

**THE BRONX RENAISSANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE LANGUAGE OF  
HIP-HOP CULTURE**

THESIS

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By

E. Ron Kelley, B.A.

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my parents, Edmond C. Kelley, Jr. and Margaret Kelley. You have given me the support, guidance, and motivation to succeed in everything I do. I love you very much.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **THE FOUNDATION: AN OVERVIEW OF HIP-HOP CULTURE**

Hip-hop culture, which consists of rapping, deejaying, breakdancing, and graffiti, has made a worldwide impact. It has led to the sale of millions of records and successful films, and has affected advertising. This culture has also had a major impact upon language, fashion, and sociological practices in the United States. The intricate regional vernacular forms that combine to create hip-hop language have exerted a major influence upon American English.

Hip-hop originated in the late 1970's in Bronx, New York, among this New York borough's African-Americans and Puerto Ricans. The Bronx is seen as the "capitol" of hip-hop because of its status as the founding grounds for the culture. The emergence of "rapping," rhyming lyrics accompanied by music, developed as a result of gatherings sponsored by the early hip-hop deejays. "Deejaying" is the practice of mixing the music from two vinyl records together for the purpose of providing a continuous sound for dancing. Early hip-hop deejays, such as Kool DJ Herc and Grand Wizard Theodore, sponsored gatherings in Bronx parks where this new music could be heard. The early lingo of hip-hop culture set the pace for the language of "East Coast hip-hop." "M.C.'s,"

the musicians who engage in “rapping,” performed their lyrics while deejays mixed various records together. Breakdancing, a form of dance which consists of floor spins and acrobatics, became the dominant form of dancing at these gatherings. Graffiti also emerged as a part of this new culture and began to be seen on walls all over New York City. Hip-hop graffiti consists of elaborate letter designs and art which reflects the various aspects of hip-hop culture and New York life. Examples of one of the dominant forms of graffiti are the large murals which these artists create to remember their deceased friends. Many of these graffiti artists remained anonymous because of the illegal nature of their art. With this new culture, an extensive vocabulary began to develop. This vocabulary expanded into a system which provides a comprehensive view of the culture as a whole.

The impact that hip-hop language has upon the world cannot go unnoticed. In *Language, Rhythm, and Sound*, Andre Willis states, “The most discernible developments in the African-American community during the last twenty years have been rap music and hip-hop culture” (Willis 134). In this same work, Kyra D. Gaunt discusses the hip-hop word “flow” and how it relates to the overall hip-hop culture. She states that “flow” is the word that rappers “use to characterize the creative energy they experience when writing, performing, or extemporaneously “freestyling” (Gaunt 148). “Flow” is used as “Man, Jay-Z and Nas got tha tightest flow on the East Coast!” The term “freestyle” is an important word in hip-hop culture. “Freestyling” means performing a rap that has not been written down. The rapper either raps about his immediate environment or says whatever catchy phrases come to mind. Freestyling is a large part of hip-hop culture on the East Coast and in the South. The West Coast does have a small sub-culture of its hip-

hop community that embraces this practice, but the East and South are the most dominant when it comes to freestyling. On the East Coast, some rappers define a “freestyle” as a written rap that has never been recorded. In the South, freestyling, also called “wreckin” has become so popular that “freestyle” CD’s are released. D.J. Screw, Swisha House, and the Freestyle Kingz have released CD’s featuring strictly freestyles. Freestyling is yet another indication of the high levels of creativity and skill that exist within hip-hop culture.

The roots of hip-hop practices are varied and widespread. Gaunt discusses how “Anthropologists collected linguistic practices primarily among African-American men on urban streets involving rhymes, indirection, and metaphor” (Gaunt 161). The language of the urban Black community is definitely the direct root of hip-hop linguistic practices. Gaunt identifies influences such as ministers, radio disc jockeys, and celebrities such as Muhammad Ali. African-American church ministers have always had a great influence upon Black dialect. This influence reaches many African-Americans because of the cultural significance of the Black church. Traditional African-American ministers are animated speakers who use metaphor and rhyme with the utmost precision. Civil rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson is a prime example of this tradition. He is known for his rhyming slogans such as “Down with dope, up with hope.” These same practices are ever-present in the language of hip-hop. Muhammad Ali is also a good example of a linguistic influence because of his extensive use of rhyme and sense of braggadocio. His famous line, “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” can be easily compared to the way today’s rappers use similes to describe themselves.



The best source for an analysis of hip-hop language is an actual hip-hop artist. A useful interview with a hip-hop artist must touch on certain key points. Texas hip-hop artist Mikel was interviewed for this study. Questions about hip-hop language were posed in an interview with Texas hip-hop artist Mikel on February 20, 2001 in Austin, Texas. Mikel released a CD with his group N2MIT in 1999. The first question asked “what is your “rap” name and what does it mean?” In response to this question, he stated that his name is a creative rearranging of his first name “Michael.” He feels that the name “Michael” sounds too “common,” so he changed it to “Mikel” to be unique. “Mikel” is pronounced as “my-kell.” Next, he was asked “what hip-hop words do you use on a daily basis?” The words that he uses on a daily basis are *tight*, *balla*, *playa*, *honeydip*, *represent*, and *crunk*. Then he was asked “what makes a word “old?” He remarked that a word becomes “old” when a new word comes along to replace it or when it is used and others “look at you crazy” (Mikel). Mikel also said that a word becomes “old” when it is no longer mentioned in the latest hip-hop songs. The next interview question asked “where do you hear the new words first?” He commented that he hears the new words on new hip-hop songs by cutting edge artists. Then he was asked “which rappers have the most interesting vocabulary?” Mikel feels that rappers from the East Coast have the most interesting vocabulary. He believes that the East Coast rappers are the ones who are “kickin’ knowledge” (Mikel). This phrase, “kickin’ knowledge” means rapping about something meaningful or educational. When asked which region contributes the most words to the hip-hop community, he stated that the East Coast rappers are admired by many hip-hop fans because of their use of complex or obscure words, analogies, and word play. Wu-Tang Clan is an obvious example because of their use of abstract words

and concepts that many of the most adept hip-hop listeners do not even understand. This is exemplified in lyrics like “Duel of the iron mic, it’s the 52 ways you strike” (Gza “Duel of the Iron Mic”). This line is an obscure reference to features of several Chinese kung-fu films. This obscure reference is a prime example of the East Coast’s strict focus upon uniqueness.

Mikel discussed Southern hip-hop vernacular in detail. In regard to the South, Big Moe is an example of a Southern rapper who uses the South’s hip-hop vernacular extensively. He is largely responsible for the popularity of the word “mann” because of his hit song “Mann!” This word is now a popular statement of exclamation in the South. It is used to show how strongly someone feels about something. If someone feels that a rapper has good lyrics, he or she will say, “mann!” to acknowledge how good the lyrics actually are. Mikel described how Southern hip-hop includes mainly Texas and Georgia. Outkast is an Atlanta group that exposes the rest of the world to the local Atlanta dialect. This is evident in the emergence of such words as “cut,” which is an Atlanta hip-hop term for “have sex.” Words such as this one entered the hip-hop vocabulary after appearing on Outkast albums. Overall, Mikel correctly identifies the East Coast as the most influential upon hip-hop vocabulary.

Mikel commented that East Coast vocabulary is more creative and complex. When asked with which region did he identify, he said that he identifies with the South because he was born and raised in Killeen, Texas. However, he also identifies with the East Coast because he is attracted to the messages in their material. The next question asked “do you use words that are associated with other regions?” He stated that he uses words from all of the regions, rather than showing “loyalty” to one area. East Coast hip-

hop artists are known to feel superior to others because hip-hop originated there. This attitude sometimes prevents them from embracing the styles of other regions. Then he was asked “do you feel that any hip-hop originated outside of hip-hop culture?” He stated that some words derive from older music forms and vernacular. He could not think of any examples of passed down words. He believes that the hip-hop generation should receive all of the credit for its own creativity, yet acknowledge the “pioneers” who paved the way for the development of hip-hop culture. He was also asked “do you hear hip-hop words being used by those outside of the culture?” He said that he frequently hears hip-hop words being used by those who are not a part of the culture. He remarked that he hears these words on commercials, television shows, and in movies. An example of this is the Budweiser commercial which features characters saying “whazzup” to each other. This practice of stretching the phrase “what’s up?” is rooted in hip-hop dialect. He also hears these words being used by those who listen to other music genres such as country, rock, and jazz. Speakers who primarily listen to other music genres often make errors in pronunciation or vocal inflection when using hip-hop words. For example, a White person may pronounce a hip-hop word according to standard English pronunciation. An example of this would be using the word “chillin” by saying “chilling.” Adding the “g” to words such as this is an obvious way to identify someone who is not familiar with the culture. Further questions were “do the words sound different when used by outsiders?” and “can you tell how involved a person is in the culture by the way he or she talks?” Mikel does feel that he can identify someone who is an avid hip-hop fan because he or she uses the latest words and even uses words that he or she may have developed independently. Also he noted that these speakers are comfortable when using hip-hop

language. He measures their amount of comfort with the language by the speed at which they talk. When asked if he would use hip-hop words in a job interview, he commented that he would only use hip-hop words in a job interview that was for a job in the music industry. He would not use hip-hop words in a traditional work environment because he feels that he would be perceived as less intelligent. He stated that he would be seen as less intelligent because those in a conservative environment do not understand the culture. Vernacular language does carry a stigma that is linked with intellectual incompetence.

To provide a balanced view of the use of hip-hop language, it is necessary to also interview someone who is not involved with the culture. This interview involved middle school English teacher, Gabrelle Cathey. Ms. Cathey teaches at a predominately African-American school in Austin, Texas. Ms. Cathey's responses to these questions provided an interesting perspective on this issue. The first question was "do you believe that hip-hop has its own language?" She stated a definite yes because hip-hop is unique and innovative. Then she was asked, "do you understand the language of hip-hop culture?" She understands the words associated with hip-hop because she listens to some of the music, watches music videos, and listens to her students talk. Next she was asked, "do you use any hip-hop words in your speech?" Occasionally, she uses words as *tight*, *balla*, *crunk*, and *chillin'*. She was then asked, "do you feel that it is necessary for you to understand these words?" She remarked that it is not necessary for her to understand these words as a teacher. Ms. Cathey communicates effectively with her students without using hip-hop vocabulary. When asked if she hears any of these words being used by her students, she responded yes.

Next she was asked, “do you allow or encourage the use of these words in your classroom?” She highly discourages the use of hip-hop words in her classroom and does not respond to statements or questions expressed in the language of hip-hop. She acts as though she does not understand these words when used in the classroom. She does this to encourage her students to use standard English. When asked if she believes that the language of hip-hop is an area worthy of study in English? She stated that hip-hop language is worthy of study because hip-hop is so innovative. The next question asked, “what is your opinion of someone who uses these words in everyday conversation?” She does not view someone who uses these words as unintelligent. Ms. Cathey feels that someone who uses these words knows proper English. Ms. Cathey believes that these words are used to present the “hip-hop image.” One interesting comment that she made about hip-hop is that it is intended for African-Americans. She stated that it was not meant to reach all cultures as it has all over the world. As an educated African-American who has knowledge of this culture, Ms. Cathey provided valuable insight into this topic.

In *Language, Rhythm, and Sound*, Patricia A. Washington and Lynda Dixon Shaver, discuss hip-hop language from many different perspectives. The authors see rappers as “organic intellectuals” (Washington, Shaver 164) because “they are members of a community of oppressed people whose music is the instrument with which they speak of their common social, political, and economic persecution” (Washington, Shaver 164). To analyze that statement, the community issue must be addressed. The majority of hip-hop artists are members of oppressed communities because he or she grew up in poverty-stricken inner city neighborhoods which do not receive adequate support from the government. Wu-Tang Clan hails from the dangerous Park Hill housing projects in

Staten Island, New York. Platinum rap star DMX hails from the crime-ridden housing projects of Yonkers, New York. Their music is indeed their instrument because hip-hop is the dominant form of self-expression for inner city youth today. Hip-hop is one of the only ways that their ideas will ever reach the rest of the world. The music speaks of social persecution in songs such as those released by New Orleans' Cash Money Records which constantly speak of life in the "projects."

Hip-hop lyrics cover current events in songs like Willie D.'s "Rodney King." In this song, Willie D. states, "Rodney King, goddamn sellout/on T.V. cryin' for a cop/ the same motherfuckers that beat the hell out ya/ now I wish they would've shot ya" (Willie D. "Rodney King"). This is a powerful message that addresses King's call for peace after citizens rioted in Los Angeles in response to the beating of Rodney King. Willie D. felt that King was wrong to discourage the violence with his "can't we all just get along" statement. Willie D. felt that responding with violence would send a message to the Los Angeles Police Department. Hip-hop also addresses economic issues in songs like B.G.'s "Get Your Shine On" which encourages the listeners to grab as much wealth as possible. These songs allow these "organic intellectuals" to tell their story to the world.

