

## Check The Rhime!

Hip Hop as a continuation of the African American protest tradition, from David Walker's *Appeal* (1829) to Kendrick Lamar's "The Blacker the Berry" (2015)



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## **Abstract**

My thesis presents Hip Hop as a continuation of the African American protest tradition. Drawing upon literature from recognized African American protest movements, including abolitionism, antilynching campaigns, the Civil Rights movement and Black Power, I present Hip Hop as the current embodiment of the protest aesthetic. My work develops the existing understanding of the African American protest aesthetic through the creation of three rhetorical devices or identifiers, embodied by all canonized protest literature. Through the exploration of each rhetorical identifier, I present Hip Hop as both an embodiment and an advancement of the protest aesthetic. Each chapter focuses on a different identifier, from its formation to its application: these are the shared responsibility, formed in slavery; the nightmare, formed by antilynching literature; and performative distress, a rhetorical device created in the latter half of the 1900s. I then apply my work to the responses to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 and this also forms part of my conclusion. The comparative analysis of Hip Hop, focusing on rap-music, alongside canonized African American protest literature unearths the immense literary debt that the music genre owes to its predecessors. In doing so, I enhance the understanding of the African American protest aesthetic, while suggesting that the work of rappers including Tupac Shakur, Kendrick Lamar and Nas, draws on and extends this aesthetic.

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## Introduction

“See your Declaration African!!! Do you understand your own language? ... ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!”

- David Walker, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (1829)<sup>1</sup>

“He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed or spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”

- W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)<sup>2</sup>

“Cops give a damn about a negro?

Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero...

I see no changes. All I see is racist faces...

It ain't a secret don't conceal the fact, the penitentiary's packed, and it's filled with blacks.”

- Tupac Shakur, “Changes” (1998)<sup>3</sup>

“I'm tired of being desensitized to the murder of black men.

I don't give a fuck if it's by police or peers.

This shit is not normal.

I made a song. This is how we feel.”

- J Cole, “Be Free” (2014)<sup>4</sup>

At the 2015 Video Music Awards the rapper Kanye West stood before his audience, accepting the show's highest honour, Michael Jackson's Video Vanguard Award, and then revealed his intention to aim for even higher things: “As you can tell by this moment,” he announced, “in 2020 I have decided to run for President.”<sup>5</sup> After he dropped the microphone and walked off stage there was a moment of stunned silence whilst audience members, myself included, processed the image of

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<sup>1</sup> David Walker, Henry Garnet, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2009) 85.

<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (California: Bibliotech Press, 2014) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Changes”, *Greatest Hits* (USA: Death Row Records, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> J Cole, “Be Free”, *Be Free* (USA: “Soundcloud”, 2014). Brian Josephs also provided an article on the release of this track in *XXL Magazine*, August 15 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Gil Kaufman “Here's the full transcript Of Kanye West's Crazy-Ass VMA Vanguard Speech”, *MTV*, August 31, 2015.



Kanye, an undeniably talented Hip Hop artist, as the President of the United States. Although my gut told me that this was no more than a publicity stunt, part of me questioned whether or not this was legitimate. For me, Kanye's speech drew attention to the influence of Hip Hop artists as political figures, using their music to encourage audience engagement in politics and social change similarly to Malcolm X and Huey Newton. For example, NWA released "Fuck Tha Police" (1988), a satirical anthem that protested against racist profiling,<sup>6</sup> Tupac Shakur released "Trapped" (1991) to comment on the corrupt nature of racism and the judicial system<sup>7</sup> and Kendrick Lamar released the video for "Alright" (2015) to protest against police brutality.<sup>8</sup> Kanye's speech invited the audience of five million to understand Hip Hop music as a platform for the political, whilst building on the understanding of it as a mobilizing force that challenges social and political conventions.<sup>9</sup>

A number of scholars have analysed Hip Hop as a protest platform. For example, during the latter half of the 2000s, scholars including M.K Asante Jr. and Michael Eric Dyson discussed the significance of Hip Hop music as social commentary. Using these influential figures as a starting point, my research shows the genre as a continuation or redefinition of the African American protest tradition. Delving into the roots of the existing African American protest canon, this study draws on examples from abolitionism, antilynching campaigns and the Black Arts movement, and assesses Hip Hop's similarities to these previous discourses. Through comparing and contrasting literature, from pre-abolition to the modern day, with

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<sup>6</sup> NWA, "Fuck Tha Police" *Straight Outta Compton* (Compton: Ruthless Records, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Trapped", *2Pacalypse Now* (California: Interscope, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Lamar, Kendrick. "Alright." (Dir. Colin Tilley and The Little Homies, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Michael O'Connell, "2015 VMAs Ratings: Miley-Hosted Show Suffers 3 Million Viewer Drop From 2014 on MTV", *Billboard*, September 1, 2015.

the productions of Hip Hop, I highlight the links between the work of influential black protest writers and contemporary rappers and argue that they belong to the same protest aesthetic.

African American protest literature, from the slave narrative to spoken word poetry, exposes and acts against racial oppression in America, the supposed “city upon the hill.”<sup>10</sup> Despite this idealist notion, racism has remained a significant component in America’s political, social and economic foundation, generating the need for African American protest through social action and in literary form.<sup>11</sup> Since its establishment during slavery, this protest aesthetic has worked to advance the lives of African American victims of suppression. Nevertheless, racial prejudice has continued to prevail to the extent that today, “Every 28 hours a black man, woman, or child is murdered by police or vigilante law enforcement.”<sup>12</sup> American racism has taken a number of forms, from chattel slavery through lynching to the removal of civil rights and most recently the police murder of African American civilians. As a result, the protest aesthetic has evolved in form in response to changes in the nature of American racism. I have identified three rhetorical devices that are recognisable throughout the canon’s evolution: the **shared responsibility**, the rhetorical **nightmare** and **performative distress**.<sup>13</sup> In my thesis I explore and apply these rhetorical devices comparatively to protest literature and in doing so I present Hip Hop as a continuation of the African American protest tradition.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard M. Gamble, *In Search of the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth* (London: A&C Black, 2012) 1.

<sup>11</sup> When using the term “literature” I am also referring to visual literature alongside textual literature and their cultures.

<sup>12</sup> Black Lives Matter, “Black Lives Matter, About Us” (USA: Black Lives Matter, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> As these devices aid the identification of the African American protest aesthetic I also refer to these as identifiers.

Much of the music I have referenced in this thesis is broadly understood as 'conscious' Hip Hop. I distinguish this music from other types or subgenres of Hip Hop by its concern with socio-political commentary. Some artists who define their music as gangsta rap or political rap can also be included in this definition due to their engagement with social issues. It is this music that most clearly demonstrates continuity with the African American protest aesthetic, whereas apolitical Hip Hop, with sub-genres including pop-rap and snap music, is less prominent in my discussion as it predominantly functions as party music as opposed to embodying protest. By dwelling on the social and political significance of conscious rap music I build on existing understandings of Hip Hop culture established by the influential work of M. K. Asante Jr, Bakari Kitwana and Eithne Quinn. Asante highlights the necessity for Hip-Hop to be assessed as a form of protest due to it "challenging and correcting issues that have plagued previous generations,"<sup>14</sup> while Kitwana argues that Hip Hop is not only "being absorbed by young people around the globe" but may provide the tools "to jump-start an international human rights movement" similar to "yesterday's civil rights successes."<sup>15</sup> Quinn's assessment that Hip Hop is part of a long-standing tradition that embodies an "age old, 'hidden transcript' of oppressed communities" is particularly relevant to my thesis.<sup>16</sup> In the analysis that follows, I seek to further flesh out these claims by showing precisely how Hip Hop artists continue to address issues that enraged and inspired earlier generations of black protestors. I will also show how rappers have adopted the imagery, the literary

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<sup>14</sup> M. K. Asante Jr, *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop* (London: Macmillan, 2008) 101.

<sup>15</sup> Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006) 11.

<sup>16</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2013) 23. This is an assessment of Gangsta rap and culture, an important subgenre of Hip Hop.

strategies and the rhetorical devices of previous protest generations. And I will explore the ways in which they have adapted these materials to the current situation facing African Americans, extending, revising and renewing the protest tradition as they do so.

John Stauffer has argued that there are “three rhetorical strategies” used within protest: empathy, shock and symbolic action.<sup>17</sup> These form the basis of the devices I find at work in the African American protest tradition and Hip Hop: the idea of shared responsibility, the construction of a rhetorical nightmare, and the strategy of performative distress. For example, Stauffer explored how empathy in protest literature “encourages its readers to participate in the experiences of the victims” and “feel their pain.”<sup>18</sup> In my thesis I identify the rhetorical expressions of togetherness: “we” “our” and “us.” Then I explore how these empathetic terms are deployed in order to share the responsibility of protest with readers and mobilize protest action. Similarly, my identification of the nightmare builds on Stauffer’s notion of shock value that “inspires outrage” and a “desire to correct social ills.”<sup>19</sup> I focus on shock as a necessary component of protest literature, challenging the emotional and physical trauma of social and racist suppression. Finally, I develop elements of Stauffer’s idea of symbolic action that, he argues, “invites dialogue, debate” into my notion of performative distress whilst examining the differences between both rhetorical devices.<sup>20</sup> For example, whereas symbolic action is ambiguous and encourages interpretation of motifs, performative distress

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<sup>17</sup> Z. Trodd, J. Stauffer, *American Protest Literature* (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006) xiii.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

specifically presents American reality through performance. My exploration and development of Stauffer's rhetorical strategies provides one example of my research process where I utilize the work of specific theorists and historians in the field of protest literature to present Hip Hop as a mobilizing force that continues the African American protest tradition.<sup>21</sup>

The following chapters explore these three identifiers of the African American protest aesthetic in detail, comparing Hip Hop's form, content and context with canonized protest examples. In all cases, protest literature responds to socio-racial factors, where African Americans use the platform of literature to vocalise the horrors they have experienced or are currently experiencing. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has noted that "as soon as blacks could write" there was a necessity to use literature as a protest platform to voice the issues of the racial underclass.<sup>22</sup> Celeste Bernier has explored how visual artists "used their art to interrogate and challenge derogatory and stereotypical representations of African Americans."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the politically conscious Hip Hop artist Mos Def discussed the necessity for protest literature, using the music genre as the example: "People treat Hip Hop like an isolated phenomenon. Like all mediums or movements, it came out of a need."<sup>24</sup> Using these analyses I have drawn specific focus towards the triggers of each identifier, exploring how each arose out of what Mos Def calls "the need" to protest.

The first chapter begins by assessing the roots of the shared responsibility identifier where the artist shares the responsibility of protest with the audience by

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. xii.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The New Negro: Readings 1892-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007)

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<sup>23</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) 57.

<sup>24</sup> M.K. Asante Jr, *It's Bigger than Hip Hop* (London: Macmillan, 2008) 76.

evoking empathy through the presentation of continued American racism. I argue that this identifier was a response to chattel slavery, where protest was required to provoke empathy for slaves and a sense of responsibility in audiences through the use of letters, narratives and texts. These materials engaged audiences by inviting them to share with the victim the responsibility of protesting and ending slavery. In the last 250 years this identifier has been developed and signified on, most recently in Hip Hop, and the chapter shows how rappers have done so.

Chapter two focuses on how protestors have used language and imagery to convey the nightmare of racism. In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery white supremacy continued through public acts of racial terror, and the emotional and psychological trauma of lynching provoked an alteration in the black protest aesthetic. The rhetorical nightmare developed to highlight the endless horrors of racism represented most starkly in lynching. Antilynching protesters drew on religious imagery, often depicting Jesus as a lynching victim, in order to construct a dystopian picture of an America blighted by racial violence. They also used what I call “active memory” which is when nightmares of the past are recycled to create shock whilst encouraging protest action. Hip Hop has adapted the nightmare by not only recycling images of lynching textually and visually, but also by using sonic composition and video montage to create an intense nightmare to encourage protest. I then assess how Hip Hop’s multi-faceted presentation of the nightmare, past and present, develops the understanding of the African American protest tradition.

The final chapter explores the strategy of performative distress, created by the Black Power and Civil Rights movements, then adopted by Hip Hop, to address

current socio-racial issues. Here, mobilizing literature bombards and confronts audiences through particular performance styles in the spoken word and in live performances. By using performative distress, artists seek to break down or break out of the literary conventions that separate 'art' and 'texts' from the realities of everyday life. In particular, this chapter explores the use of performative distress in response to the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, further identifying Hip Hop as successfully applying strategies that emerged in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to protest against contemporary racism. Through the analysis of each identifier, I have highlighted the most significant characteristics whilst showing exactly how such methods create protest. Assessing how Hip Hop has not only embodied and continued the employ these aesthetical identifiers, but also has advanced the understanding of the aesthetic by combining them in light of the 2014 shootings concludes my research.

However, not everyone would accept that Hip Hop is a continuation of African American protest literature. There are three main perspectives that question the value of Hip Hop as any kind of positive contribution to African American culture or politics. The first is that rap presents a narrative of "corrupt morals" due to its sexist and violent themes, therefore undermining its usefulness as protest literature.<sup>25</sup> For example, Joseph Schloss has argued that, "Hip Hop has a jewel-encrusted veneer that covers some pretty rotten values."<sup>26</sup> The second is that Hip Hop focuses more on profit than social protest, and that even when rappers do

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<sup>25</sup> Steven J. Tepper, *Not Here, Not Now, Not That!: Protest Over Art and Culture in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 54.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph G. Schloss, *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 6.

protest they are using social struggles as “tools for commerce.”<sup>27</sup> The third is that previous African American protest movements were characterised by political mobilisation focused on a single struggle, whether it was abolition, antilynching, Civil Rights, or Black Power. Hip Hop, some of its critics argue, is primarily musical rather than political and is diffuse in nature—it uses a number of voices to protest against a range of current struggles. They therefore assert that “music could not substitute as politics” and question its protest value.<sup>28</sup>

Those who criticise Hip Hop for its allegedly glamorised presentation of misogynist and violent behaviour might cite an example such as ‘Lil Kim’s track, “How Many Licks” (2000). In it she raps, “I’m on the way to club, after three bottles I’ll be ready to fuck, some niggaz even put me on their grocery lists, right next to the whip cream and box of chocolates.”<sup>29</sup> Kim’s expression of female sexual self-objectification is one example of many lyrics in Hip Hop where women become submissive sexual beings available for purchase “next to the whip cream.”<sup>30</sup> The sexually provocative lyrics in “How Many Licks” and the success of the track, peaking at number 11 on the Hot Rap Singles chart upon release, suggest that women in Hip Hop have to conform to the role of the sexual submissive to be successful in a genre where “the rise of party strip-club rap, the denigration of women, particularly Black women, is hailed as acceptable.”<sup>31</sup> Thus the genre’s claim to be a continuation of the African American protest tradition that works to secure freedom is weakened as the

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<sup>27</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Verso Books, 2011) 187.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Lil Kim, “How Many Licks”, *The Notorious K.I.M* (New York: Atlantic Records, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Steven J. Tepper, *Not Here, Not Now, Not That!: Protest Over Art and Culture in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 56.



sexual objectification of women is a component of the art form's success.

Another example of Hip Hop's questionable morality is in the music's depiction of the figures of the thug and the gangsta. Often the portrayal of criminals, drug dealers, pimps and murderers is positive and aspirational, and this celebration of violence and anti-social behavior arguably weakens Hip Hop's viability as a protest platform. This perspective is expressed by Powell who claimed "Hip Hop has been assassinated by the Hip Hop industry's desire to make money by any means necessary" leading to the glamorization of crime and violence in the industry.<sup>32</sup> This view might appear to be confirmed by the rapper Tupac's lyrics in "Hit 'Em Up" (1996): "Why you fucking with me? I'm a self-made millionaire! Thug livin' out of prison. Pistols in the air."<sup>33</sup> Tupac's rival Notorious BIG presents another example of this gratuitously violent style in his posthumously released track "Whatchu Want" (2005), in which he raps, "I love to see niggas die, brains all leaking out on the street, and the pastor preaching."<sup>34</sup> Yet some protest literature from the Black Art and Black Power period used violent imagery. Amiri Baraka's *Black Art* (1979) called for, "poems that kill. Assassin poems, Poems that shoot guns, Poems that wrestle cops into alleys; and take their weapons leaving them dead".<sup>35</sup> This style was a performative technique and a reflection of theatrical bombardment, where the proposed threat was incorporated to strengthen the protest message against police brutality. Tupac's "guns in the air" lyric can be placed in this tradition where the violence is simply performative and establishes the rapper as embodying the rhetoric

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<sup>32</sup> Kevin Powell, "Hip Hop is alive...and vital" *Ebony*, June 2007. 61.

<sup>33</sup> Tupac Shakur ft. Outlawz, "Hit 'Em Up", *All Eyez On Me* (USA: Death Row Records, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Notorious BIG, "Whatchu Want", *Duets, the Final Chapter* (USA: Bad Boy Records, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Black Art" *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1979).

of a Black Power spoken-word poet such as Baraka.<sup>36</sup> Yet the examples of 'Lil Kim and Notorious BIG are not as easy to interpret as a continuation of African American protest literature, which serves as a reminder that not all Hip Hop music adopts and adapts the African American protest tradition and nor do all conscious rappers create only protest music. Equally, the often criticized apolitical Hip Hop music can, in turn, be reclaimed as realism of the hood, as street-level rejection of bourgeois niceties or even defiant celebrations of marginal and illicit lives and attitudes.

Similarly, Hip Hop's viability as a protest form must be questioned regarding whether rappers use it to provoke change or to make profit.<sup>37</sup> Tepper argues that commercial pressures compel Hip Hop artists to emphasize anti-social themes in their work: "a positive rap album sells two hundred thousand copies, whereas a rap album that talks about 'Big Booty Hos' sells two million."<sup>38</sup> By asserting that the quality of the music and lyrical content is peripheral to the desire to make money, Tepper challenges Hip Hop's value as a continuation of previous African American protest forms. The rapper Nas discussed Hip Hop artists' obsession with making money when he released his record "Hip Hop is Dead" (2006): "everybody sound the same, commercialize the game, reminiscing when it wasn't all business, it forgot where it started."<sup>39</sup> Depicting the commercialization of Hip Hop, Nas highlighted an authenticity crisis in the music.<sup>40</sup> The historian Michael Eric Dyson similarly commented on this in *Ebony* (2007) asserting, "great rhetoric has lost its sway as

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<sup>36</sup> Tupac Shakur ft. Outlawz, "Hit 'Em Up", *All Eyez On Me* (USA: Death Row Records, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> Murray Forman, Mark Anthony Neal, *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (Sussex: Psychology Press, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Steven J. Tepper, *Not Here, Not Now, Not That!: Protest Over Art and Culture in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 56.

<sup>39</sup> Nas, "Hip Hop is Dead", *Hip Hop is Dead* (USA: Def Jam Records, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business in Hip Hop* (New York: New American Library, 2011).

noble verbal art has been replaced by mindless redundancy of theme – broads, booze and bling.”<sup>41</sup> My work both answers and explores the complexities of these arguments when I assess Hip Hop as a legitimate embodiment of the African American protest aesthetic.

The success of popular rappers such as Nicki Minaj raises further complexities regarding Hip Hop’s integrity as a protest medium. Minaj’s “Anaconda” (2014) used the aggressive aural qualities of protest rap and a rapping style that has similarities to those of protest rapper Nas’ “Life’s a Bitch” (1994)<sup>42</sup> or Mos Def’s “Mathematics” (1999).<sup>43</sup> However, the lyrics focused on the singer’s sexual submissiveness to drug dealers: “I let him hit it ‘cause he slang cocaine.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Minaj herself is visually presented as a product for sexual consumption in the music video as she simulates oral sex with a banana while dressed in a revealing stripper’s waitress outfit.<sup>45</sup> The success of this particular example of apolitical Hip Hop is illustrated as the video received over 500 million views on Youtube in the 12 months following its release.<sup>46</sup> When compared with protest rapper Lauryn Hill’s “Black Rage” (2014), released the same month in protest of Michael Brown’s death and other events in New York and Ferguson, Minaj’s song appears to confirm Tepper’s argument. In the same time frame as Minaj’s “Anaconda,” Hill’s hard-hitting lyrics describing “rapings, beatings...squeezed economics...social control” received under 700,000 views on the

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, “Hip Hop is alive...and vital.” *Ebony*, June 2007. 60. Dyson is a particularly significant figure in my research as he has thoroughly examined Hip Hop artists such as Nas and Tupac Shakur as artists who mobilize protest.

<sup>42</sup> Nas, “Life’s A Bitch”, *Illmatic* (NewYork: Columbia Records, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Mos Def, “Mathematics”, *Black On Both Sides* (USA: Rawkus Records 1999).

<sup>44</sup> Nicki Minaj, “Anaconda”, *The Pink Print* (USA: Young Money, Cash Money Records, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Minaj, Nicki. “Anaconda.” (Dir. Colin Tilley, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Charlotte Altler, “Here’s why Nicki Minaj is chopping a Banana in the “Anaconda” Video.” *Time Magazine*, October 21, 2014.

