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[Introduction to] I Got Something to Say: Gender, Race, and Social Consciousness in Rap Music

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I Got Something to Say

Gender, Race, and Social Consciousness
in Rap Music

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Introduction: Started from the Bottom...

“*Fuck Donald Trump*” pulsates throughout the chorus of the song, encouraging the listener to lip-sync and head nod. This emphatically anti-Trump refrain comes from the rapper YG’s (featuring Nipsey Hussle) song entitled “FDT”; that is, Fuck Donald Trump. The song hit the charts the April preceding the November 2016 presidential election in the United States. After the track went viral, white rap artists Macklemore and G-Eazy added verses to a remix released that August. In the song, the rappers criticize Donald Trump’s controversial statements regarding American foreign policy. During his run for the White House, President Trump argued that weak immigration laws allow Mexican “rapists” and “criminals” free entry into the U.S.¹ Trump based his candidacy on erecting a “wall” between the two countries, which he claimed Mexico would pay for in full—a position that was viewed as racist and xenophobic by some in the rap world. Rapper Nipsey Hussle vehemently asserts in “FDT” that “[i]t wouldn’t be the U.S.A. without Mexicans,” rebuking Trump’s only somewhat coded appeal to a strictly Anglo-American conception of the United States. In response to Trump’s denigrating characterization of Mexicans, the artist calls for black and Hispanic unity, rapping “black love, brown pride in the sets again”—lyrics that stand in stark contrast to Trump’s divisive rhetoric.

The artists also challenge the forced removal of black teenagers from a 2016 rally for Donald Trump in Georgia. Using sound bites from an interview in the song’s introduction, a teen explains: “I think we got kicked out [of the rally] because we’re a group of black people...and like

they're afraid we're gonna say something or do something.” In response to this expulsion, YG exclaims in “FDT” that “...your racist ass did too much” by removing the rally attendees. He goes on to condemn Trump, questioning the Republican candidate’s fitness for the office. In rap convention, this song reads as politically-oriented, drawing attention to language perceived as discriminatory and jingoistic from then-candidate Donald Trump. However, YG characterizes himself as “non-political.”² Indeed, scores of seemingly “non-political” rap artists referenced Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. According to an analysis performed by CNN, there were a total of 83 songs by 70 different rappers in 2015 that mention Donald Trump by name with the vast majority denouncing him for his “hateful” comments (I discuss rappers’ responses to Trump in the last chapter). In contrast, there were 18 songs from 17 different artists in 2015 and early 2016 that referenced Hillary Clinton.³

Anti-Trump discourse pervaded the rap world, significantly eclipsing pro-Clinton lyrics. Clinton received endorsements from artists such as Jay-Z, Young Jeezy, Snoop Dogg, and Chance the Rapper,⁴ but she also attracted critics. Rap mogul Sean “Diddy” Combs encouraged blacks to “hold” their vote until she appropriately addressed matters pertinent to those in the black community.⁵ Her most strident detractor was Killer Mike, an Atlanta-based rapper from the music group Run the Jewels, who supported Bernie Sanders during the Democratic primaries. While publically endorsing Sanders during a rally at Morehouse College in February 2016, Killer Mike shared a remark by white activist Jane Elliot. According to Mike, Elliot told him: “Michael [aka Killer Mike], a uterus doesn’t qualify you to be president of the United States...you have to have a policy that is reflective of social justice.”⁶ For both, Clinton’s sex was not enough to support her; in their estimation, she failed to espouse social policies that helped people of color. In fact, she received criticism from and was reprimanded by members of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for referring to blacks as “superpredators”—presumably a racially loaded term—during the 1990s.⁷ Although not as irreverent as YG, Killer Mike made his voice heard. He felt like he had something to say.

“Fuck tha Police,” a social commentary on policing, was an instant classic released in 1988 from the California rap group Niggaz Wit Attitudes (NWA). In it, group members Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Dr. Dre narrate a faux trial where they play the protagonists, recounting

their negative interactions with police officers. During their testimony, they chronicle their experiences with racial profiling and police brutality. Indeed, a powerful scene from the 2015 movie *Straight Outta Compton* (a semiautobiographical account of the rise of NWA) perfectly captures their encounters with California police officers and the anguish they express in their music. In the scene, police officers approach the artists in front of their recording studio and tell them to drop to the ground and place their hands behind their backs. When the rappers question these actions, the cops threaten them with arrest. In a verse from “Fuck tha Police” that addresses the harassment and brutality from the police—just before the reverberating and concussive chorus—Ice Cube adamantly proclaims, “Yo Dre, *I Got Something to Say.*”

Rap artists have been expressing their thoughts since the art form began in the 1970s, not only on matters like the presidency and police brutality, but on a broad range of topics including interpersonal relationships, sexuality, poverty, wealth, partying, and dance, among other themes. In her seminal monograph, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose writes that rap music “...is the central cultural vehicle for open social reflection on poverty, fear of adulthood, the desire for absent fathers, frustrations about male sexism, female sexual desires, daily rituals of life as an unemployed teen hustler, safe sex, anger, violence, and childhood memories.”⁸ She continues that the music simultaneously offers “...innovative uses of style and language...and ribald storytelling.”⁹ Albeit often saturated with misogynistic, sexist, hyperviolent, homophobic, and hypermasculine themes, rap artists quite often articulate subversive, creative, political and sometimes contradictory messages, in their music. Moreover, record companies and market forces may dictate, temper, or mute what artists express in their songs. This book explores these dynamics in contemporary rap music for millennial emcees.