In *Language, Rhythm, and Sound*, Tricia Rose sheds even more light on hip-hop's overall impact upon society. She identifies a famous quote by Chuck D, lead vocalist of rap's political superpower, Public Enemy. Chuck once stated, "Rap music is black people's CNN." Rose agrees saying, "rap music is a highly accessible, quickly incorporative cultural form that gathers and presents information..." (Rose 268). The lyrics of hip-hop have informed urban communities about many issues. Kool Moe Dee raised public awareness about sexually transmitted disease in "Go See the Doctor." Ras

Kass called attention to world history in “Nature of the Threat.” This far reaching voice that hip-hop possesses also spreads its language to the world. To understand this “CNN,” you must speak its “language.” In *Talkin and Testifyin*, Geneva Smitherman states, “Black entry into the full swing of American life was on the white man’s terms as integration in actuality translated into acting, talking, and thinking white” (Smitherman 39). Hip-hop is a prime example of one of the facets of African-American culture that is completely original. It is not an attempt to merge with traditional American culture. Hip-hop is rebellion that has truly spawned its own culture.

In *Reflecting Black*, Michael Eric Dyson analyzes hip-hop from some unique perspectives. He addresses comments made by Tipper Gore, wife of former Vice President Al Gore. Tipper Gore insisted that hip-hop appeals to “angry, disillusioned, unloved kids” (Dyson 36) and it says that it is “okay to beat people up” (Dyson 36). To address her first comment, yes hip-hop does appeal to “angry kids.” It is the voice that speaks out against the struggles that these “kids” face everyday. The “disillusioned” statement is false because those that listen to hip-hop are well aware of everything that is going on around them. The “unloved” statement is also false. Parental love has nothing to do with the type of music that is attractive to a child. Hip-hop is a part of the everyday lives of youth from every type of social background and family situation. Mrs. Gore’s words even have a racist tone because hip-hop involves mostly African-Americans. Her comments show that she has no knowledge of what the culture is all about. She is basing her comments on a few lyrics taken out of context. This view of hip-hop is common among those who want to discredit hip-hop and do not even take the time to research the culture.

Dyson addresses the division in hip-hop between the “hardcore” and the “commercial.” This division has always been an issue of great importance in hip-hop. Since language is the focus of this study, this issue can be analyzed from a linguistic point of view. “Hardcore” hip-hop stresses lyrical content, musical creativity, and preserving the culture. “Commercial” hip-hop features are characterized by catchy choruses, dance beats, and appealing to as many people as possible. Creating “hardcore” hip-hop is known as “keeping it real” or “real hip-hop.” Performing “commercial” hip-hop, known as “rap,” is viewed as “sellin’ out” or “goin’ pop” by hardcore enthusiasts. The hip-hop/rap dilemma exists, with “hardcore” being “hip-hop” and “commercial” being “rap.” Dyson identifies commercial rap by stating “this means the sanitizing of rap’s expression of urban realities, resulting in sterile hip-hop that, devoid of its original fire, will offend no one” (Dyson 48). To summarize the concept, “rap” is the exploitation of pure ‘hip-hop.’ It is interesting how a music form that has been attacked from the outside has also been attacked from the inside.

The results of the following survey are evidence of the current popular slang among young African-Americans. As a result of this data, it is evident that the bulk of African-American slang used by these subjects derives from hip-hop lyrics. The purpose of this survey is to show which vernacular words and phrases are currently popular. This information will then show how hip-hop has greatly influenced the vernacular words and phrases that are used today. Ten African-Americans, five male and five female were interviewed. A series of questions were asked regarding the slang words that he or she uses instead of everyday words. The first question asked what slang words or phrases mean “good.” The answers were *on*, *tight*, *tha bomb*, *hittin*, *on point*, *that’s it*, and



*slammin*. Several of the subjects stated the same words, with *tight* being the most popular. The word implies that something is well constructed and cohesive. *On* is merely a shortening of *on point* or it implies that the event is about to happen. *Tha bomb* means “the best.” *Hittin* also implies that the event or thing is on track and right on point. The next question asked what familiar greeting the subject used. The answers were *what’s up*, *what up*, and *what’s tha deal*. These greetings are common among young people of all ages and races. The respondents were then asked what word is used to identify a friend. The answers were *girl*, *boy*, *man*, *dog*, *g*, *yo*, and *kid*. African-American females stated that the word they use is *girl*. These names also tend to be regional in some respects. Names like *yo* and *kid* are used mostly on the East Coast. *G* and *dog* are used mostly on the West Coast. The use of these names reflect the regional area in which the speaker lives.

Further questions were asked to investigate the usage of hip-hop language even more. The next question asked what word is used to refer to where someone lives. The answers were *house* and *crib*. These answers were interesting because they were more traditional with the exception of the males who referred to their home as *crib*. The next question asked for the name he or she assigns to their car. The answers given were *car*, *ride*, *lode*, *g-ride*, *hoo doo*, and *hooptie*. The word *hooptie* usually means an older or damaged vehicle. *Hoo doo* is a term mostly used in the Houston area and by those who listen to Houston-based rap artists. The subjects were next asked what word or phrase he or she uses for something bad. The answers given were *sorry*, *throwed*, *foul*, *messed up*, and *tired*. *Throwed* is another word that originated in the Houston area. The remainder of the words are basically standard English words. The next question focused on words to

describe money. The words were *money*, *paper*, *scrilla*, *dough*, *benjamins*, *cheese*, *lucci*, *chips*, and *dollaz*. The word *scrilla* originated in the Bay Area of California and is used mostly by those who listen to that particular area's rap artists. *Lucci* is a term mostly used on the East Coast. The next question asked what name was used to refer to the police. This question was important because many times in the African-American community, there is a sense of animosity toward the police. This animosity has traditionally been expressed in unique names for police officers. The answers given for the name used to refer to the police were *police*, *5-0*, *tha laws*, *tha po-po's*, and *one time*. The term *5-0* is a shortened version of *Hawaii Five O*, the name of the 1970's television show. This was the most common name for the police and is frequently used in conversations between those who listen to rap music. The next question asked what name was used to refer to one's neighborhood. The words were *neighborhood* and *hood*. *Hood* is a shortened form of *neighborhood* and is used frequently in music, the media, film, and in conversation.

The next interview question asked what nicknames were used for the subject's hometown. The names given were *Satown*, *B. C.*, *H-Town*, *K-Town*, *D-Town*, *A-Town*, *Tha ATX*, *Mo City*, and *Chi-Town*. These names derive from a shortening of the city's name. The next question asked what word was used to describe a period of relaxation. The answers were *chillin* and *coolin*. These words are related in the sense that they associate relaxing with cold temperatures. The next question asked of the subjects was "what word do you use to express anger?" The answers were *pissed*, *agged*, and *heated*. The word *agged* is a short form of *aggravated*. The other words are common in everyday English. The subjects were then asked what word or phrase he or she uses in place of the word *intoxicated*. The responses were *full*, *tore up*, *buzzin*, and *got my full on*. *Full* was

the most common term and it means “full of alcohol.” The subjects were then asked how he or she referred to a good song. They called the song *my song*, *tha jam*, *bangin*, *the cut*, and *tight song*.

They were then asked what word or phrase means a *bad song*. They stated *wack*, *sorry*, and *not tight*. The next question asked what name was given to a successful person. The words were *goin on*, *all dat*, *tha bomb*, and *balla*. *Goin on* and *all dat* have emerged in the mainstream, appearing on television and in films. The subjects were also asked what reference was used for a sharp dressed person. The words were basically the same, with the exception of *geed*, *sharp*, *sweet*, and *prettyboy*. The words for someone who is disliked were *hater* and *buster*. The word for a jealous person was also *hater*, which is currently a popular word in rap lyrics.

The next question expanded the questionnaire to questions about a wide range of areas. The subjects were asked how he or she would refer to a hot day. They responded with the words *burnin up*, *hot as hell*, and *blazin*. These words were not too far from the standard words and phrases that would be used for a hot day. The same was asked about a cold day. The answers were *freezin*, *tha hawk is out*, and *cold as hell*. The subjects were then asked what word he or she uses in the place of the word *hungry*. The answers given were *starvin* and *need ta git my grub on*. The phrase used for *tired* again used the *hell* reference *tired as hell*. Something that is funny was referred to as *a trip*, *crazy*, and *wild*. These are standard English words which are used in a way that gives them a hip-hop *feel*.

The next question explored the word used to describe a loser or an unsuccessful person. These words were *buster*, *scrub*, *zero*, and *wack*. Someone who is a drunk is described as *stays full*, *alcaholik*, or *full all tha time*. Alcohol itself is described as *drank*,

*forties*, or *brew*. The act of vomiting as a result of too much alcohol is referred to as *throwin up* or *earlin*. Words that describe everyday life were the next group of words that were analyzed. To be stressed out is to be *stressin* or *unda pressure*. Being very busy was referred to as *mad busy*. The words that the respondents used to describe leaving a particular place were *roll*, *jet*, and *blaze*. They are used as *roll out*, *roll up out*, *let's jet*, and *let's blaze*.

The subjects provided a wide range of words that prove that hip-hop words and phrases are a major part of today's vernacular words. As a result of this survey, someone who possesses a large amount of money is referred to as a *balla*, *big tymer*, *big willie*, *ballin*, and *tha man*. A person who shows off was described as *flossin*. A smart person was described as *a nerd*, *geek*, or *not down*. These words also applied to a person that is seen as *un-hip*. Someone conceited was referred to as *stuck up*, *thinkin they all that*, or *stuck on themselves*. A person's job was referred to as *tha job*, *tha J*, or *my gig*. A child is referred to as *young G*, *seed*, or *shorty*. Something hard or difficult is described as being *mad hard* or *hectic*. The words used by the subjects to describe clothing were *clothes*, *gear*, and *wear*.

The final question of the questionnaire asked the subjects to reveal some of their favorite phrases. These phrases covered a wide range of subjects. One of the most popular statements was "aw for real?," which shows the person talking that you are amazed at what he or she is saying. Another of these statements was "once again it's on!" This states that something is about to happen again. One subject's favorite saying was "handle yo bizness." This is merely a Southern-sounding way to say "handle

your business.” This statement is used to motivate someone. Another saying was “come real wit it.” This is also used to motivate someone. “Ball till you fall” is a saying that encourages someone to enjoy being successful as long as he or she can. Overall, this survey provided evidence that young Americans are actively using vernacular language. The majority of this language originates from hip-hop culture. This is further evidence of hip-hop’s strong influence upon American culture.

Literature is also a good source of evidence of hip-hop’s influence. The emergence of the hip-hop biography and autobiography has become a significant milestone for hip-hop culture. Little or no literary research has been done on this growing trend. As a result of hip-hop’s phenomenal expansion, biographies of musicians involved in hip-hop have attracted a wide readership. Several biographies and autobiographies of hip-hop artists deserve to be studied as literary texts. An analysis of these works is an excellent way to study the culture and its language.

Hip-hop biographies are important for several reasons. Considering the widespread popularity of hip-hop’s superstars, there should be even more literature available discussing them. These artists have sold millions of albums and serve as role models for youth of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. The late Tupac Shakur was a hip-hop artist who became a national figure. Several biographies about his life are available, but *Tupac Shakur* by the editors of *Vibe* is the most comprehensive. This work is credited to all of the editors of this magazine. This work chronicles his life from early childhood to his untimely death in 1996. The structure of this work adheres to the standards that most well-written biographies follow. The work details Shakur’s childhood through personal interviews. Tupac Shakur was born June 16, 1971 to Afeni Shakur, a former

member of the Black Panther Party. Shakur's move from New York to California was a major transition in his life. Tupac's coastal affiliation became very important in his rap career. This was due to a conflict that emerged between East and West Coast hip-hop artists. Shakur defended the West Coast artists even though he was a native of New York. The biography then focuses on his first recording contract and first acting role. His popularity began to grow rapidly due to a role he played in the film *Juice*. This film is about Shakur's character who becomes obsessed with the *power* that a gun brings him. The name of this film, *Juice*, is a hip-hop word which means *power*. The biography then moves on to Shakur's conflicts with law enforcement which became another major factor throughout his short life. Right before the height of his career, Tupac served a prison term for sexual assault. Overall, this work provides a complete analysis of a rap superstar's life.

Multi-platinum hip-hop artist and actor, L. L. Cool J has also emerged as a superstar by way of hip-hop music. His autobiography, *I Make My Own Rules*, is a work which provides an in-depth look at the music industry as a whole. His autobiography was written with the assistance of Karen Hunter. L. L. Cool J, whose real name is James Todd Smith, tells the story of his rise from "Hollis to Hollywood." This statement represents his emergence as a young music star in Hollis Queens, New York to a millionaire actor in Hollywood. He details the intricacies of the music business in a way that gives a clear picture of his entire world. He describes the money involved in the music industry stating, "Within a few months, I got another check for \$50,000 for royalties. The dough was rolling in, but with the bait comes sharks: advisors, managers, accountants..."(L.L.

Cool J 81). This autobiography mainly focuses on the details of the lifestyle that a hip-hop superstar lives.

*The Ice Opinion* by another multi-platinum hip-hop artist, Ice T, provides a unique perspective on this topic. His work is an autobiography combined with in-depth analysis of life in general. He intertwines the story of his life with frank analysis of topics ranging from police brutality to sex. His commentary on religion gets interesting when he states, “Everybody should know that Christ’s famous portrait is a picture of Michelangelo’s brother”(Ice T 125). He describes how this painting influenced the way that people view Jesus. The political nature of this work gives insight on the views and opinions of a hip-hop superstar.

