



JAMES B. PETERSON

# HIP-HOP HEADPHONES

A SCHOLAR'S CRITICAL PLAYLIST

BLOOMSBURY

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A Scholar's Critical Playlist

James Braxton Peterson

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*For Doreen V. Peterson, who always listened with love.*



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## Introduction: Critical Listening in Critical Times

*Hip-Hop Headphones* is a chaotic collection of definitions, essays, reviews, articles, round tables, and public talks mostly related to Hip-Hop culture, especially Hip-Hop music. The thematic core of these collected works summons the spirit of familial and communal listening that has been endemic to our experience with Hip-Hop culture. During Hip-Hop's early days, we circulated mixtapes—actual cassette tapes with mixes of music from recordings that we made from urban radio that only rarely played Hip Hop. When Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks" was becoming popular in 1980, New York "urban/black" radio played the song once a day. My brothers, sisters, and I would gather around the radio—when radios were large boxes with antennae and had cassette decks in them—at the same time every day. We would dance and rap the words to Blow's hit because these family rituals were our "breaks." Critical listening then was done mostly for the purpose of being able to recite popular rhymes from memory and to verbally ride all over break beats in our favorite Hip-Hop songs. But the process of memorizing rap lyrics by rote and the practice of reciting them over and over was one crucible through which we came to love the lyrics of Hip-Hop culture.

That love affair endures, but paying studious attention to the lyrics of Hip-Hop culture has taken on greater significance for me as a scholar of Africana studies and as a thinking/conscious person living in the critical conundrum that has become the twenty-first century. Kurtis Blow's "breaks" were about break beats, but it was also about brakes on vehicles, and the good and bad "breaks" that we get in life. Finding/discovering the multilayered meaning in words has always been a fascinating feature of sociolinguistic inquiry. In the land of the free and the home of the brave, the ability to discern the nuances of language has continued to be a critical skill in complicated—often Orwellian—times. Hip Hop's ongoing capacity to produce environments

wherein we might engage in what Jay-Z refers to as “Lyrical Exercise” provides vital space for learning how to figure out (and figure in) the world in which we live. Hip-Hop generational folks have had to rip the sinister meanings from too many platitudes to list here but consider the real meanings behind and beneath the following political phrases: Mission Accomplished, The War on Drugs, The War on Terror, Stand Your Ground, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, Take Back Our Country, or my personal favorite—Citizens United.

Great lyrics of Hip-Hop culture produce opportunities for critical reflection in these complicated times. In “Daydreamin,” maybe one of the best single Hip-Hop records of all time, Lupe Fiasco raps that he cannot sleep because he has the “hood” on him like “Abu Ghraib.” Before I decode this complex simile, please note that this book is almost as much about the generation of critical lists as it is about the practice of critical listening. My assertion that “Daydreamin” is one of the greatest Hip-Hop songs of all time is completely subjective—based only on my twenty-plus years of studying rap music and Hip-Hop culture, my upbringing in Newark, New Jersey, in the 1970s and 1980s in the shadows of the city where Hip Hop was born, and my research in the culture—interviews with artists; dialogues with journalists and scholars; reading, writing, and teaching about Hip Hop since about 1995; and so on and so on. Since before I became an “official” scholar of the culture, the discourses on who is the greatest and who/what you are listening to at any given point in Hip-Hop time have been the building blocks of critical listening and critical community—the substance of Hip-Hop culture itself—powerfully generated through what H. Samy Alim has defined as Hip-Hop Nation Language—the very way that we speak.

Back to Lupe’s inability to sleep because he has the “hood” on him “like Abu Ghraib.” Nas has a famous line from his 1994 debut, *Illmatic*’s “N. Y. State of Mind.” In that lyric, he refuses to sleep because sleep is the “cousin of death.” Both Nas and Lupe’s notions of sleep figure on its perceived proximity to permanent dirt naps, but they are both also ruminating on notions of sleep being akin to an absence of consciousness—an inability to be aware of the critical goings-on in one’s own surroundings and in the broader world in which we all live. Sleep in this sense has nothing to do with rest or restoration, dreams or nightmares, and has everything to do with consciousness and the awareness