Although quite insightful, many of the past reflections on rap music rely on impressionistic claims, whether through personal narratives and observations or uncritical speculation. Such an approach can be useful and necessary, but may also be short-sighted.¹⁰ More of the compelling and ground-breaking work on hip hop and rap comes from ethnographies; for example, Anthony Harrison’s *Hip Hop Underground*, Jooyoung Lee’s *Blowin’ Up*, Marcyliena Morgan’s *The Real HipHop*, and Geoff Harkness’ *Chicago Hustle and Flow*.¹¹ These monographs offer critical insights into the everyday lives of rap artists while also contributing to our understanding of race, gender, and class dynamics. Yet, these

works focus on select populations of individuals on the West Coast and the Midwest. Also, they explore the hip-hop scene in the late 1990s or early 2000s. Drawing on a larger sample of current artists and their lyrics offers the possibility for a broader, more detailed and fine-grained examination of rap music that is far-reaching and more timely in its analysis. Future studies must critically analyze bigger samples of rap music from the millennial generation rigorously and systematically. This book fills this gap while complementing previous research on hip hop culture.

Using an empirically-driven approach to examining rap music from 2005 to 2015, I note the continuities from its birth, but also reveal important and progressive differences. The genre remains male-dominated but moves beyond the hegemonic tropes of misogyny and violence, and to varying degrees addresses male vulnerability, female empowerment, same-sex desire, white privilege, and black liberation. Most noteworthy are artists' who challenge the current occupant of the White House through their politicized songs. As a result, this book highlights the presence of social commentary—anchored in the deconstruction of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and black activism—in rap over the last ten years and provides a signpost for the next generation of artists.

Applying an interdisciplinary approach that uses sociological research methods, I first focus on the larger social forces surrounding rap's birth. Before delving into a systematic lyrical analysis in the following chapters, I historicize and contextualize what artists say in their music by examining the volatile sites of their experiences—large, segregated urban cities. At the very moment when hip hop and rap emerged, these locations experienced drastic changes due to shifts in the economy, as well as investments in suburban growth at the expense of urban development. Furthermore, due to the migration of blacks from the South to northern cities, middle-class whites moved from inner cities to the suburbs. Some middle-class blacks also left the inner city. This exodus produced environments that witnessed high rates of joblessness, poverty, drug activity, and gang wars.

More profoundly, federal and state policies such as the “War on Drugs” led to the surveillance, repression, and over-incarceration of working-class and poor inner-city people of color. Harnessing their creative and competitive juices at that moment, black and Latino youth made their voices heard through the introduction of the cultural movement known as hip hop. The scene included breakdancing, graffiti writing,

and disc jockeying (DJing). I highlight Afrika Bambaataa—a disc jockey considered one of hip hop’s founders—and his Zulu Nation organization as an example of a critical political intervention at the onset of the culture. A former gang member, Bambaataa’s activist leanings worked to empower and bring youth from rival factions and different cultural backgrounds together through his music.

Yet, macrostructural arrangements alone cannot explain the particular circumstances that led to the primacy of the *rap artist*. The commercial success of the rapper happened with the release of the Sugar Hill Gang’s song “Rapper’s Delight.” More important than the record, though, was Sylvia Robinson’s (co-owner of the small independent label Sugar Hill Records) vision for the genre. She believed listeners would become loyal consumers who purchased the music. Her prescience and influence led to the introduction of the socially conscious rap song “The Message,” by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, a record I discuss at greater length below, along with the lesser known Brother D and the Collective Efforts’ song “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise.” These songs constitute a crucial intervention that politicizes the music. Women rappers, specifically, Roxanne Shanté of “Roxanne’s Revenge” fame, helped create an emerging form of female empowerment by offering a rejoinder to the all-male group U.T.F.O.’s “Roxanne Roxanne.” Shanté provided a compelling voice that challenged male hegemony in rap, signaling a strong and enduring female subjectivity seen among woman artists to this day.

In the rest of this chapter, I briefly describe rap’s origins. If fans of the music are interested in the nexus of rap and American society, they must understand its beginnings. Key figures and events at hip hop’s birth help frame my analysis of gender, race, sexuality and social consciousness among millennial rappers in the subsequent chapters.