Soundcloud platform.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, despite “Black Rage” lacking the audience size of “Anaconda”, Hill does prove that authentic protest rap exists, even if it caters for a smaller audience than the apolitical pop-rap of Minaj. However, “Anaconda” is perhaps not too far removed from protest literature when viewed as self-mocking satire, where Minaj is lyrically and visually embodying the stereotyped perception of African American culture. Here, her character in “Anaconda” is not her ‘real’ self but a caricature of the way black women are sexualized in popular culture. Nicki can thus be seen as a satirical rapper portraying and ridiculing social expectation, emphasizing her skill at turning social commentary into commercial success. Thus the perception of rappers like Minaj as apolitical and gratuitous can be challenged, whilst accentuating the extent of Hip Hop’s complexities.

Moreover, past African American protest movements focused on single struggles, but Hip Hop voices an array of opinions about a multiplicity of issues. This has meant that the genre is seen as diffuse, contradictory, not sufficiently linked to a broad social movement and therefore inadequate as a vehicle for the continuation of the African American protest tradition. Fernandez comments on Hip Hop’s multiple protest narratives, claiming the “sheer diversity of voices and politics that emerged across the Hip Hop globe made any attempts at unitary protest culture impossible.”<sup>48</sup> This makes it different to previous protest forms, such as the slave song that focused on freedom, as defined by W.E.B Du Bois who called it “the rhythmic cry of the slave ... the most beautiful expression of human experience.”<sup>49</sup> Hip Hop’s protest voice ranges from Lauryn Hill’s critique of black men and

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<sup>47</sup> Lauryn Hill, “Black Rage (Sketch)”, *Ms Lauryn Hill Soundcloud* (USA: Soundcloud, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation* (New York, Verso Books, 2011) 187.

<sup>49</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Maryland: Arc Manor LLC, 2008) 163.

championing of African American Womanism in “Doo Wop” (1998),<sup>50</sup> through Public Enemy’s attacks on the racist distortions of American media in “Don’t Believe The Hype” (1988),<sup>51</sup> to N.E.R.D’s analysis of the political system in “Lapdance” (2001): “this society, that makes a nigga wanna kill. Politicians is soundin’ like strippers to me, burnin’ the flag, all in the name of white trash.”<sup>52</sup> Hip Hop’s protest voices a range of concerns and this diversity is problematic for those who believe that an effective protest form must speak with a more focused, unifying voice. However, this argument is weakened when taking into account other African American expressive art forms. For example, during the Black Power era the means of protesting were also very varied, from the Black Panther Party for Self Defense’s news publications discussing socio-economic issues, through the utilization of Black Art as didactic protest against racism, to political activists’ use of the speech medium to provoke government action. Therefore, Hip Hop’s ability to be shaped by and reflect multiple voices is not necessarily a weakness.

This exploration highlights the sheer complexities that surface within this field of study. Hip Hop music is not always nor does it have to be politically or socially motivated and there are a number of rappers such as Flo Rida and Missy Elliott that release predominantly apolitical music. My understanding of Hip Hop as a multi-faceted canon reflects Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s presentation of the African American literary canon, where canonized literature is conscious and apolitical,

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<sup>50</sup> Lauryn Hill, “Doo Wop (That Thing)”, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (USA: Columbia Records, 1998).

<sup>51</sup> Public Enemy, “Don’t Believe the Hype”, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (USA: Def Jam, 1988).

<sup>52</sup> N.E.R.D, “Lapdance”, *In Search Of...* (USA: Virgin Records, 2001).

“motivated and unmotivated.”<sup>53</sup> Gates Jr. is significant as he presents African American literature as being a part of a canon that employs “repetition and revision” of previously canonized literature such as a theme or motif known as a signifier. I explore how Hip Hop music does precisely this and thus continues the canon in its updating of the black protest aesthetic throughout my thesis. Through the development of his theories alongside many other figures including Stauffer, my exploration of the shared responsibility, the nightmare and performative distress presents Hip Hop music as a continuation and redefinition of the African American protest tradition.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) xxiv. Gates Jr.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

# 1

## “New Slaves”

### Shared Responsibility

“Kids in jail,  
For a life they ain’t even get to start  
That’s murder,  
It’s breaking our nation apart”  
– Talib Kweli, “Joy” (2002)<sup>1</sup>

The shared responsibility identifier is the first rhetorical device that establishes socially conscious Hip Hop music as a continuation of and redefinition of the African American protest tradition. This is a previously unexplored rhetorical device, established in the abolition era, which triggers protest without solely inflicting blame upon the listener.<sup>2</sup> Neither do artists employing the identifier only discuss racism in terms of their own personal struggle; instead, terms that evoke togetherness, such as “we” or “our,” are used to engage African American and multi-racial audiences in the struggle against historical and current oppression. This rhetorical device emphasises the role of the artist as one to educate audiences on the effects of racism to provoke action. In doing so, it builds on John Stauffer’s understanding of empathy as a significant component of American protest literature, as Hip Hop shares the harsh reality of racial suppression with the audience to encourage action no differently than abolitionists did when protesting against the horrors of slavery.<sup>34</sup> The socially conscious Hip Hop group NWA used this rhetorical technique in the opening of their protest song “Straight Outta Compton” (1989)

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<sup>1</sup> Talib Kweli, “Joy”, *Quality* (USA: Rawkus Records, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, *American Protest Literature* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008) xxii.

<sup>4</sup> Stauffer illustrates how the artist “shar[es] another’s suffering in order to help end it” to trigger protest.

using the lyric, “You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> NWA identify Hip Hop as the strength of the street, the people, whilst signifying on<sup>6</sup> the protest rhetoric previously employed by abolitionists who expressed the significance of knowledge as the key to freedom.<sup>7</sup> This is not an isolated example; this technique has been recycled and reflected on since slavery, where empathy was necessary to provoke audiences into opposing the institution and this continues throughout much of the Hip Hop genre as a method to trigger action.<sup>8</sup> The use of empathy in Hip Hop becomes educative, reflecting Stauffer’s claim: “when a reader is emotionally exhausted, knowledge will remain.”<sup>9</sup> The shared responsibility identifier also reflects the theory of signifying, outlined by Henry Louis Gates Jr, as rappers signify on historical examples of racist suppression to provoke action in the present.<sup>10</sup>

Successful employment of the shared responsibility invites the audience to understand that they have been ignorant of the emotional and psychologically harrowing experiences endured by African American victims of oppression, thus provoking reflection and then action. The rap group City High provide one example of Hip Hop using the shared responsibility identifier to provoke protest in their track,

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<sup>5</sup> NWA “Fuck Tha Police”, *Straight Outta Compton* (USA: Ruthless Records, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Signifyin[g] is the term used by African American theorist and historian, Henry Louis Gates Jr, to define the recycling of the African American literary tradition and by signifyin[g] the artist reuses the work of previous protesters to provoke audiences.

<sup>7</sup> Although the Black Panther party used the expression “Power to the People”, pro-democracy students also used it as a slogan to inspire those protesting against the military occupation in Vietnam. Both movements were anti-establishment and this is clearly echoed by Public Enemy’s lyrics.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, *American Protest Literature* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008) xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Gates’ research indicated a “signifier”, a reinterpretation, between all African rooted arts where “mutable” elements in the canon serve as a “chain of signifiers” that link all literature together.



“What Would You Do?” (2001).<sup>11</sup> Whilst evoking the traditional African call and response technique as originated during the slavery period, City High’s aurally pleasing chorus encourages the audience to join the protest using the skit form to situate the Womanist African American struggle.<sup>12</sup> Lead vocalist Claudette Ortiz sings, “what would you do if your son was at home, crying all alone, on the bedroom floor...and the only way to feed him is to sleep with a man for a little bit of money?”<sup>13</sup> This rhetorical questioning serves as an empathetic depiction of American society, showing the poverty and vulnerability of women, especially African American women, whilst encouraging the listener to reflect and then engage empathetically in the singer’s struggle. This employment of empathy invites the audience to be empowered through the lyrical content of the track whilst drawing upon the call and response technique, highlighting the ties between slavery and Hip Hop.<sup>14</sup>

Socially conscious rappers such as Chuck D and Tupac similarly invite empathetic compassion, building upon the kind of analysis provided by City High. Nevertheless, these artists employ the shared responsibility rhetorical device, not only to convey their experiences and empower audiences; they also do so to provoke action in the way that nineteenth-century abolitionists might have done. Hip Hop’s engagement with the long tradition of the African American protest aesthetic proves that it is not just “pornographic music videos; extreme materialism, individualism, and anti-intellectualism; bloated boasts of arrests,”<sup>15</sup> but a

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<sup>11</sup> City High, “What Would You Do?”, *City High* (USA: Interscope Records, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Womanism is the movement that seeks to provide rights for all women of colour.

<sup>13</sup> City High, “What Would You Do?”, *City High* (USA: Interscope Records, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, *American Protest Literature* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2008) xxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Powell, “Hip Hop is alive...and vital.” *Ebony*, June 2007. 61.

modernized version of African American protest, regarded by Chuck D as “the Black CNN” due to its didactic and provoking qualities.<sup>16</sup> For example, rappers first provoke empathetic feelings by using lyrics such as, “giving crack to the kids who the hell cares? One less hungry mouth on the welfare,” as rapped by Tupac Shakur on his track “Changes” (1998).<sup>17</sup> However, Tupac builds on this depiction by evoking the idea of shared responsibility, thus providing a method for his audience to overcome racism. “Let’s change the way we live,” he implores, then draws attention to the need to progress; “you see the old way wasn’t working so it’s on us to do what we gotta do, to survive.”<sup>18</sup> Tupac’s example is one of many illustrating that Hip Hop music is a continuation of the African American protest tradition, not least in the way it uses the shared responsibility motif.

Mos Def provides an example of the shared responsibility being employed without reference to slavery, instead signifying on the lynching narrative. Here, the rapper combines the shared responsibility identifier with social commentary in his track, “Mr Nigga” (1999).<sup>19</sup> The track opens with a repeated call for “everybody,” to sing and “say hooo” together to create a collective audience.<sup>20</sup> Once the collective has been created, Mos Def begins to rap about the current social issues using satirical lyrics to draw his audience in whilst he illustrates his protest. He asks, “Is it fair is it equal is it just is it right? Would you do the same shit when the defendant is

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<sup>16</sup> Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) 201.

<sup>17</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Changes”, *Greatest Hits* (USA: Death Row Records, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Mos Def, “Mr Nigga”, *Black on Both Sides* (USA: Rawkus Records, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Mos Def’s track is also satirical. Def tells the tale of continued racism in a satirical way: “They [Anglo-Americans] think that illegal’s a synonym for negro,” and if in prison African American celebrities still get “a Mr Nigger VIP jail cell.”<sup>20</sup> Mos Def picks up on two key issues here: that racism is still imbedded in de jure practice despite it being illegal in de facto laws; and that even in prison, African Americans get the worst treatment, a “nigger VIP jail cell.”<sup>20</sup> As Mos Def’s rap style is slow and allows for emphasis on certain words, this rap becomes a slow satirical script that turns words of racism, “nigger” and “negro”, into points of verbal amusement.

white?” a question that draws attention to the injustice of brutality and racial profiling by the police. In doing so, the rapper not only highlights the issue of racism as an identifiably American rather than narrowly African American issue, he turns it into a global problem and therefore the responsibility for social action is shared by forcing the audience to question their understanding of justice. Mos Def’s particular protest technique mirrors the tactics used by those who protested against lynching, for example the protest figure James Baldwin depicted the ruthlessness of lynching when discussing the treatment of African Americans in order to provoke protest.<sup>21</sup> Baldwin wrote, “For a Negro there is no difference between the North and South [of America], there’s just a difference in the way they castrate you,” to showcase the horror of racism.<sup>22</sup> Then, Baldwin shared the struggle of racism with his audience by employing the concept of nationhood, similarly to how the rapper Mos Def did almost fifty years later: “The future of the Negro in this country...is up to the American people and our representatives.”<sup>23</sup> By turning the issue of lynching into an identifiably American problem through the terms “this country” and “our” Baldwin shared the responsibility for protesting with his audience and inspired them to act.<sup>24</sup> The links between Baldwin and the rapper Mos Def are enhanced further as Baldwin was protesting against the racist injustice of lynching and Mos Def’s music protests

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<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 220. Literary protest against lynching was a popular method as it enhanced the audiences existing understanding of the ruthless murders, as although “photographs certainly must be viewed and read as evidence of death,” protest literature and commentary enhanced the impact of each image.

<sup>22</sup> K. B Clark, *The Negro Protest* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 2008). 13. Baldwin’s comment directly assesses that although there had been a change by law regarding racism through the abolition of slavery, there has been no *de facto* change, for African Americans still feared death due to lynching.

<sup>23</sup> James Baldwin, “There is no compromise: Total freedom or Total Oppression.” *Black World/Negro Digest*, October 1963. 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

against ongoing racism, “they think that illegal’s a synonym for negro.”<sup>25</sup> As lynching was often the result of falsely accused African Americans sentenced to death and Mos Def was protesting against the falsely accused African Americans due to racial profiling, this strengthens the links between the two figures.

Despite this example using the shared responsibility without directly referencing slavery, the rhetorical identifier is most significantly rooted in abolitionist protest. Both antislavery literature and Hip Hop music act as a trigger for long term change, where the novella, article or rap song invites the audience into protest. Historian Joe Lockard discussed this, explaining that African American protest literature from the era of slavery was “only the first steps in a long march toward achievement of justice and human rights”; Hip Hop music that acts to trigger protest action and involvement continues this.<sup>26</sup> Through this analysis, surfaced through the comparative between Hip Hop music and the existing African American protest canon, the Hip Hop music genre becomes instrumental in the redefinition of the African American protest aesthetic, where the shared responsibility provides the foundation of protest. Here, I explore the shared responsibility through Hip Hop’s example of signifying on slavery, presentation of social commentary and emotional protest.

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<sup>25</sup> Mos Def, “Mr Nigga”, *Black on Both Sides* (USA: Rawkus Records, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Joe Lockard, *Watching Slavery: Witness Texts and Travel Reports* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2008) xxxiii.

## History

“My momma was raised in the era when  
Clean water was only served to the fairer skin  
Doin’ clothes you would have thought I had help  
But they wasn’t satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself”

– Kanye West, “New Slaves” (2013)<sup>27</sup>

The recycling of African American history, especially slave history, is a significant example of how the shared responsibility is employed by Hip Hop artists to provoke action and continue the work of canonized African American protesters. Here, rappers deliberately employ the shared responsibility’s recognizable terms, “we” and “together,” to alert their listeners to the longstanding impact of racism in history and in doing so, issue a call for collective action. The rapper J. Cole provides a prime example of this, illustrating how the scars of suppression continue to prevail in the present day in his track, “Runaway” (2013): “white man rule the nation still, only difference is we all slaves now, the chains concealed in our thoughts.”<sup>28</sup> Skillfully, the rapper turns distressing memories of past slavery into didactic lyrics, whilst addressing his African American listeners by evoking the shared responsibility identifier in the phrases, “we is all” and “our thoughts.”<sup>29</sup> By effectively evoking slavery’s history, J Cole’s track encourages the listeners to break from their ignorance and then work as a collective audience to end continued African American suppression. In doing so, Cole’s work seeks to overcome the historian Greg Tate’s assessment that “the Negro is still damned,” by calling for action to be taken for racism to be overcome.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, through this analysis a link surfaces between

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<sup>27</sup> Kanye West, “New Slaves”, *Yeezus* (USA: Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> J Cole, “Runaway”, *Born Sinner* (USA: Dreamville Records, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Greg Tate, *Everything But the Burden* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003) 95.

the work of African American writer and theorist Booker T Washington, as the latter believed that “no race can be lifted until its mind is awakened and strengthened,” and J Cole aurally and lyrically “awakens” the listener’s mind in his track.<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding, J Cole, alongside other Hip Hop artists does not only seek to strengthen the race, he also provides the listener with the passion, the history and then the method to “strengthen” and protest a collective force. Therefore Hip Hop music plays a significant role in the continuation of the African American protest tradition, where it not only redeems and strengthens, it provides the tools and lessons from the past to provoke positive action in the present.

Other Hip Hop artists such as Kanye West also recycle the history of slavery to share the responsibility of protest with their respective audiences. Kanye’s track “New Slaves” (2013) is one example of this where he opens by signifying on Civil Rights and slave history, using his mother as a primary source: “My momma was raised in an era when, clean water was only served to the fairer skin” and then discusses his personal struggle to be seen as anything more than a descendant of a slave; “they wasn’t satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself.”<sup>32</sup> Building upon this, Kanye then draws a comparison between the history of racial suppression and modern day penal policy: “the DEA, teamed up with the CCA, they tryna lock niggas up, they tryna make new slaves.”<sup>33</sup> The rapper then provides the listener with further examples of how history repeats itself, arguing that privately-owned prisons are the home of “New Slaves” forced into unpaid labour, where the white elite are

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<sup>31</sup> Booker T Washington, *The Negro Problem*, (New York: Start Publishing, 2013) 5.

<sup>32</sup> Kanye West, “New Slaves”, *Yeezus* (USA: Def Jam Records, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

“get[ting their] piece today,” shocking the listener out of their ignorance.<sup>34</sup> Then after this education, Kanye shares the responsibility of the protest struggle with his listener by repeating the hook, “you see there’s leaders and there’s followers,” actively inspiring his audience, “you,” to become leaders together and act against continued racism.<sup>35</sup> Kanye’s depiction of continued slavery reflects the style of the poet Langston Hughes, who protested against the ongoing suppression of African Americans in his protest poem, *Let America Be America Again* (1935): “I am the Negro, servant to you all.”<sup>36</sup> This is a striking comment as although it is post-abolition literature, it emphasised that although the “slave” term had gone, its connotation had taken a new form, the “servant”, illustrating the lack of social progression for African Americans despite time passing. Hughes enlightened the reader on the continued struggle for equality, and then shared responsibility through the phrase, “We must take back our land again, America!”<sup>37</sup> Through the term, “we,” Hughes enhances the pressure on the reader, regardless of their race to join the protest against racism, a method clearly recycled by Kanye West to provoke protest.

It is not only globally recognised rappers such as Kanye West who refer to slavery’s history to provoke protest; the rapper Killer Mike also refers to slave history when evoking the shared responsibility in his protest track “Burn” (2011). The significance of this rhetorical device is illustrated by Eithne Quinn, who argues that “to invoke the history of slavery is neither sensationalist nor excessive” due to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1973) 451.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 451.

racism's continued presence in America.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the previous two rappers explored, Killer Mike specifically calls upon the President to provoke change. "Thought shit was changing with this black President shit," he raps, alerting his audience to his frustration at the continued racism despite living in the Obama era.<sup>39</sup> This reference to continued racist history is then built upon when Killer Mike raps, "Niggers go to prison, new age slavery," which shocks his audience by showcasing the ever-present significance of racist discrimination through the historical comparative.<sup>40</sup> Then the rapper draws his listeners into the protest: "you and your folks, love me and my folks," calling his listeners to provoke action as a collective, "we get bustin' back."<sup>41</sup> This lyric also signifies the African American funk-rock band, Funkadelic, whose album *Maggot Brain* (1971) had a track titled, "You and Your Folks, Me and My Folks" (1971).<sup>42</sup> This provides an example of Killer Mike signifying on other music genres aside from Hip Hop and drawing attention to his credible style. By illustrating the potential power of the collective protest force, "we," Killer Mike reflects the passion of previous protesters, such as James Forman who referenced racist history's impact on the African American population in his Black Manifesto of 1969: "racist white America has exploited our resources, our minds, our bodies, our labor."<sup>43</sup> Through the use of the term, "our," Forman employs the shared responsibility device whilst signifying on historical racism, later reflected in Killer Mike's use of the collective, "you and your folks." Ultimately, through this application of the shared

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<sup>38</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2013) 23.

<sup>39</sup> Killer Mike, "Burn", *Pledge* (USA: Grand Hustle, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Funkadelic, "You and Your Folks, Me and My Folks", *Maggot Brain* (USA: Westbound, 1971).

<sup>43</sup> W. King, E. Anthony, *Black Poets and Prophets* (New York: New American Library, 1972). 91.



responsibility rhetorical device, where knowledge of slave history is used to provoke action in the present, rappers can be assessed alongside figures such as Langston Hughes and James Forman or even Funkadelic, continuing the African American protest tradition.

