



Spirituality, Blues, and Violence:Rap Hermeneutical Approach for Community Organizers in Memphis

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Spirituality, Blues, and Violence:
Rap Hermeneutical Approach for Community Organizers in Memphis

By

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Final Thesis Draft

RPL Capstone

Thesis Advisor: Professor John Brown

Master of Divinity Candidate '23

Dedication

The thesis is dedicated to my childhood friends who lost their lives to gun violence. This is for Braxton Watkins – age 19, Deon “Wooty” Rutherford- age 19, Moasies Hardy – age 23, and James Thomas “Cornbread” Roberson - age 25. My prayer is that the memory of your precious lives will live through my words. You will continue to live on in my heart and I will never forget our memories. Long live your names and rest in heavenly peace.

Introduction

Each day on average, 30 Black Americans are killed by guns. Almost every other day, a Black person is shot and killed by the police. These trends are worse in larger metropolitan cities like Chicago or Memphis, where Black Americans make up 68% of homicide victims¹. Many believe that Rap music and its glorification of excessive material wealth, violence, and crime is one of the main contributors of gun violence, especially among Black youth and young adults. In 2020, Memphis had one the highest murder rates in the United States, where there was a total of 289 homicides. This means that 44.4 of every 100,000 people were murdered in Memphis, well above the national average which is 6.5 murders per 100,000. ².

Several Memphis rap artists have also fell victim to gun violence like Mendenhall Mendenhall 2X, Lottacash Desto, and Snootie Wild. In 2021, national recording artist Adolph Robert Thornton Jr “Young Dolph” was shot and killed in broad daylight while ordering cookies at local Black owned cookie store in South Memphis. Alongside violence, there is disturbing connection between Rap music and mass incarceration. At the outset of the genre, rap music was mainly documenting mass incarceration but now it has moved to both documenting facilitating incarceration. There have been hundreds of cases uncovered, (mostly drug, gang, or violent crime) where Rap lyrics were used as criminal evidence³.

¹ “Impact of Gun Violence on Black Americans,” Everytown, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.everytown.org/issues/gun-violence-black-americans/>.

² Samuel Stebbins, “Memphis, TN Reported One of the Highest Murder Rates in the US,” 247 Wall St (24/7 Wall St., November 22, 2021), <https://247wallst.com/city/memphis-tn-reported-one-of-the-highest-murder-rates-in-the-us/>.

³ Dennis, Andrea. “The Music of Mass Incarceration.” American Bar Association. Accessed April 3, 2023. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/intellectual_property_law/publications/landslide/2020-21/november-december/music-mass-incarceration/.

In the wake of increasing violence and incarceration, Memphis activist, organizers, and faith leaders have begun to demand solutions to address the root issues of violence beyond the criminal justice system. Groups are searching for ways to reach Black youth and young adults amidst this technology and social media era that complicates and exacerbates factors of community violence and incarceration through a lack of non-violent conflict resolution and easy access to guns. For many organizers and activist, Rap music is seen as one of the primary factors contributing to violence. 901 Bloc Squad, a intervention program for at-risk youth and families, sees community violence as a major issue and rap music as a definite factor. Brian Tillman, a member of the organization offered his thoughts on the root issues of community violence saying, "I think a lot comes from the environment, the exposure, things that these kids are seeing at an early age, They're taking all of it in and then they come back in the community and they emulate what they've seen at home, through rap music, on television and things of that nature." This thesis seeks to uncover how a hermeneutical approach to rap music can be used as a tool for community organizers to understand ways to address community violence and the incarceration of Black youth and young adults through critically exploring the lived experiences embedded in the music. This can help organizers in Memphis identify issues that participants of community violence face in hopes to create solutions rooted in spiritual care, trauma recovery, and increased mental health support. Tillman is not necessarily wrong when he says that poor environments and rap music play a role in community violence. Furthermore, a hermeneutical analysis of the music would help groups like 901 Bloc create solutions against violence by understanding how Black youth connect to the music on both a material and spiritual level. This can help organizers identify ways to connect with Black youth and young adults who are drawn to community violence and funneled into mass incarceration.

Rap or Hip Hop music is the most popular genre in the country. As of 2021, the Hip Hop industry is now said to be 4.08 Billion dollars generating lots of wealth for major corporate record label companies⁴. Since Hip- Hop's early inception in the 1980s, it has generated mass attention from major clothing brands, and multinational corporations with its unique ability to use catchy rhyming words and metaphors to reach large populations of people nationally and even globally. While Hip Hop has become highly commercialized, the masses of poor black communities in which the music is birthed, do not benefit from the wealth created. Not only are poor black communities locked out of the wealth created from the music, but the pain, suffering, and injustice experienced by the community expressed through the music, is ignored by corporate U.S Mainstream media.

Approximately, 88 percent of paid subscribers who consume rap music are non-black people.⁵ Many white Rap consumers just see it as fun and edgy music to listen to but fail to realize how Rap music can reflect the grave realities of poor Black communities like poverty, drug abuse, lack of job opportunities, and denied rights of self-determination. Rap music has been incredibly demonized not only by conservative Black faith institutions but by political leaders who support the criminal justice system versus rehabilitation programs to curb violence. Many Rap artist have managed to earn millions of dollars from record label contracts where they have also accrued record- breaking sales on music that often glorifies community violence. Even as these artist gain wealth and move out of the poor communities that they come from, some still fall victim to community violence and incarceration. For example, Young Dolph grew up in a

⁴ "The Latest Hip Hop Industry Statistics 2023 You Shouldn't Ignore • Gitnux," GITNUX, March 29, 2023, <https://blog.gitnux.com/hip-hop-industry-statistics/>.

⁵ "Music Consumer Profile - 2018 - RIAA," accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.riaa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MusicWatch-Consumer-Profile-RIAA-2018.pdf>.

poor neighborhood in South Memphis and managed to leave that area when he became a nationally recording artist. However, one cannot assume that if rappers leave their communities to live in white, wealthier communities, that they will feel a sense of home, belonging or a sense of community. Young Dolph lived in a wealthy residential area in Atlanta but met his unfortunate fate with gun violence back in the streets of South Memphis, the only place he could truly call home.

