Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America’s Culture of Violence in Context

Jeanita W. Richardson & Kim A. Scott*

America for all her protests against violent rap lyrics has failed to acknowledge her role in the creation of this relatively new art form. There is no denying the language in some rap lyrics could be construed as offensive, however, just as other music forms are not homogeneous, neither is rap music. It is far too simplistic to portray rap artists as perpetuators of behavior deemed socially deviant without placing the artists and their life experiences in context. Instead, this article considers rap music as a creative expression and metaphorical offspring of America’s well-established culture of violence.

Got me worried, stressin, my vision’s blurried
The question is will I live? No one in the world loves me
I’m headed for danger, don’t trust strangers
Put one in the chamber whenever I’m feelin this anger
Don’t wanna make excuses, cause this is how it is
What’s the use unless we’re shootin no one notices the youth
It’s just me against the world baby (Shakur, 1993)

Rap Music has been categorized as, “A cultural evolution of the Black oral tradition and...[as] contemporary resistance rhetoric.” (Smitherman, 1997, p. 21)

America for all her protests against violent rap lyrics has failed to acknowledge her role in the creation of this relatively new art form. Evidence of America’s preoccupation with violent activity is pervasive and can be found, for example, in virtually all of the entertainment industry. As a result, of the prevalence of violence in music, movies, television and video games, America has nurtured an environment that some have come to call a culture of violence. If there is in fact a culture of violence, the true parent of rap lyrics is America herself, who financially rewards the glamorization of behaviors deemed socially unacceptable. Rap music, in this context, is merely another creative expression that is an outgrowth of prevailing entertainment practices.

Rap music, however, is not in and of itself, a genre created solely for profit. Deprivation and unequal opportunity nurtured the hopelessness, distrust, and early death depicted in Tupac Shakur’s lyrics. America’s urban centers in general and low-income minority communities in particular, are replete with poverty, police brutality, drug abuse, educational inequality, high dropout rates, and violence. The very governmental and social systems theoretically established to protect the poor, have engendered distrust. A sense of powerlessness to change conditions grounded in complex social, political, and economic issues has led artists to seek ways to express their discontent. Rap music became a cathartic outlet. As noted by Smitherman (1997), rap music has become a way for youth to voice

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175
their dissatisfaction with society employing the heritage of the Black oral tradition. Lyrics similar to those in the opening quote by Tupac, are just one way America’s children, and urban Black children in particular, have chosen to articulate their anger and frustration with mainstream society. Unfortunately in the case of Tupac, a young Black urban male who was murdered, lyrics were more than a social commentary, they were prophetic. Tupac became a victim of the very violence he depicted in his music and in the process became a rap icon.

Often the terms “rap music,” “hip-hop,” and “gangsta rap” are used synonymously. While closely related, each has a distinct meaning. Hip-hop is a broad term referring to a cultural movement among African American youth that has influenced styles of clothing, music and other forms of entertainment. Rap music, is rooted in the African tradition of speaking rhythmically to a beat generally supplied by background music. Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc are credited with being instrumental in the development of rap music as a distinct genre in the 1970s, which at the time was party-oriented. In the early 1980s, Grandmaster Flash used rap to call attention to the deplorable conditions in inner cities. Gangsta rap grew out of Grandmaster Flash’s recording, “The Message,” and became the focal point of political controversy because of its explicit, violent lyrics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At its root, gangsta rap was following in its predecessor’s tradition because many songs protested police brutality and highlighted the realities of the violence commonplace in the communities of the artists (Center for Black Music Research, 2002). Also for purposes of clarification, youth culture in this article refers to all young people irrespective of race and socioeconomic status under the age of 18.

There is no denying that some sectors of the adult culture find the language in some rap lyrics offensive. However, just as other music forms are not homogeneous, neither is rap music. It is far too simplistic to portray rap artists as perpetuators of behavior deemed socially deviant without placing the artists and their life experiences in context. Instead, this article considers rap music as just one expression of a well-established culture of violence. To this end, the pervasiveness of violence and some of the social, economic, and political responses to rap and the notoriety of gangsta rap are examined to contextualize this music genre. Depictions of rap music in literature are not intended to be an exhaustive review, but rather an attempt to highlight the hypocritical scrutiny experienced by artists and their music when compared to other music forms.

