
RAP MUSIC, IS IT REALLY ALL BAD? WHY HIP-HOP SCHOLARSHIP IS IMPORTANT

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This special section of *African American Research Perspectives* on hip-hop is a result of a call for papers that went out to participants at the Hip-Hop conference entitled, "The Hip Hop Paradigm: Mapping and Transcending its Boundaries" held at the University of Michigan in March 2001. The conference featured researchers, educators, and artists that focused on hip-hop culture (i.e., dance, deejaying, emceeing, and graffiti art) as a means of expression and subject of critical analysis. Some of the featured panelists included hip-hop scholar and keynote speaker, Dr. Tricia Rose, hip-hop pioneer, Afrika Bambaataa, and break-dancer, Crazy Legs. Conference presenters spoke on topics ranging from the use of hip-hop for political empowerment to its impact on female listeners. In building off the success of the conference, the purpose of this edition is to highlight the ways in which hip-hop music and culture are being studied and to challenge common associations between hip-hop and anti-social behavior.

The articles presented in this section offer a multi-faceted view of hip-hop culture with a focus on its potential to positively impact its audience. Dixon and Brooks largely argue that much of the criticism about rap's role in the declining moral standard among America's youth is unfounded. While it is true that rap music and videos contain violent and misogynist content and images, they argue that it is not clear how rap audiences actually interpret these messages and images. Researchers have paid little attention to the themes present within rap music and/or how these themes are interpreted, particularly among African American listeners. As Dixon and Brooks argue, more hip-hop scholarship is needed if we are to gain an accurate picture of how this increasingly popular genre affects its consumers and society at large.

Celious largely agrees with Dixon and Brooks' push for a critical assessment of rap's impact on its consumers. He argues that rap music has varying effects on its consumers based upon the demographic of the listener and the artists. In focusing on the use of misogynistic words like "bitch" in rap songs, he contends that black women ascribe different meanings to this word based upon the artist's gender. When male

artists use the word, black women perceive the word as oppressive, almost as a personal attack. When female artists use the word, however, it takes on multiple meanings. It could be empowering, oppressive, or just entertaining. Celious's work presents one example of the true complexity of consumers' interpretation of rap music.

Thompson and Brown argue that hip-hop may have implications for white listeners' racial attitudes. They review and present research that suggests that listening to rap music may be related to increased racial tolerance among whites. They contend that rap may increase whites' awareness of blacks' social conditions, leading whites to empathize with the plight of black Americans. Though more research is needed in this area, these findings suggest that rap may impact society in a number of ways. For instance, the impact of rap music on whites' racial attitudes may have a future impact on their support for race-based policies such as Affirmative Action as young white rap listeners grow older and become more politically vocal. Furthermore, movements such as *Brothers Keepers*, which was founded by black rappers in Germany in response to right-wing extremism, has resulted in several songs and performances that discuss their experiences and the problems with racial discrimination. This suggests that well designed initiatives using hip-hop could be instrumental in improving racial understanding in a multi-cultural context.

Just as rap may increase whites' awareness of blacks' social conditions, it may also serve to increase consumers' awareness of domestic violence issues. Troka discusses the ways in which the rap artist Eve makes domestic violence a societal problem. She argues that domestic violence is often seen as a personal issue that does not warrant public intervention. However, through the use of song and video to portray actual instances of domestic violence, Eve forces consumers to recognize the seriousness of this issue.

In addition to increasing racial tolerance and awareness of domestic violence, Watson argues that hip-hop has the potential to mobilize consumers to act upon their grievances. Watson asserts that the political involvement of past hip-hop artists should not be forgotten and that the potential still exists for rap to serve as a medium to mobilize young adults to discuss social problems and strategies to bring about change. While rap artists may no longer be rapping as frequently about social initiatives as they did over a decade ago, recent events suggest that politicians recognize rap artists' utility in mobilizing youth and young adults. For example, former Democratic State Representative Kwame Kilpatrick of Detroit called upon rappers, Common, The Roots, and others to lead a rally in metropolitan Detroit to call young adults to vote in the 2000 presidential election. Similarly, the National Democratic Party used a recorded public service announcement by Sean "Puffy" Combs – aka P. Diddy – to randomly phone call young adults to vote in the 2000 presidential elec-

tion. These accounts suggest that liberal policy elites recognize the role that rap can play in making young adults aware of issues they may not otherwise be exposed to. Whether this will extend to their rapping constituents remains to be seen.

Just as rap can serve as a tool to mobilize young adults, it can also serve as an outreach tool to increase African American adolescent girls' awareness of HIV and AIDS prevention. Stokes and Gant argue that African American adolescents are heavily influenced by youth popular culture including the hip-hop genre of popular films, music videos, and television. And as such, hip-hop can serve as an important link between traditional HIV prevention and African American youth.

Because of the saliency of rap to a large segment of American youth, we argue that rap music has the potential to make a positive societal impact. Today, rap is a multi-billion dollar a year industry that is consumed by youth and young adults of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Skeptics, however assert that rap music is solely for entertainment and thus will never have a lasting societal impact. This is particularly because social-political conscious rap songs tend to get little air-play on urban radio stations or music-based television stations.

Contrastingly, authors in this section and others combat this fatalist trope in favor of the hopes that hip-hop has to offer. For instance, Russell Simons, CEO of Def Jam Records, has organized two Hip Hop summits, during which artists, producers, and academics have discussed ways in which hip-hop can serve as a medium to increase the political awareness and activism of its consumers. Others raise consciousness by finding creative ways to utilize rap, such as initiating discussions among youth around songs that involve misogyny, violence, and drug usage. As some of the articles reveal, if hip-hop music is capable of promoting community betterment by increasing people's awareness of social-political issues, race and gender inequality, and safe sexual behavior, then it is a valuable social tool, above and beyond its capacity to entertain.