This topic of community violence and rap music cannot be discussed without also addressing the impact of mass incarceration on poor Black communities. Mass incarceration is tied to community violence as Black youth and young adults are easily cornered into the streets or prison. Not only is the impact of incarceration clearly conveyed in rap music, but many Rap artist themselves have found themselves facing the realities of the criminal justice system and it's unrelenting emphasis on severe punishment. *When it comes to incarceration, over fifty artist in the past decade have served sentences ranging from one-year sentences to life sentences.*

C-Murder, a popular rap artist from New Orleans who produced platinum and gold albums, is currently serving a life sentence for allegedly murdering a 16-year old.⁶ Artist are constantly falling into the criminal justice system and their lyrics are being used as evidence to convict them. In 2022, an act was introduced in the U.S House of Representatives that would ban lyrics as a form of evidence in legal claims. The act came after protest arose saying that the use of rap lyrics to criminalize the accused, suppressed the creative expression of the artist.

This is not to say that artist should not be held accountable for committing acts of violence, but they should be granted fair trials with factual evidence. Furthermore, issues of

⁶ Xxlstaff, "Here Are the Longest Prison Bids in Hip-Hop History," XXL Mag, February 3, 2023, <https://www.xxlmag.com/26-of-the-longest-prison-bids-in-hip-hop-history/>.

jealous and envy that arise from wealth gaps must also be recognized as contributors of violence. Even as rap artists receive a decent amount of money or more money than they have ever seen before in their life from record label contracts, they are surrounded by music industry leaders that do not care to understand their experience as well as friends from their community who are struggling for money. Well known media personality, Van Lathan pointed out that people should not completely blame Rap for violence and criminal activity but rather focus on the social ills. He says “It’s very hard to evolve out of dysfunction,” he explained. “If you grew up in a dysfunctional family, you’re going to develop some bad habits that carry over. The dysfunction and the sort of societal ills that we see are things that money doesn’t wash away. In some cases, money exacerbates some of these things.”⁷

What Lathan is saying, is that people think that just because you take Rap artists out of their poor neighborhoods, does not mean that they have overcome the impact of the environments they were brought up in. This is a critique against elected officials and public leaders who do not understand Rap music or Rap artists and how the music industries are only concerned with generating wealth from the music without focusing on the issues conveyed in the music. This can be easily seen in the words of New York Police Department Commissioner, William Bratton, who stated in an interview, “It’s unfortunate. You’d like to think that with all the wealth that comes from the fame, that they’ll be able to turn their lives around but they continue hanging out with the same people they hung out with when they came out of that world of desperation, poverty and crime.” To Lathan’s point, taking Rap artists out of their poor neighborhoods and placing money in their hand does not mean that any root issue is addressed.

⁷ Candice Williams, “Rap Industry Leaders Say Hip-Hop Should Not Be the ‘Scapegoat’ for the Growing Violence,” NBCNews.com (NBCUniversal News Group), accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/rap-industry-leaders-say-hip-hop-not-scapegoat-growing-violence-rcna58108>.

The issue of community violence and incarceration are much more nuanced and deserve a critical examination to understand its complexities.

The Statistics

In the past 2 years alone, fifteen nationally renowned rap artist have been murdered. Hip Hop has a higher rate of gun violence than any other genre in American popular music. The fact that no group of artist within any other genre of American music has experienced this level of incarceration and violence points to a major issue where rap music is a micro view of a larger problem and reality. A study published by The Conversation journal, examined the mortality rates of popular American musicians within genres like Blues, Rap, Rock, Pop and Country music. For rock artist, 24% of the cause of deaths were accidental deaths and 19% were also accidental for Pop artist. The rate of death for Blues artist was 28% with the cause of deaths mainly heart-related⁸. This is significantly above the overall average rate for heart-related cause of deaths within American musicians more broadly. When it comes to rap artists, the numbers are absolutely devastating. The study shows that murder accounted for 6.0% of deaths across the entire sample,(including all genres) and was the cause of 51% of deaths in rap artist. This study suggest that the reason for this significant higher rate homicides compared to other genres is “due to the genre’s strong associations with drug-related crime and gang culture.”⁹

Similarly, a study published by the National Library of Medicine called “*The Trends and Disparities in Firearm fatalities in the United States, 1990-2021*” reported that “All-intents annual firearm fatality rates were highest among Black individuals aged 15 to 39 years; the highest rate was 191.2 fatalities per 100 000 persons in 1991, which declined by half to 96.4 fatalities per 100 000 persons per year, then rebounded to 169.8 fatalities per 100 000 persons among Black individuals aged 20 to 24

⁸ Dianna Theadora Kenny, “Music to Die for: How Genre Affects Popular Musicians' Life Expectancy,” The Conversation, March 30, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/music-to-die-for-how-genre-affects-popular-musicians-life-expectancy-36660>.

⁹ Dianna Theadora Kenny, “Music to Die for: How Genre Affects Popular Musicians' Life Expectancy,” The Conversation, March 30, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/music-to-die-for-how-genre-affects-popular-musicians-life-expectancy-36660>.

years in 2021¹⁰. When it comes to incarceration, a report submitted to the U.N Human rights by the Sentencing Project, a Washington D.C based-group, warned that one in every three Black males born today can expect to go to prison as some point in their life. The statistics between the significant rate of murder and incarceration of Rap artist is also directly reflected in the rate of firearm fatalities and incarceration of poor Black communities. Both engage in the underground economy to achieve “success” and for most to just survive. It is important for organizers to understand these statistics and the ways in which rap music and the life of rap artists facing violence and incarceration can offer insight into why so many Black youth are attracted to the genre and how they are connecting with the music on a deeper, visceral and even spiritual level.

Hermeneutical & African-Oral historical approach to Rap Music and Culture

Hermeneutics refers to the theory and practice of interpretation. It makes space to understand how human beings create meaning from language, texts, or other symbolic expressions. Using Rap music, we can begin to form a hermeneutic that centers the thoughts and lived experiences of poor Black communities and offers ways to understand the music through a particular lens uncovering the factors of community violence, the ways these factors take shape in the music, and ways that a hermeneutical understanding can help organizers create solutions to address community violence. In Dwight A. Radcliff’s work, “Hip Hop Hermeneutics: How the Culture Influences Preachers”, he defines Hip Hop hermeneutics as “a theological inquiry that pushes for the inclusion of Hip Hop within the Black experiences and reveals how Hip Hop can

¹⁰ Rees, Chris A et al. “Trends and Disparities in Firearm Fatalities in the United States, 1990-2021.” *JAMA network open* vol. 5,11 e2244221. 1 Nov. 2022, doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.44221

be a source of theological interpretation.”¹¹.

Without a rap hermeneutic, Rap music and Rap artist will constantly be described, in the words of commissioner Bratton as “so-called rap artists who are basically thugs that basically celebrate the violence they’ve lived all their lives”. We often see these of critiques of Rap music from elected city officials and public leaders working to stop community violence with the wrong solutions. A rap hermeneutic centers the lived-experiences embedded within the music and engages stories of spirituality expressed through joy, pain, sorrow, and desperation.