While episodes of violence litter the daily reality of some urban youth, vicarious exposure to violence is also a function of the lives of all America’s children, primarily because of media exposure. Pursuant to a Federal Trade Commission report (FTC, 2000), children in the United States spend on average more than 38 hours per week exposed to entertainment media, which includes television, music videos, video games, and movies. Rap music, just one entertainment form, represents a small segment of the multibillion-dollar entertainment media industry in America. Despite being only one of many music genres, rap has captured the attention of youth across distinctions of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class and catapulted its progenitors to wealth. Part of the teen identification with lyrics appears to be grounded in the features of adolescent identity development. Youth look for models to shape their behavior and values (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). Given the hours of exposure to real and fictitious characters engaging in violent escapades and antisocial behavior, youth come to believe violence is not only “normal” but also admirable.

Whether rap is attractive because it speaks to one’s personal reality or represents a fascination with a foreign lifestyle, there is no denying the economic, political, and social influence of this music. In 1999, Americans purchased over $1.5 billion worth of rap and hip-hop music (Yeoman, 2001). According to the Recording Industry Association of
America (RIAA), sales rose to $1.8 billion in 2000 (Rose, 2001). Meanwhile, the youth culture has created by virtue of their support an unparalleled trajectory for rap artists and their business partners replete with money, popularity, and fame.

The mass appeal of rap music and the potential influence of violent lyrics brought this new music form to the attention of politicians, academicians, sociologists, and psychologists. Considerable contact with violence has heightened politicians’, parents’, and scholars’ concerns about the implications of the quality of entertainment images youngsters consume. Critiques of the images consider race, class, and gender in analyses of film (e.g., Dalton, 1999; Giroux, 1999; hooks, 1996; Muwzea, 1999; Tobin, 2000; Walkerdine, 1997; Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995), print media (e.g., Jamieson, 1996; Martindale, 1997), television (e.g., Giroux, 1997), and music—particularly gangsta rap music. As much as the adult society condemns rap music, critiques have done little to minimize or detract from its popularity. In fact, condemnation may have inadvertently increased popularity in teens looking for ways to distinguish themselves from their parents.

The interest of writers, politicians, and scholars oscillate between being incensed by the counter-hegemonic dimensions of this new art form to being elated that the music is a cultural elixir for African American communities. Others value dismantling the lyrics in the name of scholarship. Rarely, however, is an evaluation of rap music placed in the context of a society replete with violence in all its entertainment forms.

**RAP MUSIC IN THE CONTEXT OF A VIOLENT CULTURE**

Rap music is not synonymous with hip-hop but rather a subset of the hip-hop culture (George, 1994; Smitherman, 1997). Hip-hop refers to a cultural response from the working and lower income youth segment of the African American community to perceptions of their economic and social stigmatization (Tate, 1999). Speech patterns, dress, MCing (“mic controllers”), DJing (“disk jockeys”), graffiti writing, dance, philosophies, and music are aspects of hip-hop culture (Arads 1999; George, 1994; Fernando, Jr., 1999). Rap music is one cultural expression of hip-hop, which provides what some deem a political commentary on the tapestry of lower income African American urban life (Dyson, 1994). With gangsta rap’s emergence in the early 1990s, society developed a heightened awareness of rap music and hip-hop culture. Literature does not consistently delineate the heterogeneity of rap music. As a result, this article discusses rap music in a generic sense and, when available in cited texts, separates specific characteristics associated with gangsta rap in particular.

Gangsta rap gained notoriety, in part, due to its misogynous themes, encouragement of hypermaterialism, violent lyrics, and the behavior of some of its artists. However, antisocial behaviors, or activities considered reprobate by predominant cultural norms (e.g., shooting police officers or rival gang members) are symptoms of far more complex and multifaceted issues than commonly acknowledged. Risk factors such as poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, gang participation, and pervasive violence in all forms of media have been blamed for the 10 children and teens that die every day in the United States. Restated, one young life is lost every 2½ hours due to violence (Children’s Defense Fund [CDF], 2002b). Manifestations of violence in various forms of media and concerns about its influence on behavior are not a new phenomenon, but rather an example of history repeating itself. For example, there have been more than 30 Congressional hearings since 1954 relative to “youth violence” and the entertainment industry (Grier, 2001). Unfortunately, culpability for youth fascination with violence has been narrowly ascribed to particular ethnic or economically challenged groups instead of viewing youth violence
as a manifestation of serious economic, social, and emotional deprivation. Consider for example the marketing strategies of the entertainment industry.

Aggressive marketing of violent material to children and teens is evident in all forms of media and is at least partially to blame for a desensitized population. For example, by the time the average American child reaches the age of 18, they have witnessed 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence (CDF, 2002b; The Commission for the Prevention of Youth Violence [CPYV], 2000). Some cartoons contain as many as 80 violent acts per hour. Commercial television for children contains 50–60 times more violence than primetime adult television programs (CDF, 2002b). As per CPYV (2000), children constantly exposed to carnage become desensitized and begin to accept violence as a normal part of life to be imitated.