## Social Commentary

“Kids in jail,  
For a life they ain’t even get to start  
That’s murder,  
It’s breaking our nation apart”

– Talib Kweli, “Joy” (2002)<sup>44</sup>

Alongside historical references, Hip Hop music continues the African American protest tradition of sharing responsibility by providing social commentary on current issues to trigger protest against racism, as did nineteenth-century abolitionists.<sup>45</sup> This process of sharing responsibility allows, as the theorist Marcus Garvey argued, all African American protest literature to place “the Negro problem forcibly before the world,” and provoke action from all races.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, alongside the use of recycling history as previously explored, the depiction of racism experienced by African Americans becomes an identifiably *American* issue, not only an issue for its victims. Through this use of social commentary, after contextualising the protest, the artist uses terms such as “we,” “us,” and “together” to create a collective protest unit which takes on the responsibility for the issues. By doing so, the audience are educated on current issues and invited to join the protest force as a response to statements such as, “what is happening today is only happening because we are allowing it to.”<sup>47</sup> Once the audience has broken from their ignorance, they

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<sup>44</sup> Talib Kweli, “Joy”, *Quality* (USA: Rawkus Records, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Anthony Tibbles, *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Theodore G. Vincent, *Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1973) 219. Garvey, a figure who inspired the work of much Black Nationalist literature, furthered the significance of the shared responsibility in the context of the present, explaining, “what you do today that is worthwhile, inspires others to act at some future time.”

<sup>47</sup> W. King, E. Anthony, *Black Poets and Prophets* (New York: New American Library, 1972) 154.

share the responsibility of protest and the artist then provides them with a plan to overcome racism and create a more just America.

The socially conscious rapper Talib Kweli combined the shared responsibility identifier with the use of social commentary in his track “Joy” (2002), asserting that due to current racial suppression, “kids [are] in jail, for a life they ain’t even get to start, that’s murder, its breaking our nation apart.”<sup>48</sup> This lyric provides social commentary by outlining current racial suppression, echoing the NAACP’s view that, “If current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime.”<sup>49</sup> In “Joy” Kweli further illustrates this depiction of racism as being an identifiably American issue through the collective phrase “our nation,” sharing the responsibility through the term “our.”<sup>50</sup> Kweli’s style of social commentary reflects some of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass’ work, including his speech given on the Fourth of July 1852. Using the rhetorical question, “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?” Douglass alerted his audience to the irony that Independence Day is “a day that reveals to him [the slave], more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”<sup>51</sup> Douglass’ criticism of American racism then employs the shared responsibility

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<sup>48</sup> Talib Kweli, “Joy”, *Quality* (USA: Rawkus Records, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet” NAACP, accessed March 20, 2015.  
<http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>.

<sup>50</sup> Rick Ross, “B.M.F (Blowing Money Fast)”, *Teflon Don* (USA: Def Jam Records, 2010). Although the expression of shared responsibility is effective, rappers who are not, like Kweli, self-defined protest rappers, also express nationhood lyrically. For example, in the rapper Rick Ross’ track, “B.M.F (Blowing Money Fast)” Ross raps the lyric, “one nation, under god” in each hook. This is also a quotation of the US Constitution, something Funkadelic satirised in their 1978 “One Nation Under a Groove” song & album. Although this creates a sense of union between the rapper and audience, Ross does not use this to provoke a shared responsibility, just a shared experience to be enjoyed. This does occasionally provoke frustration as “Hip Hop is widely viewed as the soundtrack to black pathology” and therefore the use of the musical style for purely popular music can be degrading for the genre’s reputation.

<sup>51</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Selected Addresses of Frederick Douglass*. (New York: Start Publishing LLC, 2013).

method, later seen by Kweli, where he uses the terms “we” and “us” to provoke a collective response. Having united his audience, Douglass educates them on his protest method: “the conscience of the nation must be roused...its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed.”<sup>52</sup> Kweli and Douglass both evoke the term “nation” to turn the issue of racism into an identifiably American issue, by educating the audience on current issues and then provoking collective action, therefore solidifying the connection between Hip Hop and the African American protest tradition as established during slavery.

Socially conscious Hip Hop artists also draw upon the slave era to provoke protest by employing the shared responsibility rhetorical device. For example, some artists signify on the history of appropriation, where African American music has been copied or recreated by Anglo Americans who have gone on to profit from it, leaving the original musicians with little credit. The historian Greg Tate explores this issue in his work, arguing that Anglo Americans “have always tried to erase the Black Presence from whatever Black thing they took a shine to: jazz, blues, rock and roll.”<sup>53</sup> Rapper Mos Def signifies on the historical process of musical appropriation using the example of the Rolling Stones in his track “Rock n Roll” (1999): “You may dig on the Rolling Stones, but everything they did they stole.”<sup>54</sup> He first engages audiences of all races through the term “you” and then destroys the assumed authenticity of the Rolling Stones by claiming, “everything they did,” from fashion to music, they unfairly “stole” from African Americans. Mos Def then draws attention to the roots of the Rolling Stones’ music, rapping that their appropriated African American “soul”

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Greg Tate, *Everything But the Burden* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003) 3.

<sup>54</sup> Mos Def, “Rock n Roll”, *Black On Both Sides* (USA: Rawkus Records, 1999).

music descended from slavery: “those folks whose backs got broke...chains on their ankles and feet.”<sup>55</sup> This reference to slavery invites the audience to be educated on this view of appropriation, whilst challenging the Rolling Stones’ authentic reputation, by illustrating the debt popular music owes to African American history. Moreover, Mos Def heightens the controversial and unfair process of appropriation through his lyrics as he alludes to how commercial success has been “only rarely enjoyed by African Americans.”<sup>56</sup> This didactic track therefore encourages the listener to break from their ignorance by illustrating how the history of suppression has advantaged Anglo-American musicians commercially in the present.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Greg Tate, *Everything But the Burden* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003) 3.

## Emotion

“You hate me don’t you?  
You hate my people  
Your plan is to terminate my culture.”  
– Kendrick Lamar, “Blacker the Berry” (2015)<sup>57</sup>

Hip Hop music also continues the African American protest tradition by employing the shared responsibility rhetorical device to depict the emotional effects of racism and thus to trigger action. African American scholar Michael Eric Dyson commented on the reasoning behind emotive protest, explaining that it allows Hip Hop to “massage the grief and encourage the ecstasy of their audiences and cast word spells over a transfixed constituency” to provoke listeners.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, African American protest music engages audiences through aural sensation, and then provokes protest didactically through the emotional platform music provides.<sup>59</sup> Kanye West appeals to his audience’s emotions to share the responsibility for protest with them in his track “All Falls Down” (2004), illustrating the emotional impact of imbedded racism: “We buy our way out of jail, but we can’t buy freedom.”<sup>60</sup> This lyric shows the frustration African Americans feel, and the use of the term “we” is an emotive reflection of those subjected to racism, whilst the

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<sup>57</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “Blacker the Berry”, *To Pimp A Butterfly* (USA: Interscope Records, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, Monica Miller, *Religion in Hip Hop* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015). *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* unearths much regarding why protest figures have used emotions to provoke their audiences asserting that, “emotional conceptualization contributes” to and allows for effects on “movement solidarity” and united action.<sup>58</sup> Therefore it is no surprise that the use of emotions to share the responsibility with audiences is a vital component of the African American protest aesthetic.

<sup>59</sup> The emotional sharing of responsibility is employed across the protest canon with scholars such as Tare asserting that emotional protest was needed to “launch a cultural revolution to un-brainwash an entire people.” The roots of emotion being employed in African American music can be traced back to the early 1800s where the slave song engaged audiences outside of plantation life. African American spirituals, or slave songs, were “emotionally complicated, conjoining extreme expressions of sadness, loss, and suffering” yet despite this content they appeared in a form representing the “extreme joy” of music.

<sup>60</sup> Kanye West, “All Falls Down”, *The College Drop Out* (USA: Def Jam Records, 2004).

reference to “freedom” draws the connections between antislavery literature and Hip Hop music closer together.<sup>61</sup>

The use of emotional rhetoric to share the responsibility of protest with the audience is continued by the Hip Hop artist Kendrick Lamar in his recent release “Blacker the Berry” (2015).<sup>62</sup> Lamar shares the responsibility of protest by making this track the thirteenth on his protest album, drawing a comparison between the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution and his work. Through this link, the freedom anticipated by the Emancipation Proclamation is juxtaposed with the lack of racial progression today, establishing that the problem of racism is much more than an African American problem, as it is an ongoing constitutional American issue. Through this skillful track placement, Lamar’s lyrics become relevant to his American listeners; he asks, “You hate me don’t you? You hate my people; your plan is to terminate my culture?”<sup>63</sup> The aggressive bombardment portrayed in this lyric reflects the emotional distress inflicted upon African Americans due to suppression and the repeated chorus, “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice,” builds on this. This lyric is repeated three times in each chorus, and then altered to, “The blacker the berry, the bigger I shoot,” serving as a comment on the continued racist stereotype of African American men as being armed or violent.<sup>64</sup> Lamar not only educates on the racist stereotyping; he also highlights the emotional impact of

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Kanye then discusses his personal struggle due to continued racism, “We all self conscious, I’m just the first to admit it,” illustrating the intensity of racism, where it affects even a celebrity and superstar like him. This is a portrayal of emotional entrapment: “even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe,” he raps and through this self-pitying lyric, Kanye West showcases how “all” his greatest successes “fall down” in the face of racism, as his status will always be less than that of an Anglo-American. This comparison therefore invites the listener to protest against racism as they empathise with Kanye’s tainted success story.

<sup>62</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “Blacker the Berry”, *To Pimp A Butterfly* (USA: Interscope Records, 2015)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

continued racism through the “blacker the berry the sweeter the juice” reference. The phrase was originally an African American folk saying which evoked racial pride, yet Lamar cleverly turns this into a sonically disturbing phrase by using a synthesizer over the vocals so that it becomes distorted and emotionally chilling. He also links his status as a protest rapper to the late Tupac Shakur, whose opening line to his protest track “Dear Mama” (1995) was “some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.”<sup>65</sup> As both rappers evoked the folk phrase to show how African American pride is in crisis due to the emotional impact of racism this connection gains significance. In these two examples of emotional darkness protest is provoked, as the listener becomes aware that it is a product of “their” American society and therefore encouraging them to take action.

Kendrick Lamar’s emotionally bombarding style, alongside the shared responsibility identifier also depicts racist policing and penal policy. This is no surprise as since the year 2000, “more black men 19-25 years old are in prison than in college,” highlighting the prominence of this issue.<sup>66</sup> The rapper Snoop Dogg furthers this view, as in an interview he discussed how gangsta rap draws on prison culture for themes, imagery and attitude: “it is no surprise that much of the Hip Hop and gangsta rap lifestyle is taken directly from the penal system.”<sup>67</sup> Although Snoop Dogg does not define himself as a socially conscious rapper, his comments assert how penal culture is influential across Hip Hop’s sub-genres. One example of this is the socially conscious rap group Dead Prez’s track “Police State” (2000) which

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<sup>65</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Dear Mama”, *Me Against the World* (USA: Interscope Records, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet” NAACP, accessed March 20, 2015.  
<http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>.

<sup>67</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) 53.



contains the didactic chorus, “The average black male, lives a third of his life in a jail cell.”<sup>68</sup> The repetition of this phrase becomes increasingly difficult to listen to due to its monotonous and haunting sonic qualities, causing the rap to create a sense of distress for the listener due to its eerie sounds. This aural disturbance reflects the emotional hardship African Americans experience, where they are unable to remove the curse of racism, making them feel as though “we livin’ in a police state.”<sup>69</sup> Dead Prez then share the responsibility of the protest through the lyric, “we tired of that [racism]” and in doing so the term “we” can be interpreted as a direct address for all black listeners, empathisers or even the victims of racist policing.<sup>70</sup> Ultimately, the track bombards the listener with the daily experience of “average black males” who “want to be free to live, able to have what I need to live,” encouraging the listener to fight to end this struggle, thus provoking action by sharing the responsibility of protest with them.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the wish for freedom strengthens the existing similarities between antislavery literature and Hip Hop music.

Dead Prez’s emotive sharing of responsibility is not only a key example due to its relevance as a modern protest track, it also solidifies Hip Hop as a continuation of African American protest literature by drawing upon the techniques of canonised protesters such as Frederick Douglass. In his novella, *The Heroic Slave* (1853), Douglass employed emotional rhetoric to provoke the reader into protest.<sup>72</sup> The former slave depicted the emotional impact of “the cruel jaws of slavery” on his protagonist Madison, where even after escaping its horrors he recalls, “I was

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<sup>68</sup> Dead Prez, “Police State”, *Let’s Get Free* (USA: Columbia Records, 2000).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> *The Heroic Slave* is based on an a real historical uprising on board the slave ship the *Creole* where the heroic character Madison resists the savagery of the Anglo American suppressors.

wretched. I lost my appetite. I could neither work, eat, nor sleep.”<sup>73</sup> This literary account of the emotional impact of racism highlights the horrors of slavery by showing how it psychologically damaged the slave Madison. Just as importantly, Madison explains his rebellion as a continuation of the work of the Anglo-Americans upon their arrival to America when they wished for freedom and liberty. “We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing,” he tells an American court after his escape, “and if we are murderers, *so were they*.”<sup>74</sup> This eloquent comparison between rebel slaves and the leaders of the American Revolution forces the reader to realize that African Americans are fighting for their freedom like those who wished for American independence. In all examples given in this chapter, the rappers use emotional techniques to share the responsibility of protest with their listeners and in doing so crystalize the perception of Hip Hop music as a continuation of the African American protest tradition.

Hip Hop artist’s employment of the shared responsibility rhetorical device shows the genre’s adaptation and extension of the techniques used by abolitionists. In doing so, they have raised the profile of “Black music, in all of its forms,” showcasing it as “the highest artistic achievement of the race,” with Hip Hop as the most recent example.<sup>75</sup> Through this, my thesis challenges W.E.B Du Bois’ understanding that “Black folk have no defence” as Hip Hop artists invoke the sharing of responsibility, inviting audience members to protest against racism

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<sup>73</sup> Frederick Douglass, Julia Griffiths, “The Heroic Slave,” *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1853) 220.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 236.

<sup>75</sup> Larry Neal, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Liberation.” *Ebony*, August, 1969. 55.

together.<sup>76</sup> This achievement is partly due to music's form, where it engages audiences as entertainment and then, upon gaining a following or recognition, uses emotional rhetoric to trigger protest.<sup>77</sup> Hip Hop music not only embodies the effectiveness of song, but also the rhetoric of canonized African American protesters such as James Forman and Frederick Douglass. This combination of emotive music and protest rhetoric raises the significance of Hip Hop, establishing it as more than just entertainment. This is paraphrased perfectly by the rap group, A Tribe Called Quest who in their track "Check The Rhime" (1991) rapped, "Proper rap is not pop, if you call it that then stop."<sup>78</sup> As the examples discussed in this chapter show, socially aware Hip Hop artists are self-consciously placing themselves within a tradition of protest and resistance that began during the anti-slavery movement.

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<sup>76</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, Meyer Weinberg, *The World of W.E.B Du Bois* (California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992) 40.

<sup>77</sup> Langston Hughes, Dolan Hubbard, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 13* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 176. The musician and historian Quest love furthers the significance of Jazz music asserting that it "forced the mainstream to see black musicians as virtuous with complex ideas and powerful (and recognizable) emotions." QuestLove, "Questlove: Does Black Culture Need to Care About What Happens to Hip-Hop?" *Vulture*, May 27, 2014. Jazz, for example, was often enjoyed by mass Anglo American audiences for pleasure, where they would go to "cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang" and then became inspired by the emotional side of the music.

<sup>78</sup> A Tribe Called Quest, "Check The Rhime", *The Low End Theory* (USA: Jive Records, 1991).

## 2

### **“Hazy Shade of Criminal” The Nightmare**

“Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge  
I'm trying not to lose my head, ah huh-huh-huh  
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder  
How I keep from going under”

- Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message” (1982)<sup>1</sup>

The nightmare is the second rhetorical identifier that establishes Hip Hop music as a continuation of the African American protest tradition. This identifier is evident in much of the existing protest canon and unlike the shared responsibility, presents the psychological and physical trauma of social and racist suppression. The methods used to present the rhetorical nightmare include visual images, sonic sampling and lyrical content, with the ideal outcome of encouraging action after disturbing the equilibrium of the listener. I explore ideas and motifs from the antislavery movement and the Black Power movement, as Hip Hop artists recycle and recreate them to encourage protest action. However, the most significant examples of the nightmare as signified on by Hip Hop are from antilynching protest literature. The identifier itself surfaced during the lynching era to counteract the “mob violence” which audiences still “cannot ignore” as the evidence was clear regarding “who was killed and how, who was present and, often, who committed the murders.”<sup>2</sup> It is this element of the lynching that presented a living nightmare, where despite evidence of who was creating the lynching, the hell on earth, there

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<sup>1</sup> Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, “The Message”, *The Message*, (USA: Sugar Hill, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 220.

was never sentencing for the proud audience members or the lynching jury.<sup>3</sup> This living nightmare was also the unexpected outcome of the Emancipation Proclamation as freedom was expected but instead white supremacists retaliated with a campaign of racial terror.<sup>4</sup> Therefore the creation of the rhetorical nightmare was a means of invoking this situation while protesting against it.

Although the nightmare was a political and aesthetic response to the lynching era, elements of this rhetorical motif emerged during the slavery era and Hip Hop references these. The most significant recycling of slavery in Hip Hop is the rapper Nas' recreation of the *Scourged Back* (1863) photograph for his album *Untitled* (2008), originally called "Nigger." The *Scourged Back* photograph (figure 1) created much controversy upon its publication in 1863, for it highlighted the dehumanizing effect of slavery in what the historian Kathleen Collins called, "a way that even [writers] cannot approach."<sup>5</sup> These scars from a slave-master's lashings were of a keloid nature, emphasising the lashings were a repeated offense against the slave, asserting the horrifying and nightmarish outcome of racism and therefore actively disturbing the viewer and then inviting them into action. The rapper Nas recreated this image for his album artwork to educate about the nightmare of slavery (figure 2). The rapper did this by turning his back to the camera whilst recreating the keloid scarring as the focal point of the photo. Nas also reformed the whip marks so that they created the letter "N," representing the derogatory term "Nigger," suggesting that his heritage psychologically scars African Americans like a

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Hill, *Men, Mobs, and Law: Anti-Lynching and Labor Defense in U.S Radical History* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn M. Simien, *Gender and Lynching: The Politics of Memory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Sean Ross Meehan, *Mediating American Autobiography: Photography in Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, and Whitman* (Missouri: Missouri University, 2008) 167.

nightmare today. The focal letter “N” also presents contemporary racism, where the “N” represents “Now,” serving as a visual introduction to the album’s content that discusses “institutional racism” in the present day.<sup>6</sup> Nas discussed the significance of his artwork’s function during an interview with African American scholar Michael Eric Dyson. “The rate at which blacks are thrown into prison is outrageous,” he stated, thus identifying the importance of recycling past images or memories to assert and encourage action against the continued presence of the racist nightmare.<sup>7</sup> 500,000 people purchased the album upon release, emphasizing Nas’ ability to influence a large audience and encourage action against present injustice.<sup>8</sup>

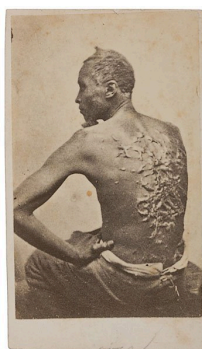


Figure 1<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Jody Rosen, “Nas”, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, August 7, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> “A Conversation With Nas and Michael Eric Dyson.” YouTube Video, 1:24:54. Posted by “Georgetown University” April 1, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vli5YcY5zNQ>.

<sup>8</sup> Jody Rosen, “Nas”, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, August 7, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> William D. McPherson, and Mr. Oliver. “The Scourged Back.” In *Photography and the American Civil War*, by Jeff Rosenheim. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). 157.

<sup>10</sup> Nas, *Untitled album*, (Def Jam/The Jones Experience, 2008).