AFRIKA BAMBAATAA AND THE ZULU NATION

Hip hop, beginning around 1974 or 1975, was a youth-driven cultural movement influenced by New York’s Afro-Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and African-American inhabitants.¹² The artist Cowboy is credited as the first individual to use the term “hip hop” in his rhymes; however, Afrika Bambaataa used the phrase to describe the music scene in the Bronx.¹³ Hip hop grew to encompass four “elements”: breakdancing, graffiti writing, rapping, and DJing. Breakdancing entailed fancy footwork,

contorting and twisting body parts, and spinning one's head on various surfaces. Elaborate and ornate spray painting on trains or walls often producing murals that convey subtle meanings or specific stories describe graffiti. Rap is simply rhythmic storytelling over music or beats. Finally, DJing—the scratching, mixing, and sampling of an eclectic mix of music from rock and roll, jazz, salsa, disco, reggae, dancehall, and so forth—was the primary focus of the genre at the outset.¹⁴

Three individuals, DJ Kool Herc, a.k.a. Clive Campbell, Afrika Bambaataa—Lance Taylor—and Grand Master Flash, a.k.a. Joseph Saddler, are recognized as the founders of hip hop. A friendly rivalry existed between them with each engaging in sound system battles where crowds would determine who had the loudest and largest speakers, the dopest skills on the turntables and who could rock the best party. Kool Herc hosted local gatherings in the West Bronx, Flash in the South Bronx, and Bambaataa in the East Bronx. All artists sought to feed and grow the movement through their talent and ingenuity, but Bambaataa introduced a social consciousness to the culture. He not only united warring gang factions under his “Zulu Nation” banner, but he also introduced the first hints of black self-determination and pride. Thus, he deserves particular attention.

Afrika Bambaataa was likely born in 1957, although he refuses to reveal his exact age.¹⁵ Raised by a single mother, he grew up in the Bronx River Projects. Bambaataa was a member of the Black Spades gang from 1969 to 1975, eventually receiving a promotion to “War Lord” of his branch, a high-ranking position. He was expected to increase and expand the Spades into new territory and did just that. He merged different chapters and created new ones in other boroughs. However, Bambaataa left this world due to internal religious and ideological conflicts. His uncle, Bambaataa Bunchinj, was a black nationalist, and several of his family members were practicing Muslims. While growing up, he regularly listened to speeches by The Honorable Elijah Muhammed, the titular leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI) in New York, Malcolm X, Minister Farrakhan and members of the Black Panther Party. He saw these individuals and groups advocate self-defense and social awareness. The Black Panthers and NOI also provided social support and economic resources for members of the black community. Impressed by the NOI's ability to rehabilitate drug users and other individuals down on their luck, Bambaataa borrowed from their philosophy of self-determination

and self-awareness to work with youth, promoting peace and quelling street violence.

Bambaataa formed the Zulu Nation organization, named after the 1964 movie “Zulu” that showed Africans fighting for their land against British imperialists. Before that point, he routinely saw blacks in degrading roles on television. Witnessing African resistance inspired him to create his group. The organization focused on fostering young adults’ imaginations in positive and affirming ways.¹⁶ Reflecting on his time as a member, Lucky Strike remarked that the Zulu Nation helped him “find himself” and that “they were teaching me things about my culture that I never knew and things I never learned in school.”¹⁷ Bambaataa’s credo stated:

The job of a Zulu is to survive in life. To be open-minded dealing with all walks of life upon this planet Earth and to teach other truth [Knowledge, Wisdom and Understanding]. To respect those who respect them, to never be the aggressor or oppressor. To be at peace with self and others, but if or when attacked by others who don’t wish peace with Zulus, then the Zulus are ordered in the name of ALLAH, Jehovah to fight those who fight against you.¹⁸

The collective hosted parties that included breakdancers, graffiti artists, DJs, emcees, as well as rival gangs, and youth of all ages.¹⁹ Sociologist Joseph Ewoodzie writes that Bambaataa possessed the ability to “move several of his peers from destructive behaviors to social activism.”²⁰

Breakdancing

Breakdancing emerged in the early 1970s in primarily working-class African-American, West Indian, and Puerto Rican communities. Breakdance crews would “battle” in non-violent ways, employing stylized acrobatics and gymnastics in group competitions. The “b-boys” and “b-girls” challenged one another to see who had the most complex and original footwork, backspins, and headspins. Breakdancers effortlessly executed elaborate moves such as a handglide, which requires that breakers spin on one hand with bent legs spread apart. They also “pop lock”—an individual in a robotic and mechanistic fashion moves body parts, starting with a foot or hand in a free-flowing manner that shifts to the legs or the arms and ends with the jerking, or popping in place of

an elbow, knee, or another body part. The dancers also performed the “freeze,” a continuation of the “pop lock” when a breaker suddenly suspends their movement as if stuck in time. Overall, in their battles, members of different crews competed for supremacy and popularity. The goal was to make a reputation for one’s self and crew while attaining “ghetto celebrity status.”²¹

This style of dance went mainstream with the “moonwalk”—made most famous by late singer Michael Jackson—where a b-boy appears to glide just above the ground rhythmically. Especially creative dancers would spin on their heads while twirling their legs in the air. The exploits of the Rock Steady Crew, members of the Zulu Nation, who smoothly carried out all of the above moves, reverberated across the Bronx and other parts of New York. Hip hop scholars argue breakdancing incorporates Afrodiasporic elements, for example, Brazilian capoeira, Cuban rumba, and other stylized African-derived dance.