Based on a request by former President William Clinton, the FTC conducted an investigation of the marketing practices applied by the entertainment industry to attract the attention of children and teens (as cited in Pitofsky, 2000). The report concluded that although the industry had imposed a self-regulating system in the form of product ratings and labeling, enforcement and adherence in marketing strategy was minimal (see Table 1).

As noted, movies, video games, and music CDs all have rating systems. Ratings are in theory designed to inform the viewing and purchasing practices of consumers. However, individual corporations aggressively market products with violent images to children that by their own standards are age inappropriate. Marketers in the FTC study targeted audiences under the age of 17 in 80% of the movies rated “R,” 100% of music with explicit lyrics, and 70% of video games. Elaborate marketing plans, such as commercials, teen magazine ads, and popup Internet ads expressly target youth under the age of 17. As a result, underage youth’s purchasing practices are minimally affected by the entertainment industry’s labeling system (FTC, 2000; Grier, 2001).

Exposure to media violence alone is not believed to cause socially unacceptable behavior in children; however, it is believed to impose a significantly negative influence on youth (FTC, 2000; Grier, 2001). One of the reasons for concern about the relationship between exposure to violence and violent activity are features of identity development and social expectations in children. It is believed that children shape their identities, values, and behaviors by drawing clues from their environments. Role models, for purposes of this article, are persons held in high esteem by children who possess characteristics, skills, or attributes worthy of emulation. Inordinate exposure to fictional and real images in television, video games, music videos, sports, and movies provide an endless array of role model choices and perhaps more importantly, cultural messages about acceptable practices and behavior (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002).

Concerns about the relationship between childhood emotional development and role model emulation are supported by several FTC reports that cite a high correlation between exposure to media violence in its many forms and aggressive behavior in youth. Further, extensive exposure to violent images has been linked to a desensitization of the general public, as well as, youth culture, which has yielded an increased acceptance of violent acts as “natural” and expected (Grier, 2001). At least in part because of ubiquitous exposure, violence has been deemed an epidemic in America and experts have begun to acknowledge connections between vicarious exposure and active participation.

Statistics further illustrate the unparalleled level of violence American youth experience. For example, gun-related deaths of American youth under the age of 15 are nearly 12 times higher than 25 similarly industrialized nations combined (CDF, 2002a, 2002b; CPYV, 2000). Gun-related homicide rates for children in the U.S. are more than two times the rate of children killed by guns in Finland (CPYV, 2000). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (as cited in CDF, 2002a) and the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and
Violence under the age of 18 is perpetrated not only by youth, but also by adults. The violence than children in similarly industrialized nations, such as Finland and Great Britain. One of every eight persons murdered each year in America is under the age of 18 and one of every 18 victims of violent crime is under the age of 12 (CPYV, 2000). Violence under the age of 18 is perpetrated not only by youth, but also by adults. The data reflected here reveals only patterns of victimization to support the thesis that violence in the United States is widespread. Mortality and injury rates are disproportionately distributed by age, race, and gender, as are many measures of economic deprivation. Consider Figures 1 and 2, which depict victimization rates by age and race.

As reflected in Figures 1 and 2, teens (youth aged 12–17) are three times more likely than adults to be violently victimized. While crime rates have decreased radically since

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<td>Suitable for adults only. Game may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. AO products are not intended to be sold to rent to anyone under 18.</td>
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Family Statistics (2000) report American children are at greater risk of being victims of violence than children in similarly industrialized nations, such as Finland and Great Britain. One of every eight persons murdered each year in America is under the age of 18 and one of every 18 victims of violent crime is under the age of 12 (CPYV, 2000). Violence under the age of 18 is perpetrated not only by youth, but also by adults. The data reflected here reveals only patterns of victimization to support the thesis that violence in the United States is widespread. Mortality and injury rates are disproportionately distributed by age, race, and gender, as are many measures of economic deprivation. Consider Figures 1 and 2, which depict victimization rates by age and race.

As reflected in Figures 1 and 2, teens (youth aged 12–17) are three times more likely than adults to be violently victimized. While crime rates have decreased radically since
1993, the group most apt to be the victims of violent crime remains those between the ages of 12–19. African Americans, when compared to Whites are more likely to be the victims of violent crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). African American females and males are 4–11 times at greater risk of being killed than Caucasian children (CPYV, 2000). Lest the blame for astronomical assaults be misplaced, it is important to note that while some juvenile offenders are violent, less than 10% of “serious, habitual violent offenders” are juveniles (CDF, 2002a, p. 3).