The mayor of New York, Eric Adams, declared war against Drill Rap music in New York calling it “alarming”¹² and criticized the social media companies for not censoring rap music videos that display guns. He said, “I had no idea what drill rapping was, but I called my son and he sent me some videos, and it is alarming,” he said. “We are going to pull together the social media companies and sit down with them and tell them that you have a civic and corporate responsibility.”¹³ Adams is right in addressing the of corporate companies inconsistency in censoring certain content versus others. However, the censoring social media videos of rappers does not address the root issues of community violence. A rap hermeneutic would help Adams to understand this because he would get to engage interpretations of the music that expresses the actual problems and needs of communities involved in gang activity contributing to gun violence.

¹¹ Radcliffe, Dwight A. Jr. (2018) "Hip Hop Hermeneutics: How the Culture Influences Preachers," *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/jhhs/vol5/iss1/7>

¹² Justin Joffe, “The NYPD Still Hates Rap Music,” *Observer*, June 3, 2016, <https://observer.com/2016/06/the-nypd-still-hates-rap-music/>.

¹³ Simon Vozick-Levinson, “New York City Mayor Eric Adams Declares War on Drill Rap,” *Rolling Stone* (Rolling Stone, February 11, 2022), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/mayor-eric-adams-drill-rap-1299108/>.

Faith leaders have also been avid critics of Rap music as well. The late Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts, prominent pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York. Butts was known for his outcry against rap music. Rev. Butts said in a T.V interview, “ I may have more in common with a white man who loves humanity than I do with a black man who thinks he ought to call all women Bs and hoes¹⁴.” Since the 1990s, Rap music and artist have been demonized by public leaders because their interpretations have been one-sided and shallow without any nuance.

A hermeneutical approach to rap music allows critical inquiry and interpretation into how youth and young adults within urban black communities make meaning of the music in multifaceted ways. It gives insight into the experiences of desperation, lack of compassion, and loneliness often felt within their everyday life. With a U.S American criminal justice system concerned with punishment and retribution, a hermeneutical approach to the music humanizes perpetrators of violence, revealing the spiritual challenges of the individual striving to find purpose in one’s life. This particular approach is key for organizers, activist, and social justice leaders pushing for rehabilitative models and mental health support in addressing community violence. In order for these models to be pushed, individuals, must be seen for their humanity.

Many Black youth and young adults find inspiration in Rap music and culture in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, rap music helps them come to terms with their everyday life. It speaks on experiences that many Black youth can relate to such as, police harassment , violence, poverty, and generational trauma. On the negative side, because of Rap’s idolization of material wealth and conspicuous consumption by those far on the margins of

¹⁴ Joel Anderson, “The Reverend Who Tried to Crush Rap Music,” Slate Magazine (Slate, November 20, 2019), <https://slate.com/culture/2019/11/slow-burn-tupac-biggie-reverend-calvin-butts.html>.

wealth, it creates false images and beliefs around the reality wealth and how to obtain it. Most Rap artists who come from poor black neighborhoods, have in their lifetime had to obtain wealth through the underground economy. These activities often include drug trade, armed robberies and unarmed robberies. This is also the reality for many poor Black youth and young adults. Nearly 80 percent of people in federal prison and 60 percent of people in state prison incarceration on drug offenses are Black or Latino¹⁵ There are many critics of rap music that see it as a lost genre that should be dismantled to protect the younger generation from a culture of violence. However, a hermeneutical approach would allow the music to be interpreted in ways that have potential to teach and give meaning to how community violence takes shape and highlights key issues that the community must focus on to address violence in Black communities.

African Griots and the Oral Storytelling Tradition

The characteristics of Hip Hop/rap music can be traced back beyond the emergence of Blues and west Indies reggae. Its origins should be focused in West Africa with the local griots. In West African culture during the 13th century, stories and legend tales were shared and passed down by the griots, who were the community storytellers. Using various forms of expression, the griots were highly respected persons in society that held the responsibility of sustaining and maintaining the history of the community. They served as poets, historians, genealogist, and musicians for the village. Their music stories were often accompanied with African string instruments and drums.

¹⁵ E. Ann Carson and Daniela Golinelli, "Prisoners in 2012: Trends in Admissions and Releases, 1991-2012," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013), Table 8.

For centuries, Griots passed down epics through songs and stories, adding details that related to their lives as well as the lives of their audiences. This is how stories remained relevant across generations and cultures.¹⁶ A contemporary definition of African Griots offered by Jones defines it as “artist who was and still is, an observer, commentator or councilor on the past and passing scenes. They happily remain in some parts of Africa, not only rehandling traditional material.. keeping the heroic feats of historical figures alive, but also commenting in traditional style on contemporary matters.”¹⁷ Isabelle Leymarie- Ortiz in her article, “The Griots of Senegal and Change” further describes the important role of Griots in traditional African culture as communicators between various groups. She writes, “griots play an important role as validators of status and agents of communication between different groups, and are thus at the center of social interaction”¹⁸.

Since the conception of Hip-Hip/Rap music, rap artists have continued to embody the role of the Griots, sharing stories on the realities of Black life in America, the good and the bad. During the late 1980s, Hip Hop largely shifted toward more political themes and critiques of racism in America. The group Public Enemy was at the forefront of Hip Hop’s political shift with their timeless hit, “Fight the Power”. The song remains a foundational song for protest with its infamous hook saying “We’ve got to fight the powers that be”, alluding to the need to address the American power structure that creates the poor conditions of Black communities. Public Enemy was also known for using rap music to address police brutality. Their song “911 is a

¹⁶ Hakimah Abdul-Fattah, “How Griots Tell Legendary Epics through Stories and Songs in West Africa,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 20, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2020/4/sahel-sunjata-stories-songs>.

¹⁷ Kaschula, Russell H. “Imbongi and Griot: Toward a Comparative Analysis of Oral Poetics in Southern and West Africa.” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999): 55–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1771848>.

¹⁸ Leymarie-Ortiz, Isabelle. “THE GRIOTS OF SENEGAL AND CHANGE.” *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell’Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente* 34, no. 3 (1979): 183–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40759177>.

Joke”, focuses on Police abuse against Black people and the lack of community safety by the Police state. Protest rap songs like “Sound of Da Police” by KRS-One, Crooked Officer by Geto boys, or “Police State” by Dead Prez addressed the impact of racism and police violence in the everyday lives of Black and Brown people in America.

