

DISSONANT LYRICISTS:
EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN UNDERGROUND HIP HOP

By

Zachary David Funk

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Humboldt State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Art

Sociology, Teaching Sociology

May 2009

DISSONANT LYRICISTS:
EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN UNDERGROUND HIP HOP

By

Zachary David Funk

Approved by the Master's Thesis Committee:

Jennifer Eichstedt, Major Professor Date

Mary Virnoche, Committee Member Date

Maxwell Schnurer, Committee Member Date

Jennifer Eichstedt, Graduate Coordinator Date

Chris Hopper, Dean for Research and Graduate Studies Date

ABSTRACT

DISSONANT LYRICISTS:

EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN UNDERGROUND HIP HOP

By Zachary David Funk

Rap music has been alive and well as a form of popular music for the last three decades. While the salience of hip-hop culture and rap music in our society has provided a rich environment for diverse forms of its expression, it has also provided a rich environment for its commercialization. Rappers independent from major record labels must negotiate the presentation of their identity within a climate of homogenized claims of authenticity by commercially popular rappers. This thesis seeks to explore the ways that this relationship plays out through the freestyle and written rap music of independent artists. Multiple methods were used, including: participant observation, interview and content analysis. Local artists are highlighted in this work, with reference to the social context in which their music is framed. Therefore, this thesis provides insight into the ways that independent rap artists express their status, while resisting the homogenization of rap music and culture at large.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
SECTION I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
SECTION III: THE FACES OF FREESTYLE IN HUMBOLDT COUNTY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY.....	14
Introduction.....	14
Methods.....	16
In the Beginning: The Roots of Freestyle.....	18
Roles Performed During Freestyle.....	21
The Veteran.....	21
The New Jack.....	23
The Little-Big Man.....	25
The Misogynist.....	26
The Prophet.....	26
Types of Responses Between Roles.....	27
The Prophet Response.....	28
Vying for Dominance – Little Big Men & Misogynists.....	30
Choir Practice.....	31

A CONTENT ANALYSIS	34
Methods.....	34
Analysis.....	36
Veteran Verification.....	37
Stories of Struggle.....	38
Respect Earned.....	39
Community Membership	41
Theoretical Implications	42
Model Description	43
SECTION V: CONCLUSION.....	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	51

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Emergent Themes in Song Verses	34
2	Frequency of Themes in Song Choruses	35

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 Theoretical Model.....	40

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

When viewed through Gramsci's theoretical contributions, popular culture is a primary area in which the struggle for hegemony takes place and social reality is negotiated (Lipsitz 1988; Traube 1996). Currently hip hop permeates our lives as one of the most influential forms of popular culture, and a primary ground in which this contestation takes place (Richardson & Scott 2002; Hamilton 2005; Lena 2006). This thesis takes an inside look at the way this negotiation plays out through rap, freestyle and written, within the community of Humboldt County. Focus was placed on the way that identity was presented in relation to the larger hegemonic discourse of privilege, oppression, and maintenance. The purpose of this thesis was to explore the way that the participants struggle to express and maintain their identity through their lyrics in relation to the production of consent for alternative versions of social reality (Traube 1996). Multiple methods were used, including: participant observation, interview and content analysis. For this reason, the methodologies were introduced within the section that they applied to, rather than in a separate methods section.

To give some background on the way that some of the fundamental hip hop terminology was used, let us consider the Hip Hop Declaration of Peace(2002), a document brought forth from a delegation of hip hop artists to the United Nations to advise, guide, and protect the international hip hop community. The first principle states:

Hip hop is a term that describes our independently collective consciousness. Ever growing, it is commonly expressed through such elements as breakin, emceeing, graffiti art, deejaying, beatboxing, street fashion, street language, street knowledge, and street entrepreneurialism.

This notion of hip hop as a collective consciousness, existing within multiple elements, is one visible to those who have witnessed much of its evolution. The following is a brief examination of some of the crucial points in hip hop history as I have been exposed to them.

Initially, hip hop as a music was developed in the 1970's in New York City, and was championed and represented by its deejays (Wheeler 1991; Baker 1991). In its beginning stages, the emcee was merely one who accented the flavors applied to the audience's palate by the deejay. The most heavily practiced form of self expression was breakin (break dancing), yet this was centered on representing your crew (group of break dancers) in competition against other crews. The object was to display how the individual's style represented the superiority of his or her crew in reference to the other dancer's crew. Dancers from the same crew would often wear matching jumpsuits with the name of the crew on the back, acting as a dynamic individual representation of the group. A circle would form, consisting of members of opposing crews in its perimeter, with onlookers pulsating against its walls, eager to see which crew would emerge triumphant.

The other popular form of self expression within hip hop was graffiti writing, but this also was affected by which crew of writers the individual was representing. In its early stages, graffiti often represented the name of break dancing crews or individual break dancers. As it progressed as its own element, an individual writer would assume a name often given to them by a veteran writer, known as a king. One assumed king status only after he got his name up "all city."

This term signified one's ability to get his graffiti on objects in all parts of the city. The primary means of doing this was to put your name on the trains and subway cars. With its growing popularity came competition to get your name up in the best spots. Within this competition, emerged some of hip hop's first solidified notions of the community member as competitor. Writers started crossing out rival writers names, triggering retaliation that sometimes ended in violence. Graffiti writers began to split between those that did large, multi-colored and dimensioned pieces, and those that did multiple quick signatures as a primary means of being seen. The divide was further exacerbated as space for large pieces began to be eaten up by those doing multiple smaller pieces, leading to writers going over each other's work and increasing an already tense situation (*Wild Style* 1983).

As New York City began to crack down on graffiti writing, other cities followed, and many of the biggest writers were incarcerated and put under institutional control. For a number of reasons, including its failed success as a marketable performance, break dancing began to lose popularity within hip hop as well. With these vacancies came the rise of the emcee and the deejay as foundational elements of hip hop, thus giving those onlookers to its newly commodified form, a notion of it as a genre of music at the record store, as opposed to a culture of lived experience and practices.

The emcee became the representative of hip hop. He or she was a rapper and the music was rap. The focus became differentiating yourself from other rappers, and professing your individual superiority to all. Consumers ate it up, and with the onset of the music video, the level of self-embellishment became more intense. Whatever the

flavor of rap the consumers wanted was brought to them via cable. A popular scene depicted by rap music was that of self-made millionaires. Videos were shot in mansions and at exotic locations, with rappers surrounded by women and men anxious for their attention.

It's no wonder why rap became so popular with white middle class males. Noticeably absent from the videos was the presence of graffiti writers, break dancers and deejays— that is, those things that signaled a larger set of cultural practices. Instead, rap was the music, and what they saw in the videos became the culture. The images of male dominance, violence and easy money made rap a solidified commodity for young suburban white men. Hip hop that professed connections to a larger community, and challenged oppression, was forced underground and became known as "underground hip hop" or "conscious rap."

I was first introduced to hip hop through my oldest brother in the mid to late eighties. As a young child, I witnessed breakin' make its way from the streets of New York to my living room in Colorado. I can still feel it like it was yesterday, the pounding of intense bass resonating through my chest, as my brother takes me on my first ride in a car with multiple gigantic subwoofers. The sound and the word were powerful and infected me with an incurable sickness.

In my case however, the sickness was the cure. Despite growing up in a relatively middle-class and racially diverse neighborhood, as a young black kid in an all white family, I found myself looking for a way to investigate my blackness. The words, rhythms, and images of hip hop culture that I was exposed to allowed me to explore

notions of blackness. I saw images of the happy and loved entertainer, the feared criminal, the misogynist, and the poet. In '91, I moved to rural Nebraska. As I grew into a young man, I began to forget about the words of the poet and embraced the words of the misogynist and the criminal in hope of being happy, loved, and feared. As a teen, like most of my peers, I listened more to what Snoop Doggy Dog said about women than my father. As the only black kid in my school, I felt that I had a certain obligation to live up to the racial stereotypes that were appearing in the popular west coast gangsta rap of the time. The weight of this obligation wore on me until I eventually stopped listening to hip hop for a couple years. In search of a way out of my assumed obligations of blackness, I took up an interest in the then flourishing rock music scene. At that age, I wanted foremost to blend in with my white teenage peers and be accepted. Regardless of how many rock CDs I owned or band t-shirts I wore, I still felt that I was meant to be a part of something bigger.