Given the high rates of death and violence, particularly from firearms, the numbers of guns present in homes is also a concern. Firearms outnumber children in the US nearly 3:1. Handguns began claiming more lives than any other weapon around 1987. Between 1979 and 1998, gunfire killed 84,000 young people under the age of 18, which is 36,000 more than the total number of American soldiers killed in the Vietnam conflict (CDF, 2002b). Firearms accounted for 25% of deaths in the 15–19 year old age group, most of which were homicides. Caucasian youth deaths are most commonly associated with suicide, while for African Americans and Hispanic Americans the cause of death is most often homicide. Males are nearly twice as likely to be victims of violent crime as opposed to females (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000). As was the case with patterns of victimization, the use of guns in homicides could also include adults. However, even in the absence of disaggregated statistics, there is evidence of disproportionate youth victimization by gender and race.
The costs of injuries and deaths caused by violence extend far beyond individual victims and their families. According to the Physicians for Social Responsibility (2002), health costs associated with gun violence are approximately $100 billion annually. Health related direct costs include medical treatment and rehabilitation. An example of indirect costs would be lost wages (CPYV, 2000). With nearly 40% of American homes equipped with at least one firearm, the potential for the perpetuation of accidental and intentional deaths does not seem likely to abate. Thus far, gun injuries have claimed 10 times the childhood victims as the polio epidemic of the early 20th century (Physicians for Social Responsibility, 2002). Further, more children and teens in the U.S. died in gun-related violence in 1999 than from the combined mortality accounted for by HIV/AIDS, cancer, pneumonia, asthma, and influenza in the same year (CDF, 2002a). Perhaps these and the many other costs associated with youth violence have prompted the cognitive shift to categorize youth violence as a public health issue. Consequently, public health agencies in the United States consider violence an epidemic inextricably linked to the risk factors of poverty, social injustice, and corporate greed, which are all additive, complex, and interdependent (CPYV, 2000). Thus, the violence depicted in rap music is an artistic expression obsessed with the very social inadequacies that plague and are perpetuated in poor urban communities.

**Violence in Music**

Violence in music is not by any means limited to rap or gangsta rap. Folk and country music have contained references to murder, killing of police, and domestic violence for...
decades. Eric Clapton’s popular song “I Shot The Sheriff” (1974) Woodie Guthrie’s “Pretty Boy Floyd” (1987) in which a police officer is killed; and, Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues” (1968) that describes a murderer who kills someone just to see him die are a few examples of violent lyrical content. Yet despite the historical use of violent lyrics, country and folk artists are rarely blamed for escalating murder and domestic violence rates (Hershey-Webb, 1993).

White heavy metal musicians also have themes of violence in songs. For example, consider a stanza from Metallica’s 1983 song entitled, “No Remorse”:

Only the strong survive
No one to save the weaker race
We are ready to kill all comers
Like a loaded gun right at your face
Chorus:
War without end
No remorse, No repent
We don’t care what it meant
Another day, Another death
Another sorrow, Another breath
No remorse, No repent

Heavy metal lyrics to “kill all comers” devoid of remorse are evaluated in different contexts than gangsta rap’s “Cop Killer” lyrics by Ice T in the early 1990s. The American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communications suggested that the relationship between violent activity and heavy metal needed further study (Rose, 1991). Conversely, rap music is subject to a markedly different analytical approach. With as little research-based data substantiating the relationship between listening and action as heavy metal there are calls for censorship of rap music—unlike any action taken against folk, country, heavy metal, or any other genre (Rose, 1991). One need only examine the transcripts of Congressional hearings to find evidence of the vilification of rap artists in isolation of other equally violent music forms (Hall, 1998; Mosley-Braun, 1994; Ogbar, 1999). Whether in the context of sociological studies or Congressional hearings, calls for censorship appear rooted in the belief that rap music poses a threat to mainstream society and requires containment, while its White counterpart (heavy metal music) warrants mere watchfulness. Before such negative pronouncements are categorically applied it is worthwhile to consider not only the influence of America’s culture of violence on the creation of rap, but also the conflict between the values rhetorically stated versus the practices rewarded with fame and money.

Rap Music: An Overview

Depending upon the source, the roots of rap music can be traced back to ancient African cultures. Evidence of the predecessors of contemporary rap can be found in the artistic expressions of Bessie Smith’s lyrical speech to the beat of music and in the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron’s recordings of the 1970s. The contemporary art form labeled rap music is urban in origin with New York City as its epicenter, and provided political commentary on drugs, police brutality, sex, and material deprivation (Dyson, 1994).