In 1991, Ice Cube’s song “How to survive in South Central” criticized the Los Angeles Police Department in their racial violence against Black people in the South Central area. Rap mogul, Tupac Shakur, was known for his critiques of racism in America by valiantly expressing his experiences with Police violence. His song “Runnin from tha Police” captures life under threat of Police violence.

He says, “Runnin' from the police (Yeah, I know what you mean) No matter what I do, they got a nigga. Still runnin' from the police, that's right (Put them motherfucking Nike's on tight and get ghost y'all)”

Tupac Shakur describes the realities of the police state in Black communities where Black people must constantly try to escape police violence. He focuses on the experience of Black men being chased down by police in their own neighborhoods. Through a rap hermeneutic, we can begin to make more nuanced and carefully critical examinations of the narrative within the music, make interpretations, and understand the impact of these interpretations by different people and groups. Because of the power and importance of the messages provided by African oral storytelling, a rap hermeneutic becomes necessary. A rap hermeneutic uses a critical lens to interpret and bring meaning to the embedded stories within the music. A hermeneutical approach to these stories can shed light on social issues, record history, and provide insight into the current times at hand.

Rap Hermeneutic to Combat Commercialization of Rap Music

It is important for community organizers to be able to analyze and interpret the stories embedded within Rap music that can shed light on social factors that lead to violence. While rap music is rooted in the African oral tradition characteristic, it has become more nuanced and complicated to conceptualize because of the influence of American values and mainstream culture on the music. When the Hip Hop/rap movement gained more popularity in mainstream American culture, it also became highly commercialized. During the late 1980s, large corporations and major American clothing brands began to use Hip-Hop/Rap music as a tool for product marketing.

The fashion industry, film industry, and print media began to attach itself to Rap music, and artists saw rap music as a popular but temporary trend. The rise of rap culture also faced much criticism and attempts of suppression by other voices within mainstream media. Mockery of the music by Hollywood as well as radio bans, strived to dismantle rap culture and its radical, rebellious sound while product retail industry leaders sought capital gain. Fast forward to the contemporary, rap music remains villainized by elected officials and members of law enforcement who see it a contributors to violent crime . Yet this goes without critique ,when Rap music is used as a moneymaking tool for leading industry brands like Versace, Nike, and McDonalds.

Even while birthed in the bedrock of America's commercial consumer culture, rap culture still holds characteristics of the African oral storytelling tradition. Tricia Rose in her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, focuses on this point in her book saying, "Rap's stories continue to articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in

contemporary American culture. Even as rappers achieve what appears to be central status in commercial culture, they are far more vulnerable to censorship efforts than highly visible White rock artists, and they continue to experience the brunt of the plantation-like system faced by most artists in the music and sports industries. Even as they struggle with the tension between fame and rap's gravitational pull toward local urban narratives, for the most part, rappers continue to craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives, and experiences of racial marginality in America¹⁹.”Rose conveys that even as Rap music and culture has faced significant commercialization, it remains valuable in understanding the experiences of Black life in America that is largely impacted by commercialization. The increased commercialization is linked to the exploitation of Black people, leading to the economic inequalities visible in poor Black communities.

Memphis Rap Culture Contribution to American Music

Memphis, in particular, had garnered national attention for its contribution to the Hip-Hop/Rap music culture during a time when New York City Rap music dominated mainstream Rap culture. Artists like Three6Mafia rose to the national scene of rap culture with their hit song “It’s Hard Out Here For a Pimp”, which was featured on the popular film *Hustle and Flow*. This film shed light on Memphis rap culture and led Three6Mafia to win an Academy Award for Best Original Song in 2006. The unique style and flavor of Memphis rap sound is a product of the Blues genre birthed out of the city of Memphis .

¹⁹ Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH :University Press of New England, 1994

During the late 19th century, Memphis became the mecca for Blues musicians throughout the American South. The Blues came out of Black communities, from their work songs, spirituals, and field chants. The blues is characterized by its chord progression, the use of bent notes or “blue notes”, and its sad and melancholy lyrics that reflect the challenges of Black life in the south. During the Blues era, Beale Street, a popular commercial district for Blacks in Memphis, became the hub for Blues music and performance. Robert Church, a Black businessman from Memphis, purchased Beale street. Beale Street’s modern-day image emerged in the early 1900s when Black entrepreneurs opened clubs, restaurants, and shops along the famed corridor.²⁰ Church’s purchase allowed economic opportunity for Black Memphians in a time of great racial injustice. Overtime, Beale street attached top tier Blues musicians to Memphis like W.C Handy, B.B King, Louis Armstrong, Memphis Minnie, and Muddy Waters. These musicians helped to create what people began to call the “Memphis Blues” known for its blend of soulful sensual flavor that would go on to directly influence World-renounced artist like Elvis Presley.²¹

What is special about Blues music is its influence on Rap music, with its expression of the visceral and spiritual experiences of Black life in America. Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III defines Blues in his book *Blues Notes* as “the curve of the Mississippi, the ghost of the South, the hypocrisy of the North. Blues is the beauty of Bebop, the soul of Gospel, and the pain of Hip-Hop.”²² Rap music holds on to the same African oral storytelling characteristic that has been present historically from the slave work songs and spirituals sung during American slavery. Like

²⁰ Historic Memphis Beale Street and the blues, accessed April 3, 2023, <http://historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/beale/bealestreet.html>.

²¹ Fox News, “Elvis Presley Became a Rock 'n' Roll Icon with the Help of Memphis Clothier,” New York Post (New York Post, July 20, 2022), <https://nypost.com/2022/07/20/elvis-presley-became-a-rock-n-roll-icon-with-the-help-of-memphis-clothier/>.

²² Otis Moss, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).

the Blues, rap music can describe the pain of Black life in America and the people's spirituality through rhyming metaphors and melodies. James Cone also touches upon the spirituality of the Blues saying “one must properly understand [Blues songs] as secular spiritual. “They are secular in the sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of Black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience²³.”

Music Hall of Fame identifies this in Three6Mafia’s music saying, “Three 6 Mafia’s best songs capture the joys and indulgences of club life all the while embedding deeper levels of commentary, often through the emblems of status and escape for disenfranchised black urban youth. Such an ability to at once entertain and speak to power suggests continuity with older regional African American music forms, none more so than blues.²⁴” This point touches upon the real-lived experiences expressed through rap music that capture stories of spirituality, joy, and pain. Three6Mafia was known for giving insight into the party and drug life in Memphis but could also express the challenges of navigating poverty, addiction, incarceration, and overall survival in the city of Memphis. This further highlights the value of a Rap hermeneutic that offer interpretations for community leaders and organizers seeking to understand the experiences of those who participate in as well as those who are affected by community violence.