required to critically engage the world. This same lyrical phrase from Lupe features a morphemic figuration on the term “neighborhood” that has become common in Hip-Hop parlance. The ’hood is a contemporary catchall reference to the blocks, ghettos, and neighborhoods within which late-capitalist neoliberal outcomes are most pronounced in America. John Singleton’s classic film *Boys N the Hood* lays bare some of the environmental pitfalls of modern urban life. But the ’hood here engenders both its locational meaning and its literal meaning—referring to the kind of hood (or hoodie) that Trayvon Martin wore on the evening of his tragic demise, as well as to those black hoods that were placed over the heads of those who were tortured in the nefarious Abu Ghraib prison. The lyric then intimates both a human and religious connection that Lupe establishes between his narrator and those who were subjected to torture, degradation, and humiliation at the hands of the United States in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Lupe is, after all, a practitioner of Islam, but the lyric challenges the denizens of America’s ’hoods to make canny connections between the roles that law enforcement and military play in their lives as well as in those who are deemed to be foreign enemies of the state. A deeper interpretation of the lyric might work as a critique of both the US Army’s practices of torture and dehumanization in the Abu Ghraib prison and the comparable practices carried out by the Saddam Hussein government on its own citizens prior to Iraq’s second war with the United States (and its allies). A shorter, more compact iteration of the themes of this important Lupe lyric might be found in the popular Hip-Hop directive: *don’t sleep*.

In order to follow the hashtag command to “stay woke” on issues of criminal justice, militarization, and incarceration, we need only reflect on the lyrical career of the inimitable Lauryn Hill. A recording on the Lauryn Hill *Unplugged* album, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” is an incisive categorical dissection of our decrepit criminal justice system rendered in the modern era. Hill exclaims that it (i.e., the criminal justice system) will “all fall down,” but not before her lyrical detailing of the atrocities have become one more compelling contribution to her artistic legacy. She indicts the system for its unchecked and racially imbalanced aggressiveness. At various points, she incriminates the judges, the prosecutors, the bailiffs, and the court reporters who are all too often more invested in headlines than in justice. Defense lawyers, expert

witnesses, and jurors are not spared here either. Through Lauryn Hill's lyrics, the absurd depths of injustice in our criminal justice system are poetically exposed. The song stands (even now) as a diatribe that dismantles the myths of justice in our systems and deconstructs the "mystery" of the "iniquity" that plagues these systems. The album *Unplugged* was released in 2002, which is a decade prior to the publication of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and thirteen years before President Obama's widely praised "mass incarceration" speech delivered in the summer of 2015. Yeah, stay woke.

Lauryn Hill's lyrical body of work is relatively short in quantity, but it is qualitatively rich, speaking volumes of critical substance for potentially engaged listeners. In "Zealot," an overlooked track in 1996's immensely popular Fugees album, *The Score*, Hill quips the following: "Two MCs can't occupy the same space at the same time." In one verse, she explicates the physics of the Hip-Hop universe: that MCs cannot be exact copies of each other in the exact same time and space—at least not without attracting serious critique and ultimate erasure from/by the Hip-Hop community. Hill's lyric here alludes to the Pauli exclusion principle, named after Wolfgang Pauli, a scientist who configured the basis of the principle in quantum mechanics that governs how certain particles interact. The science is way beyond the orbit of my expertise, but the principle speaks to the physical behavior of everyday matter and as such is an apt metaphor/analogy for certain principles within Hip-Hop culture. That is, how MCs lyrically relate to each other, whether by overlapping cross-influenced styles or through intertextual themes and discourses, is an everyday matter for the critical listeners within the Hip-Hop nation. Although repetition, sampling, remixing, and appropriation are fundamental principles of Hip-Hop culture, biting or stealing without giving proper credit and the blatant absence of original style in MC-ing/rapping (in particular) are not only frowned upon but also ultimately impossible within the public spheres of Hip-Hop culture. Consider here the fact that the entire No Limit Records (second phase in the late 1990s) required that Tupac not be around (or alive) for constituents of Hip Hop to not reject the ways in which Master P, Sillk, and C-Murder borrowed aspects of Tupac's style and persona in order to launch their careers. Around the same time, Lil Kim and Foxy Brown lyrically fought to be the queen bee of Hip Hop; Lil Kim won. And after the murder of Biggie Smalls,