Another work which gives an interesting twist to the concept of the hip-hop autobiography is *Got Your Back* by Frank Alexander. This work provides yet another look into the world of the music industry, but from a bodyguard’s perspective. This is unique because a bodyguard is both involved and removed from the industry at the same time. The work discusses how the bodyguard sees the lifestyle of the hip-hop industry firsthand. Alexander was Tupac Shakur’s main bodyguard and was on duty the night that Shakur was murdered. Alexander discusses everything from details about murder attempts on his clients to the financial side of his career. He states, “most bodyguards at that level make \$500 a day”(Alexander 44). His view of the industry provides a clear analysis of some of the negative factors involved in the entire business.

These autobiographies and biographies are unique because they allow the reader to experience the actual lifestyles of these artists. The use of the actual words of the artists in these works gives them a sense of authenticity and legitimacy. The reader is

able to understand L.L. Cool J as a person in *I Make My Own Rules*. The story is told in his own words which gives the reader an inside track to the person behind his success. Ice T expresses his honest views on many issues in *The Ice Opinion*. His work tells of the struggles of a young Black man in America. He struggled with drugs, gangs, and later with the pitfalls of success. Through Ice T's world of hip-hop, the reader is able to see the bigger picture which involves poverty, injustice, and many other social issues. The language of hip-hop provides the perfect canvas for these street messengers to paint a picture of the world that he or she lives in.

Hip-hop magazines provide a key contrast to the hip-hop biography and autobiography. These magazines have emerged as a major source of information about the lives of the artists. The detailed articles that are written about the artists are both political and promotional. They are political because they allow the artists to express their true feelings on society and government. They are promotional because most of the articles glamorize the artists' lives and music. They are also usually written about a particular artist when he or she is about to release a new album or recently released an album. *Vibe* magazine is thorough in detailing the lives of hip-hop artists. An article in the May 1999 issue focuses upon the troubles of platinum artist Russell Jones. Jones, known as "Ol' Dirty Bastard", is a member of the Wu-Tang Clan who has had numerous encounters with the police. He is also known for his appearance on an MTV special where he was shown going to cash his welfare check in a limousine. The article gives insight into the relationship between young, African-American musicians and the police. While discussing a recent incident with New York police, Jones states, "...as far as pulling guns out on cops, that's not for an entertainer to do to a cop, and that's not for a



cop to do to an entertainer”(Alexander 48). Issues such as racism and police brutality continually arise in articles that analyze the lives of these artists. Another magazine which gives quality insight on the lives of hip-hop artists is *The Source*. This magazine focuses on the culture and politics that accompany the music. An article by Frank Williams in the April 1999 issue describes the upbringing of two New Orleans based artists. The area in which the artists grew up in New Orleans is compared to “living in a rural war zone that resembled a Southern Kosovo” (Williams 185). Hip-hop magazine articles are an excellent supplement to the actual hip-hop biographies that have been written. A work which contains the same type of analysis as hip-hop magazines is *Fight the Power* by Chuck D. Chuck D’s views on this billion dollar industry provide valuable insight. Chuck D., known as hip-hop’s premier political spokesperson, represents a different side of the culture. Chuck D.’s lyrics have always focused on political and social issues while most rap lyrics focus on materialism, women, and other non-political issues. This reputation as a “hip-hop intellectual” has gained Chuck D. respect in the music industry, the media, and in the political arena.

Hip-hop culture has become a part of the daily lives of millions of Americans. The creativity of hip-hop has proven to be an attractive outlet for the majority of young Americans. This culture produces over one billion dollars in sales each year. Any culture with an influence that spans this wide is definitely worthy of serious study and analysis.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **“COAST TO COAST FLAVA:” THE LANGUAGE PRACTICES OF HIP-HOP’S MAJOR REGIONS**

The language of early hip-hop culture established a tradition which serves as the foundation of the culture. Because hip-hop originated in Bronx, New York, the East Coast established itself as the catalyst for hip-hop language. The East Coast has since remained the leading innovator when it comes to vocabulary. Its early words established a precedent that continues to produce new vocabulary today.

“M.C.,” which represents its traditional meaning of “master of ceremonies,” is the title given to one who engages in “rapping.” These musicians are also called “rappers.” In recent years, there has emerged a difference in the two terms. An “M.C.” is skilled in rapping and remains true to the culture at all times. “Rapper,” denotes one who is not skilled in the art and does not respect the culture. Those who appear to perform rap for

financial gain only or those who focus on appealing to a commercial audience are sometimes referred to as “rappers” and not “M.C.’s.”

Several words were established as the dominant vocabulary of the early days of hip-hop. One of the words that gained instant popularity is “fresh.” Something “Fresh” is “good.” A “fresh” M.C. is one who is good at rapping. “Dope” eventually became the word that replaced “fresh” and possessed the same meaning. Hip-hop words traditionally have a short life span. Another example of hip-hop vocabulary is the word “skeezer.” During this period in hip-hop, a promiscuous woman was referred to as a “skeezer.” The term “wack” also began a major part of early hip-hop vocabulary. “Wack” means “not good” or unacceptable. “Chillin” describes the act of “relaxing.” Someone who is relaxed or does not have any activity to engage in is said to be “chillin.” The practice of adding “you know what I’m sayin’” to the end of sentences also became established as a language trend in hip-hop. “Word” is also an emphatic way to follow a statement. After a statement is made that is agreed upon, saying “word” is a verbal confirmation of the truth in his or her statement. “Scratching” became the term that denotes the movement of vinyl records which creates a “scratching” sound. Deejays began to implement this technique as a sound effect. The turntables used for scratching, usually Technics 1200 turntables, are referred to as the “wheels of steel.” The terms “old school” and “new school” are terms that are still actively used today. The phrase “old school,” identifies the early days of rap. “New school” identifies a young hip-hop artist or a new trend. These words are used to categorize the two periods of hip-hop culture.

*Fresh: Hip-Hop Don’t Stop* by Nelson George, Sally Banes, Susan Flinker, and Patty Romanowski is a text which highlights many of the cornerstones of early hip-hop

culture. In this work, hip-hop legend, Kurtis Blow, states, “To attract their own followings, some of these DJs would give little raps to let the crowd know who was spinning records”(George xi). These raps were merely “tags” which distinguished one DJ from another. This period of rap involved strictly oral tradition; these raps were not written down. These raps that the DJ’s invented were eventually exclusively used by the “rappers.” The roots of rap are explored thoroughly in this text. One of hip-hop’s early powerhouse groups, The Soul Sonic Force “can be traced to the Last Poets, a politically potent black nationalist rap trio of the early seventies” (9). This work also highlights graffiti as one of the four elements of hip-hop. This work states, “Yet today a graffiti artist with the right connections is a hip-hop celebrity” (33).The graffiti artists have always been a respected group within hip-hop culture. The authors discuss how graffiti became popular through exposure on the New York subway system. The word “tag” became a part of hip-hop vocabulary due to graffiti. A “tag” is a graffiti artist’s name or title. These tags resulted in such names as “Ghost,” “Wild Kid,” and “Fame.” The early days of hip-hop laid the foundation for a culture that is now rather complex.

The word “b-boy” denotes the essence of “old school” hip-hop. “B-boy” is the definitive term for someone who is an active participant in hip-hop culture. Breakdancing, which is most often associated with the “b-boy” persona, has provided a visual representation of hip-hop that inspired hip-hop’s emergence in film. The “b-boy” lifestyle inspired films such as *Wild Style*, *Breakin’*, *Beat Street* and the PBS documentary *Style Wars*. A group of b-boys is identified as a “crew.” This is the definitive term for a b-boy and his group of friends. This word faded from the hip-hop

scene and was replaced by “posse.” This is yet another instance where the short life span of hip-hop words is clearly evident.

In Thomas Kochman’s *Rappin’ and Stylin’ Out*, articles which address Black culture are used to explain some of Black America’s culture. This source provides a useful background to explore the roots of hip-hop language. Joan and Stephen Baratz state, “...the dialect of English which many Blacks speak includes forms that are substantially similar in structure to the African languages of their ancestors.” (Kochman 11). This relation between African languages and African-American vernacular English emphasizes that the language used by some African-Americans derives from other languages. This language is not merely incorrect usage of standard English. In Kochman’s work, Benjamin G. Cooke discusses how vernacular words can change meaning. This work focuses heavily on African-American culture in the 1970’s. In this era, “rapping” meant “the kind of personal talk a man engages in with a woman” (45). This term apparently lost its usage as “rapping” began to represent “engaging in rap music.” All of the aspects which form the background of hip-hop culture and language revolve around rhythm. Elkin T. Sithole states, “Rhythm to the black man is a natural phenomenon” (70). This is a statement which applies directly to the major presence that rhythm has in hip-hop culture. The language embodies a rhythm that is seldom duplicated outside of the hip-hop community.

The language of hip-hop culture is an extension of what is traditionally defined as “soul” language. This vernacular form is dominant among African-Americans and is directly reflected in hip-hop, an African-American dominated culture. This “soul” is defined simply as “an honest vocal portrayal of Black America” (135). These words

generally have a longer life span than words that originate within hip-hop culture. One example of a word with a longer life span than a typical hip-hop word is “cop.” African-Americans began to use this word in the 1950’s and it has survived long enough to reach the hip-hop generation. This word has maintained its meaning of “to get.” In hip-hop culture, one would say, “Are you gonna cop the new Jay-Z CD?” instead of the traditional “Are you going to get the new Jay-Z CD?” This is a word that was not used in the early days of hip-hop. It began to emerge recently among East Coast hip-hop artists and fans. Ken Johnson also addresses the term “The Man.” This term’s traditional meaning within Black vernacular English has been “The White Man.” African-Americans use this term to refer to the white race. Within hip-hop, “the man” would be used as “when it comes to basketball, Michael Jordan is da man!” The term possesses an entirely different meaning. It identifies someone who is good at what he or she does. The use of “da” instead of “the” is also an interesting practice that exists within hip-hop. The word is spelled as it would sound being spoken with a “hip-hop accent.” This spelling is also a victim of a hip-hop word’s short life span. “Da” has been replaced by “Tha.” This is apparently due to the popularity of “da.” As a word or spelling becomes over-popularized within hip-hop and spreads to the mainstream, it becomes null and void. The intricacies of hip-hop language become increasingly evident through further analysis of the culture as a whole.

In *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, Houston A. Baker discusses many of the issues that hip-hop has brought to the forefront of American popular culture. One of the issues that he addresses that relates directly to the language of hip-hop is the urban authenticity factor. He states that hip-hop has a “representational black urban authenticity

of performance”(Baker 62). Street credibility is an important social element in hip-hop. Someone who cannot relate to the urban environment is seen as an outsider. The hip-hop word that describes this concept is “down.” This word means “accepted.” To show that someone is one of your friends, you would state, “He is down.” This means that he or she can be trusted. The phrase “down by law” became popular in late 1980’s-early 1990’s hip-hop. This phrase denotes the highest form of acceptance or being “down” to the fullest extent. The ever-changing nature of these words does not reflect the overall state of hip-hop. Political leader, Jesse Jackson, has been quoted stating that rap is here to stay. Scholar, Houston A. Baker Jr. states “Like Jesse, I believe rap is here to stay” (100). The culture may change from year to year, but its overall impact upon society is only growing stronger.

The early hip-hop language forms established the East Coast as the leader in hip-hop language trends. This is apparently because the culture originated from these areas. As the culture began to spread, other regions began to develop comparable systems of language. The foundation that early hip-hop language established has sparked an intricate vernacular form which is identified as the East Coast “flava.” “Flava” is a hip-hop word which means “style.” In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose states, “Rap went relatively unnoticed by mainstream music and popular culture industries until independent music entrepreneur Sylvia Robinson released “Rappers Delight” in 1979” (Rose 3). This song still maintains a strong level of popularity. Many non-rap fans can recite the song line by line. Rose states, “Rap music is a technologically sophisticated and complex urban sound” (95). The complexity of rap is largely due to its intricate vocabulary.

The way that hip-hop culture enthusiasts refer to each other is an important element in the language of hip-hop. Each region has different ways to refer to one's friends. Early New York hip-hop established the term "homeboy." A "homeboy" or "homegirl" is a "good friend." Some of the East Coast variations of this word are "son," "yo," "b," "kid," and "god." Any of these words can be used to address someone. These words are seen as strictly "East Coast" words. Someone who uses these words that is not from the East Coast is usually a staunch supporter of the East Coast style of rap. The word "god" became popular in hip-hop culture due to the strong influence of the Five Percent Nation of Islam. This religious sect originated in New York as a splinter group of the Nation of Islam. This group had an immediate impact upon hip-hop because of its strong focus on Black pride and knowledge of Black history. This focus appealed to young African-Americans in urban New York and has had a lasting impact upon rap music. The Five Percenters believe that the Black man is the "god" of his own actions. They refer to each other as "god." This reference has become popular in the music of East Coast rap superstars such as Wu-Tang Clan, DMX, and Nas. Rakim, who is regarded as the greatest hip-hop lyricist of all time, is a member of the Five Percent Nation. In his book *Hip-hop America*, Nelson George states, "Rakim is probably the most prominent Five Percent rapper, and he has used the religion's imagery to inform his writing throughout his career" (George 69). One example of this is evident in the song "My Melody" where Rakim states, "I bless the mic for the gods" (Rakim "My Melody"). The lingo of East Coast hip-hop ranges from simple references to elaborate systems of regional vocabulary.