²³ Cone James H. 1972. *The Spirituals and the Blues : An Interpretation*. New York: Seabury Press.

²⁴ About the Author William Ellis Bill is the son of banjo composer Tony Ellis and godson of bluegrass patriarch Bill Monroe. A musician, writer. “Three 6 Mafia.” Memphis Music Hall of Fame. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://memphismusichalloffame.com/inductee/threesixmafia/>.

Hermeneutics of Criminalization: Rap Music vs. The State

Mass incarceration of Black people has become a pressing issue in American society. The incarceration of Black youth and young adults is an even more pressing issue. From as early as elementary school, Black youth in disadvantaged communities are subject to the school to prison pipeline. Around the country, Black and Brown youth are arrested in schools and transported to juvenile justice centers for minor classroom behaviors, prematurely exposing them to the incarceration system. The pipeline also operates more subtly and implicitly through the presence of resource officers, who are police officers that have the authority to stop, frisk, detain, question, search and arrest schoolchildren on and off school grounds. School districts are increasingly adding metal detector systems in schools where students must walk through every day.²⁵

These tactics are supposedly put in place to curve violence and disrupt behavior in schools. However they in no way target the root issues of the behavior which is trauma, lack of mental health support, and inadequate resources. Activists have been pressuring lawmakers to end policies that favor incarceration over education and disproportionately push minority students and students with disabilities out of schools and into jails. From as early as eight years old, urban Black youth are exposed to the incarceration system. This early exposure is clearly connected to community violence, where Black youth are already imagined and defined as criminals.

²⁵ Mike Sullivan, "Question Everything: Do Metal Detectors at Schools Really Work?," CBS News (CBS Interactive, January 12, 2023), <https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/question-everything-do-metal-detectors-at-schools-really-work/>.

Rap artists reflect the impact of incarceration. The U.S. carceral system has now begun to find ways to further criminalize artist by using their lyrics as evidence in court cases. In California, the governor, Gavin Newsome signed the Decriminalizing Artistic Expression Act to limit the ways that an artist's music can be used against them in court proceedings.²⁶ Although the ban does not completely eliminate the use of lyrics from the courtroom completely, it establishes an agreement that lyrics have very minimal value as evidence. Prosecutors in California, being the first state to enact this type of law, must show that the lyrics were written around the time of a crime, have specific connections to a said crime, or depict "factual details" about the crime unknown to the public²⁷.

Critics have long called the attempt to use lyrics as criminal evidence an infringement of the First Amendment. Governor Newsome said in a statement, " Artists of all kind should be able to create without the fear of unfair and prejudicial prosecution, California's culture and entertainment industry set trends around the world, and it's fitting that our state is taking a nation-leading role to protect creative expression and ensure that artists are not criminalized under biased policies." Newsome's statement sheds light on issue that no artist from any other musical genre encounter.

In October 2017, Lawrence Montague, a Maryland man incarcerated while awaiting trial for murder and gun-related charges, rapped a verse containing "violent" lyrics over a jail phone to a friend. Weeks later, the state used the lyrics to convict him of second-degree murder, first-degree assault, use of a firearm in a crime of violence, use of a firearm in the commission of a felony, and carrying a handgun. He was then sentenced to 30 years for the murder in addition to

²⁶ 2022 at 01:10 PM EDT Jessica Wang October 03, "California Bill Limits Use of Rap Lyrics as Evidence in Criminal Trials," EW.com, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://ew.com/music/california-bill-restricts-rap-lyrics-evidence-criminal-trials/>.

²⁷ 2022 at 01:10 PM EDT Jessica Wang October 03, "California Bill Limits Use of Rap Lyrics as Evidence in Criminal Trials," EW.com, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://ew.com/music/california-bill-restricts-rap-lyrics-evidence-criminal-trials/>.

20 years for use of a firearm.²⁸ The lyrics of the rhyme say, “*It’s a .40 when that bitch goin’ hit up shit*” and prosecutors linked this to the evidence of .40 caliber bullets that were found at the crime scene in which Montague was an alleged suspect. These lyrics became the primary evidence used to convict Montague even over witness statements that were not sufficient enough for conviction. In August 2014, the New Jersey Supreme Court actually overturned the conviction and 30-year sentence of Vonte Skinner on the grounds that his lyrics were used against him and was not substantial evidence of his guilt in a 2008 attempted murder case.²⁹

New Jersey Supreme Court Justice Jaynee Lavechia stated in responding to this case, “One cannot presume that, simply because an author has chosen to write about certain topics, he or she has acted in accordance with those views.”³⁰ Furthermore, prosecutors all over the country are manipulating the power of words to convince juries that violent rap lyrics aren’t merely just creative expression. This conveys the ways that Rap music is being interpreted for a means to incarcerate rather than interpretations that explore the real-lived experiences of artists. The weaponization of rap music to incarcerate points to the importance of interpretation and how rap music is interpreted to achieve a particular end or goal. A rap hermeneutic would move beyond the surface of the music’s violent lyrics to push one to investigate the why of the music on the terms of the artist and the communities that the artist speaks from. It would center the spiritual experiences in the music that offers insight into the lived experiences of poor Black

²⁸ Brad Kutner, “Maryland Appeals Court Allows Rap Lyrics to Be Used in Murder Trial,” Courthouse News Service, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.courthousenews.com/maryland-appeals-court-allows-rap-lyrics-to-be-used-in-murder-trial/>.

²⁹ Schwartzberg, Lauren. “Vonte Skinner’s Rap Lyrics Were Ruled Inadmissible by the New Jersey Supreme Court.” VICE, August 6, 2014. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/znwwmy/vonte-skinner-rap-lyrics-were-ruled-inadmissible-by-the-new-jersey-supreme-court>.

³⁰ Brad Kutner, “Maryland Appeals Court Allows Rap Lyrics to Be Used in Murder Trial,” Courthouse News Service, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.courthousenews.com/maryland-appeals-court-allows-rap-lyrics-to-be-used-in-murder-trial/>.

communities. A rap hermeneutic would center the narrative the artist presents and allow us to critically analyze what is being expressed and why. Unfortunately, within the carcel system, the voice of the incarcerated is silenced, and the interpretations lie in the hands of the state.