Tupac Shakur similarly educated his audience on the history and nightmare of slavery, whilst continuing the African American protest tradition.<sup>11</sup> For example the photographer David LaChapelle created a portrait of Tupac in 1996, signifying on the memory of slavery through a photograph of a dehumanized slave taken by H. P. Cook, “one of the first of the ‘field’ photographers” in 1888.<sup>12</sup> The original image (figure 3) is of a black slave figure holding his work-tools, a hammer and a bucket, whilst gazing into the camera in a pleading fashion, as if to actively question his social degradation. What is particularly striking about the photograph’s composition is the contrast between dark and light, where the slave and his clothes remain the darkest part of the photograph, despite the slave being the focal point. This actively haunts the viewer, for this darkness reads as what photographer Yetman calls an “honest and forthright” reflection of how slaves were not seen as human or a point of focus; instead they were degraded, blending into the background as a product of the American nightmare.<sup>13</sup> Through the recycling of this image (figure 4), Tupac haunts the viewer with African American history by dressing as a slave and standing in the centre of the photograph, similarly to the original, to actively remind the viewer of his slave heritage. Unlike the original photograph, however, the lighting is thrust upon him, presenting him as an angelic figure, enhanced by his light clothing, a contrast to the original image where the slave was poorly lit. By switching the body

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006) 5. The theme of death is also prominent throughout Tupac Shakur’s use of the rhetorical nightmare, presented through the outcome, provocation or duration of it. For example, his track “Life Goes On” illustrates this, rapping, “how many brothas fell victim to the streets, rest in peace young nigga, there’s a heaven for a G.”<sup>11</sup> Here Shakur asserts that the numerous violent deaths of young African Americans have made the life he lives a nightmare, enhanced as he speaks of death, “heaven,” as the only time when peace will be achieved.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Norman R. Yetman, *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1999) 274.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 274.

lighting, Tupac becomes a figure of power and strength due to his physically central position, presenting him as the driving force against the current nightmare of racist suppression. However, despite the optimistic lighting, Tupac's expression is one of distress, sadness and anger that pierces the viewer with an understanding that even if Tupac is leading the other figures in the photo away from slavery, both past and present, the memories of his ancestry haunt him psychologically, forcing him to lead with caution. This "caution" was reflected in the rapper's death as he was murdered the same year as this photograph's publication, a death "that shocked the music world" whilst the fascination with Hip Hop soared.<sup>14</sup> Since his death Tupac still has a huge audience, who have to date purchased over 75 million records worldwide, leaving other Hip Hop artists to continue his educational work through the African American protest tradition.



Figure 3<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nathan Olson, *Tupac Shakur* (Minnesota: Capstone, 2005) 26.

<sup>15</sup> H.P Cook, "Unidentified Man-Chesterfield County" *VCU Libraries*. C.1888. <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cook/id/268/rec/268>.





Figure 4<sup>16</sup>

Hip Hop also showcases the nightmare by recreating photography from the Black Power era, the period of black pride and self-determination from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. Unlike the nightmare created by the recycling of slavery, the reuse of Black Power imagery does not instigate disturbance, instead it instigates action and hope of overcoming the nightmare of racism by referring to powerful leadership in memory as inspiration, whilst Hip Hop artists portray themselves as continuations of the protest leaders. Through this, freedom from the American nightmare becomes possible, reflecting the ideas of the African American protest figure Tare who believed “culture is an instrument of freedom, a means of a dominating nature.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore the recycling of photography actively creates optimism by recalling examples of success in Black Power. One example of Hip Hop’s recycling of Black Power to provoke the nightmare is Nas’ recreation of a photograph of the Black Panther’s Minister of Defense, Huey P Newton, taken in 1967 (figure 5).<sup>18</sup> Untitled, the original photograph pictures Newton sitting on a wicker chair,

<sup>16</sup> David LaChapelle, “Tupac Shakur”, *LaChapelle Studio*. 1996.  
<http://www.lachapellestudio.com/portraits/tupac-shakur/>.

<sup>17</sup> Woodie King, Earl Anthony, *Black Poets and Prophets* (New York: New American Library, 1972) 63.

<sup>18</sup> The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was a Black Power organization that advocated racial pride and social progression, popular from the late 1960s until the 1980s.

holding a bolt-action shotgun in one hand and a spear in the other, surrounded by tribal objects, an image that his widow commented “best personified...his legendary role.”<sup>19</sup> This image, “staged” by the party’s Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, was “turned into a popular fundraising poster” due to its actively embodying messages of Black Power and pride.<sup>20</sup> What must be asserted is that despite the weapons in the photograph, Newton is presented as calm, as though he is prepared and ready for a just battle. Nas’ recreation of the image (figure 6), photographed by Robert Maxwell for *Vibe* magazine, enhances his didactic lyrics that refer to the memory of Huey’s original photograph: “my niggas are war ready...sittin’ on wood wicker chairs [like Huey],” ready to act against the continued racist nightmare.<sup>21</sup> In the image itself, Nas is presented as a “revolutionary rapper” and leader by echoing Newton, sitting on a wicker chair, holding a spear and shotgun and surrounding himself with the same objects as the original.<sup>22</sup> The recycling of this photograph highlights Nas’ deliberate attempt to be perceived as a continuation of the Black Power leadership, actively continuing Newton’s work in front of *Vibe*’s audience of 300,000 readers. The presentation of Nas as the modern-day Panther continues through clothing, where unlike Newton, who wore his Panther uniform, Nas wears a casual jacket, jeans and boots. In doing so, Nas actively portrays the warrior’s clothing as evolving and therefore the warrior too. Assuming the leadership from an earlier generation, Nas becomes a visual continuation of the Panthers, an

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<sup>19</sup> Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin, 2009) xi. The original image is also parodied by George Clinton on the cover of Funkadelic’s 1979 album *Uncle Jam Wants You*.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (California: California University, 2011) 141.

<sup>21</sup> Nas, “War is Necessary”, *Grand Theft Auto IV Soundtrack* (USA: Rockstar Games, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Renee Romano, Leigh Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Renee Christine Romano (Georgia: Georgia Press, 2006) 243.

“enthroned monarch and leader of the people,” ready to expose and act against the American nightmare of racism whilst continuing the African American protest tradition.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 5<sup>24</sup>



Figure 6<sup>25</sup>

However, although the rhetorical device of the nightmare is evident in the above examples, I define it as a convention in black protest literature through the recreation of and reference to the lynching narrative. Three components form the rhetorical nightmare: the religious nightmare, the dystopian nightmare and active memory. The religious nightmare presents the horrors of racism as diabolical

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 243.

<sup>24</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, Blair Stapp. “Huey Newton on Wicker Chair.” *NY History*. 1967.  
<http://www.nyhistory.org/art-activism-graphic-art-merrill-c-berman-collection>

<sup>25</sup> Robert Maxwell. “Nas: Of Love and War.” *Vibe Magazine*, June 2003. (New York: Vibe Magazine, 2003) 92.

through, for example, comparisons between the devil and racist action, such as lynching. Building on this is the dystopian nightmare, the portrayal of American racism as the product of manmade suppression, thus illustrating the American nightmare as the product of racism, class corruption and suppressive action. Active memory presents the religious and dystopian nightmares through images and Hip Hop artists invite the audience to act against continued suppression as signified in images and memories.

## Religious Nightmare

“As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death  
I take a look at my life and realize there’s nothin’ left  
...On my knees in the night  
Sayin’ prayers in the street light”

– Coolio, “Gangsta’s Paradise” (1995)<sup>26</sup>

The religious nightmare deconstructs the presentation of the idealistic American Dream by instead depicting it as a racist hell on earth. This manifested in antilynching literature, where religious imagery emphasised the immorality of the lynching spectacle, shown as diabolical through biblical references that encourage audiences to take action against American evils.<sup>27</sup> Monica Miller has explored the links between religious imagery in Hip Hop and religion in the African American protest canon.<sup>28</sup> Miller provides compelling foundations for my research, such as her analysis of the genre’s form: “Hip Hop is often understood as ‘out of bounds’ – a cultural art form riding and challenging the moral peripheries of society,” she argues.<sup>29</sup> Thus it can be compared to the Gothic canon, as the latter was also a marginal cultural form that challenged social normality.<sup>30</sup> Parallels do not only form between the two due to their challenges to social norms, both movements also evoke the fantastical to present diabolical themes and characters. This highlights the many literary layers of Hip Hop, where it not only works as a continuation of the existing African American protest canon, it also draws upon the history of ‘white’ popular cultures. Nevertheless, within the African American protest canon, Hip Hop’s

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<sup>26</sup> Coolio, “Gangsta’s Paradise”, *Gangsta’s Paradise* (USA: Warner Bros, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Monica R Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (London: Routledge, 2013) 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Gothic conventions include the presentation of diabolical creatures, foreboding, otherness and the supernatural.

literary complexities continue to surface, illustrated by Michael Eric Dyson who explores how Hip Hop's relationship with religion not only continues the work of the canon, it recycles and recreates it. Dyson calls this particular method "holy signifying," where the invoking of religion provokes audiences and my example of the religious nightmare signifies on diabolical imagery.<sup>31</sup> Here, the religious nightmare lyrically and sonically illustrates to audiences the diabolical experiences African Americans have endured due to racist suppression.

The presentation of the religious nightmare in America through the depiction of helplessness begins this exploration. Grandmaster Flash's "The Message" (1982) is one significant example of this as the track lyrically showcases the horrors of poverty, for example using the terms, "rats in the front room" and "cockroaches in the back."<sup>32</sup> He then invokes religion, "God is smiling on you but he's frowning too. Because only God knows what you'll go through."<sup>33</sup> The rapper then builds upon this lack of hope by explaining that poverty is only one horror out of the many experienced by African Americans as a result of racist injustice: "[we are] abused and served like hell, 'til one day you was found hung dead in your cell."<sup>34</sup> Here, Flash expresses his frustration at the helplessness of the omniscient God, who is unable to intervene to alter existing diabolical horrors. Building upon these horrors is Grandmaster Flash's suggestion that suicide is the only escape from the nightmare of urban poverty. This is disturbing for the listener, especially as the backing track is ironically upbeat and funky. This aural juxtaposition first allows the listener to enjoy

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<sup>31</sup> Monica R Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (London: Routledge, 2013) xix. Dyson's work also shows how Hip Hop artists are moral characters seeking to overcome the nightmare by lyrically "exorcis[ing] demons as they encounter them in their own minds and the world around them."

<sup>32</sup> Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, "The Message", *The Message*, (USA: Sugar Hill, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the sonically pleasing qualities of “The Message” and then makes them feel uneasy when they understand the lyrics. Moreover, through a closer analysis of the term “hung dead,” another connection surfaces between Hip Hop protest culture and the lynching narrative, as the term “hung dead” also paints the image of a lynching.

The rapper’s didactic depiction of poverty and religion recycles the style of African American protester Claude McKay who, in his poem *Harlem Shadows* (1922), illustrated America as having the immoral qualities “of poverty, dishonour and disgrace.”<sup>35</sup> In this poem he referred to the “sacred brown feet” of the “fallen race” of African Americans.<sup>36</sup> McKay’s use of the term “sacred” is outwardly religious for “sacred” is by definition to be “connected with God or a God or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, as McKay asserted the religious dedication of African Americans, the reader is invited to see the juxtaposition between religious commitment in practice and the hell-like reality of poverty. McKay’s presentation of this hell-like reality is conveyed in his antilynching poem *The Lynching* (1920) where he described the absolute horror of American injustice. Writing about the death itself, McKay called lynching the “cruellest way of pain,” an analysis so upsetting that audiences were invited to protest against such atrocity.<sup>38</sup> McKay’s depiction becomes more chilling as he presents the victim as a “ghastly body swaying in the sun,” where the alliteration of the “s” sound further brings the image to life. In both poems, the presentation of American society is one

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<sup>35</sup> Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace. Claude McKay, 1922). 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>37</sup> Apple Dictionary, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace. Claude McKay, 1922) 51.

of helpless corruption, disgrace and horror and it is this depiction of the nightmare that invites the audience to protest.

Yet again, links between Claude McKay and Grandmaster Flash are solidified through the latter's depiction of God as all knowing but not all-powerful, as although he is present he is as helpless as the impoverished and tortured classes: "God is smiling on you but frowning too."<sup>39</sup> The image of God "smiling" on the tortured conveys the perspective that God is on the side of the African American individuals who have been suppressed. This lyric therefore is connected to McKay's *The Lynching* (1920) as the poet also presented God as being on the side of the lynching victims, whose "spirit is smoke ascended to high heaven."<sup>40</sup> As the victim, who was falsely accused of criminal act goes to heaven in the poem, the presentation of God being on the side of the victim draws further comparison between antilynching literature and Hip Hop music. Nevertheless, this suggests that God is not only of the same class as those in poverty, but also of the same helpless race, as God too is unable to stop the horrors inflicted by the predominantly Anglo-American ruling class. Ultimately Hip Hop's continuation of the African American protest tradition can be seen in the links between McKay and Grandmaster Flash and their respective presentations of the religious nightmare.

The rapper Coolio's work also presents the religious nightmare, signifying on biblical imagery to provoke protest. In his track, "Gangsta's Paradise" (1995), Coolio draws comparison between scripture and his experiences through the lyric, "as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," a reference to the 23rd Psalm in

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<sup>39</sup> Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, "The Message", *The Message*, (USA: Sugar Hill, 1982).

<sup>40</sup> Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace. Claude McKay, 1922) 51.



the Bible.<sup>41</sup> By “holy signifying” here, Coolio’s track is framed by religion and death that provoke a sense of foreboding, enhanced as the lyrics are rapped in a minor key.<sup>42</sup> The track’s nightmarish qualities are heightened as Coolio signifies on Stevie Wonder’s chorus from “Pastime Paradise” (1976): “They’ve been spending most their lives, living in a pastime paradise.”<sup>43</sup> Whereas the original is an attack on reckless hedonism and materialism as experienced by pleasure seekers, Coolio distorts the lyrics and sonic qualities to create an aural nightmare, reflecting the horrors of the gangsta lifestyle: “we keep spending most our lives living in the gangsta’s paradise.”<sup>44</sup> The rapper Tupac Shakur reinforces the presentation of the gangsta lifestyle as the religious nightmare: “Don’t feel bad for the people that died” and escaped the diabolical reality, he counsels; instead, “Feel bad for the folk that gotta stay behind. They the ones still in hell.”<sup>45</sup> Tupac’s suggestion that death is better than the nightmare on earth is shocking as it asserts that the “gangsta” lifestyle as a product of the hell on earth in which many African Americans are compelled to live.

This reflects the motif of the religious nightmare employed by antilynching protesters, where they also recycled biblical imagery to disturb audiences and invite them to take action. In antilynching literature, protesters would commonly signify on the biblical image of Jesus Christ, portraying each lynching victim as Christ himself, for example Angela Grimke who wrote in her poem *Trees* (1900), “Was Christ Himself not nailed to a tree?” exposing the similarities between lynching victims and

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<sup>41</sup> Coolio, “Gangsta’s Paradise”, *Gangsta’s Paradise* (USA: Warner Bros, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Monica R Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (London: Routledge, 2013) xix.

<sup>43</sup> Stevie Wonder, “Pastime Paradise”, *Songs in the Key of Life* (USA: Motown, 1976).

<sup>44</sup> Coolio, “Gangsta’s Paradise”, *Gangsta’s Paradise* (USA: Warner Bros, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 94.

Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Thus, “antilynching writers made the crucified Christ an avenging liberatory angel” for this imagery opened the public’s eyes to the reality of racial injustice, and by presenting the messianic symbol as an African American victim the lynching spectacle was challenged.<sup>47</sup> Links do not only form between the recycled image of Christ in antilynching literature and the recycling of the bible in Hip Hop. They also surface in Hip Hop artwork, as the rapper Tupac Shakur’s album, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* (1996), employed the device of the African American Christ figure on the cover (figure 7).<sup>48</sup> Posthumously released, the painted cover had Tupac on the cross, implying artistic resurrection whereby Tupac’s spirit would remain alive through continued release of his music. Tupac plays a significant role when exploring the nightmare, as he is a quasi-religious figure or a prophet in Hip Hop, even calling himself a “reverend to the hood” due to his inclusion of biblical themes in his work.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, some view the rapper as the personification of the American nightmare due to his powerful status as an influential African American. According to Quincy Jones, for white supremacists “Tupac was America’s wildest nightmare” as he was “outspoken” and “knowledgeable” and therefore able to provoke protest.<sup>50</sup> Tupac posthumously employed the literary techniques of McKay and Grimke visually, therefore bringing the Hip Hop tradition even closer to the existing African American protest aesthetic.

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<sup>46</sup> Angelina Grimke, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 109.

<sup>47</sup> Zoe Trodd, “John Brown’s Spirit: The Abolitionist Aesthetic of Emancipatory Martyrdom in Early Antilynching Protest Literature.” *Journal of American Studies*, Volume 49, Issue 02 (Cambridge: *Journal of American Studies*, 2015) 305 – 321.

<sup>48</sup> Tupac Shakur, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* (USA: Death Row Records, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Trapped”, *2Pacalypse Now* (USA: Interscope, 1991).



Figure 7<sup>51</sup>

Sonic sampling is next to explore in conjunction with lyrical and melodic elements when exploring the religious nightmare. Here, rappers sonically bombard their audiences by sampling sounds and images of the nightmare, and in doing so confront them with “criticism” and disturbance.<sup>52</sup> For example, the rapper Common in his track “Strange Fruit” (2007) samples Billie Holiday’s antilynching protest song “Strange Fruit” (1939) to aurally haunt his audience and present the nightmare to them. Using this sonic nightmare as his canvas, the rapper invites the listener to protest against suppression by highlighting that racism in America has psychologically disturbed African Americans: “roots and bruises so deep, found it hard to sleep.”<sup>53</sup> Common also consciously asserts that as a rapper he seeks to bring together a protest force: “the struggle lives through it, it’s a movement so move it.”<sup>54</sup> Kanye West similarly uses a sonic sample in his track “BLKKK SKKKN HEAD” (2012), however this sample illustrates the horror of racism through the presentation of the religious nightmare.<sup>55</sup> Here, Kanye samples a sonically distorted

<sup>51</sup> Tupac Shakur, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory Artwork* (USA: Death Row Records, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> M.K. Asante Jr, *It’s Bigger than Hip Hop* (London: Macmillan, 2008) 35.

<sup>53</sup> Common, “Strange Fruit”, *Strange Fruit* (USA: GOOD Music, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Kanye West, “BLKKK SKKKN HEAD”, *Yeezus* (USA: Def Jam, 2012).

Kanye also cleverly creates a play on words where the Ku Klux Klan, an Anglo-American extremist group present in the lynching era and in the present day, are referenced in the title of the nightmarish

scream throughout the track alongside a military drumbeat in order to instigate fear. This then becomes diabolical as the lyrics refer to hell, calling himself “possessed,” possibly by an “omen” and then describing himself as the “wolf”, a recognisably gothic image.<sup>56</sup> Through drawing on the gothic element of the “wolf” Kanye refers to the “otherness” imbedded within American society, where African Americans are perceived as being abnormal, disturbed creatures or, in the example of the religious nightmare, a product of diabolical forces. Visually, Kanye reinforces the haunting elements of the track by presenting himself in the music video as a faceless, aggressive, black body (figure 8). In doing so he reflects the stereotyping of African Americans, where the race has been presented as aggressive and faceless, such as when they were lynching victims and treated as animals. Flashing images of wolf jaws layered over his face so that he looks like a hellish werewolf (figure 9) heightens this effect. The evoking of wolf imagery in “BLKKK SKKKN HEAD” evokes a religious nightmare through the application of this hellish imagery and therefore continues the African American protest tradition. All examples establish Hip Hop as a continuation of the African American protest tradition by deconstructing the American Dream through the presentation of the religious nightmare.

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track through the “KKK” in “BLKKK SKKKN.” Additionally, Kanye West creates a physical caricature of an African American thug: “my leather black jeans on...I’m getting my scream on...they say I’m possessed, it’s an omen...ready for action.”<sup>55</sup> Kanye West’s lyrics are intense, enhanced sonically through aural bombardment, causing the listener discomfort.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



Figure 8<sup>57</sup>



Figure 9<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Kanye West, "BLKKK SKKKN HEAD" (Dir. Nick Knight, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

## Dystopian Nightmare

“Our freedom of speech is freedom or death,  
We got to fight the powers that be  
Lemme hear you say  
Fight the power”

– Public Enemy, “Fight the Power” (1990)<sup>59</sup>

The presentation of the dystopian nightmare is the next example of how Hip Hop music continues the African American protest tradition by drawing attention to the horrors of American society. Unlike the religious nightmare, which presents the nightmare as the product of supernatural or uncanny forces, the dystopian nightmare is presented as the product of man-made energies, exposing the idealized vision of America as a “city upon a hill” as a fantasy. Historian Trudier Harris’ work adheres to the view that lynching was evidence of a manmade dystopian nightmare, explaining how civil rights were systematically denied to African Americans due to corruption. He explores this by reflecting on how African Americans “were things, not men, and if they dared to claim any privileges of manhood, whether sexual, economic, or political, they risked execution.”<sup>60</sup> This de jure removal of freedom triggered a need for the rhetorical device of the dystopian nightmare to be created, where protest would illustrate the extent of the manmade corruption experienced. Since Hip Hop’s establishment, artists have presented the judicial system through the embodiment of the dystopian nightmare. Malcolm X mocked this reality during his “Black Man’s History” speech (1964): “if you’re black you were born in jail,” he declared, highlighting the endless cycle of American injustice and characterising the

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<sup>59</sup> Public Enemy, “Fight the Power”, *Fear of a Black Planet* (USA: Def Jam Records, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984) x.

nation as a dystopia.<sup>61</sup> More recently, in his track “Last Words” (1999), rapper Nas presented the prison experience for African Americans as a manmade nightmare. He raps, “I’m in the place many fear cause there’s no way out...I saw too many inmates fallin’ apart,” a presentation that highlights how the prison system corrupts the supposedly corrupt individuals further.<sup>62</sup> Nas builds upon this helplessness by drawing a comparison between the nightmares of prison with the nightmare of lynching by opening the track with the lyric, “these are the last words of a hanging slave.”<sup>63</sup> The link between historic and current oppression shows how Hip Hop invokes the antilynching tradition through the rhetorical device of the nightmare motif. Through the depiction of dystopian nightmares in both Hip Hop music and African American protest literature, the idealist perception of America as a “City Upon A Hill” is deconstructed.<sup>64</sup>

The presentation of paranoia is a key component of Hip Hop’s presentation of the dystopian nightmare. Often this surfaces when rappers reflect on their constant fear of being subject to racial discrimination in all areas of life, even though they are not necessarily as reckless as their Anglo American counterparts. This element of the nightmare draws upon the feelings of paranoia as created by lynching, where African Americans were subject to unjust torture. In Hip Hop, these feelings of paranoia are presented through judicial corruption as African Americans represent 12% of the total population of drug users, but 38% of those arrested for

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<sup>61</sup> Malcolm X, *Black Man’s History* (USA: Malcolm X, 1964) Black Power figure Malcolm X illustrated the dystopian nightmare in his “Ballot or the Bullet” speech, stating, “I have never seen democracy; all we’ve seen is hypocrisy” and even calling this corruption an “American nightmare.”