Unfortunately, upon initially encountering breakdancers, police officers primarily read their movements as fighting and rioting.²² This resulted in the arrest of some b-boys and demonization of this type of dance by local authorities. Although an art form, breakdancing was initially viewed as a part of gang activity. However, Hollywood took notice banking on its broader popularity. One of the most famous performers, Crazy Legs, along with other well-known breakers such as Ozone, appeared in movies and documentaries that focused on this urban style. With its reputation spreading, even the 1984 Olympics featured breakdancing as part of its opening ceremony. By the late 1980s, it faded from commercial limelight; yet, remains a central component of hip hop culture.

Graffiti

While breakdancing is the physical expression of the culture, graffiti is its visual representation. Initially, a method for gangs to mark their territory, graffiti also included lone individuals spray painting their monikers on buildings, subway trains, overpasses, and other areas of interest. The first prominent case of non-gang affiliated writing occurred in Philadelphia with a teenager who tagged “CORNBREAD” on a TWA jet. New York gangs and individual artists took up graffiti, as well. A Greek American teenager wrote TAKI 183 on buildings and trains. He inspired many

other writers after being profiled in *The New York Times* in 1971. Youth sought out fame and notoriety, writing on trains that traveled from borough to borough, hoping peers across the city would see their tags. In fact, Afrika Bambaataa tagged during his youth. In some ways, graffiti was a response to the elimination of art and after school programs in public schools, and the decreasing number of jobs available to teens at the time. Joseph Ewoodie contends: “graffiti...was a powerful and colorful response to societal neglect.”²³ As explained in Chapter 2, larger macrostructural forces impacted urban communities. But hip hop also emerged due to the resourcefulness of a budding youth movement. Social and economic deprivation could not fully explain the elaborate designs and murals that artists rendered during graffiti’s reign. Indeed, although birthed in working-class communities, middle-class and upper-class populations latched on to the art, tailoring it to their own visions.

Simple graffiti evolved into big colorful bubble and 3-D letters, abstract images of animals or people, emblazoned stars, and everything under the sun, including clouds and the sun. They all appeared across the New York skyline and subway stations. Names became murals during the 1970s. The style was vibrant, fresh and novel. As with breakdancing, politicians, bureaucrats, and law enforcement saw the art as vandalism of public space and a nuisance necessitating punishment; the writers were criminals, not visionaries. In 1972, anti-graffiti campaigns began in New York City. Mayor John V. Lindsay recommended fining and jailing any person using an open spray can in a municipal building or facility. In the early 1980s, Mayor Ed Koch suggested placing barbed wire on fences around train stations, and anti-graffiti messages on television, radio, and print advertisements. Authorities claimed that graffiti led to more dangerous criminal behavior and that artists had psychological problems.

As with breakdancing, the art world viewed graffiti as the work of the young organic intellectuals of this generation. Some individuals believed graffiti belonged in galleries and museums. Soon artists’ works *popped up* at venues in Greenwich Village, Times Square, and even far-flung places such as Italy and London. Graffiti art first appeared in Blondie’s—a punk rock group—music video. Fab 5 Freddy, a street artist, ascended to prominence, becoming not only one of the primary artisans of the visual art but also the curator of hip hop culture overall. Both graffiti and breakdancing became commercialized and commodified, selling viewers hamburgers, French fries, and other consumer products.

DJing

While working with graffiti artists and breakdancers, Afrika Bambaataa also DJed. This aspect entails spinning disco, salsa, rock, soul, and funk records at parties on turntables with huge speakers. Multiple DJs emerged on the scene, but Bambaataa welcomed youth from different rival factions together to have fun and dance. In fact, because of his prestige, there were very few physical altercations at Bambaataa's parties. Although the Zulu Nation was political in its orientation, infused with black nationalist and Pan-Africanist teachings, Bambaataa did not overtly view himself or his group as political or ideological. Simply, he came from a poor background and challenged the conception that impoverished African-Americans needed middle-class families as exemplars of appropriate behavior (see Chapter 2).