The Wu-Tang Clan, a multi-platinum selling hip-hop group, has established a reputation for being trendsetters in regard to rap's vocabulary. Their popular hit "Protect Your Neck" is full of clever word play and social commentary. One line, which comments on music executives who do not understand rap, states, "And he don't understand the meaning of dope/ when he's looking for a suit and tie rap that's cleaner than a bar of a soap..." (Wu-Tang Clan "Protect Your Neck"). This line uses the word "dope" which means "good." This type of commentary highlights the lack of music executives who are from the same backgrounds as most rap artists. This is evident due to the fact that there are only three Black-owned record labels which can compete with major labels. 50% of these labels is controlled by major record labels. One of these companies is Bad Boy Entertainment. Bad Boy is a successful Black owned independent label, but industry giant Arista Records owns a significant portion of the company. There is a strong feeling among rappers that the industry does not understand them and is merely using them for financial gain. This feeling has resulted in the emergence of hundreds of independent record labels owned and operated by young hip-hop enthusiasts. Independence has become a dominant theme in today's hip-hop music.

Hip-hop's vocabulary continues to expand each year. Platinum rap artist Nas is known for his clever use of hip-hop vocabulary. In "New York State of Mind," a descriptive account of New York life, he states, "Yall' know my steelo/ with or without the airplay" (Nas "New York State of Mind"). He uses the word "steelo," meaning "style," and states how listeners know how talented he is regardless of whether radio supports him. Hip-hop which steers away from formulaic success patterns and remains "raw" is seen as "underground." Underground hip-hop is rarely supported by radio. This

has created resentment toward commercial radio stations among these “underground” artists. Listeners see material that is in heavy radio rotation as “commercial.” Artists like Wu-Tang Clan and Nas command respect within the hip-hop community because of their high level of skill, originality, and focus on underground hip-hop.

The use of profanity also plays a large part in the language of hip-hop. This usage is a direct reflection of the language used by the age groups of Americans who comprise the hip-hop culture. Profanity is used to make hip-hop lyrics “real.” “Real” is one of the most important words in hip-hop. The phrase “keep it real” has become a popular hip-hop slogan which means “be yourself” or “tell the truth.” The word “nigga” is also used frequently in hip-hop culture. This word is used as a form of address that means “man,” “brother,” or “friend.” The word is used as a non-derogatory term among African-Americans. However, it is still seen as a racial slur when used by non-African-Americans. The word is sometimes used by non-African-American hip-hop fans who are seen as “down” in some liberal cities. Hip-hop has appeared to unite these cultures even though it is “fundamentally linked to larger social constructions of black culture as an internal threat to dominant American culture and social order.” (Rose 144). The world of hip-hop has always been seen as merely a form of rebellion among disadvantaged young African-Americans. Deceased East Coast rap legend, Notorious B-I-G, states “turn the pages to 1993/ Niggaz is getting’ smoked g/believe me” (Notorious B-I-G “Things Done Changed”). In these lines, Notorious B-I-G uses the words “smoked” and “g” which are West Coast hip-hop words. This shows how hip-hop vocabulary eventually spreads to all of hip-hop’s regional domains. These lines comment on the large number of Black people murdered in the United States annually. The lines reflect the danger that African-

Americans face in today's urban areas. The term "niggaz" in the line identifies "black people" in a fraternal sense. Language such as this, reflects a sort of "code" that has always existed in Black culture. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states, "It is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals." (Gates x). Hip-hop America uses its vernacular to practice its own unique cultural rituals.

The hip-hop word "phat" is a prime example of a word which has gained acceptance in mainstream America. "Phat" means "good" or "outstanding." The spelling of the word is a key component of its visual effect. The word that is meant is "fat." The change in the spelling of the word is used to give the word hip-hop "flava." The orthographical nature of words is an important factor in hip-hop vocabulary. This word is used by many who do not even listen to hip-hop music. Many hip-hop words change the spelling of standard English words in the same way that "phat" is changed. The foundation of these practices lies in the richness of the African tradition. Gates comments eloquently on African-American culture by stating, "Afro-American culture is an African culture with a difference..." (4). Just as African culture has influenced American music and dance, these are language practices which most likely arrived with the first African slaves.

The verbal game of "signifyin" is an African-American tradition which is evident in rap music. The verbal "battling" known as "signifyin" appears in rap through "battle raps." This form of rap focuses upon degrading one's opponent and displaying the extent of one's own abilities. In this genre, the rapper uses numerous similes and metaphors to highlight his or her own rapping ability. The word "dis" became popular because of

“battle rap.” To “dis” someone is to disrespect them. The word is merely a shortened form of the word “disrespect.” Rappers “dis” rappers in “battles” to show how lyrically clever he or she is. An example of a “dis” is the controversial song ‘Hit Em’ Up” by Tupac Shakur. In this song, Shakur verbally attacks rival rapper Notorious B-I-G by claiming to have slept with his wife and “dissing” his friends. This song played a large part in the escalation of the feud between East and West Coast rappers. It has also been linked to the deaths of both of these artists. In *Hip-Hop America*, Nelson George, a noted hip-hop scholar, comments, “So while I love hip-hop spirit and rhythmic intensity, I often find myself at odds with some of its values and how those values are expressed” (George x). There are a large number of hip-hop fans who share this same view. Many fans love the sound of hip-hop rhythms but are disturbed by some of its lyrics. When N.W.A. boasted of carrying AK-47 rifles and engaging in “drive-by” shootings, many hip-hop fans felt as though the group was promoting ignorance. Many are intrigued by the rebellious nature of the lyrics but do not quite agree with their direct meaning.

Just as hip-hop lyrics are innovative and revolutionary, its music also has these same qualities. The sampling of music is a large part of the hip-hop arsenal of musical tools. “Sampling” involves using portions of another musical composition to create an entirely different musical composition. This is done by recording the original sound through a digital sampler or keyboard and then looping the sound to create a different rhythm. One example of this is M.C. Hammer’s multi-platinum hit “Can’t Touch This.” This song samples the entire melody from R&B singer Rick James’ hit song “Super Freak.” Several lawsuits have occurred as a result of sampling’s early uses. In the beginning of this trend, many hip-hop artists used samples without permission from the

original artist. These lawsuits led to today's system in which record labels obtain the legal right to use samples and pay the original artist. This is a controversial practice because many believe that this process shows a lack of originality among hip-hop music producers.

Verbal sampling also exists within the lyrics of hip-hop culture. Rappers use portions of literature, quotes from films, and many other sources to compose their lyrics. One prime example of this is the song "Scarface" by rap artist Scarface. In this song, Scarface uses many quotes from the movie *Scarface* such as "say goodbye to the bad guy" (Scarface "Scarface"). This quote comes from a statement that actor Al Pacino makes in the film. Due to musical and verbal sampling, hip-hop has become a direct representation of American society's past and present. Nelson George states, "Sampling's flexibility gave hip-hop-bred music makers the tools to create tracks that not only were in the hip-hop tradition but allowed them to extend that tradition." (93). Sampling has extended hip-hop culture into other music forms and intertwined other forms into hip-hop.

While hip-hop is steadily extending, it is also steadily changing. As mentioned earlier, the words change rapidly. Nelson George states, "I remember when attractive women were simply "fly" and great records were "da joint." (208). This statement shows how hip-hop changes drastically from one year to the next. The East Coast's labels for attractive women are always at the forefront of hip-hop vocabulary. Early labels were "honeydip," "hottie," and "fly girl." Current terms include "dimepiece," "shorty," and "star." The term "dimepiece" is an example of verbal sampling because it borrows its concept from "ten." A "perfect ten" is a phrase that identifies a "beautiful woman." The

hip-hop term “dimepiece” uses “dime” to represent “ten” and create the desired meaning. The way that hip-hop enthusiasts label the world around them is one of the most interesting aspects of the culture.

Hip-hop artists are also known for their unique names. The names that are used vary from one region to another. The first hip-hop names were simple in nature and progressively became more complex. Early names included names such as “Kool Moe Dee,” “Grandmaster Flash,” and “Melle Mel.” The names used in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s were either variations of the artists’ birth name or extravagant titles that represented the artist’s “greatness.” The Five Percent Nation also had a tremendous impact upon hip-hop names, inspiring names such as “Rakim,” “Wise Intelligent,” and “King Sun.” Five Percenters adopt names that show power and reflect the teachings of their religion. Hip-hop artists began to adopt “names like Rakeem, Justice, and Unique, and started studying Supreme Mathematics and the 120 degrees, or lessons, that comprise the esoteric Five Percent philosophy” (Fernando Jr. 134). Current names of East Coast rappers include “Shyne,” “Noreaga,” and “Masta Killa.” The first name, Shyne,” the title of an artist on successful rap label, Bad Boy Entertainment, reflects two dimensions. The first dimension of this name is its reference to the hip-hop word “shine.” To “shine” is to show your abilities and receive respect that is due to you. In this instance, the word “shine” becomes the title “Shyne.” The name “Noreaga,” another title of a current East Coast rapper, highlights yet another dimension of sampling in hip-hop. Artists will name themselves after famous world leaders, organized crime figures, and superheroes. These references are used to highlight the artist’s ability and power. “Noreaga” is a variation of “Noriega,” the name of South American military leader Manuel Noriega. This artist uses

this name because of this leader's ruthless reputation. The name "Masta Killa," referring to one of the members of platinum hip-hop group, Wu-Tang Clan, highlights yet another variation of verbal sampling. Wu-Tang Clan established its image based upon characters from Chinese kung-fu films. Names like "Masta Killa" and "Golden Arms" originate from characters in these films. A description of the group's studio in a *Vibe* magazine article sums up the group's passion for these films by stating, "The place bears the unmistakable mark of the Wu-Shaw Brothers movie posters in the original Chinese" (Fernando Jr. 130). The group's name, Wu-Tang Clan, derives from a notorious group that is depicted in numerous films. Hip-hop names are a direct reflection of what hip-hop artists are interested in at that time.

Just as hip-hop names vary, the themes in hip-hop lyrics also vary greatly. However, some themes are constant within this culture. Money has always been a central theme of hip-hop. Many rap artists have referred to money and material items throughout hip-hop history. Because this is the dominant theme in hip-hop, the term for "money" has changed frequently. Some of these terms include "loot," "cheese," "cheddar," "benjamins," "paper," and "cream." The term "cream" originates from the song "C.R.E.A.M." by Wu-Tang Clan. In this song, rapper Method Man states, "Cash rules everything around me/cream, get the money/dollar, dollar bill yall." (Wu-Tang Clan "C.R.E.A.M."). C.R.E.A.M. is the acronym for the slogan "cash rules everything around me." This acronym eventually became the word "cream," which is an East Coast term for "money." The term for "money" also has a distinct regional difference which will be discussed in later chapters that focus on other dominant regions. East Coast hip-hop is currently engrossed in a trend that emphasizes materialism. The term "ice" is a term that

appears in the majority of today's rap songs. The extensive use of "ice," the term for "diamonds," shows how much rappers value expensive jewelry. Expensive cars are also a large part of East Coast hip-hop and its materialistic world. Rappers boast of \$100,000 Mercedes-Benz 600's, \$300,000 Lamborghini Diablos, and \$400,000 Bentley's in their rhymes. Rap videos are filled with images of these cars, million dollar mansions, and Cristal champagne. The word "whip" identifies a "car." Someone with a "tight whip" has a "nice car." In hip-hop, cars by Mercedes are referred to by the first number of their model. Lexus vehicles are referred to as "Lex." A Lincoln Navigator truck is referred to as a "gator." Two hundred dollar Cristal champagne is referred to as "Cristy" and Moet champagne is "Mo." Someone who has many of these material items is known as a "big willie." One interesting aspect of this term is the fact that it faded out of hip-hop shortly after the release of Will Smith's "Big Willie Style." Will Smith, although respected in the movie industry, is not respected in the purist hip-hop world. This is due to the "mainstream" focus of his music. Hip-hop loyalty strays quickly from anything associated with the "mainstream." When Will Smith used this term, it lost its street credibility because he is considered a "commercial" artist. This is one of the ironic points of this culture which focuses so heavily on success. Once an artist gains widespread fame, the culture usually brands him or her as a "sellout." In the Vibe article "Free Cheese Days," Sacha Jenkins states, "Zillions of CDs are sold. A rapper is paid. Old friends become new foes. Neighborhood fades to enemy hood" (Jenkins 132). This ties into the debate over the words "hip-hop" and "rap" that was mentioned earlier. This has been an issue in hip-hop culture since the mid 1990's. "Hip-hop" is seen as the purest form of the culture, the elements which it was founded upon. "Rap" is seen as the



“mainstream” version of the culture that is focused strictly on financial gain. Credibility and materialism are two concepts which have always been the focus of many aspects of the culture.

Just as these concepts remain constant themes in hip-hop, there are still others which appear frequently. Marijuana and alcohol have consistently been topics that are addressed by East Coast rap artists. Although marijuana was popularized in hip-hop culture on the West Coast, the East Coast has also promoted the use of the drug. The word “blunt” can be heard constantly in East Coast rap. A “blunt” is a Phillies brand cigar filled with marijuana. Jenkins’ article paints a clear picture of the East Coast rapper’s indulgences by describing rap superstar, Nas, as “plastic cup fulla Hennessy in one hand, tight pro-rolled blunt in the other” (132). Hennessy cognac, referred to as “Henny,” has become the drink of choice of East Coast hip-hop. Forty ounce bottles of malt liquor also have a nostalgic place in hip-hop history. Referred to as a “40,” this drink has appeared in rap lyrics since the early 1980’s. Malt liquor slightly lost its popularity in hip-hop when Black activist rapper, Chuck D., began to condemn it. This was due to the fact that malt liquor contains a higher alcohol content than beer and it has been traditionally marketed to African-Americans. Overall, it is evident that hip-hop language is a reflection of inner city life.