In 1998, I moved with my family to the S.F. Bay Area. With an afro, Pink Floyd t-shirt, and collection of rock CD's I stuck out like a sore thumb. Again, I soaked up what was around me and tuned into the world of Bay Area rap. The Bay has a rich and diverse hip hop culture, but initially I was exposed mostly to the most popular and available artists. Rappers like Too Short, Mac Dre, and E-40 spoke about life in fast paced, consumerist, and misogynistic ways that gained them popular notoriety across the world. Yet these artists also spoke specifically to the people of Bay Area through localized slang and by calling out well-known landmarks in their songs. Eventually I was introduced to Bay Area underground rap. This music was usually sold on the streets out

of a backpack, or on consignment at a local record store, but the feeling of being that close to those who were creating the music I was listening to was a new and fascinating experience. I watched as friends made instrumentals, recorded lyrics, and composed songs in their bedrooms. I sat in awe as they sold CD's of the music they had just recorded to men in business suits outside of a BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station.

My fascination with underground hip hop expanded and when I moved to Humboldt County in 2002 I began to freestyle. Freestyle is the act of constructing a rap in the moment most often to an instrumental or someone making a beat with their mouth, called beatboxin'. It was as if the words had been there the whole time, and my new setting allowed them to percolate through the filtering mechanisms I had built up over the years. I began to freestyle at open microphones and cultivated my skills until eventually I was performing regularly at shows without ever having written down anything. While I earned my undergraduate degree, I gained respect in the local community as an intelligent rapper with a unique sound and began writing verses and recording songs with other rappers. The process of my coming to be a sociologist is closely bound to the process of becoming the emcee that I am today. Both taught me to pay attention to the world that I was a part of, and motivated me to be the change that I want to see in that world. I saw a need for an examination of the culture that I was taking part in from not only a sociological perspective, but also an emcee's perspective.

I position myself as both researcher and emcee that champions the sounds of the underground. My position within the local underground hip hop community allowed me to gain exclusive access to poetry in motion. I provide a space in which the

experience of the people that participated in this research emerges through their lyrics.

The primary significance of this research is that it was conducted by a lifetime participant in the culture of interest.

In the literature regarding hip hop culture and rap music, there is a notable absence of work on freestyle. I provide an insider account of freestyle and written rap within Humboldt County hip hop's subcultural struggle for and with hegemony (Lipsitz 1988). I used multiple methods to understand this area including participant observation, interviews and content analysis of written rap of local artists. What follows is a consideration of some of the major assumptions made by non-participants in hip hop culture. The following literature provided a historical and conceptual framework for this thesis. However, the primary way that the academic study of hip hop inspired this research was in its lack of insight about a culture I actively take part in.

SECTION II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Rap music has been alive and well as a form of popular music for the last three decades (ya-Salaam 1996; Lena 2006). Freestyle rap had always existed within hip-hop and was possibly the first forms of rapping in hip hop (Baker 1991; Rose 1994; ya-Salaam 1996). It has its roots in many different forms of African and African American oration including signifyin', and later on, the poetry of the Last Poets and Watts Prophets (Rose 1994; ya-Salaam 1996; Martinez 1997; Hamilton 2005). Freestyle can be recorded and put on an album, but usually occurs in the public, at freestyle competitions, and live to an audience as a display of a rapper's skill.

Over rap's lifespan, there have been numerous shifts in its presentation, with a trend since the late eighties toward the commercialization of "hardcore" or "gangsta" rap (Baker 1991; Quinn 1996; ya-Salaam 1996; Quinn 2000; Lena 2006). Many have stated that as rap became more commercially successful, the concept of the artist as "hustler" was the most popular to raps consumers (Rose 1994; Quinn 1996; Lena 2006).

As Lena (2006) states, "The hustler is still an outsider, but one with a comfortable relationship to commercial culture and material success. While Lena's (2006) study of Billboard Weekly music charts only covered the period of 1979-1995; as both an avid consumer and producer of rap music I can say that the notion of the rapper as hustler is one that currently dominates the various scenes (television, radio, internet, live and home performance) in which rap music is played out.

Some scholars have found themes of opposition to oppressive structures across political and gangsta rap music (Schusterman 1991; Decker 1993; Rose 1994; Martinez 1997; Forman 2000). However, Lena (2006) found that the commercialization of certain types of rap has led to a homogenization of the most popular rap content around the hustler persona. Lena (2006) also found that as the number of charted singles from independently owned record labels declined, so did instances of an artist speaking out against corporate control of music and oppressive structures within commercially popular rap singles.

It is important to note, however, that hip hop like other forms of popular culture has emerged as a site in which “the struggle for hegemony” takes place. Just as a visible movement on the billboard charts, televisions, and iPods toward the front-staging of the hustler as the normative rap persona has existed for the last two decades, so has an opposition movement of rap personas that respond to the commercialization of certain styles of rap (Wheeler 1991; Baker 1991; Hess 2005).

When looking at the content of rap music in the context of its production, many have asserted that there has been a strong sentiment of resistance to commercialization as early as 1983 when rap's first successful label, Sugar Hill Records, signed a contract making them a part of CBS records (Rose 1991; Wheeler 1991; ya-Salaam 1996 Lena 2006;). I assert that in order to fully understand rap music, a focus must be put on how this resistance by independent artists and labels plays out through their music. Wheeler (1991) states, “You cannot hear rap music unless you acknowledge the split between two

Americas: one getting rich, the other getting evicted ... our culture rips out loud as it splits in two.”

I theorize that just as there are “two Americas,” there is a similar split in rap music, “one getting rich” on the success of the hustler persona, and the other, rather than “getting evicted,” has built a house in the middle of the street with its own tools. This “other” has come to be known as “independent rap,” “conscious rap,” “message rap,” but most commonly known as “underground rap” (Rose 1991; Lena 2006; ya-Salaam 1996; Wheeler 1991; Hess 2005; Olavarria 2002). I argue that underground rap has formed as an oppositional aesthetic to those qualities that the most commercially popular rap has been found to possess. The struggle over rap, then, becomes becomes a war of position in which underground rappers exist as organic intellectuals, experts in the delegitimation of dominant culture (Lipsitz 1988). As George Lipsitz (1988) states,

The organic intellectuals engaged in past and present social contestation can never be static entities embodying a pure consciousness. Rather, they are participants in a dialogue, authors of an ongoing narrative whose final chapter is never written (p. 150).

Other authors have asserted that hip hop is an area of popular culture in which organic intellectuals contest power, largely due to the participation of women and other rappers that subvert the dominant storylines of mainstream rap (Traube 1996; Mahr 2005; Phillips et al. 2005).

Gramsci (1971) defines the organic intellectual as one who maintains “active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, permanent persuader and not just a simple orator” (p. 10). Thus, the duties of a rapper as organic intellectual go beyond

evoking an aesthetically pleasing and emotionally charging experience for the listener, the emcees' lyrics must move with the rhythm of the social reality that they seek to inform. However, often in the case of the scholarship surrounding hip hop, a lack of "active participation in practical life" is what has led to a lack of understanding about the dynamic way that the struggle for hegemony occurs within hip hop.

Much of the scholarship surrounding rap music fails to provide a space for the voice of the artist to come through. What this often leads to is an over emphasis on the positive or negative aspects of rap music, a stance that blurs the diverse textures of representation that exist in between and as a combination of conflict and conformity (Richardson and Scott 2002). There seems to be a complete lack of literature that does more than mention freestyling in hip hop, but the lack of an organized and easily accessible body of freestyle rap, like the decades of written rap, may be the root of this issue.

While some scholars have worked with members of the hip hop/rap community (Rose 1994; Martinez 1997), few had the perspective of an insider. The failure of meaningful engagement combined with the fervor over textual analysis, may also be a major contributing factor to the lack of research on freestyle rap. Another factor contributing to the omission of freestyle within the literature may be a result of researcher assumptions that their analyses of written rap will apply to freestyle. While at a very basic level there are similarities, this overextension of analysis misses the nuance of freestyle and the centrality of the process and interactions centered on the composition and delivery of a written rap song.

Freestyle is at the core of the dynamic composition that is rap music. We need only to bear witness to the diverse new languages that flow from street corners, and club entrances, or understand that a collaboration of lyricists as diverse as *Freestyle Fellowship* can come from the inside of a health food store (Chang 2005). When a group of emcees comes together to freestyle, we call it a “cypher.” The cypher most commonly forms as a circle of emcees with onlookers surrounding its borders. The freestyle cypher emerges as the flame in which emcees are forged. We often find allies in those with similar ways of presenting their words. We respond negatively to those with whom we disagree. In the middle of all this there is a sort of multi-dimensional tug-of-war going on between the raps that support the dominant stories of power through oppression and those that support power through struggle and liberation. This is not as simple as one side against the other, in the same fashion that the larger struggle for hegemony can’t be boiled down to one side against the other. As popular culture exists as a site in which this struggle for hegemony takes place, so does rap music within it, and the freestyle cypher within rap (Lipsitz 1988; Traube 1996; Hight 2003). Any given bar of lyrics released into the air during a freestyle can contain multiple storylines that represent support for and against those of the dominant oppressive discourse. Essentially, we have a tug-of-war going on not only inside the cypher and between the individual emcees, but also within the emcee themselves.