In 1982, Bambaataa produced a single, "Planet Rock," developing the sound called "electro-funk," which sampled from the German group Kraftwerk's song "Trans-Europe Express" while using the TR 808 drum machine. He was a fan of introducing unfamiliar melodies and tunes to party-goers. Besides the actual music, he had lyrics encouraging listeners to "get up and dance" and "socialize, get down, let your soul lead the way." Through the Zulu Nation and his music, Bambaataa championed harmony and love in response to gang wars, police repression, and street violence. He claimed: "Hip [h]op has taken a lot of brothers and sisters who might be doing negative things and have gotten them into the rap world to see other people's way of life..."²⁴ Recent allegations of sexual molestation tarnish Bambaataa's legacy; nevertheless, he played a critical role in politicizing hip hop at its birth.²⁵

SYLVIA ROBINSON AND THE RISE OF COMMERCIAL RAP

Even though "Planet Rock" was well-received, Bambaataa was not a "rapping" DJ; this title went to DJ Hollywood and Lovebug Starski. Bambaataa's primary responsibility was manning the turntables. Some DJs, for example, Grandmaster Flash, had rappers who would participate in call-and-response routines, boast, signify, or toast in their interactions with party-goers.²⁶ Initially, the goal of emcees involved hyping the disc jockey's artistry and motivating the crowd with phrases like "get up," and "jam to the beat."²⁷ Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five broke this mold with artists such as Cowboy and Melle Mel skillfully delivering

more sophisticated rhymes that drew audience attention. Moreover, rap battles between groups such as the Cold Crush Brothers and the Fantastic Five drew large crowds to the clubs. Emcees became prominent in the hip hop club scene. Eventually, music entrepreneurs realized the larger possibilities of these microphone controllers.

The art of rap became commerce thanks in part to Joe and Sylvia Robinson, owners of the small independent label Sugar Hill Records. In the late 70s, while at the disco club Harlem World in Manhattan, Sylvia witnessed DJ Lovebug Starski engross party-goers with his rap, "A hip, hop/A hibbit a hop da hop da hop hibby dibby hibby dibby hop."²⁸ Taken by the audience's reaction to these colorful rhymes, Sylvia predicted young adults would purchase records with individuals rapping over pre-recorded tracks. When approached, Lovebug Starski was not interested in signing with Sugar Hill, unable to envision a future in recorded rap songs. Receiving a tip from her son's friend regarding a place where she could audition potential emcees, Sylvia encountered Henry "Hank" Jackson outside his pizzeria job in New Jersey. Hank recited verses that he heard from Grandmaster Caz, a member of the group he managed called the Mighty Force. During Jackson's audition in the back seat of a car, another man, Guy "Master G" O'Brien, joined in with his rhymes. Mike "Wonder Mike" Wright would later perform at Robinson's home, along with Jackson and O'Brien. She liked what she heard, dubbing the trio the Sugar Hill Gang.²⁹ At this moment, hip hop transitioned from live performance to music on wax.

The group released "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, a 15-minute pop song that went multi-Platinum within a few months of its initial release, becoming the biggest-selling 12-inch single at the time. The song reached #4 on the *Black Singles* charts, #36 on the pop charts in the United States; it rose to #1 in Canada and Holland, #3 in the United Kingdom, and #4 in West Germany.³⁰ The record made rap music commercially appealing and turned the emcee into a rock star. Quoting filmmaker Charles Ahearn, Jeff Chang writes that after the release of "Rapper's Delight," "‘Nobody was dancing. Period! Rap became the focal point. MCs were onstage and people were looking at them.’ DJs were no longer at the center of the music..."³¹ Later in 1979, Funky Four Plus One More recorded "Rappin' and Rockin' in the House" and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five recorded "Superrappin'" on Bobby Robinson's (no relation to Joe and Sylvia Robinson) independent label, Enjoy Records. The songs sold in the hundreds of thousands, far

from Platinum status but still an impressive feat for an incipient sound. The music industry officially welcomed rap with the help of black-owned record companies.

Message Rap

In its early years, rap *was* “party” music intended to encourage and persuade the listener to have a good time and relax, despite their environments and circumstances. These songs did not address political issues such as limited job prospects, rundown neighborhoods, or oppressive policies. An innovative response by urban youth to their postindustrial conditions, “having a fun time” was an elixir for depression, anger, or despair. Mark Anthony Neal, scholar and cultural critic, writes in his work *Postindustrial Soul*, that “the ‘party and bullshit’ themes of most early hip-hop represented efforts to transcend the dull realities of urban life, including body-numbing experiences within low-wage service industries and inferior and condescending urban school systems.”³² He goes on to claim that early hip hop was “not invested with political dimensions...”³³ However, Neal concedes that rap constitutes an art form that advocates social commentary. In describing rap music’s potential as a more explicit form of social awareness, he references the lyrics of the critically acclaimed song, “The Message,” released by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five in 1982. The song depicts the nihilism, futility, and despair felt by many working-class and poor black people in areas like the Bronx.