The East Coast is the foundation of the language of hip-hop. It is responsible for the framework which all other forms of hip-hop language merely build upon. The rich culture of New York City is heavily responsible for the creativity which sparked this cultural invention. The creative energy that the East Coast has contributed to the language of hip-hop will forever secure its place as the Mecca of hip-hop.

The East Coast remained the dominant central area for hip-hop throughout its early years. The late 1980's marked the beginning of the emergence of another hip-hop region. Because Los Angeles is a major venue for the entertainment industry, it was only natural for the city to become the next major center for hip-hop. The pioneers of West Coast hip-hop were artists such as Uncle Jamm's Army and Ice-T. However, the first group to truly establish the West Coast sound was N.W.A. Their name is an acronym for "Niggaz With Attitude." This multi-platinum selling group established what the industry identifies as "gangsta" rap and laid the foundation for the West Coast sound. In *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, Michael Eric Dyson states, "...as a professor and ordained Baptist minister who grew up in Detroit's treacherous inner city, I too am disturbed by many elements of gangsta rap" (Dyson 176). This is a statement that truly shows the power of gangsta rap because Dyson is a staunch supporter of hip-hop. The powerful effect of gangsta rap's explicit lyrics and raw street tales has had a tremendous effect upon the way many Americans view hip-hop. The term "gangsta" is a hip-hop spelling of the word "gangster." A "gangsta" in West Coast hip-hop terms, is someone who participates in the street gang lifestyle. This life involves drug dealing, gun toting, and gang membership. This lifestyle is a reality in areas of Compton, Watts, and other Los Angeles-area neighborhoods. The gang problem of Los Angeles is directly reflected in the music of West Coast rappers. In the song "The Next Episode," West Coast rapper Snoop Dogg states, "Crip walk if you're down with the set" (Dr. Dre "The Next Episode"). "Crip walk" identifies a dance that is performed by members of L.A.'s Crip gang. A "set" is a neighborhood's particular division of a gang. Dyson states, "Too often for gangsta rappers, life does indeed imitate and inform art" (179). This is true because many rap

artists have been involved in criminal acts throughout their careers as gangsta rappers. Snoop Dogg was involved in a murder trial which led to strong anticipation for the release of his solo album. Snoop Dogg's violent lyrics played a large part in the trial. Snoop is known for lyrics such as "187 on a undercover cop," (Dr. Dre "Deep Cover") which means "murdering an undercover cop." "187" is the Los Angeles Police Department's code for homicide, which is a term used in West Coast hip-hop. This pattern of criminal trouble has existed throughout West Coast hip-hop history.

The vocabulary of West Coast hip-hop has many variations. The short form of "gangsta" is "g." West Coast artists began to refer to themselves as "g's." Another word that is shortened is the word "d's." This word means "Daytons." Dayton wheels are custom wheels that are commonly placed on classic automobiles. Derogatory references to women also began to appear frequently in West Coast hip-hop lyrics. The use of the words "bitch" and "ho" in West Coast hip-hop became so influential that this practice has become a dominant feature in the language of hip-hop listeners. On Dr. Dre's multi-platinum album "The Chronic," Snoop Dogg states "Bitches ain't shit but hoes and tricks" (Dr. Dre "Bitches Ain't Shit"). The word "trick" has the same meaning as "bitch" and "ho." This line became a popular phrase on the West Coast. Through the course of a normal conversation, some young American males refer to women as "bitches" and "ho's" in a casual manner. Geneva Smitherman's *Black Talk* discusses "Hip-hop music's popular, if controversial, word *Ho* is the AAL(African-American Language) pronunciation of "whore"(Smitherman 12). Smitherman's work clearly highlights the fact that this use of the word "ho" is an alternate pronunciation of the word "whore." These derogatory words have become so common in hip-hop that they have almost completely

lost their shock value. This is evident in the language of female rappers. One female rapper, Trina, identifies herself as the “Baddest Bitch.” Rapper Lil’ Kim identifies herself as the “Queen Bitch.” These terms now appear to be labels for women that denote power, confidence, or arrogance. Smitherman also discusses how the use of vowel sounds affects hip-hop words. She identifies a West Coast hip-hop classic by stating, “This pattern produced the “thang” in “It’s a Black Thang,” and the “thang” of Dr. Dre’s “Nuthin but a ‘G’ Thang”(13).

The labels that East Coast hip-hop placed on everyday items began to appear in a new form as West Coast hip-hop expanded. Cars began to be referred to by West Coast artists as “hoopties.” Words from California’s gang culture began to spread to other parts of the nation through hip-hop. Words such as “set trippin,” which means “expressing your gang affiliation” became familiar to those who had never experienced this culture. The West Coast also introduced the “c-walk” which was mentioned earlier as a gang activity. This dance, originally intended to express affiliation with the “Crip” gang, is now a popular hip-hop dance. The entire fascination with “thug life” is a large part of West Coast hip-hop. This concept is a way of life that means “be true to yourself” and “fear no man.”

One language practice that originated on the West Coast is truly unique. California artists began to add common sounds to different words, such as saying “fa shizzel” to denote “for sure” and “go to the hizzel” to denote “going home.” The “izzel” sound is placed with all words to produce a common sound throughout the person’s speech.

The word “saggin” became popular on the West Coast to signify pants which are worn hanging from the waist. The term “flag” identifies a bandana, which is usually worn to indicate gang affiliation. West Coast artists are also known for coining phrases such as “you don’t hear me doe” and “ please believe it.” “You don’t hear me doe,” a form of “you don’t hear me though” is used to emphasize what someone is saying. “Please believe it,” a newer West Coast term, is also a way to emphasize a statement that has been made. The popular movie *Boyz in the Hood*, exposed West Coast hip-hop culture to mainstream America in many ways. This movie presented the language, clothing, and lifestyle of the West Coast to mainstream America.

California’s Bay Area has long been a strong contributor to hip-hop vocabulary. Oakland and its surrounding areas have established themselves as a breeding ground for the latest rap slang. The uniqueness of the language of this area has become the defining factor of this area’s hip-hop culture. Rap artist, E-40, has become known as the central figure behind this area’s slang. The Bay area is known as the “Yay Area.” The term “yay” identifies “drugs.” Due to this area’s high drug trafficking, it is referred to as the “Yay Area” to denote the strong presence of drug dealing in the area. One Bay Area slogan, “pop ya collar,” which means “show off” or “be yourself” has become popular nationwide. This phrase accompanies the actual physical gesture of grabbing one’s own collar. This act is even done by pro football players after scoring touchdowns. Another popular Bay Area term is “what’s crackin?” This term, a shortened form of “what’s crackulatin?” means “what’s going on?” It derives from the saying “what’s poppin?” This term has the same meaning as “what’s poppin?” except it uses another sound, “crackin,” to give new life to an older word. The many conversational terms that are used for

money in the Bay Area are one of the most interesting aspects of the language of this area. Some of these terms are “scrilla” and “fetti.” Terms like “sprinkle me” which means “tell me” became the title of E-40’s hit song “Sprinkle Me.” Vallejo, California is referred to as “Valley Joe” which is an interesting form of slang. This variation takes the Spanish root of this word and translates it into a two-word English nickname.

One Bay Area phrase that has spread all over the United States is “player hater.” This term represents someone who is jealous of a successful person. “Player” is the definitive term in hip-hop language for a successful person. The “hater” portion of “player hater” has become its own term. “Hatin” is the term that identifies the process of being jealous. A “hater” is the shortened form of “player hater.” This word has expanded into many forms such as “Haterade” and “player hation.” The use of words such as these give the hip-hop listener a whole new vocabulary. The interesting factor about the majority of hip-hop slang is that many of its users speak in a bi-dialectal manner. Although hip-hop language is the ideal way for hip-hop fans to relate to their peers, mainstream America requires an entirely different dialect. In *Black Street Speech*, John Baugh states how “although they grow up surrounded by peers who value the nonstandard dialect, when they enter a professional society another style of speaking is demanded.” (Baugh 3). Issues such as dialect leveling also become a factor when analyzing the language of hip-hop culture. This process occurs “When two individuals who speak different dialects come together, there may be a tendency to adjust speech...” (Baugh 33). When West Coast hip-hop listeners talk with East Coast hip-hop listeners, there tends to be a focus away from the area-specific terminology. The conversation will use universal hip-hop terms like “tight,” “the bomb,” and “playa.” One East and West

Coast term is “bail.” “Bail” means to “leave.” The East Coast uses terms like “bounce” and “Audi 5000” to express that one is “leaving.” “Audi 5000” is an interesting term that is used because its first syllable sounds like “outta here.” “Audi” becomes a short form of “outta here.” The “5000” part is the model number of a car manufactured by Audi and is used with this word to simply add style.

In *Black Street Speech*, Baugh also states “It may seem ironic, but many of the harshest critics of street speech are black.” (Baugh 120). Since the majority of those who invent and use the language of hip-hop culture are Black, the criticism has been heavily directed toward them. Black members of Congress, religious leaders, and other notable African-American figures have repeatedly spoken out against hip-hop culture. Religious leader Reverend Calvin Butts and congresswoman C. Delores Tucker are two of the most noted African-Americans that have spoken out against hip-hop. Reverend Butts has organized several events where hip-hop CD’s were destroyed publicly. C. Delores Tucker, a respected African-American leader, has openly denounced hip-hop music many times. Due to her outspoken nature on this topic, she is viewed as an “enemy” by many hip-hop enthusiasts. Baugh makes an interesting statement when he writes, “Just as some people have more athletic ability than others, some are able to master dialects more readily than others” (Baugh 120). This applies directly to hip-hop because its language sounds awkward when used by someone outside of the culture. Hip-hop has a sort of fraternal culture that is not easily accessible to outsiders. Most of hip-hop culture assumes the participant has certain prior knowledge. This makes it difficult for an outsider to understand certain hip-hop concepts.

Hip-hop has truly influenced the English of young Americans in many ways. The interesting fact about this influence is that it includes White Americans. In *Black English*, J.L. Dillard states, “the tracing of one of their language or behavior patterns to Negro influence was the bitterest of insults” (Dillard 211). This applies to hip-hop culture because it was founded by African-Americans. The quote identifies how some Whites in America refuse to acknowledge the influence that African-Americans have had upon American culture. This is an interesting concept because statistically, White teenagers purchase more rap music than any other group. The many cultural lines that this culture has crossed is a further testament of its power and scope.

The West Coast played a large role in developing hip-hop’s power and scope. The West Coast provided reinforcement to hip-hop at a time when its future was uncertain. The enormous record sales and influence that N.W.A. had upon America established hip-hop as a true powerhouse in the music industry. The anger that the West Coast rappers expressed through rhyme highlighted the struggle that exists in Black America. Despite this social resistance, the negative messages that appeared in this music overshadowed the cultural issues. The promotion of drugs, alcohol, and violence in West Coast hip-hop overshadowed the message that America needed to hear. Songs such as Snoop Doggy Dogg’s “Gin & Juice” glorified drug use to millions of listeners. The chorus of the song states, “Rollin’ down the street, smoking endo, sippin’ on gin & juice.” (Snoop Doggy Dogg “Gin & Juice”). “Endo” is a West Coast term for marijuana. This song, featured on his multi-platinum selling album, stirred up the interests of hip-hop listeners in regard to marijuana and “gin & juice.” The same effect occurred when N.W.A. released its hit song “Fuck the Police.” This song, written in response to rampant police brutality in Los



Angeles, was seen by mainstream America as a call for violence. This song states, “not the other color, so police think/ they have the authority to kill a minority” (N.W.A. “Fuck the Police”). African-Americans in Los Angeles have dealt with negative issues such as the Rodney King incident which heavily influenced this song. The media presented this song as a hate campaign against the police. This hatred toward “one time,” which is a West Coast term for “police,” is a direct result of the environment that West Coast artists are products of.

West Coast hip-hop has played a large role in the growth and development of hip-hop. The rawness of the West Coast brought worldwide attention to hip-hop culture as a whole. Its message highlights problems and issues that America must face in one way or another. By taking the torch that was passed on by the founders on the East Coast, the West Coast established its own place in music history.

Southern hip-hop has emerged as a major force in the recording industry. For many years, the East and West Coast dominated hip-hop, while the South was a small, unnoticed voice. With the rise of independent record labels, artists from the South got a taste of hip-hop glitz and glamour. With all of its recent success, the strength of Southern hip-hop still lies in its “down to earth” flavor.

Hip-hop in the South became firmly established with the emergence of the Geto Boys, a group from Houston, Texas. Their style, which was similar to the West Coast’s gangster image, reflected their environment. Growing up in Fifth Ward, one of the more violent areas of Houston, they were witness to an environment filled with drugs and violence. Their music, filled with terms that hip-hop had never heard before, established the South as one of the centers of creativity within the culture. The term “dirty South,”

coined by Atlanta rapper Cool Breeze, denotes Southern hip-hop. This name identifies the South's gritty "underground" image. Houston has brought language to hip-hop that has spread to all of its regions. One of the most popular words in this area is "balla." This term, like "playa," identifies a "successful person." In the song "Wanna be a Balla," the popular chorus states, "Wanna be a balla/ shot calla/ twenty inch blades on an Impala" (Lil Troy "Wanna be a Balla"). The "balla" is associated with material items, such as "blades," which are custom chrome wheels. Another popular term that originated in Houston is "crunk," which means "exciting." When Southern rappers say "get it crunk," he or she means "get the party going." The conversational word that is used in the South to affirm something that has been said is "already." If a statement is agreed upon, the proper response is "already."