In the conversation between the emcees that occurs during a freestyle, the lyrics go beyond supporting a singular story of identity. Within freestyle, multiple identities emerge that support and/or reject multiple storylines. It is in the vivid intersection of

storylines that happens during a cypher that we see the struggle for hegemony taking place. With this in mind, it is in this rural, mostly white, setting known as Humboldt County that I participate regularly in freestyle cyphers, and seek out to better understand within the field, asking these questions:

- 1.) How do the participants present themselves in their lyrical and physical presentation while freestyling?
- 2.) What is the range of roles that the emcee extols and that exist during a cipher?
- 3.) How do the participants of freestyle cyphers use these roles in relation to others in the cypher?
- 4.) How do these roles interact with the dominant oppressive discourses of misogyny, capitalism and racism?

Through the literature, we have seen that the discourse of rap music is often both supportive and oppositional to the dominant oppressive stories of race, class, gender, etc. The following section seeks to examine how these stories are spontaneously reconstructed and deconstructed through freestyle rap. The goal of this next section is to examine the ways that these stories are performed by individuals in order to gain status as an emcee. I then focus on the ways that this status is used to control the lyrical theme and tone of the freestyle cypher through coercion and manipulation.

SECTION III: THE FACES OF FREESTYLE IN HUMBOLDT COUNTY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction

Freestyle involves the emcee delivering lyrics that are constructed in the moment. As defined earlier, a group of rappers freestyling is called a cypher, and usually consists of any number of participants and can form at any time, anywhere. I've seen many cyphers form in obvious places emcees congregate like outside of a concert or at an open microphone, but I have also seen them form in the most unsuspecting places like a wildlife sanctuary. Anyone who can rap is able to join a cypher, but that does not mean that everyone is welcome.

The cypher is a sacred circle and any newcomer must tread lightly. As an outsider stepping in, you understand that your weaknesses, whether perceived physically or conceived lyrically, can be put on display, and the strengths of whatever your opponent constructs as your opposite can be championed and thrown in your face. Freestyle can be about building, destruction, and maintenance. The cypher is a place where you can find enemies, allies, or just people to hang with. Most emcees that step into a cypher with the mentality that they have something to prove are met by others who want to prove them wrong. The cypher can often look and sound like a fight to observers, and it is this tension that attracts so many to these pulsating circles of people and energy. A circle of emcees can be rapping about anything, and all it takes is one lyrical phrase to be directed at another and the imagery turns to weaponry. If a battle

tested emcees tears into his opponent in a highly populated public area, you can often hear onlookers shout, “OOOHH!” like they just saw someone get punched in the face. In my experience, it is when most of the emcees that make up a cypher don’t know each other that these “battles” as they’re called break out.

Cyphers consisting of friends and acquaintances often occur in locations that are more private and usually do not turn into a battle. These freestyle sessions often take on the tone of a roundtable discussion with topics introduced and built upon by each emcees’ words. These lyrical discussions serve several functions: a brainstorming session before writing a song, an exhibition of skill, or as a way to keep skills sharp. Emcees often refer to cyphers like this as “building.” When building, the focus is on progression of skills and new ideas. Each emcee may complement the other emcees’ rhymes rather than compete with them. While the tension that comes with a group of emcees putting their lyrics on display in relation to others still exists, emphasis is placed on pushing the bar higher and elevating the complexity of the content and delivery of lyrics.

Freestyle in this context allows us to bring forth raw thought into rhyme, and it is in this way that the cypher is closely related to the process of writing rap. During a freestyle session, we not only give birth to words, but we learn how these words are taken in and interpreted by others. Freestyle is like a prototype test for lyrics that may eventually hit the showroom floor as a solidified representation of an emcee’s identity. In other words, we find out what works for us and that becomes translated through what we write down, compose and record as a song. Emcees rarely use an entire freestyle as a verse in a song. Most often we may remember bits and pieces of a freestyle that inspire a

general topic that we “build” on through a more thought out and time consuming process than freestyle. Despite this interconnection between freestyle and written rap, the two are separate experiences for the emcee and deserve singular focus. This process of freestyling inevitably changes based on the context and setting.

Methods

This study was conducted through participant observation and in-depth interviews. It initially began as participant observation ethnography of a local hip hop open microphone that I was organizing. I had already organized the event prior to the conception of this project, which made the process of gaining access and group membership a natural progression. The event lasted for a period of three weeks and was a weekly event occurring every Tuesday night. The participants were gained through convenience sampling, obtained by leaving the microphones open to anyone who wanted to participate. There were approximately 20 participants in the event, with about seven to ten people that were there every time. The participants were largely white, male, college students in their early to mid twenties.

I was interested in the various roles that participants performed during the act of freestyle rapping and how they negotiated those roles with the other participants. Freestyle is by nature extemporaneous, yet my aim was to find the patterns of self-presentation, and map their movement. I took field notes while participating as a performer in the freestyle sessions. For unforeseen reasons, this event had to shut down, and my research took to the streets.

As an active member of the local hip hop community, it was not difficult for me to find other venues for research. By organizing freestyle sessions with friends, and coming upon random sessions in progress, I was able to continue with field research and find participants. Many participants in this second phase had attended the weekly open microphone, and were of a similar demographic makeup, with more variation in age.

The settings ranged from my apartment to the beach. The primary indicator of difference was the presence of onlookers, or non-participants, in the freestyle session. As a participant in the sessions, it was not possible for me to record lyrics without a recording device, so one was used whenever possible. Nevertheless, when the use of a recording device was not possible, I was able to make observations of the other participant's presentation in terms of body language, tone of voice, and general themes behind their lyrics.

In order to gain a deeper look at how the individual participants attach meaning to hip hop and the freestyle process, I facilitated six in-depth interviews. The interview participants were men ranging in age from 25 to 70 years, with most in their mid to late twenties. Two self identified as white, two self identified as mixed European and Native American, and two self-identified as black. All participants were from middle to lower middle class socio-economic backgrounds. Their employment status varied with participants working full time, part time, unemployed, and retired. Two of the interviews took place in the participants' homes, two took place in my home, and two were conducted at a local park.

The data from the field notes and interview transcripts was color coded for themes. The themes were then adjusted as new concepts emerged from the data (Charmaz 2006; Berg 2007). These concepts were then used to form a topographical map of the roles that were performed. Interview data was used to give a personal account of those different roles while also framing freestyle within a historical-cultural context.

In the Beginning: The Roots of Freestyle

As stated earlier, freestyle has its roots in African oral tradition and later the work of poets like the Watts Prophets. I was blessed to be able to interview Amde Hamilton of the Watts Prophets and gain further insight into the roots of freestyle. Speaking candidly on the subject he stated,

It started in Africa we've always been doin call and response and rhythm, we were doin freestyle, you can find that goin on right now in west Africa, and we been doin it for centuries. At a birth they'll have a freestyle song and a freestyle dance. It's like we think we're comin up with something new....That oral tradition moved on down from Africa to slave poets, to the Harlem Renaissance, the beat poets, the last poets, The Watts Prophets, on down to y'all, unbroken.

The roots of freestyle are unmistakably African, with improvisation playing a crucial role on the continent long before slavery. Improvisation also played a critical role during slavery for Africans who had been purposefully removed from their traditional means of cultural expression. When asked about his thoughts on the role of improvisation in a historical context, he stated,

I guess it had to come about from African- Americans because we lost our tradition, culture, and history, so we had to improvise. It became a movement and has infected all of the art forms. Nobody wants to give us that, but we did. We are freed ... the music, the dance, from tight tradition,

and rules and regulations. We broke them all with our improvisational creative movement.

This “improvisational creative movement” in Amde’s view, though rooted in African tradition, was destined to go beyond the African-American experience. The power behind the creativity eventually found its way across racial and spacial barriers into communities like Humboldt.

In reference to the goals of the Watts Prophets Amde stated:

What I mean by that is that area of expression has been opened up for the whole world. We were successful in our desire to open up that area of expression because you can hear rappin’ in China; you can hear it in Japan you can hear it all over this whole earth now. And they’re measuring it by the sales on the radio and TV, but that’s not really where it’s happening, it’s happening where it always has, in the communities amongst the people.