a bevy of artists, including Sean “Puffy” Combs, DMX, and Jay-Z stepped into the gaping hole in Hip Hop left by his passing. Hip-Hop artists can be influenced by other artists; they can quote each other—and they do—but they cannot artistically occupy the same space at the same time. The culture rejects it and the aficionados of the culture protect the spaces in ways that prevent it. But Lauryn Hill said it, and in one lyrical speech act, she challenges listeners to critically engage the meanings of her assertion about the physics of/for MCs in Hip-Hop culture. By the way, there is only one Lauryn Hill, and despite numerous attempts by commentators to claim that some new(er) artist can stake a claim to her indelible imprint in Hip Hop, it will never happen and she spoke this theoretical fact into existence twenty years ago.

Some of what I am saying here can now be found in Hip-Hop discourses across various online platforms. The Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive ([www.ohhla.com](http://www.ohhla.com)) was the platform of choice for those interested in seeing rap lyrics on the digital page, but Rap Genius, now just Genius ([genius.com](http://genius.com)) pushed the transcription of rap lyrics idea to the next level—offering verified and (artist) verifiable transcripts of lyrics with annotations. The very existence of these web-based platforms signals an important (and paradigmatic) shift in the discourses on and about Hip-Hop culture. So many of the selections in *Hip-Hop Headphones* take an oversimplified historical framing of the culture into account in order to make certain claims about the critical listening that is endemic to the culture. The eras of Hip Hop help to shed some light on the various and interesting ways that the critical listening community engages in discourses about the music of the culture. For example, the oft-cited golden era of Hip Hop (from about the mid-1980s through the mid- to late-1990s) featured a shift in how we consume the music. The shift, a decidedly visual one that was characterized by the onset of music videos and music television, was a key development in Hip-Hop culture’s ascension (or expansion) into American mainstream popular culture. If the visualization of Hip-Hop narratives in some ways obscured the central aspects of Hip Hop’s lyrical wizardry, that obscuration was temporary. Made so by the simple fact that for critical listeners of Hip-Hop lyrics, words, rhymes, poetic technique, and linguistic mastery continue to matter even in our multimedia digital-based world. And this is why developments in the branding and innovation in the technologies



that are used for listening to the music have taken on such seminal significance in Hip-Hop culture.

The cover art for *Hip-Hop Headphones* features a digitally and artistically enhanced image of my son, James Braxton Peterson, III, listening to Hip-Hop music (on an airplane), through a popular brand of headphones. One compelling feature in the historical developments of Hip-Hop culture is the fact that Hip Hop unfolds contemporaneously with a range of technological developments in how we produce and listen to music. For old-school-era Hip-Hop folks, the transitions from the boombox moment—a time when young Hip-Hop heads would carry portable (and I use this term lightly) radios around our neighborhoods with the latest rap tunes blasting from the radio's speakers—to the Sony Walkman and Discman moments of personalized listening, to the heyday of super-decibel car stereo systems (particularly on the West Coast), together reflect a whirlwind of distinct critical listening opportunities and situations. For all of that progress and distinction in the practices of how we listen to Hip Hop, few could have anticipated the birth of the iPod or of Hip-Hop branded “high-end” headphones.

The advent of the iPod (in 2001) signaled a rebirth of personalized critical listening opportunities. Now music aficionados could carry their entire music collections on a device that fits in a pants' pocket. iTunes software (released on Macintosh computers in 2000) allowed critical listeners to create (and now share) endless amounts and configurations of playlists. With this tremendous advancement in making entire music collections portable—in the true sense of the word sans the weight of the big boom boxes—it could not be long before the market place configured ways to further commoditize the listening experience. Headphones have always been part of Hip-Hop culture. DJs used headphones in innovative ways at the very onset of the culture. In the twenty-first century, we are now treated to a bevy of branded headphones that offer studio-quality listening capacity through headphones dripping with Hip-Hop cultural styles and the brand signatures of some of Hip Hop's most popular artists. I consider it a fortunate privilege to have been alive during the full range of these commercial and technological developments in how we listen to the music that I have loved and enjoyed for most of my life. But a critical question that *Hip-Hop Headphones* seeks to answer is what to do

with these resources for listening to the vast repertoire of lyrical ingenuity that Hip-Hop music represents. One answer is to use all of the tools at our disposal to continue to listen to the music critically.