The mass appeal of rap music is generally considered to have begun in 1979. At the time the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rappers Delight” reached number 36 on the Billboard charts and sold two million copies. In 1983, Run D.M.C. released the first rap album to be certified gold by RIAA. Despite the popularity of rap, MTV did not broadcast rap videos for the first several years of programming, which began in 1981. MTV devoted its telecasts to rock and roll music videos targeting White suburban teens. Minimal exposure of African American artists was limited to rock and roll acts such as Tina Turner. It was not until
the airing of Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” in the early 1980s that African American rap and hip-hop artists markedly increased their presence on the music network. There are conflicting accounts as to why Michael Jackson’s groundbreaking video was played, ranging from threats by CBS Records to pull all its label videos from the MTV broadcast line-up to MTV’s recognition of the mass appeal of African American artists (Fernando Jr., 1999; The Eighties Club, 2002). Whatever the reason, the telecast of “Billie Jean” and its popularity are widely viewed as a turning point in hip-hop and rap music video access to mainstream media. Further evidence of the appeal of rap music was demonstrated over time. While initially rap CDs were purchased primarily by African American youth, as of 1999, 7 out of 10 of the teens that purchased rap music CDs and tapes were White youth (Yeoman, 2001). Since its inception in the 1970s, rap album sales approximated 81 million in 1999, making rap the fastest growing music genre in the United States (Salon Brilliant Careers, 1999).

Just as there are numerous forms of hip-hop expression, there are many categories of rap (Hall, 1998; Powell, 1991). For example, Hall (1998) presents four kinds of rap music and artists: gangsta (e.g., Snoop Doggy Dogg), hip-hop (e.g., Fugees), political (e.g., Public Enemy), and commercial (e.g., MC Hammer). Among the many forms of rap music, gangsta rap consistently contains the most violent lyrics. However, not all violence is equal. In the case of violence perpetuated on youth by police, artists may be crying out for justice. On the other hand, promoting gang members to kill rival gang members may be a qualitatively different type of expression. The larger point is that without critical dialogue with the creators of rap music and its genre, it is difficult if not impossible for outsiders who are in many cases non-African American and/or not economically disadvantaged, to place lyrics in the intended context.

Gangsta rap emerged when the rap group Niggaz With Attitudes’ (N.W.A.) released their 1988 album entitled Straight Outta Compton. Unapologetic voices provided explicit accounts of violence, death, drugs, and despair—the daily reality of many poor, urban-dwelling youth. Predictably, the public concentrated on the songs’ perceived deleterious effects. The belief that gangsta rap lyrics increased the incidents of male aggression in general (Ballard & Coates, 1995), and sexual aggression in particular, shaped much of the discussion. While there is no conclusive evidence demonstrating a causal relationship between rap lyrics and violent antisocial behavior, there is substantial statistical and sociological data corroborating the violent contexts many of the lyricists chronicle. Tupac Shakur’s words, among others, map the violence, hopelessness, and despair from which many gangsta rappers emerge. Social, political, and economic factors disproportionately work against certain groups in search of a better future and, as such, notions of cultural capital and social reproduction cycles are relevant to this discussion.

**RAP, CULTURAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION**

Bourdieu’s (1977) notions of cultural capital as well as cultural goods help explain the preoccupation with rap music lyrics within a culture replete with violence. The creation of the art form and the associated capitalistic tug-of-war over profits is a function of the creation of an alternative to the hypocrisy of the dominant cultural norms. While rhetorically violence is condemned, it is clearly considered a profitable venture and rewarded in all forms of entertainment media.

Social capital in the Bourdieu (1977) tradition refers to the skill sets, practices, and mores esteemed by the dominant social group. Culture and its varied aspects are socially constructed, defined, and controlled by the dominant empowered group (Gordon, 1999; Richardson, 2002). Social capital groups the valued skills and practices into the “composite
Rap demonstrates the intersecting lines between language, history, culture, and the resiliency of Black America. Examination of the integration of African American discourse practices (e.g., African American language, semantic inversion) rap music is categorized by Smitherman (1997) as a, "cultural evolution of the expression that can best be understood through academic microanalysis. These narrow categories tend to prioritize the critics' and interpreters' voices rather than the artists creating the objects for analysis—the lyrics.

A limited number of hip-hop and rap studies have examined rap as a social phenomenon manifesting the cultural resiliency of Black America. Examination of the integration of African American discourse practices (e.g., African American language, semantic inversion) rap music is categorized by Smitherman (1997) as a, "cultural evolution of the Black oral tradition and the construction of contemporary resistance rhetoric" (p. 21). She highlights how rap demonstrates the intersecting lines between language, history, culture,
and self within Black America. Further, Smitherman (1997) describes the contribution of rap and hip-hop as a response to the noted author James Baldwin's (1992) challenge for artists to disturb the peace. Given its popularity and economic profitability, one could argue that rap music and its genre have been quite successful in fulfilling Baldwin request.