In the vision of The Watts Prophets, the avenue of expression that was opened up was not one meant solely for the possession of African-Americans. It has permeated all corners of the globe and remains in a state of constant change. As Krs-one (2000) says, “You are not just doing hip hop, you are hip hop.” Those who participate in the constant shaping and reshaping of the sound through freestyle exist as vital components of hip hop as a culture. The race of those participants and the extent to which the dominant hegemonic discourse is woven into the tapestry of their rhymes becomes evident in freestyle. Our filter opens up and words flow that would likely be self-censored in a conversation.

This concept of “being uncensored” is a vital consideration in my research, since this study was conducted with largely white male participants of varying socio-economic backgrounds. Every emcee in a freestyle cypher wants to have his or her voice heard. We seek to leave the listener with feelings of awe and the notion that respect is due. In the process of seeking this we as emcees often rely on certain words, phrases, and topics that shock the listener. What would normally not enter into a discussion between relative strangers (as often participants in a cypher are), like detailed accounts of sexual encounters or spiritual beliefs, becomes the main focus when a freestyle session kicks into high gear.

The lyrical forms that this may take depend on the emcees’ conception of what will gain them attention and status as a veteran emcee. For some this emerges through exposition of sexual conquest and wealth. For others it may come through a vivid depiction of poverty or crime. Other emcees may bring forth the imagery of apocalyptic landscapes or abstract and cryptic word combinations that grip the listener through intrigue. The following section seeks to map out the roles the participants performed and the ways that these roles played out in relation to the dominant discourse within hip hop culture and society.

With a boom box and backpack packed full of beats, the man you know as Zach Funk took to the streets. Hearts and minds don’t lie in academia’s sheets, so I opened up my eyes and ears to hear and see, what they say when they’re free.

Roles Performed During Freestyle

The participants while freestyling performed five predominant roles. Following the dramaturgical analysis of Goffman (1959), these roles were viewed as masks with different levels of transparency. All masks may be worn simultaneously, yet the two thickest masks serve as a foundation to the others. The two foundational masks deal with the skill level of the participant in terms of time spent becoming an experienced lyricist. I labeled the two foundational masks "The Veteran" and "The New Jack." I labeled three more fluid and transparent masks "The Little-Big Man," "The Prophet," and "The Hyper-Masculine." The roles are based on what was observed through interaction with the participants in freestyle sessions. Those interviewed gave accounts of their experiences within the roles, and shed light on the context in which the roles are formed. The in-depth nature of the interview data allowed me to look inside the rhymes and understand how meaning was attached and cultivated through the filter of their lives experience.

The Veteran

The veteran was the most esteemed mask that one could wear within a freestyle session. It was characterized by a foundational rhyme pattern that was rhythmic and tight, yet coupled with an ability to adapt to changing themes in lyrics and emerging rhyme patterns. The veteran often set the topic of the freestyle session. The veteran was the master in the dojo, all students were aware, and thus showed respect.

He was always prepared to do battle with challengers that wished to question the authenticity of his dedication to the art.

One participant, Opie, a 32- year-old father of four and artist highlighted this point in a response to a question about his participation in hip hop culture:

I was battlin' cats at these freestyle open mic things that would be around, or at hip hop jams for graffiti functions, and we were slaying cats back in those days. As far as freestyle went, we were on fire.

In the freestyle session, the veteran exhibited body language and a vocal tone that evoked a sense of comfort and security in their presentation of lyrics. The veteran stood proud, with slicing, rhythmic hand motions that resemble that of a kung fu master. The vocal tone was loud and resonated with a sense of authority, and the lyrics were clearly spoken. The Veteran is a role that is hard to assume without the actual time spent developing the lyrical skill, and knowledge associated with its attributes. In the veteran's body movements and lyrics existed tales of movement through the various elements of hip hop and knowledge of the origins of the culture.

Opie repeatedly reiterated the place of graffiti writing and break dancing in his life. Placing one's own life in context with the historical progression of hip hop's various cultural elements (deejayin', emceeing', breakin', graffiti writin') was a key element in process of verifying ones self as a veteran.

In response to a question about how he came to participate in hip hop he stated:

B-boyin', breakin', that was the era I started to participate in, like 85'. Probably died out on the break tip around 87'. And it was just something that happened all across the board, hella people stopped break dancing. Except the people that were hella down, and they kept going, and some became legends.

When asked how he felt the first time he heard hip hop, he gave this account:

Well, at that time it was definitely incredible. It was blowing up so hard, and once "Beat Street" came out, everyone was breaking everywhere.

Opie indicates that he only stopped because it was "across the board" and that he had paid his dues by break dancing with the "legends." Referencing time spent as an emcee and any other involvement in the elements of hip hop is critical in forming the stories that flow from veteran during a freestyle. The aim is to evoke a feeling of paternalism between the veteran and the other participants. The participants most accepting of this relationship became known as the *new jack*.

The New Jack

The new jack was the newcomer to the world of freestyle. The inexperience of the new jack was evident in his body language defined by shaky hands, and non-threatening posture. The vocal tone of the new jack was often too quiet to hear, or too loud and exaggerated in relation to others in the session. This seemed to be a direct indicator of experience at freestyle sessions.

The new jack had a rhyme pattern that was often very simplistic rhyming one syllable at the end of every second bar (what could be understood as a complete thought). The new jack often spoke only in the first person about their positive attributes.

The interview data expressed a notion by the participants that it is a natural starting point when one is trying to prove himself or herself as a skilled freestylist.

Heath, a 25-year-old European-American with Native American ancestry from the

outskirts of Chicago, said this in relation to a question about the progression of his interest in freestyle:

Since I first heard it, it was something I wanted to be able to do. I wasn't very good at first, it came with time. I learned to freestyle long, long before I wrote anything down.

Heath expressed his understanding of the process involved in becoming one who can easily don the mask of the veteran. It was often expressed in terms of something that tied the participants to a sense of pride in their accomplishments. It also served as a reference to hard times or the life lessons they learned by assuming the role of the new jack. Robert, a 25-year-old white man of a strict religious background gave his experience relating to this.

hip hop is basically saving my life. If I look at the past, I wouldn't have been able to have a shred of confidence running through all of the tough times in my life. It gave me something to hold onto and be proud of. Being homeless, wishing I just had the guts to kill myself, and I remembered the only things that were going to save me were music and love. I guess I always wanted to be a cool kid and hip hop in Seattle was just a way for me to do that. So it was born of necessity, my need to perform and to prove that I was intelligent.

Often what drives us to move past the simplistic one syllable rhymes and regurgitated topics that define the new jack is the experience of being humbled by a veteran rapper in a cypher. It is then when we are pushed to “perform and to prove” that we understand the veteran status of those who push us, “came with time.” The new jack doesn’t rap about being inexperienced. He tries on the various rhyme styles and modes of self-presentation to find the combination that gives him the best

response. Once the new jack has finds a way to present his identity as an emcee (through a vocal tone, syllable rhyme pattern, etc.) that gives him the best response from cyphers members and onlookers he begins to feel more comfortable freestyling. The false sense of accomplishment and inflated ego that accompanies the emcees' attempt to shed the role of the new jack is the hallmark of the *little-big man*.

The Little-Big Man

The little-big man was the role performed often by those who wished to maximize their voice within the freestyle session. Those with a smaller physical stature in relation to others also often performed this role in the session. The participants who spent the most time playing this role were often those that have shaken the unsure body language of the new jack through experience or often a false confidence provided by alcohol. The new jack used wild arm movements fashioned to resemble the skilled, rhythmic chops of the veteran. Yet the overall body movements of the little-big man closer resembled what could be seen as an off beat dancer. The vocal tone of the little-big man was consistently louder than the other participants. The content of the lyrics was largely a first person declarative account of their superiority in terms of lyrical skills. The little big man could be seen as a new jack who attempted to wear the mask of the veteran without the necessary skills. This role was exemplified by attempts to monopolize time within the session. The little-big man would often cut off participants in the middle of a strong rhyme. This acted as a way for him to assert his will on the freestyle session.

By preventing others from freestyling, he prevented the possibility of anyone outshining him.

The Misogynist

This role is typified in the actors focus on the exploitation of women as a lyrical topic. Those who played this part were often given the highest level of crowd response. That is, after finishing a statement, there would often be an accompanying, "Oh!" signaling the session members' approval and recognition. The most valuable tool of the hyper-masculine was the shock value produced through the use of graphic sexual imagery within the content of his lyrics.

Women were spoken of in terms of submissive partners to their sexual conquests. Often claims were made through the misogynist's lyrics of sexual relations with the other participants' partners. The other participants often responded by assuming the role of the misogynist and lyrically attacking the initiator. It is in this sense that the misogynist role often gives the actor the ability to dictate the theme of the session.