Soft drink giant, Sprite, has proven the fact that Hip-Hop lyrics are commodities across the eras and developments of the culture. In 2015, the company launched its “Obey Your Verse” ad campaign, signifying on the brand’s popular “Obey Your Thirst” ads originally made popular by a 1995 commercial featuring the freestyle lyrics of Pete Rock, C. L. Smooth, and Grand Puba. Twenty years later, the “Obey Your Verse” ad campaign features a series of sixteen Sprite cans emblazoned with a set of classic verses from Nas: “The World is Yours”; Rakim: “Thinking of a Master Plan”; Biggie Smalls/Notorious B.I.G.: “Lyrically I’m supposed to represent”; and Drake: “Know yourself/Know your worth.” Any commercial intervention into the well-argued discourses on the greatest lyrics of Hip-Hop culture will undoubtedly invite ongoing debates about who is the greatest and what are the greatest lyrics of all time. Most will accept the assertion of Nas, Biggie, and Rakim as being a part of these ongoing debates. Drake’s inclusion, however, poses certain challenges to these discussions, especially for old-school-era Hip-Hop heads. It is not just that he is too new or too popular to be considered among the greatest lyricists of all time, but that he comes into the culture from a different station in life and from a region (Toronto) that is not New York—that is, not from the birthplace of Hip-Hop culture.<sup>1</sup> Setting these authenticity and regional origin concerns aside, the lyrics of Rakim, Nas, and Biggie are established in their legendary status. Rakim’s “Thinking of a master plan” from 1986’s “Paid in Full” is a lyrical entrée into the mind of an MC who has often been referred to as “the God.” “Paid in Full” is a deceptively simple narrative about the common plight of the poor and working-class constituents of Hip-Hop culture—having no money and thinking of all the ways to get some. Rakim’s narrator in “Paid in Full” ultimately decides to forego any criminal means of acquiring capital and instead opts to focus on his music and artistry to get paid in full. Nas’ lyric is actually the title of one of his most well-known tracks. In Peterson (2009), I contributed to a collection of writings about Nas’ 1994 debut album, *Illmatic*, edited by Sohail Dulatzhai and Michael Eric Dyson. In it, I focus in on the lyrics and samples of “The World Is Yours” and argue that

Nas' interpretation of the phrase—derived from classic imagery from the 1983 version of *Scarface*, starring Al Pacino—relies heavily on racial romanticism and certain aspirational narratives related to underground economies that appeal to Hip-Hop artists across the eras of the culture. “The World Is Yours” takes into account the imperative to get “Paid in Full” and pushes past the idea that Hip-Hop artistry is in and of itself the only means by which Hip-Hop constituents might claim this world as their own. These lines are and have been classic staples in the lyrical tapestry of Hip-Hop culture. Adding Biggie’s “lyrically I’m supposed to represent” to this mix makes sense because debates about Biggie’s greatness in comparison to Nas and Rakim (and to others, including Jay-Z and Tupac) in many ways resolve on who represents the culture the best through his/her lyrics. This classic quip from Biggie speaks poetic volumes to the value of Hip-Hop music and culture in the lives of these artists and in the lives of millions of their fans. Biggie asserts that there is an inherent imperative to lyrically represent himself, his neighborhood, his city, his Hip-Hop nation. That impulse to represent is one of the driving value systems within the culture itself.

All of the featured lyrics in the “Obey Your Verse” ad campaign wrestle with material and other value systems within the culture. Material and monetary gain, whether through the artistry or through underground economies, factors into the imperatives to represent where we are from and the socioeconomic circumstances within which much of Hip-Hop culture was produced. It is in this way that Drake’s “Know yourself/Know your worth” begins to make some critical sense in the ad campaign. Again, to the extent that constituents of the culture can set aside the aforementioned resistance to including Drake among this established pantheon of lyrical masters—Rakim, Nas, and Biggie—we might consider an interpretation of Drake’s words within the Hip-Hop value system frame. “Know yourself/Know your worth” can function on the level of the individual—that is, in order to claim the world, get paid in full, and represent where you are from, you have to first know yourself and thereby know your value. But Drake has been known to speak on behalf of (i.e., represent) Hip Hop more broadly—listening to Drake’s popular 2013 single “Started from the Bottom” and its many remakes and remixes proves this point. If the lyric “Know yourself/Know your worth” can be applied to the culture itself—and

in fact it should be applied to the lyrics of the culture, given the commercial contexts of the “Obey Your Verse” ad campaign—then the lyric points to how and why we can and should value the lyrics of Hip-Hop culture.