Other songs spoke to the anguish that people of color faced, such as Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks” and “Hard Times.” Brother D and the Collective Effort’s black nationalist song “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise” addressed these themes also (I discuss this song below). However, “The Message” resonated with audiences, becoming the fifth rap single certified Gold. Lines such as “Got a bum education, double-digit inflation” and “You’ll grow in the ghetto livin’ second-rate” sadly and vividly described the harmful impact of the changing economy and failed state policies on minorities in urban centers. Furthermore, the powerful refrain, “It’s like a jungle sometimes/It makes me wonder how I keep from goin’ under,” expresses a hopelessness radiating from many in these communities. The music was compelling because it connected words with reality for some.

The video for the song took place in an environment full of burned-out and torn down buildings spread out over several city blocks. At the very end of the song, congregating on a street corner, the members of the group experience police harassment. Wanting to ease tensions they shout their identity—“We down with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five!”—an officer responds “What is that a gang?” and then proceeds to shove the rappers into the back of a police vehicle. The song presages “Fuck tha Police” and conveys the fraught relationships between law enforcement and some black males in contemporary American society. Liberal music critics praised the song; clearly, listeners liked it too.³⁴

Lacking mainstream acceptance, possibly due to its black nationalist tone, in 1984, Brother D and the Collective Effort’s record “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise” expressly brought social consciousness to rap. In the song, released two years later than “The Message,” Brother D urges “his people” (i.e., blacks) to recognize and acknowledge “unemployment’s high, housing is bad, and [that] the schools are teaching wrong [sic],” paralleling the Furious Five’s music. Brother D adds that people are so preoccupied with partying that they do not see the “cancer from the water” and the “pollution in the air.” After describing problems faced by blacks, the artists implore the listener to “agitate,” “educate,” and “organize.” Rhymed over rhythm and blues singer Cheryl Lynn’s single “Got To Be Real,” and promoting a call to action, Brother D sought to galvanize blacks to recognize and overcome their actual problems. The group was ahead of its time; though not commercially successful, they were the forerunners of the indelible conscious rap of groups such as Public Enemy in the 1980s, Paris in the 1990s, and foreshadow contemporary artists such as Killer Mike and Dae Dae who embrace Black Lives Matter platforms.

ROXANNE SHANTÉ AND WOMAN RAPPERS

Initially appearing in significantly smaller numbers, female emcees were nonetheless present at raps inception; however, they received less attention than men. Largely due to sexism, women’s contribution to rap did not receive full recognition—to some extent, as discussed in Chapter 4, this problem persists. For example, at hip hop’s birth, there were woman graffiti artists such as Lady Pink and breakdancers (b-girls) such as Baby Love.³⁵ There were also women rappers. MC Lady B was the first female

rapper recorded in 1979 with her release “To the Beat Y’all.” Queen Lisa Lee was a member of Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation while MC Sha-Rock was the “one more” in the group Funky Four Plus One More. In 1984, along with Debbie Dee, Lisa Lee and Sha-Rock formed the group Us Girls. In addition to the Sugar Hill Gang, Sylvia Robinson signed the female group, Sequence, who recorded their hit song “Funk You Up” in 1981.

Perhaps no other artist deserves more credit for bringing woman lyricists to the fore than the first “Queen of Rap,” Roxanne Shanté, with her release “Roxanne’s Revenge” at the young age of 14.³⁶ In her song, she responds to UTFO’s (an all-male rap group) record “Roxanne, Roxanne” that describes a woman named Roxanne as conceited and “uppity” for rejecting their advances. So-called “answer rap records,” an early staple of the genre, started with Roxanne Shanté whose real name is Lolita Shanté Gooden. Regarding “Roxanne’s Revenge,” Tricia Rose writes it “was a caustic and frustrated response that struck a responsive chord among b-girls and b-boys,” moreover she notes that Shanté “gave a voice to a young girl’s response to real-life street confrontations with men.”³⁷ Resisting male dominance and gamesmanship, Shanté claimed that her subpar suitors’ rhymes were “weak compared to” hers. She describes herself as a “fly MC” with “fresher” lyrics than her competitors, characterizing one of the rappers as “not really cute” while telling him to “step back” from his overzealous pursuit. Her most vicious verse, “...but lemme let ya know—you’re not a real man,” emasculates her disrespectful suitors, foretelling the brashness of women artists in the new millennium.

Shanté centralizes women’s desires, expectations, and agency in her rhyme, challenging male denigration. Nancy Guevara quotes Shanté describing the purpose of her song: “‘Roxanne’s Revenge’ is saying that guys should stop talking about girls...It’s played out...Why do you [men] always gotta say girls are stuck up?”³⁸ Unfortunately, as I discuss in later chapters, characterizations of women by male rap artists became *more* denigrating and misogynistic over time, although there are several cases to the contrary. Very early in the genre’s development, Shanté privileges a black female voice, opposing and undermining the sexism promoted by some male rappers at the time. Moreover, she enters and conquers an already largely male-dominated space. Her song sets the stage for 1990s female artists such as Salt N’ Pepa, MC Lyte, Queen

Latifah, Lil' Kim, and millennials such as Nicky Minaj, Rapsody, Iggy Azalea, and Young M. A to communicate their aspirations and desires.