The Prophet

The prophet operated as an antagonist to the generally first person oriented style of the other roles. He often spoke in terms of "we," and "us," and used metaphors and similes as a primary means of gaining recognition by the group. Stylistically, the prophet was similar to the veteran with a strong foundational rhyme pattern. The prophet also presented confident body language. However, the prophet spent less time talking

about experience and skill, and focused on “saving” the group members from talking negatively towards others. There were often references to spirituality, as depicted by the following excerpt from Heath’s lyrics in a freestyle session with him and me: “I’m feeling like a fish with no fins, in an ocean overflowin’ with sin...” He goes on to say: “I got a friend called common sense. But even common gets the fifth once the drama commence.”

The prophet shows unconstrained emotion, and seemed to channel words rather than carefully orchestrate them. The prophet could be seen as a role that is shaped by the context of the freestyle session. If the topic was heavily leaning on lyrics depicting male domination, then the prophet sought to express lyrics that countered the claims made by emcees that performed the role of the misogynist. If the topic continued, the prophet would speak directly to those who maintained it, warning them of their ways, or give examples of why it’s not acceptable to continue on in this manner. In this sense, the prophet also held the ability to enforce his will upon the topic.

Types of Responses Between Roles

Beyond a simple explanation of the roles performed during the freestyle sessions, there must be an examination of the ways that the various actors used the masks in response to changing conditions within the cypher. As previously stated, the veteran holds the most esteem in the eyes of the other members, yet due to the requirement of relating actual lived experience in one's rhymes, one of the other more easily assumed roles was often chosen. One who has been freestyling long enough to exhibit the

characteristics of a veteran was often not present at the freestyle sessions that I attended. This may also have played a role in the way that the participants wore these masks.

The topic of a freestyle session can change within performer's lyrics, and from person to person, but it can also be sustained for a time only limited by the participants' ability to express it. This gets at the notion that those who participate in any cypher have been exposed to other rappers lyrics, and their ability to express any given subject matter is partially constrained by this.

If we understand the popularity of self-promotion and male domination in the lyrics of commercial rappers, then we can begin to see the limits of the average freestylist's lyrics. The ability for one to sound aesthetically pleasing while freestyling often rests on their aptitude for grabbing a set of words out of their brain and assembling it over the instrumental track. The easiest way for most to do this is to use a rhyme scheme as the outline and fill it in with bits of lyrics used by various commercial rappers, who are in essence providing a lyrical framework. The lyrics are not recited in whole, but rather used as a rough guideline for the emcees lyrical interpretation of a topic. It seems that this may point to the high salience of the misogynist mask in the ciphers, as misogyny is an undoubtedly visible image within commercial rap.

The Prophet Response

Following from this the first role response that I'll address is one that often in direct relation to the topics of the misogynist and the little big man.

The actor performing the role of the prophet would often tailor his or her lyrics to embody the antithesis of male domination and capitalism, this was labeled *the prophet response*. This response gives the prophet a way of differentiating from the group but more importantly, to move the topic of the cypher towards what could be seen as "conscious rap." Those who had a lyrical framework of conscious rap seemed to play out the struggle that goes on in the commercial rap arena, in the cypher. In other words, the prophet assumes the role of those rappers who serve as a contrasting and less supported alternative to popular rappers, constantly seeking to convert listeners to lyrics that advocate social consciousness. On the macro level, the conscious rapper can form an independent label and seek to distribute their music outside of corporate control. However, the prophet as the conscious rapper on the micro level must attempt to convert those in the immediate audience, the other members of the cypher.

Following the cue of the most successful conscious rappers, the prophet immediately responds to a topic change in the direction of hyper-masculinity or self embellishment, by exhibiting his or her most aesthetically pleasing lyrics with an emphasis on the abstract or the metaphorical. This often proved effective as an initial tactic for topic change, with the other participants responding by exhibiting their conception of an aesthetically pleasing set of lyrics. The critical issue was how the next freestylists lyrical framework shaped their conception of lyrical frame that was aesthetically pleasing. The choice that was often made was to remain on safer ground and assume the lyrical framework of the commercial rapper.

If this did not switch the topic of the other participants' rhymes, then a further push was made to convert the others. At this point, the prophet seeks to bring lyrics that contain direct references to current social issues. This was effective in that it tapped into the connections that members of a social group may have on issues like law enforcement, and war.

For example, the cyphers filled with college students that I participated in, freestyling about a disdain for George W. Bush became a surefire way to bring up a topic that others would follow. If this did not work, the prophet attempts to call on the differences between him or her and the group as a tool for topic change. The prophet may take the last rhyme of a misogynist's lyrics and rhyme it with his or her own lyrics that counter the claims made. This serves as a direct way to call out those most responsible for the continuation of undesirable topics. This proved to be very effective, but was dangerous as it may evoke one of the members of the cypher to fulfill the role of the little big man and attempt to "battle" (a war of words) the prophet by asserting their superiority in relation to him or her.

Vying for Dominance – Little Big Men & Misogynists

This move to battle the prophet embodies the responses of the little big man and the misogynist. The little big man is not a fan of the conscious lyrics as they don't allow much room for self-embellishment. So to regain control of the cypher, an attempt is made to battle those who would seek to silence the lyrics of the little big man. If the little big man successfully drives anyone attempting to perform the role of the prophet away

from the cypher then he has become one step closer to achieving the goal of time monopolization. If a battle is taken on with one who performed the role of the misogynist, then it most often happens that one participant is wearing the mask of the misogynist and the other the mask of the little big man. They both seek to assert their dominance and monopolize time, yet the emphasis of attack was often related to perceived weakness in the other member's masculinity. This was a very common way for the cypher to turn and may be an indicator of why there were not more women participating in the cyphers. If the cypher is devoid of those performing the roles of the veteran, and the prophet this scenario often played out, I labeled this, *masculine fastening*.

As stated earlier, ones lyrical framework is constricted by their exposure to external sources of lyrics. The words and phrases of misogyny are widely used outside of rap's lyrics and undeniably predate the existence of rap music itself (Richardson & Scott 2002). It becomes obvious to see how so often the topic that continued to dominate the circle and go unchallenged, was the sexual exploitation of women. Participants often embraced this topic with all the zeal of a young man telling locker room stories about his latest sexual conquest.

Choir Practice

It is because of the prominence of this masculine fastening that the prophet seeks to find other performers who wish to play the role of the prophet and commence with what I've termed, *choir practice*. There is no preaching involved when all members of a

cypher fully embrace the mask of the prophet. When those who meet in a cypher share such a political/social sensibility it is commonly known in hip hop culture as, "building", and it resembles a philosophical meeting of minds. Though there may be some disagreements, they are worked out through the lyrics of the cypher, and all participants seek to draw on, and build on the strengths and weaknesses of the other participants. I attended many of these "choir practices" during the process of completing this research. The overall mood evoked a sense of great comfort and sharing. Members often put their personal problems into lyrical form and sought to reveal their weakness with the goal of strengthening. The strengthening came with the self disclosure of the other participants and the interrelation of all the members' disclosures through the lyrics. Many of the most intimate disclosures were between I and one other participant at a time. An individual who often performed the role of the prophet would contact me and set up a time to meet up and freestyle. This occurred with individuals that were both close friends and what I would consider casual acquaintances that I only know through freestyle cyphers. The level of disclosure and intimacy did not seem to be affected by the degree of friendship that myself the other participant held with each other. The freestyle session in this format seemed to provide the most open environment for the cultivation of lyrics that are most conducive to conscious rap.

Each one of the roles performed had the ability to change the entire theme of the freestyle session. The roles themselves could be moved in and out of during the course of a given freestyle session. They provide the participants with the ability to gain positive recognition and gain status in the eyes of other group members.

I have seen freestyle spawn movements of thought that could have been accomplished no other way. With the forces of chaos, conformity, and conflict, we emerge reshaped through each cypher. A regular figure at local cyphers and national freestyle battle competitions, Franco, had this to say about the experience of freestyle:

I just felt like I was going to burst, I just wanted to have all my words come out and hear them out loud instead of being pent up inside ... the freestyle shit is always the most compelling to any listener. If someone hears that you can freestyle good, that's just going to be more stripes for you as an emcee. You know, you gotta earn your stripes.

However, even this seasoned freestyle veteran views freestyle as functional only in relation to producing written, recorded, and preformed music. He goes on to say, "But I don't think it really matters (if your good at freestyling), if your shit's rehearsed and it's dope, then that's gonna be more entertaining than someone coming with a shitty freestyle."