Sprite and many other consumer product corporations have monetized the lyrics of Hip Hop in order to sell any and everything. One assumption in *Hip-Hop Headphones* is that these same lyrics have discursive and *educational* value for the listening communities associated with the culture. Critical listening is one practice through which we have (and will continue) to harvest the educational value in the lyrics of Hip-Hop culture. In this sense, knowing what the culture is, how it has developed, and how it has been historically framed are all important parts of the process of fully understanding the culture’s educational “worth,” so to speak. My hope is that *Hip-Hop Headphones* will become a staple resource for all educators who are interested in and committed to teaching the history, artistry, and culture of Hip Hop at all levels of education. If we can come to embrace critical listening as a practice akin to critical thinking, to be used as a tool to develop critical media literacy, then the educational value of Hip-Hop culture might be fully realized.

Chapter 1, “RE: Definitions,” culls together a set of definitions of Hip-Hop culture that were designed/conceived from various vantage points and/or frames. In order to develop a framework for the cultural and historical contexts from which critical listening emerges, this chapter defines Hip Hop through various frames. Some of these frames or vantage points include the categorical or elemental frames for defining Hip Hop—Graf art, Breaking, DJ-ing, and Rapping. Other approaches settle in on the historical eras of Hip Hop—the old school, golden, and platinum eras or ages formulate one of the critical bedrocks upon which Hip-Hop discourses continue to be cultivated by critical listening communities. Still other approaches feature analyses through race or racial lenses and/or sub genres of the music. This multifaceted approach to defining Hip-Hop culture sets in motion the machinery of discursive practices that substantiate the communities of Hip Hop and help to harness the educational potential that might be derived from a critical interface with Hip-Hop music.

Chapter 2, “Becoming and Being a Hip Hop Scholar,” takes a slight autobiographical turn in order to chart my academic development, in part, to reveal the unfolding of certain lived experiences in Newark, New

Jersey, at the onset of Hip Hop's old school era. This chapter focuses less on defining what a Hip-Hop scholar is and tends more toward operationalizing the pedagogical approaches to teaching (as well as writing and research) that underwrite the value of critical listening as a scholar and would-be aficionado of the culture. Being a scholar of Hip Hop challenges academics to engage in discourses emanating from within popular culture on topics and subject matter that might not always produce neat or comfortable course outcomes and safe class discussions. But learning how to listen to students in the twenty-first century might be the most significant aspect of the critical listening directives of and within this work. Chapters 1 and 2 constitute the "Definitions" section of the book, a longer form of introduction of sorts where I attempt to define the culture and an academic subjectivity that emerges out of that culture.

Chapters 3 ("Ashy to Classy"), 4 ("Best Never Heard") make up Part 2 of *Hip-Hop Headphones*. Each of these short essays attempts to re-present concepts and insights from public academic talks given at Georgetown University, University of Pennsylvania, and Northeastern University and at various points over the course of my academic development. "Ashy to Classy" signifies on a well-known line/lyric from Biggie Smalls/Notorius B.I.G. and contemplates the lyrical "phrases of poverty" that have populated Hip-Hop discourses over the last several decades of the culture's existence and development. Defining Hip Hop in or through certain socioeconomic contexts requires critical listening, an educational intervention into class-related themes in the lyrics of Hip-Hop music. "Best Never Heard" briefly highlights the pedagogical potential of playlists in the classroom and beyond the walls of educational institutions. Through the discourses available in Hip-Hop culture, the culture's constituents take full advantage of the Black public sphere in certain contexts/situations presenting important learning environments and opportunities for education within the culture.