The Story of Ricky “Finesse2Tymes” Hampton

Memphis artist Ricky “Finesse2tymes” Hampton is known for his incarceration story. At the age of 25, Finesse2tymes garnered a huge fan base with his hit song “Goin Straight in”, where he vented about his life in and out of prisons, selling illegal drugs, and confrontations with rival gang members in two straightforward hardcore poetic verses. While he was climbing to success in the rap industry, he could not escape the reality of the streets and was arrested on outstanding charges of aggravated assault with a gun after headlining a show that turned violent in Arkansas in 2017³¹. A dispute between rival gangs left twenty-eight people injured, and Finesse2tymes responsible for the crime.

Initially, he was facing a possible twenty-year sentence due to a prior conviction. However, his sentence was reduced due to proof of a number mental health issues that the rapper had been dealing with all of his life. As a guest on the Million Dollaz Worth Game podcast on YouTube, Finesse2tymes talked about the situation saying, “ I was facing 10 years in the feds and twenty years in the state. I had two separate shooting charges. With the first situation, the only thing that helped me was me being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. I have jumped from two story buildings, cut on myself, and tried to hurt others and I always end up going to the psych ward. I been there three or four times.”³² He goes on to talk about his court

³¹ Sean Murphy, “Little Rock Club Shooting: Finesse 2tymes Arrested in Alabama,” The Mercury News (The Mercury News, July 3, 2017), <https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/07/03/rapper-who-performed-at-little-rock-club-arrested-in-alabama/>.

³² *YouTube*, 2022. <https://youtu.be/y5pFHT-hkzk>.

case, and how his lawyer was not arguing against the crime the rapper did, but *why* the rapper was involved in the shootings. These shootings were prompted by his mental health challenges that are also reflected in his music. In his hit song Goin Straight in, the lyrics say;

I'm smoking Ali the Greatest

I'm a patient serving patients

Here Finesse2tymes is talking about how he smokes a strong strain of Marijuana, a Cannabis plant that is known to be used to relieve symptoms such as stress and anxiety. Then he calls himself a patient who is serving others patients, meaning that he himself uses drugs while also selling drugs for others to deal with their own problems. A rap hermeneutic allows us to understand that because there is not much mental health support in poor black communities, mental health issues are treated with drugs. Finesse2tymes conveys how this affects the seller and the user. The one making profit must also consume to treat themselves.

Finesse2tymes ended up serving a five-year sentence and music would be the one thing that pulled him through. He also talked about ways that he navigates his mental health issues and how his self-care process was informed by his prison experience. He says, "I self-therapy myself. It might sound institutional as fuck but I do what I did in jail... I cut the lights off, I get under the cover and I lay there...and I think and I meditate." Finesse2tymes was released during the summer of 2022, and immediately began climbing the rap music scene again. He released his mixtape called "90 Days" that reflects on his first 90 days since his prison release, his rise to fame, and experiences in prison. In one of the songs on the mixtape, he details how life was in Memphis in finding opportunities outside of illegal activity. In his song Gucci Flow featuring Gucci Mane, the lyrics say,

I'm from Memphis, I grew up and walked to Simmons (eastside)

If you ain't from the block, you the opposition (opposition)

If you weren't sellin' dope, you was killin' and pimpin' (pimp)

Robbin' and stealin' (rob), whatever to get it, just get it (just get it)

It Ain't just on me, it's in me (in me)

I speak the truth, I'm the realest

Here Finese2Tymes is describing life in Memphis for poor Black communities. A type of dog-eat-dog world, Finese2tymes sheds light on having to harm others to just to survive. He points to the fact that this was not only his reality, but the reality of others in the community as well. The story of Finese2tymes is the story of so many others from black impoverished communities that experience violence and incarceration. The rapper talks about growing up with very limited options around economic opportunity that placed him and others within the community in survival mode rather than coexistence. Through a Rap hermeneutical approach, we can see Finese2tymes engaging in a form of storytelling that reveals the very grim reality of the inequalities reflected in Black inner-city communities.

The story of Lontrell Denell “Pooh Shiesty Williams Jr.

Memphis rap artist Pooh Shiesty gained a music buzz and following at the age of 18. He began making songs with popular Memphis artist and producers and was eventually signed by 1017 records, a record label owned by rapper Gucci Mane that is ultimately owned by Atlantic Records Corporation. His hit song “Back in Blood” featuring Chicago artist Lil Durk, became one of the most streamed songs in 2021 and received over sixty-six million views on Youtube. Despite all of his music success, Pooh Shiesty is currently serving a five-year prison sentence for

a shooting that occurred at a Miami strip club. Just at the age of 22, he has already had previous encounters with the carceral system after facing charges of armed robbery, aggravated assault and battery, and criminal theft. When Pooh Shiesty was interviewed on the Million Dollaz Worth of Game podcast, he talked about how his encounters with the law began at the age of eleven-years old when we was sent to Juvenile.

On the podcast, he was asked when did he develop the mindset that he wanted to seek opportunities to leave Memphis and live a better life instead falling into street activity. He said, “It was during my first time in juvenile, and having to stay there. I said, aw yeah, I gotta get out of the M”. With record labels and major brand companies investing and profiting from Rap music and culture, many Black youth jump to use Rap as a way to achieve economic opportunity and bring their families out of poverty. Pooh Shiesty’s music can be labelled very violent as much of it details gang shootings, selling drugs, and armed robberies. The rapper also incited a fashion wave when he began wearing ski masks in his videos that became the “Shiesty mask”. Businesses began to post signs on their doors saying “No Shiestys allowed” trying to stop merchandise theft by Black youths.³³

Many of the most popular Rap artist come from underserved communities that battle issues such as poverty, food deserts, lack of healthcare services, ecological degradation, mass incarceration, poorly funded education, and police violence all at once. All of these issues show up in Rap music as Rap artists express the realities of their communities and their struggle to escape a life of generational hardship through sometimes, very violent and unethical means. In Pooh Shiesty’s song called Welcome to the Riches, the lyrics say,

³³ Sha Be Allah, “Pooh Shiesty Incites Ski Mask Trend, Prompts ‘Shiesty Mask’ Ban,” The Source, January 8, 2022, <https://thesource.com/2022/01/07/pooh-shiesty-incites-ski-mask-trend-prompts-shiesty-mask-ban/>.

Welcome to the riches, we got switches, move wrong, get hit up (fo' sho')

And can't nothing come between me

Seeing this money but a pair of buffs (nope, nope, nope, nope)

Here Pooh Shiesty is describing the realities of obtaining wealth in an unrecorded and untaxed underground economy. This economy, a product of structural inequality, is heavily targeted by the police state and legislators seeking to crack down on criminal activity without creating opportunities for equal wealth distribution. Shiesty says this is what it means to achieve monetary wealth through the underground economy in poor black communities. You are subject to community violence because violence becomes the means of survival. Shiesty points out that nothing will come between him and money except for the bullets of his enemies.