The following section looks at three currently local emcees albums to examine the relationship between freestyle and written lyrics. A complete emcee must master the art of both freestyle and written. A content analysis was performed to see how some of the emcees that I had a chance to freestyle with present themselves beyond the cypher. After you prove yourself so many times in freestyle sessions, people expect more of you. They expect a "real emcee" to produce an album.

SECTION IV: PRESENTATION OF IDENTITY THROUGH WRITTEN RAP: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

While scholars note that rap is primarily consumed by white audiences, few have taken into account how white youth, who were responsible for 70% of the record sales in 1999, experience and interpret this music (Yeoman 1999). Much of the research focuses on putting the work of rap artists in relation to the struggles of the urban black community, calling it, “contemporary resistance rhetoric” (Smitherman 1997). This led me to ask then: “How is rap being interpreted by white rappers in rural Humboldt County”?

In order to provide the provide the space for such a consideration of white rappers, experience and interpretation, I subscribed to a grounded theory approach, or one that advocates a reflective reiterative process in which the data informs the theory, and a focus is placed on analyzing the data as it is collected (Charmaz 2006). My aim in this study is not to compare white rappers to black rappers, but rather to provide a space in which these three artists can speak and be heard. The theoretical model developed here builds on the previous section’s findings while adding new insight into the way that these emcees negotiate the presentation of their identity.

Methods

I selected a convenience sample of three albums by three separate Humboldt county rappers. The albums included *Cauliflower Ears and Green Thumbs* by Kush

(2007), *Natural Reaction* by Nac One (2004), and *Even if the Record Skips*, by Franco (2007). I was personally familiar with these artists and have collaborated on songs with Nac One and Franco. Nac One's album was not produced or released locally, but he has lived and performed locally for the past three years. Franco and Kush come from a local group of emcees that call themselves "The Dirty Rats" and have been putting out albums locally for the last several years. The visibility of these artists in the local hip hop scene, the availability of their work, and my personal connection to these artists is what led me to choose these albums for my analysis.

I transcribed and coded the choruses of the 41 songs on these albums. I focused on the chorus of each song as the chorus often encapsulates the artists' main theme for that song. Once I identified emergent themes, I analyzed the data quantitatively using the song as a unit of analysis. In most cases, a chorus was counted as including more than one theme. The lyrics in the verses of the songs were qualitatively, but not quantitatively analyzed. By using the grounded theory approach advocated by Kathy Charmaz (2006), the methodology of this project was organized around the process of constantly refining emerging analytical categories with the goal of developing a theoretical model. Following a grounded theory approach, these themes are the end result of the constant refining of many topics that appear in the text, into a smaller set of key themes (Charmaz, 2006).

Analysis

Four major themes emerged from the data and were conceptualized as, *community membership, stories of struggle, respect earned* and *veteran verification* (Table 1).

Table 1: Emergent Themes in Song Verses

Community Membership	Stories of Struggle	Respect Earned	Veteran Verification
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reference to participating in hip hop community. - Accounts of local places, people, and things. - Accounts of artist's position in relation to the global flow of people, places, and things. - Reference to the artists crew (rap/graffiti/break-dance associates). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accounts of hardship experienced by the artist. - Accounts of hardship witnessed by the artist. - Accounts of hardship on a global scale (war, global poverty, environmental degradation). - lyrics describing the physical experience of pain in a way that expresses the artist's familiarity with it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - accounts of notoriety locally, regionally, or globally. - accounts of accomplishments - reference of others approval. - reference to the superiority of the artists lyrics in relation to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reference to time spent as a rapper or member of the hip hop community. - Reference to inside knowledge about hip hop history. - Reference to and demonstration of a mastery of the various lyrical styles. - Reference to and demonstration of the creation of new styles.

These themes occurred in the choruses as well as the lyrics of the verses. Only the chorus frequencies are presented here (Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency of Themes in Song Choruses

Theme	% (n)
Community Membership	53.7% (22)
Stories of Struggle	68.3% (28)
Respect Earned	63.4% (26)
Veteran Verification	75.6% (31)
Total	100% (41)

Veteran Verification

The data suggests that the primary focus of the lyrics in the choruses was to verify the status of veteran. Veteran verification occurred in 75.6% of the songs choruses. This theme was defined by:

1) Reference to time spent as a rapper or member of the hip hop community, reference to “inside knowledge” about hip hop history, 2) Reference to and demonstration of the creation of new lyrical styles, as well as, 3) Reference to and demonstration of a mastery of various lyrical styles.

An example of this theme of can be found in these lyrics from Nac One (2004):

I'm from B-town, were freestyle cyphers were found, I was a young cat,
on the prowl through the town /Now I'm veteran since then been a
severin' heads of snakes, to take the venom, and then make medicine.

Franco (2007) drops some hip hop history into the lyrics in the second song on his album, setting up the listener to feel a sense of validity in his words, by referencing what could be considered insider knowledge about things like key artists of hip-hop's inception.

For example:

Don't be passive act creative, when you snap the fader, pretend to emulate the Grand Wizard Theodore scratch creator

In the same song while stylistically presenting his lyrics in a sped up pace reminiscent of early rap styles, he states:

The earth is the foundation, groundbreaking, /poundin' pavement, got em' spotted like Dalmatians, / A new birth, from two shoes and school work, /so they, Rock Steady and clock feti for Kool Herc/

With this set of lyrics the artist is demonstrating hip hop knowledge as the Rock Steady Crew is a fundamental name in the origins of break-dancing, and Kool Herc is known as one of hip hop's founding members. While demonstrating knowledge, Franco (2007) also displayed skills in the mastery of multiple lyrical styles in this song and throughout his album. When the elements of skill and knowledge combine in the lyrics, it seems as though the intention is to leave the listener with a sense that the artist is an experienced and dedicated rapper.

Stories of Struggle

Stories of Struggle occurred in 68.3% of choruses analyzed. This theme appeared as accounts of hardship experienced by the artist, accounts of hardship witnessed by the

artist, accounts of hardship on a global scale, and lyrics describing the physical experience of pain in a way that expresses the artist's familiarity with it.

An illuminating illustration of this theme comes in Kush's (2007) first person account from the perspective of a one dollar bill:

I'm the dirtiest thing to touch the cleanest hand, I'm the reason why you won't be a man/ I'm your blood sweat and tears, I'm the stress at the end of the month, the reason why she's bitchin' in your ear/

Another example of this theme in which the artist references struggle on a global scale comes in Franco's (2007) commentary on environmental degradation and capitalism in which he states in the rap's chorus:

Long before the land was, over harvested and cattle branded/ the open hearted were targeted for cash advances/ until it's abandoned I'll be standin' in my battle stance kid, for those super killed in cold blood like avalanches/who has the answers? No one, it snaps the branches, the last one standin', a lonely crone inside his castle dancin'/ time travels fast drive past your hansom grandson,/ heirlooms, most families have none, share tunes and a massive handgun/

Possibly the most articulate explanation of this theme comes in the chorus of Nac One's aptly titled song "Feel Me". The artist's familiarity with pain and struggle flow through this song and can be felt as the chorus resonates:

I spill my heart on the beat, just trying to get people to think/ my life has been one big roller coaster tryin' to get back on my feet/ I feel the pain very deep/, short of breath, sometimes I suffocate waking out of a sleep.

Respect Earned

Respect earned was a prominent theme occurring 63.4% of the songs choruses and throughout the songs verses. It was expressed primarily in the form of accounts of

notoriety locally, regionally, or globally, accounts of accomplishments, references of others approval, and references to the superiority of the artists lyrics in relation to others. Kush (2007) expressed this theme in a way that seemed to command the listener to recognize him as a worthy rapper, while referencing specific aspects of culture that speak specifically to a rural Humboldt County in the chorus of the song “Fall Back:”

You wanna grow like a ten lighter, and be the king of your own empire,?/
 better fall back, fall back, fall back/ I’m not street, I’m dirt road, Fuck
 what ya’ heard bro’, so you better fall back, fall back, fall back/There on
 to you like some flies on shit, you better be the quietest cat and fall back
 fall back, fall back/I was put here to kick out your chair, tongue out like
 Jordan, lickin’ shots in the air/

In these lyrics Kush asserts that he was “put here to kick out your chair,” implicating that his status and skill has been earned and verified by others, he’s been “put here” to replace the status quo in hip hop, and admits that he is not the average urban based rapper by stating, “I’m not street I’m dirt road.” In fact, the song starts out with a skit in which a loud concert is taking place with Kush’s (2007) lyrics playing in background. The dialogue started with three stereotypic black voices (concert attendees or event organizers backstage) with the notably louder one played by Kush (2007) repeatedly asks, “Who the fuck is this white boy,” and “who let this mutha fucka, on the stage, it’s my stage” until he says “what, Humboldt, oh shit!”