Just as the East and West Coast have their own terms to replace standard English words, so does the South. Cars are referred to as "slabs" and "hoo-doo's." Custom wheels are referred to as "swangaz" and "choppers." Southern rap speaks constantly of "wood" and "screens." "Wood" identifies the woodgrain that is found on the interior of many luxury cars. "Screens" are mobile video/television systems that are installed in cars. It is popular in the South to get as many as six or more television screens installed in a car as a sign of prosperity. One Houston term that is rather interesting is "sternin wheel." This term for "steering wheel" is merely a variation of the original term to give it a "Southern" feel. Another term which is a variation of the original term is "twankies." This term identifies "twenties," which are twenty-inch custom wheels. The word twenty is altered to give the word style and originality. "Candy" is a term that identifies custom paint jobs popular in the Houston area. In Houston, Cadillacs are referred to as "Boss Hoggs," a

reference to a character who drives a Cadillac in the 1980's television show *The Dukes of Hazzard*. "Pop trunk" describes a trend in which neon lights are placed in car trunks for display. Cars play a large part in the culture of Southern hip-hop and are seen as the central representation of wealth and success.

Just as terms for marijuana are popular on the East Coast, West Coast, and in American society as a whole, they are also popular in Southern hip-hop. Marijuana is referred to as "dank," "swishas," "fry," and "killa." The term "swisha" derives from the Swisher Sweet cigar brand. The popularity of this term is evident by the presence of it in the name "Swisha House," which is the name of a popular Houston rap group. "Fry" identifies a dangerous practice in the South where marijuana is mixed with embalming fluid. Sayings such as "blow some kill," which means "smoke some marijuana" have become popular in the Texas area. The use of "kill" is a short form of the word "killa." "Yak" is the shortened form of "cognac," which is the alcohol of choice among Southern "ballers." Another popular drug term in the South is "syrup" or "lean." In a popular Houston rap song, artist R.P. Cola states, "Man, hold up, I got too much lean in my cup" (R.P. Cola "Too Much Lean in My Cup"). "Syrup" or "lean" is a drink that consists of codeine syrup mixed with soft drinks. In his song "Mann," Houston rap artist Big Moe states, "got a potent ass purple Sprite." (Big Moe "Mann"). This identifies "syrup" which is a purple color when mixed with the Sprite soft drink. Drugs and alcohol have always been a part of American culture that is linked with various vernacular terms.

These words are not only popular among those who are a part of hip-hop culture. These words have spread to every race and social class in America. In *Black English*, Dillard states, "There is no reason whatsoever to insist that the word, or any other word,

once into the everyday English of White Southerners, could not also spread to white Northerners” (Dillard 219). This statement identifies how the dialect of Southern Blacks spread throughout the U.S. after slavery. Just as this Black Southern dialect spread throughout the country, Southern hip-hop dialect has also had the same effect.

Renaming cities has also become a popular practice in the South. Every city that is a major part of hip-hop in the South has at least one or two alternate names. Houston is referred to as ‘H-Town,’ Atlanta is “Tha A.T.L.,” and New Orleans is “Tha 504” because of its 504 area code. Certain phrases have become exclusively associated with the Houston area. Phrases such as “I’mma come through,” “Break them boyz off,” and “What’s tha deal?” can be frequently heard in the music of Houston artists. Houston rap group, the Botany Boyz state “I’mma come thru with tha grill and grain/ I’mma come thru with 50 rocks on my ring” (Botany Boyz “We Throwed”). In this song, every line of this verse begins with “I’mma come thru.” These phrases are sometimes repeated at the beginning of a line of rap to give the song a sense of repetitiveness. “Throwed” is a Houston term that is now used throughout the South. Something “throwed” is something “messed up” or “shocking.” “Plex” is another Houston hip-hop term. This means to “start trouble.” This dialect even categorizes people based upon skin color. In the South, a light-skinned African-American is referred to as a “yellowbone” or “red.” These are terms that were already a part of Black dialect. Houston is also known for inventing its own form of rap known as “screw.” This style, popularized by an artist from the south side of Houston, D.J. Screw, has grown to enormous proportions since its beginnings. This style has spread through the distribution of underground tapes known as “screw tapes” which take popular rap songs and slow down the pitch of the songs. This is called

“screwing” the sound. This results in a slow sound which has spread all over the nation. Many “screw” fans state that the music sounds better when combined with marijuana use.

Clothing names have also felt the effect of Southern hip-hop. Versace sunglasses are seen as a status symbol in Houston. These shades are referred to as “Saces,” yet another instance where the original word is abbreviated. Platinum and gold necklaces with diamonds and other elaborate designs are also a part of this fashion. This type of necklace is referred to as a “piece & chain.” Gold and platinum teeth are also a popular style among Southern hip-hoppers. These teeth are usually referred to as “golds” or being “grilled out.” Terms for certain types of women also exist within this language style. In Houston’s hip-hop lyrics, a woman who is a “golddigger” is referred to as a “bopper.” This derives from the word “teeny bopper” and is yet another use of hip-hop word shortening. An attractive woman is referred to as a “star.” A woman with no class or dignity is referred to as a “chickenhead.” In his song entitled “Chickenheads,” Memphis, Tennessee rapper Project Pat states, “bald head, scaliwag, ain’t got no hair in back” (Project Pat “Chickenheads”). This describes the unrefined appearances of these women referred to as “chickenheads.” This is a term that is shared with the East Coast. Social events also receive alternate names in the Southern hip-hop culture. One popular college event is an annual beach party that is held in Galveston, Texas. This event is known in Southern hip-hop as “The Kappa.” This name is a short form of “Kappa Beach Party,” the name of the event when it was associated with Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Even though the event is no longer affiliated with this organization, the event is still referred to as “The Kappa.” The influence of the dialect of Southern hip-hop is truly evident throughout the South.

Due to the widespread success of its hip-hop artists, New Orleans has also contributed greatly to the language of Southern hip-hop. Artists such as Master P and Juvenile have popularized the local slang of the New Orleans area. “Whodi” has become a popular term that means “friend.” A popular song by the New Orleans group, The 504 Boyz, states “where you at whodi, I’m right here whodi” (504 Boyz “Whodi”). The repetitive nature of this chorus resulted in this regional word being spread to many other regions. Other examples of words that have the same meaning in this area are “lil’ daddy,” “lil’ mama,” and “playboy.” The term “big body” which identifies a large luxury car is a phrase that New Orleans rappers have popularized. Changing the sound of certain words is a large part of the Black dialect in Louisiana. The most common examples of this is saying “yurn” instead of “yours” and saying “scurred” as opposed to “scared.” In his platinum-selling single “Shake It Fast,” New Orleans rapper Mystikal states, “don’t be scurred...” (Mystikal “Shake It Fast”). The use of this sound added to the commercial appeal of this song by making it verbally unique. A song by New Orleans artist B.G. popularized the term “bling bling.” This means “to shine.” This term is now used in other hip-hop regions to denote “shining” or “bright.” New Orleans also originated the term “stun’n.” This means “showing off.” This derives from “stunt.” A stunt is usually a spectacular act, so this identifies someone who possesses spectacular cars, jewelry, clothes, etc.

Florida plays two roles in the hip-hop community. Florida is on the East Coast of the U.S. and it is a part of the Southern U.S. This has resulted in the development of a unique identity. The most popular phrase that has emerged from this area is “hoochie mama.” This word represents a woman with no dignity, similar to “bopper” (Texas) and

“skeezer” (New York). In their song “Hoochie Mama,” controversial Miami group 2 Live Crew state, “you ain’t nothin’ but a hoochie mama/ hoodrat, hoodrat hoochie mama” (2 Live Crew “Hoochie Mama”). The word “hoodrat” is a West Coast term that also has the same meaning. The style of music that is popular in this area is known as “Miami Bass.” This name identifies the heavy bass tones in the music of this area. This name has led to this style simply being called “bass” music. This style of hip-hop is also popular in the Atlanta area. Due to many hit songs, Miami has established its own identity in hip-hop culture.

The names of Southern rap artists are also interesting. Houston rap artists use names such as Scarface, Yungstar, and Slim Thug. Scarface, one of the most popular Southern rappers, takes his name from the film *Scarface*. The main character in this movie, Tony Montana, is frequently idolized by hip-hop fans because of what he represents in this film. His rise to riches from being a poor Cuban immigrant is hip-hop’s shining example of what one can achieve. The name Yungstar is a variation of “Youngster.” The variation of this name adds the word “star” to now give the meaning “young star.” Slim Thug shows the influence of West Coast rapper 2Pac. The central theme of 2Pac’s records was “thug life,” highlighting the life of a “thug.” His strong influence has resulted in the appearance of the word “thug” in names such as “Slim Thug.”

Everyday language in Southern hip-hop is almost a language of its own. Many areas use different words to express the same meanings. Whereas “stun’n” means “showing off” in New Orleans, “actin’ bad” means the same in Houston. Differences in pronunciation also determine what region a rapper is from. For example, on the East

Coast, “shorty” is a term used to refer to a female. However, in Atlanta, the word has the same meaning, but is pronounced “shawtee.” The presence of the Southern dialect is the difference between the words from a regional perspective. Differences such as this enable one to determine where the rapper is from when it comes to the language of hip-hop.

The language practices of Southern hip-hop involve some of the most unique words in the entire hip-hop vernacular. The fact that the South has emerged as a true powerhouse in the music industry is a testament of the perseverance of these artists. For many years, Southern hip-hop was seen as “country” and “simplistic.” Now it is recognized as one of the pillars of the hip-hop community.



## **RAPPERS AND POETS: ANALYZING THE LANGUAGE OF HIP-HOP LYRICS**

Hip-hop has been compared to poetry since its emergence in the Bronx in the late 1970's. The rhyme of its lyrics is the most obvious reason for comparison. Hip-hop's depth and expression of feeling is also an aspect that links it to poetry. In this chapter, hip-hop's premier lyrics will be analyzed and then compared to works of poetry. Jean Toomer is the poet that will be compared to hip-hop lyricists in this chapter. Toomer was an African-American poet who covered a wide range of topics and feelings just as hip-hop does. The rapper and the poet possess similarities that are shockingly evident.

*The Source* is recognized as the premier source of information regarding hip-hop culture. It is the top-selling hip-hop magazine. This magazine focuses on all aspects of hip-hop culture. Due to its enormous influence, the magazine receives mixed reviews from the hip-hop community. This is especially evident in regard to the magazine's album ratings. Each month, the magazine rates all of the hip-hop album releases. This has become a process which is greeted by fan resistance when an artist receives a low rating. Some rap artists and fans feel that the magazine has become too powerful and gives biased opinions. There are also those who feel that it is truly "The Source" for hip-hop.

One popular feature of this magazine is its “Hip-hop Quotable” column. This column showcases the best song lyrics of each month. Many times, rap lyrics are difficult to understand with music. Also, few hip-hop artists print their lyrics with the CD. This column gives the reader a chance to truly analyze the lyrics. This process is important because hip-hop lyrics are a direct reflection of what young America really feels. In *Language, Rhythm, and Sound*, Joseph K. Adjaye states, “the study of popular culture(s) has undergone a dramatic transformation, moving from the periphery and neglected backwaters of academic disciplines to becoming a legitimate field of serious inquiry unto itself” (Adjaye 1). The legitimacy of hip-hop culture has become clearly evident through the fact that it grosses over one billion dollars each year. In the April 2001 issue, lyrics from “Benefits “ by Kam are featured. Kam is a West Coast artist who is known for his social and political commentary. The portion of this song that was selected as April 2001’s “Hip-hop Quotable” states,

*“Pistol grippin’/  
 Trick flippin’/  
 Click trippin’/  
 Sounds bumpin’/  
 Get your body jumpin’/  
 Like Scottie Pippen/  
 Dippin’ and ridin’/  
 West Coast eastsiders/  
 Where the blue and red flames/  
 Like cigarette lighters/  
 We street fighters/  
 Like the video game/  
 No pity, no shame/*

*An' we just tell the police/  
 Any ol' thang and remain silent/  
 Never nonviolent/  
 Once you aggress/  
 God bless Dr. King but nigga/  
 We gon' make a mess/  
 An' you see stress/  
 Success is the best revenge/  
 I don't get into shit/  
 Unless it offends friends/  
 To be or not to be?/  
 Took me a minute to see/  
 That ain't the question/  
 The question is/  
 What's in it for me?/  
 Ain't nuthin' free/  
 You got to make it worth my while/  
 I never trust a smilin' face/  
 'Cause they just refiled my case/  
 To go to trial/  
 The words cut like a knife/  
 I'm out for money, luxury/  
 Good homes and friendships/  
 In all walks of life"*

(Kam "Benefits", 2001 Hard Tyme/JCOR Records).