<sup>62</sup> Nas “Last Words”, *Nastradamus* (USA: Columbia Records, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> John F Kennedy, *Address to the General Court of Massachusetts* (USA: John F Kennedy, 1961).

drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for a drug offense.<sup>65</sup> Much Hip Hop protest literature surfaces how they feel paranoid that they could be falsely accused or imprisoned, similarly to how lynching victims were falsely criminalized. For example, in Lupe Fiasco's track "Strange Fruition" (2012),<sup>66</sup> a play on Abel Meeropol's antilynching poem *Strange Fruit* (1939), he illustrates how past corruption continues today, to the extent that he cannot identify with America.<sup>67</sup> He raps, "I can't pledge allegiance to your flag, 'cause I can't find no reconciliation with your past" and this turns into paranoia through the lyric, "I wander through the city going mad, I see the fruits of planting evidence."<sup>68</sup> It is the latter lyric that draws a direct comparative with the lynching era, when false evidence was used against innocent African Americans. Therefore, with Lupe suggesting this practice continues today the track not only highlights paranoia about false sentencing, but also the significance of the aesthetic tradition where the nightmare continues to be employed almost 100 years after its establishment during the lynching period. The paranoia felt by African Americans, as illustrated by Lupe, is not surprising due to the racial disparity between African American and Anglo American sentencing. The difference in treatment between races as illustrated by the judicial and penal systems, is also evident in other racial inequalities, from financial success to social status. For example, "as of April 2009, the overall unemployment rate for African

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<sup>65</sup> "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet", NAACP, accessed March 20, 2015.  
<http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>.

<sup>66</sup> Lupe Fiasco "Strange Fruition", *Food & Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album, Part 1* (USA: Atlantic Records, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Abel Meeropol, "Strange Fruit", *Strange Fruit*, (USA: Abel Meeropol, 1939). In this poem, Meeropol exposed the horrors of American racism, written as a response to seeing the lynching photograph of the 1930 lynching of Tom Shipp and Abe Smith in Marion, Indiana. Using nightmarish elements, the poem described lynching as a "strange and bitter crop," an exploration, which ultimately shocked the audiences as the presentation of the man-made horror of lynching was chilling.

<sup>68</sup> Lupe Fiasco "Strange Fruition", *Food & Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album, Part 1* (USA: Atlantic Records, 2012).



Americans has increased to 15 percent” which is “well above the national unemployment rate of 8.9.”<sup>69</sup> Also, there are an “estimated 32 million people in the United States” who have said and recorded “that they have been victims of racial profiling by the police.”<sup>70</sup> Chance the Rapper explores how this racial injustice makes him feel emotionally in “Pusha Man/Paranoia” (2013), rapping “the days is pretty dark a lot,” where his paranoia of being mistreated has caused him to see only darkness.<sup>71</sup> The Geto Boys similarly described their paranoia in “Mind Playing Tricks on Me” (1991): “At night I can’t sleep, I toss and turn,” they rap, “I’m paranoid, sleeping with my finger on the trigger.”<sup>72</sup> Here the dystopian nightmare makes them so paranoid that they are prepared to countenance murder in self-defence, reflecting the horror created by endless racist action. Therefore Hip Hop artists illustrate the dystopian nightmare, initially presented during the lynching era, as the outcome of continued racism that ultimately causes the psychological symptom of paranoia.

The paranoia created by suppression is also a component of the dystopian nightmare in Hip Hop music and the African American protest tradition. Claude McKay’s previously mentioned poem *The Lynching* (1920) explores this as, after the description of the lynching, the poet foresees that there will be no change to the continued suppression: “And little lads, lynchers that were to be, Danced round the

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<sup>69</sup> “Easing the Squeeze on African American Families”, U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, accessed April 1, 2015. [http://www.jec.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/826057c5-0fa5-4c04-9317-55ba044b4cf5/easingthesqueezeonafricanamericanfamilies.pdf](http://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/826057c5-0fa5-4c04-9317-55ba044b4cf5/easingthesqueezeonafricanamericanfamilies.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> “Threat and Humiliation”, Amnesty International, accessed December 2014. [http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/rp\\_report.pdf](http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/rp_report.pdf)

<sup>71</sup> Chance the Rapper “Pusha Man/Paranoia”, *Acid Rap* (USA: Self Released, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Geto Boys “Mind Playing Tricks on Me”, *We Can’t Be Stopped* (USA: Rap-A-Lot Records, 1991).

dreadful thing in fiendish glee.”<sup>73</sup> The comparison between the innocent descriptions of “little lads” with the phrase “lynchers that were to be,” expresses the paranoia McKay feels.<sup>74</sup> This paranoia is that the nightmare of lynching will be endless, for the next generation of lynchers has already begun and therefore, the suppression he faces as an African American in will continue. This feeling of never ending suppression is reflected in The Roots and John Legend’s track “Hard Times” (2010), where the lyric, “Cold, cold eyes upon me they stare, people all around me and they’re all in fear,” further expresses the endless nightmare African Americans experience.<sup>75</sup> This “fear” here is a feeling the rappers have based upon being successful and therefore perceivably dangerous African American men, heightened by the lyric, “people wanna see my blood flow like fountains.”<sup>76</sup> Dead Prez also echo this endless paranoia, as showcased by McKay and The Roots, in their track “They Schools” (2000) where the socially conscious rap group express how America is not progressing racially, as the school system is still disfigured by racism. Dead Prez rap, “the same people who control the school system control the prison system...and the whole system, ever since slavery.”<sup>77</sup> In their track “Hip Hop” (2000) they create a conspiracy theory that the American government “shot Biggie Smalls” due to his success as an African American. This highlights the extent of the paranoia the rap group feel, furthered as they say, “If we don’t get them, they gonna get us all.”<sup>78</sup> Clearly the mistrust in the Anglo American ruling class as illustrated here shows how

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<sup>73</sup> Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace. Claude McKay, 1922) 51.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> The Roots, John Legend, “Hard Times”, *Wake Up!* (USA: Columbia Records, 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Dead Prez, “They Schools”, *Let’s Get Free* (USA: Columbia Records, 2000).

<sup>77</sup> Dead Prez, “Hip Hop”, *Let’s Get Free* (USA: Columbia Records, 2000).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

living within a dystopian nightmare produces a kind of paranoia that is a rational response to that dystopia, rather than a symptom of psychological malfunction.

Drawing attention to the removal of freedom through the ever-present threat of death and violence is another strategy used to illustrate the dystopian nightmare of injustice in the African American protest tradition and in Hip Hop. Historian Daniel White discusses the references to death in rap music as a result of oppression, describing how death is “valued, feared and even glamorized” due to its presence in African American culture.<sup>79</sup> Rappers illustrate this fear as a dystopian nightmare by presenting the persistence of death, one example being Public Enemy’s track “Fight the Power” (1990) where they rap: “our freedom of speech is freedom or death.”<sup>80</sup> The juxtaposition between “freedom” and “death” highlights the significance of Hip Hop as protest. This reflects the antilynching poem *Song For a Dark Girl* (1927) by Langston Hughes, where a man is hanged for being attracted to a woman; “They hung my black young lover,” she laments.<sup>81</sup> The lack of freedom presented here is the punishment for engaging in human attraction, “Love is a naked shadow, on a gnarled and naked tree.”<sup>82</sup> Hughes portrays this suppression through the grotesque term “gnarled and naked,” expressing the horrors of lynching and ultimately the nightmare the young lovers experience. Tupac Shakur presents the outcome of the nightmare as presented by Hughes and Public Enemy in his track “So Many Tears” (1995), describing how his fear of being killed was so intense that it

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<sup>79</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 94.

<sup>80</sup> Public Enemy, “Fight the Power”, *Fear of a Black Planet* (USA: Def Jam Records, 1990).

<sup>81</sup> Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (London: Profile Books, 1999). 172.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

triggered suicidal thoughts.<sup>83</sup> He first depicts the ever-present death: “I lost so many peers, and shed so many tears”; he then expresses how he now lives an unhappy life: “I’m suicidal, so don’t stand near me.”<sup>84</sup> All examples explored here portray violent, premature death as normal in African American life, a concept that Michael Eric Dyson reflected on recently. Dyson notes that “in its response to death, black youth have reversed perhaps the problematic expression of self-aware black morality” by instead feeling “detachment” towards death itself.<sup>85</sup> The perception of youth as detached due to the normalization of murder advances the depiction of the American dystopian nightmare in the African American protest tradition.

In all examples, the dystopian nightmare is the result of the experiences African Americans have had due to racial suppression. The presentation of African Americans as living through the product of manmade corruption invites the audience to act against such horrors. Through this analysis, Hip Hop’s evoking of the dystopian nightmare continues the African American protest tradition whilst highlighting a need for protest action.

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<sup>83</sup> Tupac Shakur, “So Many Tears”, *Me Against the World* (USA: Interscope Records, 1995).

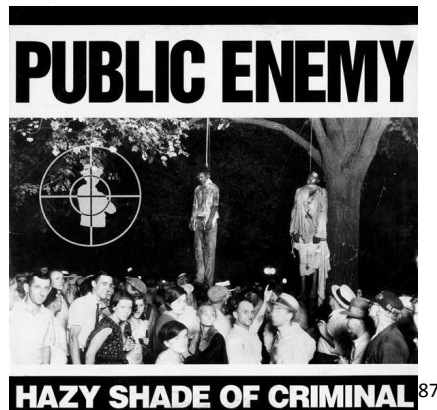
<sup>84</sup> Ibid. Although this is distressing, this is reflective of Tupac’s rap style where he intended to provoke a response from audiences as opposed to simply providing pure entertainment.

<sup>85</sup> Monica R Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (London: Routledge, 2013) 94.

## Active Memory



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In response to the American nightmare, Hip Hop music has used images from antilynching campaigns to mobilise active memory. Active memory is a method of recalling a past event accurately in order to create action against the American nightmare in the present. When rappers signify on such memories of the past they illustrate the lack of socio-racial progression in America, thus portraying racism as an endless nightmare, inviting audiences to create action using “the form of visual artwork” as a trigger.<sup>88</sup> Hip Hop artists “reanimate certain forms of political struggle,” and then emphasise current racial issues to “encourage the curtailment of [present] struggle” by providing the audience with a visual insight into racism.<sup>89</sup> In doing so, Hip Hop artists not only educate about past political movements such as the antilynching movement, they assert the significance of them in the present day to encourage protest action, visually continuing the Ghanaian Akan concept of “going back to your roots in order to move forward.”<sup>90</sup> Hip Hop actively educates on

<sup>86</sup> Lawrence Beitler, “The Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith.” In *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob*, by Dora Apel. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004). 21.

<sup>87</sup> Public Enemy, “Hazy Shade of Criminal” Artwork, (USA: Public Enemy, 1992).

<sup>88</sup> Kathy Hairston, *Crafting Cultural Meanings: Artistic Creation and Meaning for African American Visual Artists* (Michigan: ProQuest, 2009) 162.

<sup>89</sup> Renee Romano, Leigh Raiford, *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Georgia: Georgia University, 2006) 234.

<sup>90</sup> M. K. Asante Jr, *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop* (London: Macmillan, 2008) 75.

racism's horror through invoking the memory of lynching where, after George Eastman's invention of the Kodak camera in the mid-1880s, it was "noted that hundreds of Kodaks clicked" during the lynch mobs; the events provided entertainment worth actively documenting for memory.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise that Hip Hop artists have reused these images and memories to remind their audiences of these nightmares, actively educating them upon the evil of racist suppression. One example of Hip Hop using lynching as active memory is the rap group Public Enemy who recycled an image of lynching taken by Lawrence Beitler (figure 10). The original image was of two men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, lynched in Indiana for allegedly murdering a white factory worker and raping his partner. Despite the case being unsolved, as many other lynching cases were, the two figures were executed to the crowd's enjoyment, highlighted by the many audience members looking towards the camera and smiling, presenting their pride in attendance. This image was also used to actively protest against lynching, however, appearing in publications such as *The Crisis*, founded in 1910 by W.E.B Du Bois, that "especially sought to attack the barbarous practice of lynching" in America by using images such as this one for protest.<sup>92</sup>

Public Enemy reused this image (see figure 11), and therefore its active memory, as the artwork for their single "Hazy Shade of Criminal" (1992).<sup>93</sup> By reusing Beitler's image, the Hip Hop group educated the audience on the horrors of past racism as well as protesting against the current racist nightmare. In particular, the front man of the rap group, Chuck D, asserted that the reuse of Beitler's photograph

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<sup>91</sup> William D. Carrigan, *Lynching Reconsidered: New Perspectives in the Study of Mob Violence* (London: Routledge, 2014) 77.

<sup>92</sup> *The Crisis, The Battle of 1920 and Before, Eleventh Annual Report* (New York: NAACP, 1921) 202.

<sup>93</sup> Public Enemy, "Hazy Shade of Criminal" Artwork, (USA: Public Enemy, 1992).

was to protest against “the legal lynching of black boxer Mike Tyson” whom he believed had been unjustly convicted in 1992 of rape”<sup>94</sup> and therefore, the rap group reestablished the significance of lynching as a nightmare in the present. In this particular case, despite knowledge of the victim “falsely accusing” other men, Tyson was proven guilty.<sup>95</sup> Public Enemy signified that “the tale of the black male rapist [or] criminal, the heart of the lynching narrative, [is still] alive and well.”<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, Public Enemy’s use of active memory educated the audience on past American racism, whilst recreating its horror to provoke action against the current nightmare of Mike Tyson’s trial.



Figure 10<sup>97</sup>

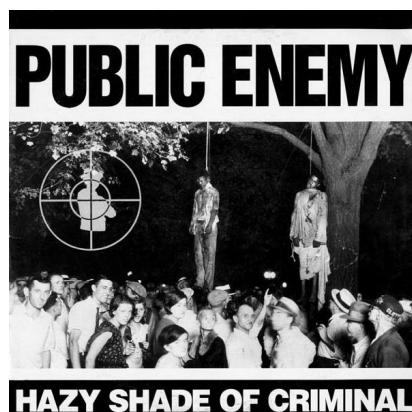


Figure 11<sup>98</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: Chicago University, 2012) 227.

<sup>95</sup> Jet Magazine, “Mike Tyson’s Attorneys Claim Desiree Washington Cried Rape Previously”, *Jet Magazine*, March 22, 1993. 12.

<sup>96</sup> Leigh Raiford, “Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory”, *History and Theory*, Issue 48 (Connecticut: Wesleyan University, 2009) 124.

<sup>97</sup> Lawrence Beitler, “The Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith.” In *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob*, by Dora Apel. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004). 21.

<sup>98</sup> Public Enemy, “Hazy Shade of Criminal” Artwork (USA: Public Enemy, 1992).

Another example of Hip Hop using active memory to portray the nightmare visually through the recycling of lynching photography is seen in Steve McQueen's photograph of a lynching tree, exhibited in 2013 (see figure 12). Although McQueen's photograph was taken recently, the image portrays the American nightmare by relying on the memory of lynching to actively provoke and educate. The photograph is physically haunting due to the darkness of the colours, where the green and grey are dimmed, and by focusing only on the tree and the weeds growing around it, the image becomes a visual representation of the grotesque nature of racism as a hellish nightmare. The symbolic dark qualities of the image continue as a direct representation of the death that surrounds it; "those who were murdered were later buried in the ground around the tree."<sup>99</sup> These qualities force this contemporary photograph to be "viewed and read as evidence of death" even though there are no victims hanging.

Using it as the backdrop of his stage whilst projecting his shadow upon it when performing his track "Blood on the Leaves" (2013) during a Music Television Channel award ceremony that same year to an audience of 10.1 million, (figure 13) Kanye West portrayed the visual nightmare of lynching through active memory during his performance, "rapping in front of an actual relic from the dark era [of lynching]."<sup>100</sup> As Kanye manipulated the photograph so that a sepia filter replaced the dim colour, the image looked aged, as if it was an original photograph or nightmare from the lynching era, something that McQueen commented on as proving Kanye was "a thinker, interested" in the psychological implications of

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<sup>99</sup> Christopher Harris, "Kanye West performs Blood on the Leaves", *Vibe Magazine*, August 26, 2013).

<sup>100</sup> Latifah Muhammad, "Kanye West Explains Blood on the Leaves", *Black Entertainment Television*, August 26, 2013.



racism.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, through Kanye's projection of his shadow, he created a chilling illusion depicting the rapper as part of the image and therefore the lynching. Therefore Kanye educated his audience that as an African American he could have been a lynching victim, a signifier that his heritage psychologically haunts him like a nightmare.<sup>102</sup> Through the reuse of McQueen's photograph, alongside the aural haunting of Kanye's song, that featured a sample from Nina Simone's 1965 cover of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," a protest song against lynching, the rapper turned his performance into an art instillation, bombarding the audience with the diabolical horror of the lynching nightmare. Through this graphic portrayal of the diabolical nightmare, the viewer becomes uncomfortable and disturbed by watching a simplistic, yet shocking, recreation of a lynching, heightening the offensiveness of the topic whilst also presenting the hell-like references here.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, Kanye emphasises the significance of lynching through Hip Hop, educating the audience on its nightmare and extending the African American protest tradition into the present.

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<sup>101</sup> Jonah Weiner, "The Liberation of Steve McQueen", *Rolling Stone Magazine*, March 3, 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Problematically, however the track is also about a relationship in which the singer gets his "second string bitch" pregnant and seeks to persuade her to have an abortion. Therefore, although the lynching narrative plays a certain role in the track, there are noticeable disparities between some of the themes and the signified references to lynch culture.

<sup>103</sup> Kanye West's presentation of the devil in another track, "Jesus Walks", strengthens his work representing the rhetorical nightmare as in this track the rapper repeatedly calls upon God to help him escape the wrath of the devil: "God show me the way because the devil's trying to break me down." In doing so he reaffirms the perception of the devil, and therefore the diabolical nightmare, as being present in American society.<sup>103</sup>



Figure 12<sup>104</sup>



Figure 13<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Steve McQueen, *Lynching Tree*. 2013, Light box with colour transparency, 85.4 × 105 × 13 cm. Basel, Schaulager.

<sup>105</sup> Kanye West, "Blood on the Leaves", *Video Music Awards* (USA: MTV, 2013).

### 3

## “Tell the Children”

### Performative Distress

"I'm tired of being desensitized to the murder of black men.  
I don't give a fuck if it's by police or peers.  
This shit is not normal.  
I made a song. This is how we feel."  
– J Cole, “Be Free” (2014)<sup>1</sup>

The previous chapters have explored how Hip Hop music has employed the shared responsibility and the nightmare to encourage audience protest action through empathetic rhetoric and traumatising literature. These rhetorical strategies originated in the nineteenth-century campaigns to abolish slavery and end the racial terror of lynching. However, during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras of the 1960s and beyond, another key element of the protest aesthetic emerged that I call performative distress. Here, the protester calls for change through distressing performance techniques that are intended to encourage social action, such as pausing for emphasis and presenting actual events in a bombarding way.<sup>2</sup> This identifier responded to continued mistreatment of African Americans into the late twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> where they were as LeRoi Jones put it, “still treated like subhuman” and therefore it was felt that a more intense technique of drawing upon current events to invite protest action was necessary.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J Cole, “Be Free”, *Be Free* (USA: “Soundcloud”, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Peniel E. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Gair, *The American Counter Culture* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 146.