Dimitriadis (2001), Dyson (1995), hooks (1994), and Rose (1994), among others, collaboratively work with rappers to explore the deeper sociological significance of their messages. Given society's treatment of children, particularly Black youngsters, these heuristic approaches stand out. While Rose (1991) tends to analyze rap music and highlight its connection to certain Black American traditions, she also pays attention to the social, cultural, and artistic dimensions of the music and the movement. Similar to Potter (1995) and Dyson (1995), Rose defends rap with a clearly defined heuristic framework including the voices of the participants of whom she speaks. More recent works (see Dimitriadis, 2001), follow in Rose's ethnographic tradition to explore the effects of hip-hop on self and communal identity formation. Rose does not give voice to the artists—a method many researchers slip into when presenting their participants' perspective. Rather, she provides a space in which their voices can be heard and appreciated by a normally critical public—academe.

Some researchers have argued that society in some ways, needs rap music—no matter how seemingly misogynous, hypermaterialistic, and hedonistic—to illustrate cultural norms of the urban poor. As hooks (1994) explains, a lack of critical evaluation of the roots of rap music allows mainstream White culture to avoid challenging the culture of violence it engenders. The point that gangsta rap is "a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by White supremacist capitalism patriarchy" (hooks, 1994, p. 116), remains narrowly understood. The most well-meaning critiques often limit themselves to intracultural commentaries. Controversies abound with respect to White artist imitation of Black art (e.g., Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, Cypress Hill, Eminem), women as sex objects, derogatory language, blatant sexuality, and promotion of debauchery (see Perkins, 1996 for example), but fail to contextualize the real issues behind these topics and hide behind academic jargon (see Potter, 1995).

As the current form of intergroup dialectic for the youth culture (Pinn, 1999), rappers are the contemporary Black culture's griots (Smitherman, 1997). The culture of hip-hop has become the nexus from which youth (particularly lower income Black youngsters) can create their values, define their selfhood, and express their heightened consciousness of violence and its implications against a social backdrop that has historically devalued their color and contributions. Rappers, even the most graphic, often become cultural ethnographers systematically silenced due to their social and cultural disenfranchisement and further censored for describing the effects of their marginalization.

Rap and Hip-Hop artists have not waited for acceptance to embrace publications as another means of challenging mainstream perceptions. Popular magazines (e.g. Vibe, URB, XXL, The Source) and books provide a forum for artists to answer critics, voice their positions and diversify their media empires. Several examples of books written by rap artists include: "I Make My Own Rules (Parental Advisory)" by LL Cool J with Karen Hunter (1998) published by Doherly, Tom Associates LLC; "Life & Def: Sex, Drugs, Money & God", by Russell Simmons and Nelson George (2002) published by Crown Publishing Group; Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman" by Queen Latifah (1998) published by Morrow, William and Company; and, "Fight the Power: Rap, Race & Reality" by Chuck D. Chuck with Yusuf Jah (1998) published by Dell Publishing Company. Perhaps one of the reasons artists branched into print media is because of the absence of ongoing dialogues between rap artists and scholars.
The majority of studies about rap music and its progeny are not collaborative efforts between researchers (writers) and subject of the writing (rappers). Despite important exceptions (Dyson, 1994, hooks, 1994; Rose, 1994; Smitherman, 1997), central to prevailing research perspectives is the belief that youngsters are unfinished products, immature, untrustworthy sources of data that can only be understood by their deficiencies (Alanen, 1994; Mandell, 1991; Oakley, 1994; Waksler, 1991). It is much easier to essentialize youth and avoid attending to the diversity of childhood experiences. African American youth's experiences and voices have been historically trivialized and homogenized into violent, deficient, anti-intellectual characterizations. It is ironic that these seemingly voiceless individuals have sufficient ability to create and maintain a multimillion-dollar industry. As the subject of articles and books, it is little wonder that many of the young Black artists look to rap music to express their developing consciousness and gain profit.

**POLITICAL AND JUDICIAL SCRUTINY OF RAP**

Anxiety associated with lyrics and gangsta rap in particular became a hot political topic in the early 1990s. Gangsta rap’s emergence and popularity coincided with national elections and sparked what has now been termed a “cultural war.” Incensed by the lyrics of Ice T’s song “Cop Killer” on the Time Warner label, police groups publicly advocated divestiture of company stock. Boisterous condemnation also came from Former Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich who suggested boycotts of radio stations that played “vicious” music, which he identified specifically as rap music. Not to be left out of the rising controversy, presidential candidate William Clinton denounced Sister Souljah lyrics (Johnson, 1999; Ogbar, 1999).