The most obvious aspect of the language used in these lyrics is the dropping of the "g" at the end of words. This surface variation has been common in hip-hop language since its beginning. The use of "grippin'" instead of "gripping" adds the hip-hop sound

to the words. Dropping the “g” from these words gives them a “street” feel as opposed to the standard English sound. In the third line, Kam uses the word “click.” In hip-hop this word means “your group of friends.” This word possesses the same meaning as the word “clique.” In this line, “trippin’” means “causing trouble.” When he states “Click trippin’,” he is expressing that he is not getting along with his “click.” The word “bumpin’” in the fourth line means “playing music loud.” When you are playing loud music, you are “bumpin’” your music. The simile “Get your body jumpin’ like Scottie Pippen” is an example of how rap uses similes. Kam chooses to use basketball star Scottie Pippen in this line because of his jumping ability. Rappers use similes like “rich as Bill Gates” and “dope like heroin” to enhance the appeal of their rhymes. The use of these similes is seen as a way of showing how skilled you are as a lyricist. The more creative and obscure these similes are, the more respect you receive as a lyricist. “Dippin’ and ridin’” from the seventh line simply alludes to “cruising in your car.” When he states, “blue and red flames,” he is referring to the Los Angeles gangs, the Crips and Bloods. This reference is present in the rhyme to reinforce the West Coast’s identity. The gang problem in Los Angeles has always been a factor that has affected West Coast’s hip-hop identity. The rhyme continues on with more similes that match Kam’s “hardcore” delivery. The lyrics in this song give a clear example of how hip-hop uses language to establish its sense of style and culture.

Another shining example of hip-hop language is the March 2001 hip-hop quotable. This example is a portion of “What If” by Fredro Starr. Fredro Starr is a New York rapper/actor who is a part of the cast of the television show *Moesha*. This passage states,

*What if Notorious was here?*  
*What if he was around?*  
*Would all these ni\*\*as claim to be king?*  
*Who would wear the crown?*  
*Yo, what if Pac was still thuggin?*  
*What if he was alive?*  
*Would all these ni\*\*as be screamin' out ride or die?*  
*What if Milli Vanilli's record never skipped onstage?*  
*They'd be the illest con ni\*\*as in the game today*  
*Yo, what if Jordan never had Scottie?*  
*What if Sammy never ratted Gotti?*  
*What if New York without Giuliani?*  
*What if Mike Tyson fought Ali in his prime?*  
*What if Will Smith got gangsta and start cursing in rhymes?*  
*What if Erick never met Parrish?*  
*Think they'd be makin dollars? ...*  
*What if Eminem was black?*  
*Would he have sold five mil?*  
*Or would he be one out of five million rappers*  
*With no deal? ...*

(Fredro Starr "What If", 2001 Koch Records).

The lines of this song use hip-hop expressiveness and language to convey numerous messages. The reference to "Notorious" identifies the name of deceased rap legend, Notorious B-I-G. The reference to "Pac" identifies another deceased rap legend, Tupac Shakur. This line points out how many rappers have imitated Tupac's style and language since his death. The next lines refer to Tupac Shakur's slogan, "Ride or Die." This slogan

meaning “go all out,” began to be used in conversational form after Shakur’s death. The rhyme continues on with references to recording artists, athletes, and Mafia figures. By using the names of popular media figures, Starr creates a song that a wide range of listeners can relate to. The creative touch that Fredro Starr adds to this song is based around the repeated use of “what if.” This is the first time that this technique has been used in hip-hop.

The creativity that rap possesses shows its definite poetic value. The lyrics of hip-hop have been compared to poetry by hip-hop enthusiasts since their beginning. There are many rappers who can easily be compared to poets. Jean Toomer was a Southern poet who possessed many unique qualities that can be compared easily to today’s hip-hop artists. Throughout his writing career, he explored many different topics in his poetry. Toomer’s overall versatility and poetical talent provide a unique comparison to today’s rappers.

Over time, hip-hop culture has developed its own “abstract” style. A popular song by hip-hop group De La Soul is titled, “Potholes in my Lawn.” This title can take on several meanings. Its apparent central meaning is “my problems” or “roadblocks.” De La Soul marked the beginning of abstract hip-hop which involves intriguing, obscure lyrics and unique musical patterns. This abstract style can be easily compared to poetry. Jean Toomer’s poetry expressed many abstract ideas. During his abstract period he created poems which were rich in symbolism and possessed an abstract quality. He also experimented with form during this phase of his writing. His use of unique form consisted of use of everything from all capital letters to one-word lines. This form can be easily compared to how hip-hop changes the spelling and pronunciation of standard

English words. The symbolic nature and meaning of Toomer's poems appear to be their overall dominant feature. An example of the personality and color that these poems possess is evident in lines from "Five Vignettes" which state, "The old man, at ninety, / Eating peaches, / Is he not afraid of worms?" (Toomer 7-9). These lines have a certain appeal that causes the reader to wonder about several different concepts. First, the line makes you wonder if the man is not afraid because of his wisdom. Second, it intrigues the reader because most people do not worry about worms when eating a peach. Also, the line indicates that the poet may be afraid of worms being in the peaches. His tone implies that the man should beware of the peaches because they most likely contain worms. This type of word play and mental imagery is present throughout this phase of Toomer's poetry. This type of word play is also present in "abstract" rap.

The emergence of abstract hip-hop added many new dimensions to the culture. It sparked a new style of dress which strayed away from designer clothes and flashy jewelry. This new style featured dreadlocks, natural, unprocessed hair styles, and vintage clothing. This style ignored the previous "rules" of hip-hop lyrics and featured lyrics that were sometimes obscure. An example of this is "I Left My Wallet in El Segundo" by A Tribe Called Quest. The entire song is about the group's lyricist leaving his wallet at a restaurant. This abstract style is also evident in the rhymes of rap artist Kool Keith. His song's chorus states, "blue flowers, growing by the purple pond." (Kool Keith "Blue Flowers"). "Abstract" hip-hop made hip-hop lyrics more "poetic," thus creating an even closer connection between rappers and poets.

The abstract hip-hop phase can be directly compared to Toomer's objective consciousness period. This period consisted of a return to his abstract themes with

touches of nature and religion. This phase also contained a few poems which were longer than his previous work. He usually wrote poems which were relatively short in length. This period's experimentation with longer poems further exhibited his range and depth. These poems can be easily matched to abstract hip-hop. Groups such as De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and Del Tha Funkee Homosapien wrote songs which are similar to Toomer's poetic style in this phase of his poetry. The poems in this Toomer period explore everyday issues and objects using methods that hide the poems' meanings. Toomer's language becomes noticeably more eloquent in this phase. "Angelic Eve" gives clear examples of this language with lines like, "Strong hands have shaded your clear sight/ Within luxurious slumber,"(41). The imagery in Toomer's language is at its peak in these poems. "White Arrow" contains a powerful opening line which states, "Your force is greater than your use of it" (1). This line can be interpreted in several ways. One interpretation could be that it is stating that one is capable of more than what he or she can imagine. Another perspective could interpret it as saying that one has more power than he will ever use. The wide range of lines such as this allow his work to be appreciated in many ways. The power of individual lines in this period of his work is evident in many ways. In "The Gods are Here," the opening lines are "This is no mountain/ But a house"(1-2). This line's power sets the tone for the rest of the poem. It makes a statement that it is both humble and powerful. This is a combination that is rarely expressed effectively in poetry. Toomer's desire to be well-rounded in his literary style shines through in several ways. His noticeable attempt to focus on a new phase in his poetry shows his concern with this. He rarely wanders back into his previous styles like many poets do. Occasionally, there are hints of his ancestral consciousness period,



but overall this phase of his work remains unique. An analysis of this period gives insight into Toomer's personal life and views.

The abstract rappers share many similarities with Toomer. They subscribe to a school of thought that differs from the majority of hip-hop artists. Their music does not focus on record sales or fame. It is primarily focused on their creative freedom as artists. In *Jean Toomer*, Brian Benson states, "Toomer was not in pursuit of success. Rather he sought the truth"(130). This is an important statement in regard to his work. A poet that is in pursuit of success does not usually take the chances that Toomer took. Toomer took chances by changing his poetry so drastically. He risked not being accepted with his new styles and changing periods. His lack of concern for pleasing anyone contributed greatly to the effect of his poetry. His search for truth is evident through his experimentation with so many forms and styles. The abstract rappers have the exact same views as Toomer in regard to their work. Toomer was constantly searching for his true self and the best way to represent that self. His identification with "the self" is reminiscent of Walt Whitman. The qualities which he possessed are shared by many of the great poets and writers. "The Blue Meridian," clearly his longest poem in length, is an interesting work. This work is unique because it combines many of his styles in one poem. This poem shows a presence of his ancestral consciousness period through references to African heritage. The length of this poem is surprising compared to his other poetry. Most of his poems are all about the same length. "The Blue Meridian" contains many changes of form and style within its stanzas. It is similar to his most popular work, *Cane*. His poetry remains separate from *Cane* because it identifies with the many sides of Jean Toomer as a poet. Critics have labeled *Cane* as one of the best works of the Harlem Renaissance period. Toomer was not

satisfied with being labeled as only a Harlem Renaissance poet. The poems in this phase of his poetry makes this evident through their universality.

Like Toomer's poetry, hip-hop presents many complex ideas. "Diary of a Madman" by the Gravediggaz takes a trip through the mind of a psychotic killer. This song has chilling lines like, "I saw the tortured brutal murder of my father/ so my brain became stained with the horror/ I'm having reoccurring nightmares/ of being soaking wet, strapped down to the electric chair" (Gravediggaz "Diary of a Madman"). This song journeys into complex visions of murder and suicide. Toomer addresses complex ideas just as the Gravediggaz do in this song. He also was able to analyze the simplest of concepts. One of Toomer's lines states, "A Chinese baby fell/And cried as any other" (14-15). This line is showing how all babies are the same, regardless of color or race. Even though these are two short, succinct lines, these lines make a powerful statement. These lines so calmly make the statement that "all people are created equal." One prime example of hip-hop and its ability to address a complex issue is "C.R.E.A.M." by the Wu-Tang Clan. This song, mentioned in an earlier chapter, uses this acronym to symbolize money. Money becomes "cream," which has become a symbolic title. In the poem "Water," Toomer simply states, "It needs a container" (12). This statement, although brief and simple, brings up a large concept. In one line, it sums up the power and greatness of water as an element. The power of the imagery that a poet creates is clearly matched by the rapper's street imagery.

Hip-hop is also able to create powerful effects when it comes to love. Until "I Need Love" by L.L. Cool J., hip-hop did not focus on love songs. Since then, hip-hop has produced a mixture of R&B (rhythm and blues) music and hip-hop called "new jack

swing.” A “new jack” is someone young or someone that is new to something. “Swing” symbolizes that this is a style of music. “New Jack Swing” evolved into today’s modern rap ballads. Today’s hip-hop discusses love in songs like Ja Rule’s “Put It On Me” which states, “Where would I be without you, I know you’re tired of being lonely, so baby girl put it on me” (Ja Rule “Put It On Me”). In these lyrics, “put it on me” is a slogan that means “give me all of your love.” The love poems that Toomer wrote share the same feeling and honesty that hip-hop’s love songs possess. These poems are descriptive and emotional in their depictions of love. In “Face,” Toomer says, “Her eyes-/ mist of tears/ condensing on the flesh below” (8-9). These two descriptive and detailed lines give the poem a visual nature. The reader can actually see the woman and feel her emotions as she cries. The line breaks are also important in these lines. The points at which Toomer chooses to start new lines give added weight to the individual lines. Overall, the poet and the rapper successfully express feelings of love.

Public Enemy provided the soundtrack for the hip-hop movement toward Black nationalism. With lines like, “Farrakhan’s a prophet and I think you oughta listen to/ what he could say to you,” (Public Enemy “Bring the Noise”) this group presented a strong message. This line encourages support of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, known for his Pro-Black stance and promotion of events such as the “Million Man March.” Toomer’s poetry went through an ancestral consciousness period that can be compared to the hip-hop Black Nationalist movement. This phase is characterized by culture-oriented poems that depict Black life and history in America. The Black pride trend that emerged in hip-hop culture from the late 1980’s to the mid-1990’s provides a fitting comparison to this Toomer period. In their work *Jean Toomer*, Brian Joseph Benson and Mabel Mayle

Dillard explain Toomer's thoughts by stating, "Toomer's extensive reading had convinced him that the spirit of the black had not been satisfactorily expressed" (27).

This attitude is evident in this phase because his poetry seems to capture the true spirit of Blacks in America. He expresses a sense of pride in "November Cotton Flower" when he states "Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear, / Beauty so sudden for that time of year" (13-14). The first line shows the contrast between love and courage in the culture. The love portion of the line represents the strong bond of love which exists among the traditional Black family. The courage represented by "without a trace of fear" is the courage to fight for equality. The way that these lines represent many different concepts gives them a depth that adds to the overall poem. The fact that these are the poem's two ending lines gives them additional substance. In comparison, Benson and Dillard discuss Toomer's mission by stating "Toomer wanted to capture these emotions of the "pure Negro" so that he might create art forms"(27). In these poems, he indeed captures these emotions and creates artful poetry. "Portrait in Georgia" is one of the best poems from this period. In this poem, he compares a white woman to the objects used in a lynching. This is an imaginative and powerful poem that clearly expresses its point. Its point is that a black man in this time period should see a white woman as a ticket to his own lynching. Historically, many African-American men were lynched for merely looking at white women. This poem is also interesting because it attributes an evil nature to the woman. This plays off of the fact that only an evil mind could lynch another human being. The lessons that these poems teach in this phase of his poetry are vivid and noticeable. This provides an ideal comparison to the hip-hop stance on interracial dating. The overall attitude in hip-hop culture discourages interracial dating. It exists, but it has a negative

effect upon an artist's image. An example of this is "Let the Rhythm Hit Em," by rap legends Eric B. & Rakim. The group received criticism for this music video because it featured numerous white female dancers. The majority of rap videos feature only African-American females as dancers or actors. This is directly related to the view in the Black community that those who date other races are "sell-outs." Rap artists are trying to portray a "real" image that relates to other Blacks. Violating this unwritten rule puts their social standing at risk.