Beyond serendipity, the youth culture intentionally created hip hop as a vibrant and innovative movement to overcome environments rocked by postindustrialization and concentrated poverty and surveilled or destroyed by authorities. Out of this creativity and marginalization came hip hop—graffiti, breakdancing, DJing, and rapping. Due to their commercial appeal, rap artists became the representatives of the culture. And they had a lot to say. At the start, they encouraged listeners to have fun and dance their cares away, but they soon expanded their message to include other topics explored in the following chapters. For example, artists reference poverty, police brutality, racialized and gendered norms, as well as sexuality. This book explores these topics within the lyrics of contemporary rap music.

Chapter 2 describes the structural conditions in urban areas across America that led to the birth of hip hop culture in New York. As addressed in previous works on rap, deindustrialization, urban renewal programs, and the criminalization of poor and working-class minorities took hold in the late 1960s and 1970s, changing inner-city environments from New York City to Los Angeles. Here, I describe how these changes impacted individuals living in these environments, ultimately providing a backdrop for men and women to talk about the happenings in their communities.

Using content analysis as an innovative methodological approach, Chapter 3 analyzes 371 songs of popular millennial male rappers from 2005 to 2015. In particular, I find the continued presence of *black hegemonic masculinity* in the form of misogynistic and violent themes that dominated the genre in the 1990s. However, this analysis reveals fewer instances of homophobic lyrics than expected. I also find that males express vulnerability, caring, and loving attitudes towards friends and family. These *homosocial* themes seldom receive attention when addressing male artists' lyrics. This chapter complicates readers' opinions regarding turn of the century emcees.

Chapter 4 focuses on 173 popular female emcees' songs over the same period. Women also articulate misogynistic and violent lyrics in their music. Upon further examination, women artists espouse a *hip hop feminist* orientation, presenting their sexual needs and desires in their music, a subversion of traditional gender norms. Yet, this agency may

perpetuate the view of women as sex toys for male enjoyment. Hence, feminist messages of empowerment and sexual liberation possibly reinforce stereotypical and caricatured images of women as a collective. This has important implications for how women emcees navigate this space.

In Chapter 5, I explore the extent to which socially conscious themes are present in approximately 300 underground rap and 650+ popular songs from 2005 to 2015. Supposedly, non-commercial rap is free of the staples of misogyny, violence, and materialism found in commercial rap. However, I find that male and female underground artists parrot the lyrics of their mainstream counterparts. Some distinctions exist, for example, underground rappers express more social commentary in their music than their popular peers, but not as much as one would expect. Within this subgenre, artists of color address police brutality and race-related themes more than white artists. White artists as a group engage in what I call *racial evasion* more so than minority rappers. But caveats exist here as well. For example, popular rappers of color minimally reference racial matters. Individuals such as Macklemore eagerly grapple with whiteness and white privilege while Iggy Azalea refuses to engage in such conversations. Despite the conventional view of underground rappers as subversive, some artists may yearn to sign with major labels. As a result, readers should consider the boundary between underground and mainstream rap manufactured and permeable, rather than rigid and solid.

Chapter 6 examines the rarely discussed presence of queer rappers in hip hop. Unacknowledged, a queer aesthetic has been a part of the genre since its beginning and remains so to this day. Chart-topping artists such as Young M. A and Nicki Minaj provide opportunities for an in-depth exploration of the history and contemporary experiences of LGBTQ emcees in rap. These artists openly discuss same-sex desire in their music, a move that fundamentally challenges homophobia in hip hop. However, I argue that some lesbians likely encounter more acceptance than gay males due to continued heteronormativity in rap music. Perhaps more discouraging, lesbian acceptance remains predicated on appealing to heterosexual male sexual fantasy.

Chapter 7 discusses how some current lyricists embrace the emergence of the BLM movement. The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland sparked BLM protests across the country. First, I highlight the life and death of these individuals as galvanizing forces for BLM.

In turn, their passing inspired several high profile and lesser known emcees to not only address police brutality, a running theme for artists since its early years, but to engage in larger critiques of systemic and institutional racism. Arguably, raps renewed and reinvigorated politicization occurred in 2014 with the death of Trayvon Martin.

The final chapter explores the future of rap music by returning to Donald Trump's presidency. No one can accurately predict future trends especially in the fickle world of music; however, the election of Donald Trump increases the odds of a more politically vibrant genre for years to come. Interestingly, in the 1990s, male and female rappers praised Donald Trump's wealth and status. However, since becoming president of the United States, many emcees reject him for what they consider expressions of racism and xenophobia. This concluding chapter examines rap in the age of Donald Trump. I finish with the first female artist since Lauren Hill—Cardi B—to reach number one on the charts in 2017 and what this means for women rappers going forward. I contend women's achievements happen alongside continued misogyny and heteronormativity as witnessed by Rick Ross' remarks about female rappers signed to his music label.