The intensity of performative distress reflects the Theatre of Cruelty, a theatrical technique created by the practitioner Artaud in 1938 and first presented in *The Theater and Its Double* (1938).<sup>5</sup> The Theatre of Cruelty voices “emotional screams, grunts and yelps that make up real living” and this includes performers vocalizing sounds of pain to present messages.<sup>6</sup> Performative distress embodies and advances Artaud’s practice, as unlike the Theatre of Cruelty it is formed by and applied to literature outside of the theatre. For example Kendrick Lamar’s track, “u” (2014),<sup>7</sup> opens with an intense scream on the record that immediately draws the listener in.<sup>8</sup> Hip Hop musicians also develop Artaud’s bombarding realism by incorporating sonic samples of “real living” into performances and recordings. Moreover, Artaud is particularly relevant to my thesis as he used the Theatre of Cruelty to remove “false shadows of contemporary culture” by correcting misconceptions and revealing hidden truths.<sup>9</sup> I have explored how Civil Rights, Black Power and Hip Hop protesters do this by employing performative distress.<sup>10</sup>

Through performative distress, protesters often present their realistic surroundings through passionate and emotional performances, both recorded and live. This is unlike the nightmare that deliberately presented suppression as dystopian or religious through metaphors and motifs.<sup>11</sup> Most of the sources I have assessed are recordings of speeches, performances, interviews, skits and protest

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<sup>5</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and It’s Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> Stanford Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989) 102.

<sup>7</sup> Kendrick Lamar, “u”, *To Pimp a Butterfly* (USA: Interscope, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Chong, *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Stanford Lyman, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989) 102.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Performative distress is applied in speeches, skits, interviews, live or recorded performances as well as real-time social media.

events where the audience members are from a range of social and political backgrounds. African American protesters highlight corruption to these audiences by turning all the idealist principles of freedom and hope into performative, yet realistic, portrayals of urban decay.<sup>12</sup> The spoken word poet formerly known as LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka, provides one example of performative distress in his performance of his spoken-word poem “Somebody Blew Up America” (2003) at the Sanctuary for Independent Media in 2009.<sup>13</sup> Accompanied by a slightly offbeat saxophonist whilst frequently altering his speed of delivery, Baraka unsettled his audience. “Who? Who? Who?” he asks, “who cut your nuts off, who rape your ma, who lynched your pa?”<sup>14</sup> This repeated questioning becomes aurally distressing whilst the grotesque imagery and historical references bombard the audience’s senses, disturbing them with the vile and aggressive content. This performance encourages protest action, allowing the poet to do what Ralph Ellison called taking on “a role beyond that of entertainer.”<sup>15</sup> Malcolm X similarly evoked performative distress in his live speech, *The Ballot or the Bullet* (1964). Predominantly known through its textual or audio-recorded form, Malcolm utilizes performative distress by inserting deliberate pauses into his speech for emphasis: “We all have the same problem. They don’t hang you because you’re a Baptist. They hang you because you’re black. We suffer political oppression. Economic exploitation. Social

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<sup>12</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2013) 19. Using disturbing techniques presents what Eithne Quinn called “a dire and depressing underclass reality” and by doing so shares the African American experience with the audience to provoke change.

<sup>13</sup> “Amiri Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America”, YouTube Video, 9.30. Posted by “mediasanctuary” December 16, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUEu-pG1HWw>.

<sup>14</sup> Amiri Baraka *Somebody Blew Up America* (USA: Amiri Baraka, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, Simon Stow, *A Political Companion to John Steinbeck* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2013) 53.

Oppression.”<sup>16</sup> The blunt presentation of reality intended to bombard audience members with the presentation of modern racism, whether conservative whites, authority figures or African American campaigners.<sup>17</sup>

During Hip Hop’s emergence as a protest platform it both employed and developed performative distress. First, the genre recycled the style of Amiri Baraka and Malcolm X, for example using emphasis and bombardment.<sup>18</sup> Then it advanced the technique by merging this with the sonic properties of the musical style as seen in NWA’s “Fuck Tha Police” (1988).<sup>19</sup> Unlike the group’s other tracks on their album, *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), “Fuck Tha Police” was recorded as a performative skit.<sup>20</sup> The sonic composition of the track is bombarding yet the rappers use satirical tones in lyrics such as “beating on and thrown in jail...Fucking with me coz I’m a teenager.”<sup>21</sup> This invites the listener to laugh through the comic qualities, whilst alerting audiences to the distress the rap group feel due to police discrimination. The technique of performative distress in Hip Hop traces back to the oral tradition in slavery: “some see rap as one natural progression in African American oral forms, and strong cases can be made tracing the lineage between rap and forms such as the talking blues and oral storytelling.”<sup>22</sup> Amiri Baraka commented on the recognisability of the Hip Hop form as modern oration: “rap is nothing but a modern blues...There’s

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<sup>16</sup> Malcolm X, *The Ballot or the Bullet* (USA: Malcolm X, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> NWA “Fuck Tha Police”, *Straight Outta Compton* (USA: Ruthless Records, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> NWA, *Straight Outta Compton* (USA: Ruthless Records, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Justin A. Williams, *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 11-13. Nevertheless, it cannot be simply assessed that Spoken Word poetry was a direct rap or Hip Hop form, instead it must be noted that “the influence and similarities between the poets that preceded rap and rap innovators are apparent.”

no great difference between rap and talking blues...they can feel continuity."<sup>23</sup> This highlights the two significant elements of Hip Hop, tradition and modernity, paraphrased by Williams who explained: "Rap is not simply a type of spoken poetry, but a relation in the family tree of black artistic expression."<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, in the last year rappers have employed performative distress to protest against injustice in America, especially at the hands of the American police force. Two particular shootings that rappers have publically responded to are the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York, in turn raising the Hip Hop genre's reputation as protest literature.<sup>25</sup> The killings have triggered global criticism due to the obvious injustice, with the unarmed eighteen year old Brown being fatally shot on August 9<sup>th</sup> 2014 by the "evil" and "devilish" Anglo American police officer Darren Wilson.<sup>26</sup> This homicide inspired numerous protests alongside civil disobedience, actions furthered by the dismissal of the case against Wilson by the Grand Jury on November 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>27</sup> This protest built upon existing tension caused by a viral video of unarmed forty-three year old Eric Garner, an African American man, being choked to death by Anglo American policeman Daniel Pantaleo on the 17<sup>th</sup> July; the latter was also not charged for the offense. In this case, "the 43-year-old was placed in a banned chokehold that led to

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<sup>23</sup> Justin Williams, *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. "...Rap can therefore take inspiration and borrow from preceding spoken word works and styles, while standing independently as an individual member of the family."

<sup>25</sup> Although not all Hip Hop artists actively and consciously protest, many rappers and Hip Hop figures have indeed provided commentary over these events by using the platform of music to educate and invite audiences from all over the world into action.

<sup>26</sup> Justin Wm. Moyer, "Michael Brown's mother on Darren Wilson: He's Evil", *The Washington Post*, (USA: The Washington Post, August 5<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>27</sup> "Investigative Report 14-43984", Saint Louis County Police Department, accessed August 2014. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1370562-14-43984-care-main.html>.

his death” and despite this breach of the law, the offender was not prosecuted.<sup>28</sup> These examples highlighted the obvious racial inequality in the law enforcement system’s treatment of African Americans, where they already constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated Americans.<sup>29</sup> Hip Hop’s responses to the events of 2014 voiced the fear African Americans felt, commented on by “Black Lives Matter”: “Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state.”<sup>30</sup> Through the use of performative distress in lyrics, speeches and through contemporary social media, Hip Hop encouraged protest.

The deaths in 2014 are not the only deaths that rappers have spoken out against. In *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang* (2005), Eithne Quinn explored the impact on gangsta rap of African American taxi driver Rodney King’s beating by a Los Angeles police officer in 1991.<sup>31</sup> “[It] provided the most compelling piece of evidence for gangsta’s antipolice [themes],” she claims, whilst arguing that it showed to the world the true horrors of American racial prejudice.<sup>32</sup> The rapper Ice Cube provided one example of conscious Hip Hop being used in the response to King’s beating in his track “Alive on Arrival” (1991), rapping “Don’t wanna go out like my man Rodney King” when explaining why he obeys what obviously corrupt police officers say.<sup>33</sup> Cube’s track becomes distressing by enacting how his fear of being beaten by a police officer stopped him from challenging the officer’s racism. Tupac Shakur’s

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<sup>28</sup> Oliver Laughland, “Eric Garner killing, one year on: ‘Sit down son, it’s time for The Talk’”, *The Guardian*, July 25, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet”, NAACP, accessed March 20, 2015. <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>.

<sup>30</sup> “About Us”, Black Lives Matter, accessed September 1, 2015. <http://blacklivesmatter.com>.

<sup>31</sup> Gangsta rap is a useful example to explore here as it is often regarded as party music, however much of the themes and lyrics are politically conscious and inspired by the judicial system.

<sup>32</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2013) 108.

<sup>33</sup> Ice Cube, “Alive on Arrival”, *Death Certificate* (USA: EMI Records, 1991).



music video for “Trapped” (1991) also illustrates the theme of injustice by using performative distress. In this video Tupac plays an isolated victim, highlighted by his physically lower status than the Anglo-American police officers surrounding him.<sup>34</sup> Through this, Tupac physically embodies his distressing lyrics: “trapped in a prison of seclusion, happiness, living on the streets is a delusion.”<sup>35</sup> I will now explore the responses to Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s deaths by Hip Hop artists who have used performative distress to try and mobilize global protest against these events. Using these responses, this chapter will compare Hip Hop artists’ use of performative distress techniques in the last year with the way Civil Rights and Black Power protesters used the technique, while linking both to the oral tradition dating back to the antislavery movement.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Trapped” (Dir. Nick Knight, 1991). This also reflects his status that is lower than that of a white policeman.

<sup>35</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Trapped”, *2Pacalypse Now* (USA: Interscope, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Dennis Chong, *Collective Action and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

## Off the Record: Speeches and Protests

"All thoughts to those who peacefully protested.

My thoughts and prayers to those who could not hold that anger in.

We will not live in your fear.

We know you don't value my skin."

- Killer Mike, "Pre-show Ferguson Grand Jury speech" (2014)<sup>37</sup>

One of the many examples of performative distress used to respond to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner is by the rapper Nelly. Here, in a speech at a charity football game hosted by Quincy Jones and Chris Brown on August 16<sup>th</sup>, Nelly called for all the crowd watching and all the singers and rappers playing in the game to stop whilst he inflicted distress upon the audience during an emotive and provoking speech: "If I could get everybody to rise and just raise their hands in support for everything that's going on back home in my city right now at this minute."<sup>38</sup> Nelly's tone throughout his speech was strong, whilst he asserted the emotional need for everyone in the stadium to join in as the struggle against oppression was, "bigger than us."<sup>39</sup> The rapper's distressing emotion was enhanced visually by his use of the stadium's crowd, by having them all standing in the vulnerable "hands up, don't shoot" position (figure 14). In doing so, Nelly evoked performative distress by recreating the haunting images of unjustly killed African Americans. He also drew upon the group protest techniques created during the 1960s as part of the Civil Rights Movement. Here, on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 1968, after the Memphis Sanitation Strike, where around 1300 African American sanitation workers went on strike in protest of the horrific working conditions, Martin Luther King

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<sup>37</sup> "Killer Mike's pre-show Ferguson Grand Jury speech", YouTube Video, 7.33. Posted by "Stephen Bolen" November 25, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQs7CWKHM9w>.

<sup>38</sup> Eren Strecker, "Watch Nelly Lead 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' Protest Chant for Michael Brown." *Billboard Magazine*, August 18, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

organised a march where participants carried placards with the statement, “I Am A Man.” With over 5000 demonstrators carrying signs, the strike became performative and symbolic, a technique later evoked by Nelly when asking for his audience to all take on a dramatic position.<sup>40</sup> Alongside his many famous Hip Hop peers that were all employing the stance of surrender, Nelly created further distress by ensuring all were silent out of respect, but also alluding to the silence of death.<sup>41</sup> This protest position also reflected the thought of the African American intellectual W.E.B Du Bois who commented in 1952: “the great mass of arrested or accused black folk have no defence.”<sup>42</sup> In the present day Du Bois’ comment on “the desperate need” for African Americans to defend themselves clearly continues, as does the aesthetical method of protesting against suppression.<sup>43</sup> Placards similar to those used in the 1968 demonstration march that read “I Am A Man” were used in the protests against the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner (see Figures 15 and 16), a performative example of the continuity of protest techniques in response to a lack of racial progression.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wendy Cuthbertson, *Labour Goes to War: The CIO and the Construction of a New Social Order, 1939-45*, (Canada, UBC Press, 2012) 151.

<sup>41</sup> The performative disturbance was heightened by the subtext of the image where, as an African American male or female, they could have all or could all be subject to an unlawful killing as their race made them more vulnerable than their Anglo-American counterparts.

<sup>42</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 106.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Cate Matthews, “Photos From Ferguson And 1960s Protests Side By Side Make It Clear How Little Has Changed.” *The Huffington Post*, August 14, 2014.



Figure 14<sup>45</sup>



Figures 15 and 16<sup>46</sup>

Killer Mike is another rapper that used performative distress to invite his audience to protest against the killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of the police. In a moving speech before his set in St Louis, that happened to take place on the same day as the Grand Jury's decision (November 2014) not to further the Michael Brown murder trial, Killer Mike passionately protested against the ruling by employing performative distress. The rapper reached out to his audience and shared his distress with them: "All thoughts to those who peacefully protested. My

<sup>45</sup> Eren Strecker, "Watch Nelly Lead 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' Protest Chant for Michael Brown." *Billboard Magazine*, August 18, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Cate Matthews, Zellie Imani, "Photos From Ferguson And 1960s Protests Side By Side Make It Clear How Little Has Changed." *The Huffington Post*, August 14, 2014.

thoughts and prayers to those who could not hold that anger in.”<sup>47</sup> The rapper, who has since been titled “one of the most vocal Hip Hop representatives on police brutality and social injustice,” created a space where he was in support of all protest, regardless of whether it was violent or nonviolent, asserting that it did not matter to him how you were protesting, as long as there was a response and action against the Grand Jury ruling.<sup>48</sup> Upon creating this atmosphere, Killer Mike continued to evoke powerful protest rhetoric on behalf of his audience: “we will not live in your fear...we know you don’t value my skin. It is us against the mother fucking machine.”<sup>49</sup> The depiction of American racism is shocking and disturbing, turning this speech into an emotive declaration and an example of performative distress, encouraging his audience to protest against the “machine.”<sup>50</sup> Killer Mike’s assessment of racial injustice is not only emotional; it is reflective of social factors where in Ferguson the population is “67 percent black and 29 percent white. However, last year, African Americans made up only 5.6 per cent of the police force.”<sup>51</sup> This statistic emphasizes the racial disparities in American society, in turn heightening the necessity for protest.

Killer Mike’s rhetoric reflects the performative elements of Malcolm X’s *Message to the Grassroots* (1963) where the protest leader discussed the dehumanization of African Americans and other racial minorities: “America has a very serious problem [racial minorities] are not wanted...You catch hell because

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<sup>47</sup> Killer Mike, *Foreword to Run The Jewels at the Ready Room, St. Louis, Missouri*, (USA: Killer Mike, 25 November 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Yohance Kyles, “Killer Mike Explains Why He Believes Rioting Worked In Ferguson”, *All Hip Hop* August 10, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Killer Mike, *Foreword to Run The Jewels at the Ready Room, St. Louis, Missouri*, (USA: Killer Mike, 25 November 2014).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Kashmiri Gander, “Ferguson unrest: Google Trends shows what people want to know about the shooting of Michael Brown.” *The Independent*, August 11, 2015.

you're a black man."<sup>52</sup> Malcolm X and Killer Mike employ similar rhetorical devices; from the emphasizing pauses used to accentuate emotion to the depiction of the lack of value African American men have in a racist society. The day after Mike's performance his speech went viral, highlighting that this example of performative distress had successfully raised the awareness of the need for protest against the Ferguson ruling, as "he talked as strong and as deep as he could with passion."<sup>53</sup> As he told an interviewer, he did not want to "have to be preparing my children that the world is going to be unfair to them for the rest of their lives."<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, Killer Mike's performance was chilling as protest, crystalizing the perception of the rapper as a protest leader.

Through using performative distress, socially conscious rappers such as Q Tip have publically participated in protest rallies and events to highlight their disgust at continued American racism. Q Tip participated in the New York Ferguson protest on November 25<sup>th</sup> 2014 (see Figure 17)<sup>55</sup> and in this particular protest, he tweeted in real time that those campaigning believed there is "no value for black life" from the Anglo American community, "And [they] leave us stripped of our right to exist".<sup>56</sup> This is only one example of how rappers have used their high profile positions to protest by applying performative distress on social media to encourage action. Q

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<sup>52</sup> Malcolm X, *Message to the Grassroots*, (USA: Malcolm X, November 10, 1963).

<sup>53</sup> Eric Sundermann, "The Morning After: An Interview With Killer Mike About His Explosive Ferguson Speech And Moving Forward." *Noisey, Music by Vice*, November 25, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Sunderman, "Killer Mike On Stage In St. Louis After Mike Brown Decision: "It Is Us Against The Motherfucking Machine." *Noisey, Music by Vice*, November 25, 2014. This indirectly creates links between Killer Mike and Martin Luther King who famously spoke about how he wished for his children to have a better life in his March on Washington Speech (1963): "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Both figures showcased the tragedy of racism through the image of their children, representing innocence and therefore Hip Hop protest in performance is again asserted as a continuation of the African American protest tradition.

<sup>55</sup> Dan Rys, "Q-Tip Is Helping Lead New York's Ferguson Protests", *XXL Magazine*, November 25, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Tip's employment of performative distress through his emotive language echoes the passion of the Black Power figure Earl Anthony who asserted in his article, "Why the Police attack the Black Panthers" (1972) that "Black people are [still] economically exploited and oppressed."<sup>57</sup> Anthony explained that although de facto measures had been taken against racism, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, in de jure terms there had been no alteration in attitude.<sup>58</sup> The language here is emotive and becomes performative due to the blunt tone of the statement, a technique clearly signified on by Q Tip.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, that the issues Anthony discussed are as applicable to today as they were during the 1970 explains the necessity for Hip Hop to protest against the continued injustice. The historian Daniel White Hodge crystalizes this view in his text *The Soul of Hip Hop* (2010), where he discusses death as a normal part of African American culture. "Death to these [working-class, black] youth is viewed as the condition, not the culmination, of their existence," he writes.<sup>60</sup> Taking this into account, Hip Hop's multitude of criticisms, comments and protests against the killings of 2014 proves that rappers are continuing the African American protest tradition, furthering the protest rhetoric once vocalized by David Walker in his Appeal (1829) against slavery, "See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you

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<sup>57</sup> Earl Anthony, Woodie King, "Why the Police attack the Black Panthers", *Black Poets and Prophets* (New York: New American Library, 1972) 83.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> For an explanation on signifying please refer to pages 18 and 20 where Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s work is referred.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 94. The normality of death is a result of racist hate crime or police brutality on the one hand, and "black-on-black" crime in poor African American neighborhoods on the other.<sup>60</sup> The latter is commonly mentioned and criticized by Hip Hop artists. Tupac Shakur's track "White Manz World" is a prime example of this. "It ain't them," the Anglo Americans, "that's killing us," the song asserts; "it's us that's killing us!" Tupac's example is distressing for the audience as the normality of death is presented through Tupac's helpless voice, presenting American society as a dystopian nightmare that crushes even the bravest of spirits.

understand your own language? ... ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!”<sup>61</sup>



Figure 17<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> David Walker, Henry Garnet, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2009) 85.

<sup>62</sup> Dan Rys, "Q-Tip Is Helping Lead New York's Ferguson Protests." *XXL Magazine*, November 25, 2014. <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2014/11/q-tip-helping-lead-new-yorks-ferguson-protests/>.



## On the Record: Tracks and Artwork

“Black Rage is founded on dreaming and draining,  
Threatening your freedom,  
To stop your complaining...  
Black rage is founded on blocking the truth”

– Lauryn Hill, “Black Rage” (2014)<sup>63</sup>

Rappers have also instigated performative distress aurally and visually to encourage audiences to partake in protest action against Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s deaths, reflecting the techniques used by Black Power figures. A first example of Hip Hop artists employing the use of performative distress aurally to provoke protest after Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s deaths is the rapper J Cole’s release of the track “Be Free” (2014) on the sharing music platform, Soundcloud.<sup>64</sup> Cole’s performance on the record is distressing as he lyrically attacks Anglo American supremacy through the use of a harsh tone, as if he is crying or shouting out in anger over the killing of Michael Brown. “Can you tell me why? Why? Every time I step outside I see my niggas die?” Cole asks his listener, providing them with an insight into the emotional distress he has been experiencing since the death of Michael Brown.<sup>65</sup> He follows this question with, “All we wanna do is break the chains off, all we wanna do is break free.”<sup>66</sup> The rapper’s reference to the “chains” is particularly distressing as this asserts that there has been a lack of racial progression since slavery when African Americans were physically in “chains.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>63</sup> Lauryn Hill, “Black Rage (Sketch)” *Ms Lauryn Hill Soundcloud* (USA: “Soundcloud”, 2014).