This seems to be alluding to the thought that status brought by claiming “Humboldt” can overshadow a white rapper’s outsider status, and thus gain him respect. In another lyrical ode to Humboldt County, Kush says, “Take your opinions of truth, and lay low like a didgeridoo, and you’ll get that respect that’s comin’ ta’ you.”

A more direct representation of this theme emerged in the lyrics of Nac One (2004) in the title song of his album, “Natural Reaction.” In the opening verse of his album, he explains the process of gaining respect in saying:

When you first start, you’re usually wack at it,/ you get dissed and either stop, or want to get back at it/ These cats think they’re gonna’ be stars over night/ but they crash and burn before they even take flight/ That’s right you gotta’ pay dues to be at the top/ believe it or not, I got more than ten years under my belt/...I’m conceptual, with lyrics that’s highly perceptible/ my second long playing record, a classic collectable

We see through Nac One’s lyrics that becoming a veteran and earning respect within the hip hop community is a process.

This process becomes defined by the way that we react to the challenges laid before us and “pay our dues.” As the title of his album states, for Nac One, it was a “natural reaction.”

Community Membership

Reference to community membership occurred in 53.7% of the choruses analyzed. This theme was represented by lyrics that referenced participating in hip hop community, gave accounts of local places, people, and things, lyrics that gave accounts of artist’s position in relation to the global flow of people, places, and things, and reference to the artists crew (rap/graffiti/break-dance associates).

Kush (2007) references Humboldt County throughout his album. This example seemed to express a sense of the artist openly asserting himself in contrast to the average rapper while connecting himself with his local community.

Walkin' around all confused, like shockin' news, If you only knew how
to fly with the cockatoos,/ not everybody's from an urban jungle, in
Humboldt they walk with a different view/ Different way of life, different
crew, different style than you/you can't see this way, don't be afraid/

In a more abstract format, the theme was expressed in terms of a spiritual or physical connection to all living things within the global community. Nac One expressed this in the song "Meditate with Me." In the first verse of the song he states, "Everything connects, order to chaos, life to death..." He goes on to say:

From within I begin meditation with dedication, elevation to the highest
peak you can see from/Each one teach one to become one under the heat
of the sun, change with the seasons/reasons for teachin' before the times
gone, I'm tryin' to tell you to keep your mind strong./

Through meditation the individual strengthens their mind. But the teaching of others strengthens the bonds that connect the collective consciousness. So in telling the listener to "meditate with me" Nac One seeks to offer a chance to join in this strengthening of the mind and pushes us to see the interconnectedness between all humans.

Theoretical Implications

In order to demonstrate the relationship between the themes that emerged from the artists' lyrics, and following the grounded theory approach of Charmaz (2006), I constructed a theoretical model. (Figure 1)

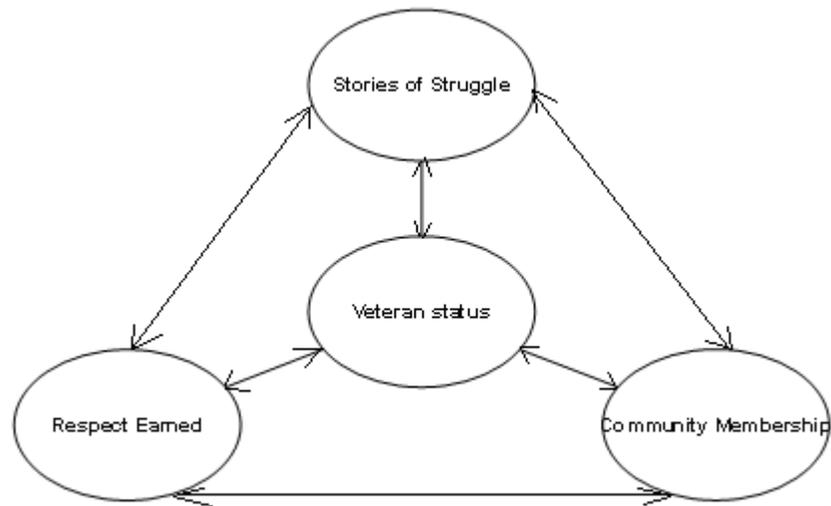


Figure 1: Theoretical Model

Model Description

The purpose of the model is to demonstrate the theoretical implications of the data.

The theory asserted here is that because rap has been stated as, “the voice of urban African American youth” (Martinez 1997), white rural hip hop artists must go through a process of authentication to verify that their voice is worthy of attention.

The themes in the outer spheres of the model are the fundamental ways that the artists gave evidence of their authenticity as a rapper. There is a multidirectional relationship between the themes in the model. The outer themes work together to verify the central theme, veteran status. As the white rapper’s status as veteran becomes emboldened, his lyrics gain more authenticity which increases their potency and reifies the cycle.

The veteran is one that can give evidence of achieved status through the stories that manifest within their lyrics. The major themes that have appeared in these stories are as follows: *community membership*, *stories of struggle*, *respect earned*, and *veteran verification*. *Community membership* was essentially denoted by the artists' reference to being a part of a larger group, whether it is the city they live in, the hip hop community at large, or the global community. Being part of a community, especially a "color-blind" hip hop community, gave these artists space to claim authenticity as a veteran rapper while downplaying their whiteness. The artists often expressed *stories of struggle* in an experiential format by citing, for example, incidents of people living in poverty (the artist or others), and thus served to authenticate the artist as one who has experienced these circumstances, adding a contextual narrative that supports their status as a veteran. *Respect earned* occurred in stories that described achievement and acceptance by peers inside and outside the hip hop community, and can be seen as testimony by others of the artists' achieved status as a veteran.

The model demonstrates that the stories of these artists serve to engender and reify the notion of veteran status to the listener. The frequency that the emergent themes occurred within the lyrical text supports this conclusion. What the numbers can't show however is the way that the artists expressed multiple themes within the text of their lyrics. The way that these themes were expressed demonstrates the multi-directional relationship between the themes in the model. As one might imagine, the themes that emerged within the artists' lyrics did so in correlation with each other. That is to say, in any given text, multiple themes emerged that worked in a synergistic fashion to inform

each other and support the overall notion of *veteran status*. Take for example this excerpt from the lyrics of Nac One (2004):

I remember getting clowned and dissed shamefully/ but now there ain't nothin' no one can take from me/ I went back to the lab study creatively,/and became deadly with spontaneity/ I returned to the open mic session/ with my skills representin' my progression/ had the whole crowd bouncin' with the words I'm pronouncin', cause now I hold it down no testin'/ no question, this kid's got his rhymes on, / I been waitin' ta detonate like a time bomb/ it's a life long mission, with the right songs hittin'/ phat tracks and concepts, that's what I'm on/

In this one section of text, Nac One (2004) expresses all of the emergent themes in an autobiographical format; in doing this, he seems to lead the listener down a path that verifies his *veteran status*. The *stories of struggle* are represented with “getting clowned and dissed shamefully,” and the “going back to the lab to study;” both of which explain the pain and hardship experienced by the artist in a way that the listener can relate to and understand how the artists struggle led to their status as a veteran. Nac One (2004) is interacting with the hip hop community through the “open mic session” where he “represents his progression” from his struggle, and gets “the whole crowd bouncin’” evoking the themes of *community membership* and *respect earned*. He goes on to explain that now he “holds it down no question” and that he “got his rhymes on,” but also makes it clear that this process has been “a life long mission” embodying the theme of *veteran verification*.

Due to the extent to which these themes were able to be found across these artists lyrics, it seems possible that this theoretical model could inform the analysis of other rap lyrics. A comparative analysis of other non-white hip hop artists from urban areas would be likely to be confounded with new and emergent themes. With some work

though, it seems likely that a model could be developed that would help us understand the work of urban black rappers in relation to that of rural white rappers.

Along with the process of authenticating ones status as veteran and thus viable voice, there was largely an absence of the topic of race within the lyrics of the artists studied. Although class was mentioned often in the lyrics within the stories of struggle, race received little attention in these rappers songs. The extent to which a white rapper can downplay his whiteness or attempt to replace it with stories of class struggle may also be seen as helping authenticate their status as a veteran rapper. Many albums put out independently fail to be taken seriously as veterans. In an attempt to be taken seriously, white emcees may rely on tried and true methods of gaining respect through the incorporation of lyrics about struggle, and cultural membership, while downplaying the thing that will get them not taken seriously, their whiteness.

The overall focus of the emcees highlighted within this piece seemed to be a solidification of their status as someone not only worth listening to, but someone who is worthy of respect as an emcee. The stories within their songs tell of perseverance in the face of adversity, and call on fundamental elements of hip hop culture through their lyrics.