In some ways, gangsta rap’s profile rose significantly when it became the subject of political rhetoric and referred to as the antithesis of “family values.” One of the most comprehensive hearings focusing on rap lyrics and its violent content was held in 1994. The Senate Juvenile Justice Subcommittee (1994) convened hearings, entitled *Shaping Our Responses to Violent and Demeaning Imagery in Popular Music* (p. 1). Testimony was heard from members of Congress, professors, members of the recording industry, public health professionals, and various advocate groups. While implying an interest in violence in popular music, testimony was almost exclusively devoted to commentary on gangsta rap lyrics and hip-hop culture.

Wisconsin Democratic Senator Herbert Kohl (1994) was careful to voice the Senate Juvenile Justice Subcommittee’s concern as the message conveyed in lyrics rather than “the color of the messengers” (p. 1). This proclamation, however, appeared to be disingenuous, since overwhelmingly testimony focused on African American rap artists and their music. No more than cursory references were made to heavy metal music or its content.

Not all persons who testified viewed rap from the same perspective. In his testimony before the Senate Juvenile Justice Subcommittee, Dr. Robert Phillips (1994), Deputy Medical Director of the American Psychiatric Association reminded participants that rap was merely the latest iteration of themes prevalent in popular culture. The problem was the prevalence of poverty and the despair it nurtured. Further, while not condoning the language, Congresswoman Maxine Waters (1994), a California Democrat, testified:

I don’t encourage the use of obscenities. I just think we should stop pretending that we are hearing them for the first time. . . Let’s not lose sight of what the real problem is. It is not the words being used. It is the reality they are rapping about. (p. 3)

Despite calls for consideration of the underlying social inequities as the breeding ground for discontent, participants such as Dr. C. Delores Tucker (1994), Chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women, Inc., claimed that if unleashed, gangsta rap would
James Brown's 1969 release "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" became an anthem portion of the financial benefits their creativity has yielded. Blues, jazz, and rock and roll (1960s-1980s) and John Coltrane (1950s-early 1960s) reflected the energy and complexity reflected the heartaches and transformative personas of Americans of African descent.

reflect examples of the growing influence and profit potential associated with rap. African rap music sales (Rose, 2001). Merchandise, publications, concerts, and movie revenues the trunks of cars quickly turned into a multimillion-dollar industry (Stephaney, 1999). As previously noted, the $1.8 million in music industry sales in 2000 account for only may have fueled its popularity among America's youth. As a result, a music genre whose behavior. A rap-related test of CPD came in the case of Ronald Howard. Mr. Howard had been diminished because of Tupac's lyrics (Dow, 1998). Using a, "the music made me do it" defense did not work and Mr. Howard was sentenced to death. However, the use of gangster rap lyrics as a force capable of diminishing the capacity of a listener lends credence to the perception that rap lyrics promote and encourage violent behavior.

**CAPITALISM AND RAP**

Rather than detracting from the appeal of rap, the legal, legislative and media attention may have fueled its popularity among America's youth. As a result, a music genre whose beginnings were in garages and basements, and whose records were initially peddled from the trunks of cars quickly turned into a multimillion-dollar industry (Stephaney, 1999).

As previously noted, the $1.8 million in music industry sales in 2000 account for only rap music sales (Rose, 2001). Merchandise, publications, concerts, and movie revenues reflect examples of the growing influence and profit potential associated with rap. African American artists' creation of an innovative music form is not a contemporary phenomenon. What is novel, however, is the progenitors of this new music form reap a significant portion of the financial benefits their creativity has yielded. Blues, jazz, and rock and roll reflected the heartaches and transformative personas of Americans of African descent. James Brown's 1969 release "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" became an anthem of self-validation in the midst of a movement to secure civil rights. Miles Davis (1960s–1980s) and John Coltrane (1950s–early 1960s) reflected the energy and complexity.
of urban life and mass migration. Unfortunately, more often than not, White entertainers through imitation, distortion, or self-serving copyright filing, reaped the benefits at the expense of Black innovators (Greene, 1999).

Conversely, young rap artists created their own companies (now empires) in their garages, basements, and homes. Rap artists created distribution networks completely outside of the White mainstream recording sector, which, once establish, were sold to major corporate concerns. As such, the money that used to go exclusively to White executives and producers now was and is in the pockets of the creators for the first time in the history of African Americans musicians.