In another song called “See Red” Shiesty describes the vivid experience of participating in community violence. The lyrics say,

Everybody 'round me see red (Big Blrrrd)

Everybody 'round me got one in the head (Blrrrd, blrrrd)

Shiesty pulled up shootin', they fled (They gone)

Shiesty pulled up shootin', they was tryna fake dead (Blrrrd, blrrrd)

Shiesty’s focus on “seeing red” can be connected to the ways that substance abuse is connected to violent behavior. According to a study by the National Library of Medicine, drug abuse and dependence were found in 10% to 48% of men and 30% to 60% of women who committed violent crimes³⁴ This Studies indicate that violent offenders are more likely to abuse sedatives and alcohol. A rap hermeneutic of “Welcome to the Riches” and “See Red” tells

³⁴ Håkansson, A., & Jesionowska, V. (2018). Associations between substance use and type of crime in prisoners with substance use problems - a focus on violence and fatal violence. *Substance abuse and rehabilitation*, 9, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.2147/SAR.S143251>

organizers that factors of community violence are related to a lack of mental health support and structural inequalities that create a dog-eat-dog type of life. With no mental health or addiction support, community violence becomes almost inevitable. A Rap hermeneutical approach helps explore these issues by critically examining the real-lived experiences of participants of community violence to ask the question of why it happens instead of focusing on when it happens.

Rehabilitation over Criminalization To Address Violence

The relationship between Rap music and community violence is one that holds many complexities. When it comes to this conundrum, three things can be true at the same time. First, there is validity to role of Rap music in influencing Black youth and young adults to become participate in community violence. Oftentimes, Black youth are affected by structural racism and inequality but are not aware of how the systems shape their lives and mindset. Therefore, for many Black youth and young adults, the violence in the music becomes how they see themselves and their Black identity. They internalize anti-blackness without knowing how these things came to be in the music and the role that structural inequality and racist stereotypes play into it. Subsequently, we see Rap music interpreted in ways that that led to self and community harm.

With Gun violence on the rise in Black communities nationally, communities of color are demanding policymakers to respond to the rise in violence crimes. Most of the time, the answer to violent crimes and gun homicides by lawmakers is more police and jail time rather than resources for trauma recovery and prevention. Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland said in a press conference earlier in the 2022, “Too often, people in Memphis shoot a gun at another person and

literally get zero prison time or less than a year.³⁵” Homicide is the seventh leading cause of death in Shelby County and the homicide rate, adjusted for population, is 57.3% for Black people and 6% for white people. In Shelby County, homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males ages 15-24, according to 2020 CDC data.³⁶

More recently, there have been calls from community leaders to treat gun violence as a public health concern³⁷. The public health approach looks at the act and engages a deeper and critical examination on why violence occurs and what factors contribute to violent crime to create violence prevention strategies. Community leaders in Memphis have begun to advocate for a public health approach to address the rising gun violence especially among youth and young adults³⁸. Community leaders and residents have continuously voiced their concerns of gun violence and its impact on the community, especially Black youth and young adults. Organizers who are seeking to take a public health and rehabilitative approach to address community violence would benefit from the storytelling function of Rap music that uncovers not only the mental health disparities that contribute to violence, but spiritual decay that occurs at the hands of community violence.

Black youth and young adults in Memphis have constantly been linked to crimes such as car theft, armed robberies, and homicides. During the summer of 2022, two Black 15-year old males shot and killed a Memphis pastor outside of her home while attempting to steal her car.

³⁵ FOX13 Memphis News Staff and Kayla Solomon, “Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland Releases Scathing Letter on 'Revolving Door' Justice System,” <https://www.fox13memphis.com>, March 11, 2023, https://www.fox13memphis.com/news/memphis-mayor-jim-strickland-releases-scathing-letter-on-revolving-door-justice-system/article_e9eedf44-bf8b-11ed-9b0f-4f6e6652f6a0.html.

³⁶ Carrington J. Tatum, “Some Cities Treat Gun Violence as a Public Health Crisis. Should Memphis?,” MLK50, March 28, 2022, <https://mlk50.com/2022/03/17/some-cities-treat-gun-violence-as-a-public-health-crisis-should-memphis/>.

³⁷ Carrington J. Tatum, “Some Cities Treat Gun Violence as a Public Health Crisis. Should Memphis?,” MLK50, March 28, 2022, <https://mlk50.com/2022/03/17/some-cities-treat-gun-violence-as-a-public-health-crisis-should-memphis/>.

³⁸ Ian Round, “Bill Seeks to Treat Gun Violence as a Public Health Issue,” Memphis Local, Sports, Business & Food News | Daily Memphian (The Daily Memphian, February 18, 2022), <https://dailymemphian.com/article/27122/tennessee-gun-violence-general-assembly-london-lamar>.

When the Shelby County district attorney's office announced that the teenagers would be tried as adults, the teen's lawyer pleaded the court for a 30-day mental evaluation of the youth. During the murder, one of the teens was wearing an ankle monitor revealing an already existing history with criminalization. Memphis social justice advocates have been pushing the criminal justice system to take up sentencing alternatives called "blended sentencing" to offer juveniles convicted of serious crimes sentences that are "not too light, not too severe but somewhere in between"³⁹. Supporters of the alternative believe that this method seeks to give youth a chance to become rehabilitated. While this method does not completely detach itself from the penal system, it suggests that there are deeper issues that cause violence particularly within Black youth and young adults. Youth having to navigate generational poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and poor education creates the playing field for violence. In the same way, Black youth and young adults continue to fall victim to the penal system because of alternative opportunities that can lure them away from criminal activity and violent crimes.