SECTION V: CONCLUSION

The spontaneous nature of freestyle brings forth the voices of the immaturity, new confidence, misogyny, prophecy, and experience. The beautiful thing about any cypher is that you can be almost sure that each one of these voices will be present. The tension that exists between these voices manifests itself through the emcee. The new jack attempts to disguise himself as a veteran by falsifying stories of defeating “wack emcees,” in other words, he raps about rapping. The misogynist seeks to draw attention away from a lack of experience as a rapper and by referencing his experience dominating and exploiting women.

During freestyle as in written, we seek to impress upon the listener a sense of awe and respect. However, with freestyle we are compelled to continuously bring forth rhymes in the moment and often draw on a more situational motive for lyrical formation. I’ve seen emcees that usually perform the role of the misogynist exist as the prophet while on L.S.D., but I’ve also seen veterans perform the role of the new jack with the addition of alcohol to a cypher. In other words, the context surrounding the cypher plays a major role in defining the themes that emerge from our lyrics. Take for instance the setting of a house party with Mac Dre playing in the background telling you to “get stupid”, and a cypher forms consisting of male college students looked on by young women. Chances are that the lyrics coming out of that cypher aren’t going to have much to do with struggling for hegemonic control, but rather preparing to be controlled.

When we sit down to write, it is a different experience in terms of the time spent on each line, yet is highly informed by our experiences within the cypher. We are given the opportunity to carefully construct lyrics that draw the listener into a sense of connection with our story. In an era of home recording and production, the emcee has to do more than have an album recorded to be considered a veteran. He must convince the audience that they have, as Nac One puts it, “paid their dues to be at the top.” Being at the top is more than just a metaphor for status achieved as an emcee. It also describes the way that the emcees struggle to assert their version of reality.

Part of paying your dues is putting time in freestyling. During the cypher, we get a chance to run through the different roles, always paying attention to what gains us the best reaction from others. If an emcee receives praise and respect during a cypher for lyrics that disrespect women repeatedly, he may begin to see this as the ultimate path to veteran status. It is through this process that the flames of misogyny that will forge his identity as an emcee.

We seek to shape the overall appearance of hip hop culture and more specifically rap music, through the dynamic contestation of hegemony that occurs in the cypher, and solidify this shape through our written and recorded raps. Thus, the roles of the little big man and the new jack are often hidden when we are given the chance to carefully plan our self-presentation. However, as was evident with the artists in this study, the storylines of the misogyny, false pride, hope, and revolution that exist within our culture as Americans inspire lyrics that support, oppose, and offer alternatives to dominant oppressive discourses.

While writing, we draw on stories struggle as a method of connecting the listener with our history. Another way that we connect the listener with our history and our history with the moment, is the linking of these stories of struggle with claims of wisdom and respect achieved. The major aim of this is to authenticate that we are what we say we are, whatever that claim may be. In authenticating our identity as a “real emcee”, we often draw on pieces of the dominant oppressive discourse that apply to the context. To put it simply, everything we say isn’t a fact and often isn’t even meant to be truthful. We need only to draw on the dominant oppressive storylines that verify themselves in front of our faces every day to make our lyrics “real” to the listener. However, it was emcees that went beyond refabrication and maintenance of oppressive control that inspired this work.

Some of the original prophets of hip hop were those that spoke out against corporate control like Afrika Bambaataa (Krs-one, 2001) and provoked us to question the structures of power we engage with. The prophet embodies the struggle for alternatives to the dominant oppressive discourse within his lyrics. The prophet is a poet, and an iconoclast. Yet this iconoclast only exists in relation to the icons with which he clashes. The words of counter-hegemony must flow with the struggle of today and make plans for constructing new realities. The prophet is a rock tossed into the pond of hegemonic control, sending ripples through stagnant structures of race, class, and gender. As the water moves, so does the prophet; as the prophet moves, so does the water.

Whether freestyle or written emcees that exist in the underground yearn to emerge and be heard. In the process of this emergence, words serve as the surface from which our identities surge. I heard a scholar say that hip hop was just a product of place and

time (Shusterman 1991). It becomes like writing about the warmth of the oceans waves, while flying above enclosed in planes of ice. To truly understand the dynamic forces that mold an emcee and their lyrics, a researcher must live everyday with rhyme.

During the course of this research, I've encased every face in my mind, of every person who has joined with me in embrace of this sacred right. We write to be immortalized, and solidified as more than known to rhyme, as pure and full of light, a light that shines through endless nights. We freestyle to be heard, to see words form in the moment. We are clams displaying pearls of the world we know, or at least the world that serves us that we want to show them.

I see the same thing when the journals are opened. There is much to learn from academic journals, but also much to be learned by those who wrote them. Hip hop is my religion and lyrics are like scripture. What seems to have appeared is a picture of translation and misquoting.

What I hope may rise from this, is some recognition that many people build their life around a rhyme that might guide their ship. Navigating who we want to be, while crashing into the waves of what they say we should be, is like trying to find your way across an unsure sea. When we anchor ourselves in the moment of the rhyme, we come to understand nothing matters except the fact that you breathe

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004 "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy". *Sociological Theory*. 22:527-573
- Baker, Houston A. Jr. 1991. "Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy for the 1990s." *Black Music Research Journal*. "11:217-228
- Berg, Bruce L. 2007. *Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences* 6d ed. Boston: Pearson.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage
- Decker, Jeffrey Louis. 1993. "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism." *Social Text*. 34:53-84.
- Forman, Murray. 2000. "Represent': Race, Space and Place in Rap Music." *Popular Music*.19: 65-90.
- Franco, 2007. *Even If the Record Skips*. Dirty Rats Records.
- Hamilton, Anthony "Amde". 2005. *Me Today You Tomorrow*. Arcata, Ca: Classic Cut Musiz.
- Hess, Mickey. 2005. "Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hop's Persona Artist". *Popular Music and Society*. 28: 297-311
- Hight, Christopher. 2003. "Stereo Types: The Operation of Sound in the Production of Racial Identity." *Leonardo*.36:13-17
- Hoare, Quintin ;Geoffrey Nowell Smith. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York. International Publishers.
- Keyes, Cheryl L. 2000. "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance." *The Journal of American Folklore*.113:255-269.
- Krs-One. 2001. *Sneak Attack*. In the Paint Records.
- Kush, 2007. *Cauliflower Ears and Green Thumbs*. Dirty Rats Records.

- Lena, Jennifer C. 2006 "Social Context and Musical Content of Rap Music, 1979-1995" • *Social Forces*. 85:479-495
- Lipsitz, George. 1988. "The Struggle for Hegemony." *The Journal of American History*.
- Maher, George Ciccariello. 2005. "Brechtian Hip Hop: Didactics and Self-production in Post-Gangsta Political Mixtapes". *The Journal of Black Studies*.36:129-160.
- Martinez, Theresa A. 1997. "Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap as Resistance." *Sociological Perspectives*. 40:265-286.
- Nac One, 2004. Natural Reaction. Bomb Hip Hop Records.
- Phillips, Layli; Reddick-Morgan, Kerri; Stephens, Dionne Patricia. "Oppositional Consciousness within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop." *The Journal of African American History*. 90 :253-277.
- Quinn , Eithne. 2000. "Black British Cultural Studies and the Rap on Gangsta". *Black Music Research Journal*. 20:195-216
- Quinn, Micheal.1996. "'Never Shoulda Been Let out the Penitentiary': Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity." *Cultural Critique*. 34:65-89.
- Richardson, Jeanita W.; Kim A. Scott. 2002. "Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America's Culture of Violence in Context." *The Journal of Negro Education*. 71:175-192.
- Rose, Tricia. 1991. "Fear of a Black Planet": Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s." *The Journal of Negro Education*. 60:276-290.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. U.S. Wesleyan UP.
- Shusterman, Richard. 1991. "The Fine Art of Rap." *New Literary History*. 22:613-632 .
- Smitherman, Geneva. 1997. "The Chain Remain the Same: Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation." *The Journal of Black Studies*.
- Somer-Willet, Susan. 2005 "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern language Association*.38:51-73.
- Tabb-Powell, Catherine. 1991. "Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street." *The Journal of Negro Education*. 60:245-259.

- Traube, Elizabeth G. 1996. "The "Popular" in American Culture." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 25: 127-151.
- Walser, Robert. 1995. "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy." *Ethnomusicology*. 39:193-217.
- Wheeler, Elizabeth A. 1991. "Most of My Heroes Don't Appear on No Stamps: The Dialogics of Rap Music." *Black Music Research Journal*. 11:193-216
- ya Salaam, Mtume. 1996 "The Aesthetics of Rap". *African American Review*. 29: 303-315