Toomer's poems in this period are focused upon Black culture, yet these poems have a universal appeal. Toomer's life experiences played a key role in his writings. His experiences in the South firmly grounded his identity with Black culture. Although he was fair-skinned and appeared white, he always remained close to his Black roots. The influence that life experiences have is a major factor in the subject matter of almost every hip-hop lyric. In Robert B. Jones' *Jean Toomer and the Prison-House of Thought*, he discusses Toomer's experiences in Georgia. He states, "Living as a black American in a small, segregated, Southern community liberated his latent identification with black folk culture"(28). The experiences that Toomer faced throughout his life shaped his mind for the type of writing that he is known for. This compares directly to how urban environments have strongly influenced hip-hop's music.

Religion is an area that many types of poetry explore. Rap music has discussed religion in some instances, but not many. The ideals of Christianity are mainly present in Christian rap. Christian rap is a style of hip-hop that has never really reached the mainstream. The only true religious presence in hip-hop is Islam. The presence of references to the Islamic Five Percenters, mentioned in the first chapter, has spread

Islamic ideologies to the mainstream. This group is known for its alteration of words such as “tricknology” to replace “technology.” This change implies that technology “tricks” the masses. Another example of this is “United Snakes of America” instead of “United States of America.” This change implies that the U.S. government is led by “snakes.” The religious views of the Five Percenters appear to be the most attractive theological concepts for hip-hop artists. Like hip-hop, Toomer also had a unique identification with God and religion. His poems show a search for a true understanding of God. This search translates directly into truth about God and his relationship with man. Toomer attempts to inspire man in his religious writings. He uses lines that encourage faith and focus upon creating a better “self” in regard to God. This strong religious background again touches upon the significance of the Church in Black culture. He compares the Church to all areas of society and shows its relation to them. He uses religion to question our views on war, racism, and almost every other pressing societal problem. Toomer’s poetry began to go through a Christian existential period. This was the poetry that he wrote toward the end of his life. The key element of this phase of his work is his language. He mastered the ability to discuss a topic from a distance in this period. His previous references to God were obvious and straightforward. In this period, he touches upon those same issues, however he skillfully places them in the background. Surprisingly, he wrote very few poems in this phase of his writing. This is interesting because it seems as if this is the period that he had been striving to attain. His poems are almost like Bible verses in this period. His familiarity with the Bible is evident in many ways in these poems. He sounds almost prophetic in his delivery of language.

Hip-hop has its own prophetic works that emerged as a result of the music's growth. The lyrical content of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B-I-G brought a "prophetic" touch to hip-hop. Before their untimely deaths, both of these rappers spoke frequently of their deaths. Shakur's lyrics were filled with references to how he would die. Notorious B-I-G's debut album was entitled "Ready to Die." On this album, the last song depicts an apparent suicide. Both of these rappers were killed by gunfire in two separate incidents. These deaths have been frequently linked because of the bitter feud that existed among the two before their deaths. The constant references to death in their music crowned these two hip-hop legends as the "prophets" of rap. These artists can be easily compared to Toomer in his "prophetic" phase. He allows a constant theme of morality to exist among his works in this period. His religious views were always mixed and never favored one religion over another. Toomer experimented with Quaker religious philosophy later in his life. He attempted to bridge the gap between this religious philosophy and others. This proved to be a frustrating attempt for him. This increased interest in religion brought a confessional tone to his poetry. His poems in this stage tend to be personal confessions of faith and righteousness. There is also a sense of alienation in these works. This alienation is interesting because it can be traced back to his childhood. The alienation of Toomer as a child reappears in Toomer's later years. In regard to his practice of Quaker religion, Robert B. Jones states, "his acceptance of Quaker idealism actually further alienated him from the concept of God as he had come to understand it"(132). This shows how his conflicts of religious thought left him in a deeper state of moral alienation. This struggle for understanding of God contributed greatly to the changing winds of his poetry.

The struggle with moral and religious issues in hip-hop exists mainly among the Five Percenters. Five Percenters are considered righteous, yet are allowed to drink alcohol, smoke marijuana, and use explicit lyrics in their songs. These activities are seen as “unholy” by society because we disassociate them with religion. However, Five Percenters do not practice these same disassociations. This brings about the issue of whether their actions are even “immoral,” because this does not violate their own moral standards. Toomer’s struggle with moral issues led him to view society in a different light. His moral issues also tied into racial issues. Robert B. Jones states, “Despite all evidence to the contrary, Toomer believed that America was evolving into an amalgamated, raceless society”(137). His views were obviously idealistic considering the turbulent state of race relations during his lifetime and in the present. This ideal view of the world allowed him to write in a world separate of that which was all around him. The religious phases that Toomer experienced directly compare to the poetical phases that he experienced. The effect that religion has upon poetry is evidently not as strong in regard to hip-hop and its culture.

Like poetry, hip-hop is filled with references to self. The majority of hip-hop lyrics focus on promoting the individual’s greatness. In his classic song, “I’m Bad,” L.L. Cool J. starts off by stating, “No rapper can rap quite like I can/ I take a muscle bound man, put his face in the sand” (L.L. Cool J “I’m Bad”). The “self” is the most common topic in hip-hop lyrics, especially those from the East Coast. The references to the “self” are abundant in some of Toomer’s poems. Two lines that sum up Toomer’s mind state in regard to the “self” are evident in “Not For Me.” In these lines he states, “Of the thousand things mind could write/ Guide it to the essential, hold it,”(12-13). These lines reflect



Toomer's goal of writing only that which is needed. He believed that it was necessary for him to write poems which were spiritually uplifting. These poems give spiritual guidance and serve as testaments of his own personal faith. Toomer's poems clearly show his development of self and his spiritual growth.

Hip-hop documents the lives and experiences of its artists. Toomer's poems also appear to be documentation of his own personal life and its changes. His poems focus upon emotion in many ways. Several of them focus upon emotions toward God while others focus upon emotions toward other humans. The overall themes of soul searching and faith weave in and out of every line of these poems. This period stands out among the rest because it represents the achievement of his lifelong goals. To fully understand these many phases of his poetry, one must fully understand his personal life. His youth played a large role in the formation of the thoughts that produced these various styles of poetry. Being from a broken home, he faced many changes in his youth. His grandfather was the center of the family structure that he kept himself detached from. Family life also plays an important role in hip-hop culture. Numerous lyrics have been written about family life, especially in regard to "missing" fathers. Basketball superstar Shaquille O'Neal, who is also a rap artist, wrote a song entitled "Biological Didn't Bother." This song discusses the fact that he feels that his stepfather is his true father.

In regard to Toomer's family situation, his grandfather was a politician and led a life that was uncommon for a Black man in that time period. This affected many of Toomer's views. This is probably one of the influences that is responsible for Toomer's desire to be universal. His family interacted with culture outside of the culture that most Blacks faced during segregation. This attitude is evident in Toomer's desire to not be

seen as just a Black writer. The only presence of a similar focus in hip-hop is the desire of some artists to sell records to all racial groups. This attitude is mainly sparked by larger financial gain as opposed to a desire to be accepted by all cultures.

The many phases of Toomer's poetry show that he wanted to be seen in the same light as all American poets. His youth was filled with mischief which he was continually punished for in his grandfather's strict household. He also explored nature frequently during this time. This early experience with the appreciation of nature definitely returns in his later poetry. He was also observant of people and their actions. This continued throughout his life and is evident in his detailed analysis of people in his poems. His grandfather's attempt to limit Toomer's reading caused him to be more interested in literature. As a result of this deep interest, he read many different types of literature which is evident in his versatility as a poet. This influence from literature can be compared to the influence upon hip-hop from films and television. Hip-hop is heavily influenced by these sources in regard to lyrical references and artist names. Many rappers name themselves after movie characters. Examples of this are names like "Scarface" (taken from the film *Scarface*) and "Pastor Troy" (from the character "Castor Troy" in the film, *The Usual Suspects*).

Hip-hop fashion is also a factor that affects the public perception of hip-hop. Toomer's appearance allowed him to be accepted by the white students when he entered college. This played a key role in his ability to observe all levels of society and not be confined to a segregated existence. The hip-hop look and language does not fit as easily into mainstream society. The baggy jeans, bandanas, hats turned backwards, and "cornrow" hairstyles of hip-hop are seen as "thuggish" in American society. Toomer's

experience interacting with other races definitely contributed to the universality of his poems as a Black poet. Many Black poets of the time remained within the genre of Black poetry. This was most likely due to the fact that these poets were not exposed to other cultures because of the shackles of segregation. Toomer was fortunate to be able to be a part of many different experiences with culture. The attitude toward the publishing of Black writers was also a major issue of his time. His disinterest in writing the type of literature that publishers wanted from Black writers put him in a tight situation.

Publishers did not want material from Blacks that was not of this sort, so Toomer learned that it was important to hide his racial identity. This situation is present in the music industry as a result of sales. Rap artists are sometimes forced to record songs merely because that particular style is currently popular. This is done regardless of whether the lyricist agrees with what the lyrics are saying. This desire to write whatever he wanted played a large role in the work that Toomer produced. If he had went with the norm, he would be seen today as a completely different writer. The experiences of Toomer's life are a direct reflection of his poetry and the message that he was trying to get across.

The poems of Toomer's most popular work, *Cane*, have a distinct musical quality. This musical quality provides a key comparison to hip-hop lyrics. It highlights the fact that hip-hop is basically African-American poetry. The musical quality of the poems in this Toomer work add a sense of culture in regard to the musical roots of Black culture. The poetry in *Cane* is important in regard to the many phases of his work. The main reason that these poems are significant is the fact that this is his most popular work. Many people see Jean Toomer through *Cane*, so it is important to analyze the work that he is most known for. This work contains both short stories and poetry. It is considered

by many to be a “novel-poem.” The poems in this work are Toomer’s ancestral consciousness poems at their best. His portrait of slaves through vivid language appears throughout the poems in this work. Toomer addresses beauty in the poem “Karintha” by focusing on her soul rather than her physical beauty. *Cane* is characterized by strong characters who are unique and colorful. However, these characters are presented and later not developed fully. The entire work has a folk tale appeal that is laced with an abundant dose of culture. With this work, he addressed issues that had been addressed by other Black writers. However, his handling of this subject matter was entirely unique in its approach. He strayed away from this style in his later work to move toward a more universal message. Brian Benson describes the situation perfectly when he states, “His creative powers were lost in his struggle for racial anonymity”(98). This is a valuable statement because *Cane* was the high point of his literary career. His desire to separate himself from this style produced the later phases of his work. These new styles were not appreciated on a level equivalent to *Cane*. *Cane* is the essential work to study in regard to the poetry of Jean Toomer. In comparison, hip-hop artists usually have one work which stands out above the rest. This is usually the artist’s first work. This is so common in the music industry that a failed second album is referred to as the “sophomore jinx.”

Jean Toomer was a poet with a unique, extraordinary talent. He had the ability to maintain his poetical genius throughout his many personal struggles. Although some phases were more effective than others, the overall quality of his work places him among the best American poets. His versatility emerges as his most dominant trait as a poet. This combination of versatility and pure poetical skill places Toomer in a class of his own

among American poets. These characteristics make him the ideal comparison to hip-hop's young "poets."

## CONCLUSION

The language of hip-hop is a topic that has significant relevance in regards to language. Judging from the amount of hip-hop words that have entered the mainstream, its effect upon language is powerful. This language has spread to all media forms and is now popular in Europe, Asia, and Canada. The power of this language gives those who invent and maintain it the status and success that he or she deserves. Hip-hop artists like Sean “Puffy” Combs and Master P are now estimated at net worth values of over \$300 million dollars. This language has produced “poets” that truly represent the younger generation. This culture was not expected to last long, yet it continues to thrive after just over twenty years in existence. Hip-hop is truly on its way to becoming the dominant musical culture of the new millennium.

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## VITA

E. Ron Kelley was born in San Antonio, Texas, on May 12, 1973, the son of Edmond C. Kelley Jr. and Margaret Kelley. After completing his work with honors at Theodore Roosevelt High School, San Antonio, Texas, in 1991, he entered the University of Texas at Austin in Austin, Texas. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Texas in 1996. In 1998, he entered the Graduate School of Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. He is currently teaching English, Speech Communication, and Media Technology at William B. Travis High School in Austin, Texas. He is the Program Director of Youthvue, the radio-television-film-music education division of Austin Independent School District's Communications Academy. He is also the President/CEO of Konfident Entertainment, an independent record label that he started in 1992. His professional and service memberships include: Member-Texas Classroom Teachers Association, Member- Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., Master Mason- John T. Maxey Lodge #74, 32<sup>nd</sup> Degree Mason- Lone Star Consistory #113, and Shriner- Moussa Temple #106.

Permanent Address: 1510 Baccarat  
San Antonio, Texas 78258

This thesis was typed by E. Ron Kelley.