Rap recording artists, Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons' Def Jam, Dr. Dre and Suge Knight's Death Row Records, and Sean "Puffy" Combs' (a.k.a. P. Diddy) Bad Boy Entertainment, and Master P's No Limit Records represent just a few of the rap artists turned multimillionaire entrepreneurs (Considine, 1999; Stephaney, 1999). Another example is Queen Latifah—one of the first female rappers to convert her early success into an empire. Her label and talent agency, Flavor Unit Records and Flavor Unit Management, represent artists and serve as a production company for other ventures. She has established herself as an actress in films such as *Set It Off* and *Living Out Loud*, on the long-running sitcom *Living Single*, and as a talk show host and author (Jamison, 1999).

**Reflections**

While not professing to be an exhaustive social, economic, legal, and political examination of rap music, this article sought to place rap music and its artists in a context rarely seen in the literature. Exploring the prevailing literature and its shortcomings represent only a first step. There is clearly a need to consider conditions that made youth frustrated enough to create rap music. Rap music is America's child, born of the inadequate remediation of social inequities. As offensive as some lyrics may be, they speak the "truth" as constructed by an isolated Black urban youth culture in a land of plenty. Given the pervasive exposure to violence and poverty in particular, it is reasonable to assume that gangsta rappers might feel as Tupac, "It's just me against the world." Rap music deserves in-depth study that engages the artists in dialogue because of its broad appeal, its influence, the social ills lyrics bring to our attention and perhaps most importantly because rap artists have demonstrated a type of integrity, which married entrepreneurship and creativity.

The pivotal hypocrisy is that this art form is disparaged without a critical evaluation of society's role in creating this level of hopelessness. Amidst the despair, gangsta rap breathes life into the inequities substantiated in statistical data and perpetrated against Black urban youth. Within this framework, gangsta rap does not initiate violence. Instead, the verbalizations of violence call attention to structural and cultural injustices of the larger social system in America. In a broad sense, gangsta rap provides a much-needed space in which the impoverished Black community can reshape itself (George, 1994). Youth affinity for actual or fanaticized violence is a result of the collective failure of our societal institutions including our government, businesses, families, social welfare agencies, schools, and religious institutions (CDF, 2002b; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000; CPYV, 2000).

Despite age, race, and gender discrimination rappers' success exemplifies an uncanny ability to command the youth culture's attention and resources. Society may do well to recognize the potency of Black youth culture evidenced through the hip-hop movement. Instead of silencing their voices to which their peers are attentively listening, more researchers and writers need to tap into the knowledge of the artists and engage in a meaningful critical conversation. As pivotal members of the youth culture, many of the
artists play crucial roles in shaping the future society's values, collective consciousness, and cultural pursuits. If the economics of hip-hop culture are any indication, the social marginalization and attack on rap music may create a new powerful group of disenfranchised, angry, monetarily, and politically influential citizens.

Until America comes to understand that violence in the form of poverty and deprivation against children is an injustice to all, hope for curbing violence in the Black community in a traditional sense seems unlikely. Relative to the artists, there is no denying that rap music and the hip-hop culture have carried many impoverished Black youth to unanticipated economic heights. Unfortunately, notoriety and economic mobility, notwithstanding, the general response to rap music has also allowed another Black youth culture to mature without heightening their critical consciousness. That many of these artists without formal musical training command both the throngs of concert goers and their pocketbooks reflect the potential of Black youth. However, how the artists make sense of their journeys as young African Americans in a society that historically and systematically devalued their Blackness seems to be missing from conversations with and about the artists. The absence of this question allows young rap artists to continue without reflection, uncritical paths and indirectly endorses society's demonization of Black youth and culture.

There is a symbiosis between violent reactions in rap music and a culture that rewards violent expressions. Writers, researchers, and scholars continue to be incensed by the counter hegemonic dimensions of this new art form, elated that the music is a cultural elixir for Black communities, or intellectually engaged in dismantling the lyrics in the name of scholarship. Meanwhile the youth culture continues to create a music trajectory replete with money, popularity, and fame. Dialogue with an emphasis on self-evaluation seems conspicuously absent. It is precisely this point—this failure to facilitate a dialectical approach to the evolution of and reaction to rap music and hip-hop—that allows our youth to prioritize economic gain and fame over self-reflection and critical thinking. It is the adultist society's rejection of anything related to African American youth culture that allows youngsters to remain culturally insulated.

Rap music has drawn attention to the subjugated life and senseless violence the mainstream culture attempts to normalize, and more importantly, rap and its progeny have served as an emancipatory tool allowing Black urban youth previously systematically silenced, to name the injustices of poverty and their subjugation. In the end, to liberate ourselves from the diseased culture of violence, we must refuse to accept it and seek alternative songs of transformation, empowerment, and self-determination.

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192 The Journal of Negro Education