Part 3, "Scholarly Reviews," consists mostly of republished and slightly refurbished reviews of books and films. "Angry Black White Boyz" is less of a review and more of a revisiting of my experiences listening to a range of white male artists within Hip-Hop culture. Given the ongoing critical and popular discourses related to cultural appropriation, artistic authenticity, and whiteness

in Hip Hop, this selection serves as an overview (and review) of the white male rappers who have captured the imaginations of Hip Hop's (largely white) consumer audience. The other reviews—of two films and two books—are for the most part self-explanatory, but the process of writing reviews—a process that most scholars of all disciplines engage in at some point—usually early—in their careers—is a process that requires critical listening and the subsequent distillation of the listening (and viewing) experience into an assessment of the text under review. I see the writing involved in review processes as important and substantive outcomes of the critical listening project.

Part 4, “Rap Around the Table,” transcribes an academic roundtable at Ohio State University's outstanding perennial “Hip Hop Literacies” conference hosted by Dr. Elaine Richardson. Roundtables are loosely organized discussion sessions—skull sessions if you will—that mirror and model the discursive practices that work in tandem with the critical listening practices that I am arguing are an important educational aspect of Hip-Hop culture. This roundtable features Treva Lindsay, Scott Heath, and Regina Bradley. The conversation ranges in reach and in scope to cover some of the important themes in contemporary Hip-Hop scholarship. The (academic) roundtable is an exercise that relies heavily on the everyday practices of critical listening. Each participant/speaker and/or moderator on these roundtables has spent hundreds if not thousands of hours listening to Hip-Hop music. Some of those hours have been critical listening hours and that shows in the erudite insights found in this section.

The final section of *Headphones*, “Rapademics,” collects three academic essays that critically engage Hip-Hop scholarship from various topics and perspectives. Chapter 11 “These Three Words,” revisits various censorship efforts directed at the use of profanity and controversial language in Hip Hop and considers whether or not the censorship project operating within and in response to Hip-Hop music can ultimately have merit and impact in the ways that its supporters imagine. Chapter 12, “Corner Boy Masculinity,” revisits the story world of HBO's *The Wire* in order to read Common's “The Corner” over and against the corner boys featured in Season 4 of the critically acclaimed socioeconomic drama set in Baltimore, Maryland. And finally, Chapter 13 showcases the value of Hip-Hop cultural approaches to the college composition classroom.

In addition to critical listening, this chapter considers other Hip-Hop pedagogies and strategies that inform and innovate the traditional rhetoric and composition courses. A brief conclusion and an appendix that includes course syllabi, course descriptions, and several of the pedagogical playlists referenced in Chapter 4 round out this chaotic collection on the critical, educational potential inherent in Hip-Hop culture. The best way to “read” *Hip-Hop Headphones* is with your music collection on deck. Happy listening!

## Part One

# Definitions





## Re: Definition

### I Defining rap

In his 1976 book *Roots*, Alex Haley wrote about his extraordinary journey to excavate the narratives of his African ancestry, including his encounter with a griot (an African oral historian) in a West African village.<sup>1</sup> This seventy-three-year-old griot recited a protracted history of the tribe—recounting its origins and establishing direct connections between Alex Haley and his mythological ancestor, Kunta Kinte. The scene, as detailed by Haley, is as enigmatic and unforgettable as any of the episodes of the 1977 *Roots* television miniseries.<sup>2</sup> Haley was overcome with gratitude as the tribal community worked together to bring his long-lost African relatives to him, so that this momentous occasion could be captured through photography. Flash forward thirty-eight years to 2015 and Kendrick Lamar’s “King Kunta,” a deceptively simple-sounding track on his critically acclaimed second studio album—*To Pimp A Butterfly*—and Haley’s ancestor inhabits the world of Hip Hop as a king of lyrical/verbal artistry and invention. King Kunta boasts of his success in the rap game, challenges other rappers who may not be writing their own lyrics, and celebrates his roots (via “the yams”) and the potential that Hip-Hop artists have to wrestle an ancestral history from obscurity, a history too often inaccessible to the Hip-Hop generation as an ongoing consequence of chattel slavery and various systematic attempts to erase the humanity and the history of Black folks in America.