Throughout it all, affirming or disempowering, political or apolitical, rap artists continue to make their voices heard. Ultimately, context matters and this book provides a multi-layered approach for understanding emcees' lyrics. Critics may argue that we should not take rapper's words literally; they are provocateurs who push the envelope by articulating playful, boastful, or unconventional rhymes. They posture and present over-the-top personas more than anything else; thus, a critical analysis is futile. Such a critique seems plausible, bravado and breaking the rules of decorum are integral to rap music. Sometimes art defies interpretation. However, as laid out in this book, artists' words can speak to real conditions or imagined realities for men, women, LGBTQ individuals, and artists of color, among others. Moreover, the music may reflect everyday concerns and desires that allow for a more sophisticated understanding of gender, race, sexuality and the meaning-making of social consciousness in contemporary America. In the end, whether deliberate, unintentional, funny, or serious, words matter. Especially for those who poetically and impolitely speak them.

NOTES

1. His exact words: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best—they’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”
See Burns (2015). <http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/06/16/choice-words-from-donald-trump-presidential-candidate/>. Accessed on December 3, 2016.
2. Zaru (2016). <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/02/politics/election-2016-hip-hop-vote-hillary-clinton-donald-trump/index.html>. Accessed on December 11, 2016.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. McCarthy (2016). <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/17/killer-mike-uterus-hillary-clinton-bernie-sanders-jane-elliott>. Accessed on December 12, 2016.
7. During her run for president in the 2016 she apologized for making this remark.
8. Rose (1994, pp. 18–19).
9. Ibid.
10. For example, John McWhorter’s (2008) *All about the beat: Why hip-hop can’t save black America* reads more as a rant against rap music rather than a critical analysis.
11. Harkness (2014), Harrison (2009), Lee (2016), and Morgan (2009).
12. Both Rose (1994) and Perry (2004) contend that hip hop’s roots emerge from African and Afrodiasporic traditions with individuals such as Bambaataa, Kool Herc, among many others, introducing West Indian cultural sensibilities to hip hop culture and rap music. Of course, Puerto Ricans must be acknowledged for their contributions to early hip hop culture.
13. Ewoodzie (2017) argues that the term originated from the Disco crowd who attempted to distinguish themselves from this new youth music (pp. 129–130).
14. Chang (2005), Charnas (2010), Keyes (2004), and Rose (1994).
15. Bambaataa tells those who ask that he does not “speak on [his] age” (Chang 2005, p. 91).
16. Chang (2005) and Ewoodzie (2017).
17. Ewoodzie (2017, p. 58).
18. Chang (2005, p. 101).

19. These were not mutually exclusive entities, there were gang members who would breakdance or write graffiti.
20. Ewoodzie (2017, p. 138).
21. Chang (2005, p. 115).
22. In some cases fights erupted after a breakdance contest, but not enough to characterize all battles as violent activities (Ewoodzie 2017).
23. Ewoodzie (2017, p. 33).
24. George (2012, p. 54).
25. On March 29, 2016, Ron Savage gave an interview to the *New York Daily News* alleging that Afrika Bambaataa molested him when he was 13 or 14 years old. Three other males came forward making similar claims. Bambaataa denied these allegations (Ewoodzie 2017, p. 143).
26. Smitherman (1997) identifies these aspects as part of African-American oral tradition dating back to the griots or storytellers in Africa. Rose (1994) writes that "...pleasure and mastery in toasting and rapping are matters of control over the language, the capacity to outdo competition, the craft of story, mastery of rhythm, and the ability to rivet the crowd's attention" (p. 55).
27. Keyes (2004) writes that the MCs would intermittently talk to the crowds in order to excite them (p. 62).
28. Of course, these are the lines from the song "Rapper's Delight." However, Henry Jackson took these lines from DJ Casanova Fly aka Caz (Charnas 2010, pp. 32–33, 38–42).
29. Charnas (2010) and Ewoodzie (2017).
30. Charnas (2010, p. 43).
31. Chang (2005, p. 132).
32. Neal (2012, p. 483).
33. Ibid.
34. Chang (2005).
35. Rose (1994) writes that women did not have access to turntables or the other technological aspects of the culture at its beginning. Lady Pink and Baby Love discuss their encounters with other male graffiti artists and rappers who attempted to limit what they said on the mic or wrote on walls because they were women.
36. I recognize that this statement is highly debatable and that hip hop historians and aficionados would mention other noteworthy artists. Shanté helped establish answer rap while forging a space for women to express their feelings towards males.
37. Rose (1994, pp. 57, 162).
38. Guevara (1996, p. 57).

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