<sup>64</sup> J Cole, “Be Free”, *Be Free* (USA: “Soundcloud”, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

reference to “chains” also reflects the “psychological chains of ghetto colonization” where racism has inflicted psychological distress through generations.<sup>68</sup>

Cole’s lyrical disturbance became further performative on *The Late Show with David Letterman* (2014), where his rapping technique reflected that of a wail or scream, bombarding the audience.<sup>69</sup> Cole presented the emotional turmoil of psychological chains in his performance by weakening his voice when saying “chains” and looking down so that it looked like he was breaking into tears. This performance physically encapsulated his despair when recalling past racism, social issues and ultimately his fear of police oppression. Additionally, Cole used an image of Michael Brown’s mother as the single’s artwork where she is crying at her loss, which is visually distressing (Figure 18). Cole also signifies on the Black Panther Party’s visual techniques, where they used images of distressed friends and family members of victims alongside captions in their publications. For example, in their publication on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1971 they used an image of an upset woman with the caption below reading, “baby where are you?” (Figure 19).<sup>70</sup> This was intentionally distressing by appealing to the horror a parent feels if their child is unjustly treated or killed, a technique reused by J Cole for his artwork. Cole’s personal distress was encapsulated by his statement regarding the song, explaining that Mike Brown’s killing “coulda been me, easily. It could have been my best friend. I’m tired of being desensitized to the murder of black men.”<sup>71</sup> Ultimately this statement adds to the disturbing quality

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<sup>68</sup> Justin Williams, *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 61.

<sup>69</sup> J. Cole, *The Late Show with David Letterman* (USA: HBO, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2014).

<sup>70</sup> Black Panther Party “Comrade Angela Davis: 8 Years Since Birmingham.” *Black Panther Party Newspaper*, September 18, 1971.

<sup>71</sup> Brian Josephs, “J Cole, “Be Free” *XXL Magazine*, August 15, 2014. It must also be noted that J Cole’s protest does not take into account the African American women who are also subject to racial

of the track, building another dimension to Cole's application of performative distress to provoke protest.

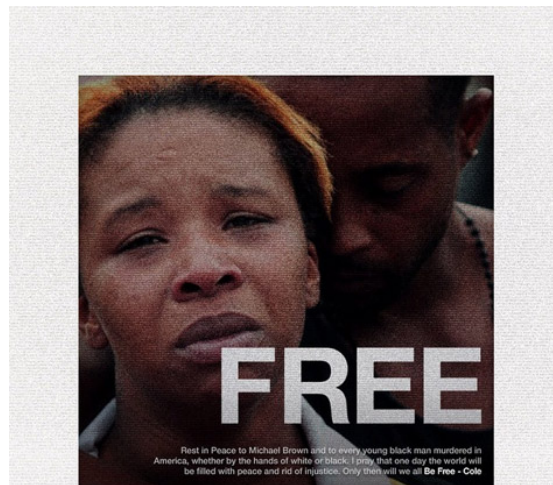


Figure 18<sup>72</sup>

## COMRADE ANGELA DAVIS: EIGHT YEARS SINCE BIRMINGHAM

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE  
sectors of the Black church community in social struggles was a clear demonstration of the historical dialectics of oppression. Still contained within the boundaries of racism, Black people were forging a culture of resistance from raw material whose purpose was to promote oppression by encouraging docility and acquiescence.

The 'master' was experiencing what must have been the horrifying recognition that his own weapons were being turned against him. It must have been painfully reminiscent of the earlier eras of religion-inspired slave uprisings. Under attack himself, he unleashed all his fury; it fell upon four young sisters, growing into maturity, destined perhaps to become revolutionary advocates of the liberation of their people.

In its crude and indifferent brutality, in its arbitrary striking out at Black youth, there could not have been a more perfect expression of the racism of the period and the direction it was about to take. The bombing prefigured, eight years ago, the intensification of repression which was to come, the brunt of which would be borne by fighting Black youth. By Bobby Hutton, Fred Hampton, Jonathan Jackson, and now by



..Baby, where are you?"

George Jackson, whose fighting spirit and revolutionary message can never be destroyed. It was the youth who were then in the process of seizing the reins of resistance and who would soon begin to reveal in theory and in practice, the new and revolutionary dimensions of the Black thrust towards freedom.

On the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the church bombing, we must also remember that even then, before the era of mass uprisings in the country's urban centers, our people responded swiftly, aggressively and in large numbers. Blacks spontaneously retaliated en masse by taking to the streets. They burned police cars, stoned 'em and fought with racists. So great was their rage, that tanks had to be brought out to subdue them. It was because of such actions that years later George (Jackson) could say, "I'm part of a righteous people who anger slowly, but rage undammed."

Our responsibility -- to Carol, Cynthia, Addie Mae and Denise, to L'il Bobby, Jon, and now to George, to our people and to all the oppressed is clear. We must gather up that rage and organize it into an invincible movement which will irresistibly advance towards the goal of liberation. It must smash the capitalist order and its attendant racism and must ultimately begin to build the new society.

Figure 19<sup>73</sup>

Lauryn Hill's track "Black Rage" (2014), dedicated to Michael Brown and

discrimination, as defined by Layli Phillips in *The Womanist Reader* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), "A womanist is triply concerned with herself, other Black women, and the entire Black Race, female and male." Therefore although the statistics of young black deaths are higher than women that J Cole's work is in protest against the masculine struggle must be noted.

<sup>72</sup> Rap Up Writers, "New Music, J Cole 'Be Free'." *Rap Up*, August 15, 2014. <http://www.rap-up.com/2014/08/15/new-music-j-cole-be-free/>.

<sup>73</sup> Black Panther Party "Comrade Angela Davis: 8 Years Since Birmingham." *Black Panther Party Newspaper*, September 18, 1971. [http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/BPP\\_Newspapers/pdf/Vol7\\_No4\\_1971\\_Part2.pdf](http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/BPP_Newspapers/pdf/Vol7_No4_1971_Part2.pdf).

other Ferguson victims, is yet another example of aural and visual elements employing performative distress.<sup>74</sup> Releasing the track on the music-sharing platform Soundcloud, Hill addressed American suppression as a “strange” life form that crawls beneath the “free” spirit of the nation.<sup>75</sup> The rapper and soul singer heightened the distressing content of this protest track by using a bold visual design for the lyrics of the song (see figure 20).<sup>76</sup> Through the use of black and white colours, she emphasizes the racial content of her work. Additionally, by capitalizing the words “BLACK RAGE” she draws focus to her personal emotions of anger and distress. The performative elements are enhanced by the track’s composition as “Black Rage” employs the skit form, turning the comforting spirit of the track “My Favorite Things” (1959), originally composed by Rodgers and Hammerstein, into dark and twisted protest literature.<sup>77</sup> This hard-hitting, lyrical attack on global issues, orated through Hill’s soulful, frustrated vocals, creates aural discomfort and disturbance whilst turning the once comforting song into a musical horror. The performative disturbance of this track reflects the context of Ferguson and New York, forcing the listener to feel the chill and distress that many African Americans have thrust upon them due to racist police brutality. “Threatening your freedom...murder and crime...victims of violence both psyche and body,” Hill cries, whilst using her music to further critique the oppressive American police system.<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, the skit

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<sup>74</sup> Biba Adams, “10 Lauryn Hill Traits All Rappers Should Have.” *All Hip Hop*, August 26, 2015. It must be noted that although this track took the form of a soul song in composition, Lauryn is still regarded as a Hip Hop performer and therefore this track is taken into consideration here. A recent article featured on the Hip Hop publication “All Hip Hop” when discussing her work supports this: “[Lauryn is] often categorized as a neo-soul, but is really hip-hop soul.”

<sup>75</sup> Daisy Wyatt, “Lauryn Hill dedicates new song ‘Black Rage’ to Ferguson”, *The Independent*, August 22 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Lauryn Hill, “Black Rage (Sketch)”, *Ms Lauryn Hill Soundcloud* (USA: “Soundcloud”, 2014).

<sup>77</sup> Richard Rodgers, “My Favorite Things”, *My Favorite Things* (USA: Richard Rodgers, 1959).

<sup>78</sup> Lauryn Hill, “Black Rage (Sketch)”, *Ms Lauryn Hill Soundcloud* (USA: “Soundcloud”, 2014).

becomes a protest cry, employing performative distress to encourage action.<sup>79</sup>



Figure 20<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and It's Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

<sup>80</sup> Lauryn Hill, "Black Rage (Sketch) Artwork", *Ms Lauryn Hill* August 20, 2014. <http://mslaurynhill.com/post/95329923112/black-rage-sketch>.

## Rereleasing Records

"Time to start the revolution,  
Catch a body head for Houston  
...I never sleep,  
'Cause sleep is the cousin of death"  
– Nas "NY State of Mind" (1994)<sup>81</sup>

Hip Hop artists have not only protested by recording new aural and visual content or attending and creating protest events. In light of Michael Brown and Eric Garner's deaths, older Hip Hop of the 1990s and 2000s has also been rereleased to evoke performative distress. Through the rereleasing of these tracks, Hip Hop artists have reminded audiences of the lack of socio-racial progression to encourage action in the present. The most significant example of this would be the rapper Nas who re-released his album *Illmatic* in 2014, 20 years on from the original release.<sup>82</sup> Although a multitude of themes from the album are still relevant today, the track "NY State of Mind" (1994) is directly applicable to the events of 2014 and the Ferguson unrest. Both Nas' aggressive vocals and the track's minor composition contribute to the performative distress inflicted by the record: "cops could just arrest me, blaming us, we're held like hostages."<sup>83</sup> Nas' distaste for the police, as portrayed in this particular lyric, reflects the attitude created by the killings of Garner and Brown. Nas recreated and enhanced the distress of the original release by performing it during various concerts throughout 2014. This disturbingly illustrated the ease with which his lyrics could be applied today whilst specifically using performative distress in live

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<sup>81</sup> Nas, "NY State of Mind", *Illmatic* (USA: Columbia Records, 1994).

<sup>82</sup> Darryl Robertson, "Illmatic Sales Increase", *The Source*, April 24, 2014. Upon its original release, Nas' album sold 59,000 copies in its first week and within two years it had sold one million copies. However its re-release increased its sales dramatically, as within one week according to *The Source*, there had been an "844 percent increase."

<sup>83</sup> Nas, "NY State of Mind", *Illmatic*, (USA: Columbia Records, 1994).

performances to do so.

In all the examples shown in this chapter, Hip Hop clearly “tapped into the hatred, fear and profound distrust of the criminal justice system” by using the technique of performative distress.<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, through the use of this identifier, Hip Hop artists protest against the unjust killings in ways that both echo and advance earlier forms of African American protest through a range of protest platforms.

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<sup>84</sup> Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2013) 54.

## Conclusion

“See your Declaration African!!! Do you understand your own language? ... ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!”

- David Walker, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (1829)<sup>1</sup>

“He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed or spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”

- W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)<sup>2</sup>

“Cops give a damn about a negro?

Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero...

I see no changes. All I see is racist faces...

It ain't a secret don't conceal the fact, the penitentiary's packed, and it's filled with blacks.”

- Tupac Shakur, “Changes” (1998)<sup>3</sup>

“I'm tired of being desensitized to the murder of black men.

I don't give a fuck if it's by police or peers.

This shit is not normal.

I made a song. This is how we feel.”

- J Cole, “Be Free” (2014)<sup>4</sup>

In this thesis, through the lens of the shared responsibility, the nightmare and performative distress, I have argued that Hip Hop is a continuation of the African American protest tradition. However, what distinguishes Hip Hop as not only a continuation but an advancement of the African American protest aesthetic is the genre's ability to combine the identifiers to create a new, more powerful kind of protest rhetoric. As explored in the last chapter, Michael Brown and Eric Garner's deaths have been criticised by African American Hip Hop artists who applied

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<sup>1</sup> David Walker, Henry Garnet, *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2009) 85.

<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (San Antonio: Bibliotech Press, 2014) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Changes”, *Greatest Hits* (USA: Death Row Records, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> J Cole, “Be Free”, *Be Free* (USA: “Soundcloud”, 2014) Brian Josephs also provided an article on the release of this track in *XXL Magazine*, August 15, 2014.



performative distress to encourage protest action. One year on from these events, the Hip Hop community is still responding to them. For example, Azealia Banks tweeted, “It’s so discouraging, just as a young black person, to know that people like me can be murdered and there be no real justice,”<sup>5</sup> and Common protested, “Now we fight to change America.”<sup>6</sup> Whereas the last chapter explored the application of performative distress in protest of Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s deaths, Azealia Banks and Common use other rhetorical devices to do so. For example Banks’ portrayal of murder and injustice is reflective of the dystopian nightmare and Common’s evoking of the term “we” shares responsibility. The varied application of identifiers in the last year has led to rappers combining performative distress with the shared responsibility and the nightmare. I conclude my thesis by exploring these combinations and how they have emerged and voiced protest in light of the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. I then present satire as a rhetorical device before finally taking a look at Hip Hop as an international mobilizing force and this finalizes my presentation of Hip Hop as a continuation of the African American protest tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Azealia Banks, Twitter Post, 25 November 2015, 6:52 a.m., <https://twitter.com/azealiabanks>

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell Peters, “Hip-Hop Stars Remember Michael Brown on Anniversary of His Death in Ferguson.” *Billboard*, August 9, 2015.

## Shared Responsibility and Performative Distress

"I'm talking 'bout Emmett Till, I'm talking 'bout Ezell Ford  
I'm talking 'bout Sean Bell, they never go to jail for  
Trayvon over Skittles, Mike Brown Cigarillos  
History keeps repeating itself, like a Biggie Instrumental"  
– Diddy, "Don't Shoot" (2014)<sup>7</sup>

The exploration of Hip Hop's merging of the shared responsibility and performative distress when protesting against the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner begins assessing the way artists have alerted the public to the importance of education in light of these events. For example, the rapper Nelly started the Michael Brown scholarship fund to get African American children to college and therefore provide them with the education the victim was denied.<sup>8</sup> In his comments to the press on this issue, Nelly shared responsibility by stressing the importance of responding in a collectively thoughtful manner: "I understand the frustration, but we have to strategize before we overreact...we have to do right the first time."<sup>9</sup> Through the use of "we," Nelly directly shares responsibility with his audience, alerting them to the need for all to act positively as a united force rather than leaving the responsibility to him or his fellow rappers. "Make sure Mike didn't die in vain and he will always be remembered," Nelly continued to say in a later interview with *VLAD TV* speaking with passion and emphasis before taking a pause and saying, "it's tough."<sup>10</sup> This call for united action through sustainable education and scholarship recycles some of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass' themes who in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) emphasized that education was central to

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<sup>7</sup> Diddy, The Game, Rick Ross, 2 Chains, Fabulous, "Don't Shoot", *Don't Shoot* (USA: The Game, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Kim Lampkins, "Nelly creates Mike Brown Scholarship Fund", *American Urban Radio Networks*, August 19, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> TMZ Staff, "Hometown Rioters Need To Wise Up; Stop The Violence", *TMZ*, June 16, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> VLAD TV, "Make sure Mike Brown Didn't Die in Vain", *VLAD TV*, November 26, 2014.

breaking free from the horrors of oppression: “the pathway from slavery to freedom...[was] to learn how to read.”<sup>11</sup> Douglass’ focus on sharing responsibility through education and Nelly’s focus on responsible education exemplify the thematic continuum from abolitionist times to Hip Hop artists as protest leaders.

Nelly’s response to current police brutality also signified on the work of older rappers such as Mos Def who emphasised the frustration of racial suppression in his 1999 album *Black on Both Sides*. Def’s protest album raised a multitude of questions regarding injustice within the police system, encapsulated on the album’s track, “Mr Nigga” (1999): “Is it fair, is it equal, is it just, is it right?” the rapper asked about police and judicial mistreatment of African Americans. “Do you do the same shit when the defendant is white?” Mos Def thus educated his audience so that they could be invited to share the responsibility of protest with him.<sup>12</sup> Although these particular lyrics reflected the reality of the socio-racial climate of the 1990s, they are equally applicable to Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s deaths in 2014. Def’s lyrics’ contemporary relevance brings to light the necessity for Hip Hop to employ the shared responsibility and performative distress techniques to encourage protest today.

The Hip Hop community has also used the platform of social media when combining the shared responsibility identifier with performative distress. Using Instagram as the real-time performance platform, the rapper Diddy provided commentary and support for the Ferguson unrest, where he visually protested

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<sup>11</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Minnesota: Cricket House Books LLC, 2012) 232. Initially, Douglass’ pursuit of literacy was about individual enlightenment and emancipation, yet through the centrality of individual emancipation of “Three millions of people shut out from the light of knowledge” collective emancipation is possible.

<sup>12</sup> Mos Def, “Mr Nigga”, *Black on Both Sides* (USA: Blackstarr, 1999).

against Eric Garner's death, therefore sharing the responsibility with his audience through visual culture. In one particular Instagram post (Figure 21) Diddy places three images of Eric Garner's murder side by side and then writes a caption sharing responsibility and calling for action: "Justice is a right all of us are entitled to, not a privilege that can be denied. We need to use this moment as an opportunity to act strategically to protect the right to live freely, in our own communities, without fear."<sup>13</sup> Diddy's post was followed by multiple video-clips of the rapper, one addressed to President Obama where he shared responsibility with him through an emotive and distressing plea: "Obama—for real—get on a plane. These are your people. It's serious baby."<sup>14</sup> This Instagram post directly shared responsibility through performance with Obama whilst simultaneously alerting the public to the hesitancy in political leadership.

Diddy's visual embodiment of performative distress and the shared responsibility built upon a previous protest track he was a part of with other rappers including The Game and DJ Khaled. In this track, appropriately titled "Don't Shoot" (2014), Diddy condemned continued police brutality and racism: "I'm talking 'bout Emmet Till...they never go to jail for...history keeps repeating itself."<sup>15</sup> Diddy's historical references encouraged distress, and through the lyrical content of "Don't Shoot" alongside his social media pleas, Diddy was able to provoke performative distress on a number of protest platforms. As Diddy shared responsibility with his audience whilst using performative distress in visuals and lyrics, the rapper utilized

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<sup>13</sup> Diddy, Instagram Post (USA: Instagram, 16 December 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Brian Josephs, "Puff Daddy Calls On Barack Obama To Help Ferguson", *XXL Magazine*, August 19, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Diddy, The Game, Rick Ross, 2 Chains, Fabulous, "Don't Shoot", *Don't Shoot* (USA: The Game, 2014).

the African American protest aesthetic in a unique manner to encourage his listeners to take action into their own hands.



Figure 21<sup>16</sup>

The rapper Tink's track "Tell The Children" (2014) is another example of Hip Hop artists combining the shared responsibility with performative distress to provoke protest. The day after the Grand Jury decision, Tink released a record on Soundcloud produced by Timbaland. The record sonically incorporated recorded samples from Michael Brown's death including the statement "Hands Up! Don't Shoot!" drawn documentary-style from newscasts of the incident.<sup>17</sup> This was one example of how the track sought to disturb the audience in a bombarding way. Tink also employs the shared responsibility through the lyric; "[Martin] King died for us" where "us" refers to a collective audience the rapper is encouraging to protest.<sup>18</sup> She then explains how "we living in fear of the people here to protect us," another example of how the shared responsibility terms, "we" and "us," are employed to provoke empathy from listeners.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Diddy, Instagram Post (USA: Instagram, 16 December 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Tink, Timbaland "Tell The Children", *Tell The Children* (USA: "Soundcloud", 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

However, there are important differences between the likes of Tink and her predecessors in the black protest tradition. Where Tink is able to make immediate comment using social media platforms such as Soundcloud, earlier protestors such as the Civil Rights era Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were limited to less flexible methods of communication. SNCC had to urge students “to send regular and prompt reports” to their Alabama headquarters to be published, a much slower process to raise awareness of their political campaigns whilst also limiting the performative elements of their protests.<sup>20</sup> At its peak, SNCC’s Atlanta’s headquarters was sending “40,000 copies” of the newspaper to supporters; this compares with Tink who has had over 588,000 listens since she released the track on Soundcloud, showing the heightened opportunity Hip Hop artists have today as their platform is much easier to access and their audience much larger.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Hip Hop artists have an even greater responsibility as leaders to be vocal as, when unified, the audience participating could be much larger than their predecessors. Rapper Flavor Flav reflects this as he attended a number of rallies in the latter half of 2014 whilst sharing the responsibility of protest with his fans through Tweets: “If we want justice, we need to be in the street working for justice.”<sup>22</sup> This emotive statement emphasises the importance of his audience’s participation by employing the term “we,” therefore inflicting the responsibility onto them through performance to join him to overcome the “police power rules.”<sup>23</sup>

The rapper Nas has built on the techniques used by Tink and Diddy by using social media to share responsibility with his audiences through performative

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<sup>20</sup> Clayborne Carson *The Student Voice* (California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1960) vii.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. vii.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Thomson, “Flavor Flav Marches In Ferguson”, *XXL Magazine*, December 5, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Flavor Flav, Twitter Post, 25 November 2014, 11:58 a.m., <https://twitter.com/flavorflav/>.

distress. Nas uses Twitter to draw upon Hip Hop's legacy as a musical movement. In November 2014 he tweeted, "No sweeter sound than New Hip Hop, No uglier face than injustice. We are a flawed species."<sup>24</sup> This particularly distressing statement encouraged a unified mobilization of protest, calling upon those who appreciate the sounds of Hip Hop to stop being a "flawed species" and work against "injustice" together.<sup>25</sup> This particular example of Nas employing the shared responsibility and performative distress identifiers on Twitter has literary similarities to the protest figure Amiri Baraka's spoken word poem "Black Art" (1979), where the poet also juxtaposed the "sweetness" of the cultural form with the ugliness of oppression: "poems & poets & all the loveliness here in the world," are contrasted with "black ladies dying of men leaving nickel hearts beating them down."<sup>26</sup> Unlike Baraka who did not have an instant internet audience at his time of publishing, Nas was able to share the responsibility of protest with his audience of 1.7 million, directing them to the protests against the Grand Jury's decision, tweeting the last words of Eric Garner and the protest slogan, "I CAN'T BREATHE"<sup>27</sup> from the New York location of Garner's death. Through accessing this large audience Nas was able to inspire protest and comment on events as they occurred unlike his predecessors. In all examples explored, by calling for shared responsibility in conjunction with performative distress, Hip Hop advances the African American protest aesthetic.