Amid the powerful energy of ancestral reconnection and historical continuity in Haley’s roots-based recovery narrative, one might gloss over a key element in the retelling: How is it possible that the griot is able to retain centuries of genealogical information and perform it on demand? One part of

the answer to this query is that griots perform history in verse. The griot is, in this instance, the ancestral progenitor of the modern-day rapper—hence Kendrick Lamar’s allusion to Haley’s Kunta Kinte. Griots preserve tremendous amounts of cultural information for spontaneous performances in verse for tribal communities. Of course, years of repetition help to instantiate these tribal histories in the collective memories of the griot as well as his audience, but Alex Haley’s experiences and the powerful narrative that emerged from these experiences suggest enduring connections between ancient African griots and prominent rappers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In no small way, the history and political economy of rap music is reflected in this *Roots* moment. First, the power and political potential of rhymed verse is readily apparent in Haley’s interaction with the West African griot. Second, rap music, notwithstanding its modern-day origins as entertainment, has always been challenged to shoulder the social responsibilities of the communities from which it emerged. In 1979, rap music exploded onto the popular landscape with the enormous success of a single by the Sugarhill Gang entitled “Rapper’s Delight.”<sup>3</sup> Following its release in October 1979, “Rapper’s Delight,” with its complete sample of the group Chic’s disco hit “Good Times,” was a mainstay on the Billboard Pop charts for twelve weeks.<sup>4</sup> Although it was not the first rap record to garner popular acclaim (i.e., Fatback Band’s “King Tim III (Personality Jock),” which was released earlier in 1979), “Rappers Delight” is still considered the popular point of departure for contemporary rap music.<sup>5</sup>

The griot is only one of several African or African American progenitors of the rapper. In fact, there is a continuous trajectory from griot to rapper that underscores the ever-present relationship between the oral poet and the community within the African and African American traditions. Other oratorical precedents to rappers and rap music that emerged after the griot but before “Rapper’s Delight,” include: Jamaican-style toasts (a form of poetic narrative performed to instrumental music); various blues songs (especially where conversational talking styles are dominant); prison toasts; playing the dozens (an endless repertoire of verbal insults); disc jockey announcer styles, such as that of Douglas “Jocko” Henderson; the Black Power poetry of Amiri Baraka; the street-inflected sermons of Malcolm X; and the rhetorical prowess

of nearly all of the prominent Black poets of the early 1970s, including Gil Scott Heron, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, the Watts Poets, and the Last Poets.

Rap music might not exist (at least in the way it does today) without the precedential, iconic influence of James Brown. The “Godfather of Soul” was also the preeminent forefather of rap music. James Brown’s celebrated call-and-response technique—coupled with his conversational vocal style, his incredible interaction with his band and audience, and his ear for the most contagious break-down arrangements in the history of Black music—positions him at the genesis of Hip-Hop culture from which rap music was derived. Listening to a James Brown classic, such as “Funky Drummer”<sup>6</sup> or “Funky President,”<sup>7</sup> will immediately render his impact on rap music apparent. Indeed, Brown was rapping before rap music became reified as a popular phenomenon. It is no mistake that James Brown’s music is still one of the most sampled and copied sounds in rap music.

When all of the historical and influential touchstones for rap music are considered, the fact that rap has become the premier element of Hip-Hop culture, a culture that has spread all over the world, should be fairly unremarkable. Since 1979, thousands of known and unknown rappers have produced records, and some of them have achieved commercial success. In order to develop a definitive sense of rap music, especially concerning its connections to race and African American culture, as well as its relationship to inner-city populations and American popular culture, various subcategories of the genre warrant some further explanation/definition. The following taxonomy divides rap music into four somewhat simplistic categories: mainstream, underground, conscious, and gangsta.

Mainstream rap music is the category most widely listened to by the majority population. It is a fairly fluid category. At one point (during the old school and golden age eras of Hip Hop, from about 1975 to 1990), mainstream rap was conscious and consistently political. For example, during their heyday (c. 1988 to 1989), Public Enemy—whose music was motivated by a sustained critique of white supremacy and their deep dislike/distrust of governmental politics and policies—was the most popular rap group on the most popular recording label, Def Jam Recordings. By the mid-1990s, mainstream rap’s content had completed a dramatic, paradigmatic shift toward more violent and

misogynistic narratives allegedly designed to denounce the horrific conditions of American inner cities. By the late 1990s and through the first half of the first decade of 2000, the content of mainstream rap shifted yet again, this time toward the celebration of conspicuous consumption. Some scholars and fans refer to this current mainstream moment of rap as the “bling bling era” (the term “bling bling” was coined by the New Orleans rapper B.G., short for “Baby Gangsta,” in onomatopoeic allusion to the glistening radiance of his diamond-encrusted platinum jewelry).<sup>8</sup>

