. The more popular hip

hop music becomes within the mainstream, the harder it is to ignore the issues plaguing impoverished communities across the country. Rap music and the MCs who define the culture are given a platform to voice their concerns and the struggles they've been through. Whether they decide to take action in order to incite political action or not, every popular MC is capable of galvanizing minority groups under a cause because they have the attention of the youth who have always been at the center of political change.

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