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<sup>24</sup> Nas, Twitter Post, November 29 2014, 10:33 p.m. <https://twitter.com/nas>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Black Art* (USA: Amiri Baraka, 1979). It must be noted that Baraka was a pioneer of the performative distress style, for his work was very shocking and was written to be performed.

<sup>27</sup> Nas, Twitter Post, December 11, 2014, 12:36 a.m. <https://twitter.com/nas>.

## The Nightmare and Performative Distress

"Put your hands up and you still gettin' shot.  
Here they go now they out on patrol.  
They done killed a few.  
They gonna kill some more."

– G Unit, "Ahhh Shit" (2014)<sup>28</sup>

Hip Hop's employment of the rhetorical nightmare in conjunction with performative distress has also contributed to redefining and enhancing the African American protest tradition. Throughout the responses to the unjust killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, this combination has been used by rappers to protest against emotional and psychological trauma inflicted upon the victims of current racism. Here, rappers have incorporated videos or audio clips of the murders of Brown and Garner into Hip Hop music in the form of visual and sonic samples.<sup>29</sup> One example of this is G-Unit's release, "Ahhh Shit" (2014), which directly addresses Mike Brown's and Eric Garner's murders through sonic sampling and distressing lyrics. This eerie and chilling track samples the recorded footage of Eric Garner's suffocation as part of its disturbing introduction. This specific sample has been sonically enhanced, with the most disturbing phrases being the focal point of the aural nightmare. These include, "please just leave me alone" and "I can't breathe" being repeated.<sup>30</sup> This depiction of Garner's suffering just before he was murdered is then developed by G Unit's presentation of themselves as the avengers of his killing:

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<sup>28</sup> G Unit, "Ahhh Shit", *Ahhh Shit* (USA: TM 808 Mafia, August 18, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Justin A. Williams, *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 12. In doing so, the rap form has provided what Gill Scott Heron called "examples of how rhythm and melody can perfectly offset uncomfortable truths and deep messages," where the "rhythm and melody" is created as a combination of sonic samples and lyrical references relating to social issues.

<sup>30</sup> G Unit, "Ahhh Shit", *Ahhh Shit* (USA: TM 808 Mafia, August 18, 2014).



“we don’t do no peace treaties, no backing down, no calling quits.”<sup>31</sup> This lyric is assertive, and the rest of “Ahhh Shit” uses this distressing tone, commented on by the senior editor at *XXL Magazine* as an example of the rap group’s ability to “address specific situations rather than dancing around any issue.”<sup>32</sup> Through this direct address, G Unit instigates protest based on real issues, by portraying the nightmare and then performing an angry response to it.

G Unit’s strategy here recalls the performative style of the Black Power figure James Forman who, in the *Black Manifesto* (1972), protested against “the power of the US government, this racist, imperialist government” and asserting that “no oppressed people ever gained their liberation until they were ready to fight.”<sup>33</sup> “Ahhh Shit” echoes this call for action through the combination of performative distress with the nightmare: “once again, police beating up on people...this is a disgrace...we intend to keep the pressure on.”<sup>34</sup> The aural nightmare of G Unit’s lyrics and sonic composition is crystalized by the music video, a montage of distressing news reports and footage from the nightmare of Eric Garner’s killing and the ensuing Ferguson unrest. The fast-paced video montage becomes a compact news report, compiling visuals from the protests and police violence from the latter half of 2014 together in one disturbing sequence.<sup>35</sup> Concluding the music video for “Ahhh Shit” is the viral-footage of Eric Garner’s chokehold death, educating the audience by focusing them on the reality of the distressing nightmare as a method of encouraging them to protest against it.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Dan Rys, “Hip Hop’s response to the protests in Ferguson.” *XXL Magazine*, August 19, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Earl Anthony, Woodie King, James Forman, “The Black Manifesto”, *Black Poets and Prophets* (New York: New American Library, 1972) 87.

<sup>34</sup> G Unit, “Ahhh Shit”, *Ahhh Shit* (USA: TM 808 Mafia, August 18, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> G. Unit, “Ahhh Shit”, (Dir. Timo Albert, 2014).

The Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar's track "i" (2014), titled with the lower case letter, is another example of Hip Hop's employment of the aesthetic nightmare in conjunction with performative distress.<sup>36</sup> Using a sonic sample of The Isley Brothers' "That Lady" (1973), the aural qualities of this track are upbeat.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless this sensory "safety" created by the "i love myself" lyric is contradicted by the song's repeated hook that refers to Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" (1971)<sup>38</sup>: "The world is a ghetto with big guns and picket signs."<sup>39</sup> As the song pulls the listener in through the superficial "niceness" of the track, then skillfully educates on the class and race struggle, Lamar indirectly educates on the nightmare of continued oppression caused by the events in Ferguson. This skillful and didactic approach to song-making was commented on by John Janick, the Chairman of Interscope records, who called Lamar an artist that puts "A lot of thought" into his records, similarly to G Unit.<sup>40</sup> Lamar's lyrics are valid and personal, emphasized in a reflective interview where he discussed his own experiences of police brutality in light of the Michael Brown and Eric Garner deaths, recalling that unfair treatment had been given to him "plenty of times. All the time."<sup>41</sup> Lamar's honesty and fairness when depicting the nightmare of the deaths was further portrayed in another interview for *Billboard* magazine in early 2015 where he asserted, "What happened

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<sup>36</sup> Kendrick Lamar, "i", *To Pimp a Butterfly* (USA: Interscope, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> The Isley Brothers, "That Lady", *3+3* (USA: T-Neck Records, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> Marvin Gaye "What's Going On", *What's Going On* (USA: Tamla, 1971).

<sup>39</sup> Kendrick Lamar, "i", *To Pimp a Butterfly* (USA: Interscope, 2014). This is also a quotation of the lyric to the title track of War's *The World is a Ghetto* album, number 1 in 1972-1973. This quotation is also significant as the Bloods and Crips-referred to by Kendrick on the single artwork-were prominent in the 1970s.

<sup>40</sup> Insanul Ahmed, "When Kendrick Lamar Delivered A Classic With *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, Nobody Saw It Coming. Now That The Whole World Is Watching, Can He Outdo Himself?", *Complex Magazine UK*, August/September Issue 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Gavin Edwards, "Billboard Cover: Kendrick Lamar on Ferguson, Leaving Iggy Azalea Alone and Why 'We're in the Last Days'", *Complex Magazine*, January 9, 2015.

should've never happened" and that the victim's death was not a surprise as African Americans being murdered was "already a situation...it's f---ked up."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Kendrick's performance on *Saturday Night Live* (2014) further combined the rhetorical nightmare with the bombardment of performative distress by wearing black contact lenses and "punctuating the beat with frenetic, jerking choreography" in an unnatural style.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, through the didactic track, performance style and his critical surrounding statements, Lamar illustrates an American nightmare that continues to prevail in a multitude of communities, calling for action from his audiences. "God put something in my heart to get across," he stated, "and that's what I'm going to focus on, using my voice as an instrument and doing what needs to be done."<sup>44</sup>

During an interview about Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, Miami rapper Rick Ross evoked the nightmare and performative distress together to encourage protest action. He asserted, "I just feel like it has been open season on young black males for a long time...How long did you think this was going to go on before something like this [the killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner] happened?"<sup>45</sup> Ross' presentation of the normality of racist oppression and Ross' saddened tone during the interview inspires a need for his audience to act with him against this struggle. Nevertheless, the significance of Ross' illustration of the nightmare is complicated as the interview ends with, "Ross' [album] *Hood Billionaire*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Miriam Coleman, "Kendrick Lamar Makes Triumphant Return to 'SNL'", *The Rolling Stone*, November 16, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Insanul Ahmed, "When Kendrick Lamar Delivered A Classic With *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, Nobody Saw It Coming. Now That The Whole World Is Watching, Can He Outdo Himself?", *Complex Magazine UK*, August/September Issue 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Thompson, "Rick Ross On Ferguson Decision: 'It's A Travesty'", *XXL Magazine*, November 26, 2014.

is out this week.”<sup>46</sup> This raises the concern that his call for action and his evoking of performative distress to protest against the racist nightmare is a tool to increase album sales. Regardless of suggested controversy, the rapper made his audience more aware of the necessity to fight against the nightmare by educating about it: “A young teenager, unarmed, shot six times. No indictment? It’s a travesty.”<sup>47</sup> Additionally, Ross presents the Michael Brown’s innocence through calling him “A young teenager” as opposed to referring to him by name.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

## Satire

"Order, order, order,  
Ice Cube - take the motherfucking stand!  
Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth?  
And nothing but the truth so help your black ass?"

– NWA, "Fuck Tha Police" (1988)<sup>49</sup>

The examples I have explored above illustrate that Hip Hop is not only a continuation of the African American protest tradition, but also a redefinition of its legacy and significance. Hip Hop provides the African American protest tradition with a much larger platform than it has ever enjoyed, where protest rhetoric reaches audiences who would have not necessarily had an insight into the racial struggle previously. The use of satire might be seen as a forerunner of future developments in the African American protest tradition as it embodies a number of recognisable elements and has a long-established significance within African American protest literature through the presentation of stereotypes and caricatures. Hip Hop's taste for satire is especially important; it can be compared to black stand-up comedy in the way it uses satire as a political tool and it could be argued that Hip Hop is in the process of developing satire as a key feature of the protest tradition.

Through satirical caricature, Hip Hop artists continue the African American signifying process. Here, using a particular theme, in this case Nicki Minaj's range of Hip Hop characters, provokes protest by what Henry Louis Gates Jr described as "making fun of a person or situation."<sup>50</sup> From the character Tyrone, a drug-addict from Harlem who raps in a slurred and aggressive tone, to the character of the Harajuku Barbie, a naïve and over-sexualised character that raps in a softer and

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<sup>49</sup> NWA, "Fuck Tha Police", *Straight Outta Compton* (USA: Ruthless Records, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 24 Jun 2014) 28.

younger tone than others, Minaj creates a variety of African American caricatures and alters her rapping technique to represent these different personalities.<sup>51</sup> In doing so, Minaj is able to provoke protest through the lyrics of these alter egos or characters, as opposed to directly discussing these issues using her 'natural' voice.

Using the caricature of the innocent female submissive, the Harajuku Barbie, in "Monster" (2010) she provokes protest didactically: "I'm the rookie? ...Hotter than a middle-eastern climate, violent...these niggas come so one track minded."<sup>52</sup> By identifying herself as a "rookie," Minaj's character Harajuku Barbie is portrayed as innocent, contrasting with the other rappers in the track, including Kanye West and Jay Z, who assert themselves as strong and almost dangerous men: "Everybody know I'm a motherfucking monster."<sup>53</sup> By highlighting her naivety and child-like actions, Minaj's character mocks and protests against the stereotype of African American women as being dependent on male supremacy. Yet through the introduction of a much more powerful character, the rapper later asserts her role as a successful female through lyrics that mock Kanye West and Jay Z. "My features and my shows ten times your pay," she boasts. "50k for a verse, no album out."<sup>54</sup> Therefore, Minaj adopts the caricature of African American female submissive in order to protest against and then subvert it through this simple and satirical style.

Another example of Hip Hop artists employing the use of satire to provoke protest is through the mocking of Anglo Americans. This holds a mirror to American

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<sup>51</sup> Saddleback Educational Publishing, *Nicki Minaj* (Costa Mesa: Saddleback Educational Publishing, 2013) 23.

<sup>52</sup> Nicki Minaj, Kanye West, Jay Z, "Monster", *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (USA: Def Jam Records, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Nicki's technique is not the only distinctive element here; her deconstruction of sexist stereotypes also calls upon male audience members who support patriarchal expectations.

society by highlighting Anglo American racist behaviour using a satirical form. For example, in NWA's "Fuck Tha Police" (1988), the rappers satirically take on the voice of racist Anglo American policemen: "do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help your black ass?"<sup>55</sup> This lyric appears in the first of the three scenes of "Fuck Tha Police" rapped by NWA as satirical conversations between the Anglo American police force and the rap group. The discriminatory tone used in scene two—"Pull your god damn ass over right now...cause I feel like it"—is so harsh that the listener is amused whilst simultaneously being disturbed by the racist expression. This disturbance is somewhat turned on its head by the cathartic ending, where Dr Dre judges the cop by calling him a "guilty...redneck white bread, chickenshit motherfucker."<sup>56</sup> Although this is reverse racism, the listener can't help but revel in the success of Dr Dre, who becomes the satirical hero in this rap plot twist. This satirical style echoes the work of Langston Hughes, especially *The Ways of White Folks* (1934). Writing in the narrative voice of an Anglo American caricature, Hughes is able to express racist opinions satirically. For example, he uses a tone that mocks white supremacy's mocking of African Americans: "he was an adorable Negro. Not tall, but with a splendid body."<sup>57</sup> Through the term "adorable," Hughes's white character degrades the maturity of African American men, as "adorable" is a word often used to describe children who are mentally inferior to adults, but in doing so he exposes his own patronising racism. Moreover, Hughes' satirical reference to the "splendid body" teases the white fascination with African American physicality as "other," further exposing Anglo-American racist assumptions to mockery.

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<sup>55</sup> NWA, "Fuck Tha Police", *Straight Outta Compton* (USA: Ruthless Records, 1988).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Langston Hughes, R. Baxter Miller, *The Short Stories* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2002)

Hip Hop's use of satire when creating Anglo American caricatures echoes African American stand-up comedy. For example, Chris Rock employs comic satire to depict the racist attitudes of some Anglo Americans towards African Americans. During a stand-up tour, Rock discussed socio-racial issues within America, noting that there is "nothing that a penniless white guy hates more than a nigga with a nickel."<sup>58</sup> Rock's wordplay, "nigga with a nickel," cleverly turns the hatred Anglo American lower classes have towards successful African Americans into a memorable satirical phrase.<sup>59</sup> Rock furthers this satirical attack on racism by discussing how Anglo-Americans "hate Hip Hop," demonstrated in his view that those who have killed rappers, so-called "Hip Hop killers," are suspiciously never arrested or found.<sup>60</sup> This cleverly links satirical comedy to the Hip Hop genre, furthering the potential for satire to be another identifier of the canon. To illustrate his condemnation of America's police force with regard to rap, Rock even puts on a high pitched and effeminate voice when acting as an Anglo-American policeman, saying, "This is a rap killing—let's go home."<sup>61</sup> By feminizing the cop, Rock ridicules the power the police force has in a satirical fashion by drawing upon patriarchal stereotypes, where the woman is of a lesser status than a man. In another satirical example, Chris Rock asserted that assimilation is still a struggle due to racist subjection still remaining prominent: "all my black friends have a bunch of white friends, yet all my white friends have one black friend."<sup>62</sup> Rock's assertion that although multi-ethnic friendships exist, there is still a struggle to have multi-ethnic

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<sup>58</sup> Chris Rock, *Niggas vs. Black People* (USA: HBO, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Chris Rock, *Kill The Messenger* (Dir. Marty Callner, HBO, 2008).



friendship circles, or what Rock calls an “inter-racial posse”, due to continued prejudice can certainly be assessed as satirical and didactic.<sup>63</sup> Through Chris Rock’s performances, the links between Hip Hop and stand-up comedy heighten the significance of satire. Satire thus has the potential to become an important feature of the African American protest tradition.

Presented throughout this paper is Hip Hop’s effectiveness as a mobilizing force and protest voice in America. Rapper T.I. explained the significance of Hip Hop as socio-political commentary: “Our messages reach the ears of people that most common men in America can’t reach, and I think that has to be used to the advantage and the greater good of the masses.”<sup>64</sup> America’s rap music and Hip Hop culture has also influenced socially conscious Hip Hop movements globally. In the UK, Hip Hop was one of the genres that influenced the establishment of grime music where rap lyrics provide socio-political commentary. Lethal Bizzle’s aurally bombarding “Babylon’s Burning the Ghetto” (2007) for example, described the ghetto lifestyle in the UK: “there’s a war going on outside, you can’t hide...Life’s so hard, everyone wants an easy ride.”<sup>65</sup> In France, Hip Hop group Sexion d’Assaut have songs that explore the fewer opportunities given to them due to their African heritage such as “Africain” (2012): “I wanted to walk on the moon but I’m only African. Enjoy having goods, but I’m only African.”<sup>66</sup> Moreover, in Israel and Palestine Hip Hop also acts as a protest platform, and British grime rapper Mike

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> T.I., Associated Press, “Hip-Hop moves as a strong force for Michael Brown”, *Billboard*, August 30, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Lethal Bizzle, “Babylon’s Burning the Ghetto”, *Back to Bizznizz* (UK: V2 Records, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Sexion D’Assaut “Africain” Translation, *L’Apogée* (France: Jive Epic, 2012). The portrayal of being “only African” refers to the idea of being an African in exile.

Skinner discussed its significance after creating a recent documentary about it.<sup>67</sup> “It’s domestic rap” Skinner reflected, answering questions about his time exploring the Middle Eastern rap cultures influenced by the likes of Tupac Shakur.<sup>68</sup> For example, Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansour uses the shared responsibility device on her track “El Kofeyye Arabeyye” (2010), a protest song about the on-going war with Israel: “Our dignity they want it...It suits them to steal something that ain’t theirs and claim that it is.”<sup>69</sup> Israeli rapper Subliminal also protests against the war with Palestine in “Hope (Tikva)” (2003): “everybody talks about peace, but they shoot, oppress, pull, squeeze the trigger in the world of suicide attacks.”<sup>70</sup> Written and performed in Hebrew, this track merges Israeli culture with the productions of Hip Hop.

As a component of the African American protest canon, Hip Hop has inspired politically and socially conscious movements outside of America whilst voicing local struggles of police brutality and continued suppression. Rap provides a universally recognisable language, understood as mobilizing rhetoric and gives a voice to victims of social, political and economic oppression. By assessing rappers as protest leaders, I have presented Hip Hop figures as continuing the legacies of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Malcom X and many more. My assessment is reflected by influential rapper Shock G who discussed Tupac Shakur’s legacy after his death: “I felt like I was putting music behind Huey P or Malcolm X.”<sup>71</sup> Artistic, historic and popular, Hip Hop is a mobilizing force redefining and inspiring social and political

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<sup>67</sup> *Hip Hop in the Holy Land* (Mike Skinner, Noisey by Vice: Vice: 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Sam Wolfson, “Mike Skinner is “still doing the Same Shit”, He Just Doesn’t “Have to Sing the Old Songs”, *Noisey By Vice*, August 25, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Shadia Mansour, M-1, “El Kofeyye Arabeyye”, *Noisey’s Hip Hop in the Holy Land Playlist* (UK: Vice, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Subliminal, “Hope (Tikva)”, *Hope (Tikva)*, (Israel, Tact Records, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> *Tupac Shakur, Thug Angel: The Life of an Outlaw* (Dir. Peter Spirer, Black Watch Television: 2002).

cultures. As I have presented throughout this thesis, Hip Hop continues the African American protest tradition and mobilizes audiences so they share the responsibilities of protest, understand the nightmares of the African American experience and encourage action against these horrors. As the rap group Dead Prez wrote:

“It’s bigger than Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop, Hip.  
It’s bigger than Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop, Hip-Hop”

- Dead Prez, “Hip Hop” (2000)<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Dead Prez, “Hip Hop” *Let’s Get Free* (USA: Columbia, 2000).

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