Underground rap music is even more difficult to define because it generally takes its cues from mainstream rap and often does not (and by some definitions cannot) enjoy the popular distribution, exposure, and financial attention and rewards of mainstream music. Underground rap tends to be predicated on regional or local development and support, although with the advent of the internet and the imminently transferable mp3 music files, underground networks have expanded across local, regional, and even international barriers. Underground rap must also, in both content and form, distinguish itself from popular mainstream rap. Thus, when mainstream rap is about being a gangster, underground rap tends to be more politically conscious, and vice versa. When mainstream rap production is sample-heavy with an explicit emphasis on beats per minute (BPM) hovering in the mid-1990s, underground rap will dispense with samples and sport BPMs well into the 100s. This symbiotic relationship between the mainstream and the underground is far too complex to fully explicate here, but inevitably, one defines itself against the other, sometime through reverse reciprocity. Most mainstream styles of rap were at one time or another considered underground. Some of the most talented underground rappers and rap groups are: Rebel Diaz, Invincible, The Living Legends, MF Doom, Immortal Technique, The VI-Kings, The Last Emperor, Medusa, Chillin Villain Empire (CVE), Aceyalone, and Murs.

Conscious rap music came into prominence in 1982 with the release of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message.”<sup>9</sup> The term “conscious,” as it is being employed here, refers to an artist’s lyrical realization of the various social forces at play in the poor and working-class environments from which many rappers hail and from where the music and culture of Hip Hop originated. “The Message” was a powerful response to/commentary

on postindustrial inner-city conditions in America. Since then, the subgenre of conscious rap music has continued to produce some of the most inspired songs for the enlightenment and uplift of Black and brown people. Run–D.M.C.’s “Proud to Be Black”<sup>10</sup>; KRS-One’s “Self-Destruction,”<sup>11</sup> “Why Is That?”<sup>12</sup> and “Black Cop”<sup>13</sup>; and Public Enemy’s “Can’t Truss It,”<sup>14</sup> “Shut ‘Em Down,”<sup>15</sup> and “911 Is a Joke,”<sup>16</sup> all come to mind. Conscious rap thrives in the shadows of both underground rap and mainstream rap, even as it innovates and informs a genre that most people associate with violence and consumerism.

Gangsta rap is a subgenre that stems from a complex set of cultural and sociological circumstances. Gangsta rap is a media term partially borrowed from the African American vernacular form of the word *gangster*. African American Vernacular English [AAVE] employs many systemic rules and features. One of these features is “r-lessness,” meaning that speakers drop or significantly reduce the “r” in certain linguistic situations. When the popularity of rap music shifted from New York City and the East Coast to Los Angeles and the West Coast (between 1988 and 1992), this geographic reorientation was accompanied by distinct stylistic shifts and striking differences in the contents and sounds of the music. This paradigmatic shift took place in the late 1980s through the early 1990s and is most readily represented in the career peak of the late 1980s conscious group Public Enemy (PE), as well as the subsequent, meteoric rise of N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), a group from Compton, California. Just as the marketing and retail potential of rap music was gaining prominence (both PE and N.W.A. were early beneficiaries of rap music’s now legendary platinum-selling potential), the music industry media clamored to find acceptable terminology with which to report on this new, powerful, and vulgar phenomenon. Since the challenges of gang warfare in Los Angeles were already journalistic and cinematic in legend (consider gangster narratives such as *The Godfather Saga*, *Goodfellas*, and *Scarface*), the term “gangsta rap” was aptly coined in response.

Yet even at its inception, gangsta rap compelled scholars, journalists, and critics to confront the cruel realities of inner-city living (initially in the South Bronx and Philadelphia with KRS-One and Schoolly D, and almost simultaneously with Ice-T and N.W.A. on the West Coast). Still, only the rudimentary realities of poverty, police brutality, gang violence, and