Rap Hermeneutic to Understand Spiritual Care Need

Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III made an important statement on the role of spirituality in healing and prevention against Gun Violence in a PBS interview saying "Anytime you talk about violence or economics, it always starts spiritually, because economics and actions of violence are spiritually connected." When it comes to community violence, lack of spiritual care and development provides great obstacles toward the ability to galvanize and organize communities to address violence. When individuals experience a lack of purpose or hope in life, they are

³⁹ Brad Broders, "'We Need a Third Option': Shelby County Justice Advocates Pushing for 'Blended Sentencing' for Juveniles Convicted of Serious Crimes," localmemphis.com, August 18, 2022, <https://www.localmemphis.com/article/news/local/shelby-county-memphis-tennessee-juvenile-blended-sentencing-crime/522-fecbfff8-8ca7-4d82-bd99-9cc58c821fa9>.

experiencing signs of “spiritual decay”. The term *spiritual decay*, was used by Cornel West as he described the ills of America. West says, “When you think of the secular these days, you think of careerism, opportunism, hedonism, egoism, individualism—and the ways in which science seems to be driven by corporate greed, seems to be moving toward the explosion of the planet or the collapse of the environment. It’s almost as if everybody recognizes the spiritual decay and the moral decrepitude of the culture”⁴⁰. Cornel West’s conceptualization of spiritual decay by the oppressors, should also be conceptualized for the oppressed. Spiritual decay of the oppressed individuals can be understood and uncovered with a Rap hermeneutical approach. It can explore how “spiritual decay” occurs within the oppressed when their ability to find a sense of purpose in life and value within the community is diminished. If a person cannot establish a purpose in life that is connected to the flourishing of themselves and their community, then they are susceptible to spiritual decay. Thus the importance of spiritual care is to develop and nurture one’s spirituality so that they are able navigate and overcome challenges in life. This sense of spiritual decay works two-fold and is destructive for both the oppressed and oppressors.

The life of Alexander “Big Scarr” Woods

An example of spiritual decay can be seen through Memphis rap artist, Alexander “Big Scarr” Woods, who passed away at the age of 22 from a prescription drug overdose. When Big Scarr made his debut in the Rap industry, he managed to garner over 300 million views on his YouTube channel. His debut track song gained 50,000 views in just one week, helping him gain a loyal fan base. Big Scarr’s debut mixtape that was released in April 2021, was entitled “Big Grim Reaper” alluding to several near death experiences he endured at a young age. At the age

⁴⁰ Vinson Cunningham, “Cornel West Sees a Spiritual Decay in the Culture,” *The New Yorker*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/cornel-west-sees-a-spiritual-decay-in-the-culture>.

of 16, he was in a severe car accident when he was literally thrown through a windshield. The accident left him with a scar on his body which explains how he created his rap name. Big Scarr was also struck by a bullet at the age of 19 that traveled up his spine causing him to have his appendix removed. Alongside the traumatic experiences in his life, Big scarr battled with depression and often abused prescription drugs to treat it.⁴¹ He openly talked about the difficulty of losing his grandmother, his primary guardian, at the age 13.

Big Scarr's music falls in the category of "street music", being rap music that describes illegal activity like robbery, assault, and murder. His rhymes often allude to instances of violence. Big Scarr was born and raised in South Memphis. South Memphis consists of a group of poor Black neighborhoods prone to violence. Big scarr's music uncovers the level of despair and hopelessness that drives many desperate people to participate in community violence.

When we place Big Scarr's lyrics in context with his childhood upbringing and experiences of trauma, we can begin to see how community violence takes shape. Big Scarr details these experiences in one of his songs called "From the jump. The lyrics say:

Mama said, "Son, boy, you better sit down" (better sit down)

"You been through too much to keep playin' around" (playin' around)

I was too young, tryin' to figure it out (tryin' to figure it out)

Grandmama's baby, I'm my grandmama's child (oh)

When she left, I was stuck, had to find a way out (oh)

I couldn't go to school, they kept kickin' me out

I couldn't work a job, so I went to the trap

⁴¹ Deepak Kumar, "Big Scarr's Cause of Death Revealed: Rapper Was Prescribed Pain Meds amid His Battle with Depression," MEAWW, December 24, 2022, <https://meaww.com/big-scarr-cause-of-death-revealed-rapper-prescribed-pain-meds-battle-depression-gfs-home-overdose>.

These lyrics reveal various factors that can ultimately contribute to community violence in Black communities. Big Scar details loss of a grandmother, lack support in public education, lack of economic opportunities, and lastly having to navigate all of these issues as a teenager. The short life of the 22-year old rapper can teach us the importance of mental health support and spiritual development to combat battles with mortality. Big Scar experienced a level of hopelessness and despair that was easily portrayed in his music. His experiences with poverty, violence, and drugs prevented him from overcoming these experiences of trauma. Big Scar was a talented and beloved artist with a large fan base across the country of people who found value in the stories he offered in his music. His life is a common example of so many Black youth and young adults navigating violent and traumatic experiences without any mental health support. They are left to deal with severe depression that prevents them from overcoming feelings of hopelessness. Subsequently, we see continued hopelessness shifting into a spiritual decay where the spirit becomes unwell.

Faith communities nationally have been working toward ways to address youth and young adult gun violence in Black urban neighborhoods. When placing spiritual care and development at the forefront of community violence, this aids the public health approach in implementing and centering values of compassion, healthy relationship-building, harmony with nature, ourselves, and the larger community. Spirituality also encompasses how one understands their purpose and destiny in one's life. Without proper spiritual care and development, we begin to see symptoms of violence prompted by structural inequalities that define one's worth and value negatively within society. National renowned Rap Artist Common said "I don't have the one solution to the violence. And many times we get asked, like, what is it? And I do believe it is — on a deeper level, it is a lack of the spiritual connection, where you do — because, any time,

even in the most difficult situations, if I see the God in another human being, I'm not going to look to destroy them. And I think that's one of the keys to us healing our city⁴².”

Memphis Faith Leader, Imam Shaykh Hamza Abdul Malik spoke about the impact of poverty on Black youth and the role that faith communities must play to address these issues. He says, “more families and youths living in poverty should seek out religious institutions for help because those entities have communities of people who offer their time, services and material donations like clothes and food to help those in need.⁴³” While Imam Malik is correct, the reality is that many faith-based institutions are unsure how to engage at risk Black youth. A Rap hermeneutical approach can serve as a way give insight into the lived experiences of Black youth and young adults who are traumatized by violence and incarceration. This approach helps looks within the music to understand the person behind the music to address their needs.

Rap Artist as Community Heroes and the Death of Rap Artist by Gun Violence

Over the two decades, Rap artists have fell victim to gun violence. It began subtle with the murders of Tupac Shakur in 1996 and Notorious “Biggie Smalls” BIG in 1997. Although these artist achieve national and even global success in American mainstream entertainment, they still come from and are connected to the problems plaguing poor Black neighborhoods (i.e drugs, violence, and inadequate mental health support). Tupac and Biggie Smalls are considered two of

⁴² Nina Joung, “Common and Reverend Otis Moss on Healing Injustice through Spirituality, Art and Music,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, October 7, 2021), <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/exploring-hate/2021/10/07/common-and-reverend-otis-moss/>.

⁴³ Audrey Conklin, “Amid Memphis Violence Spree, Faith Leaders Call on Residents to 'Love Thy Neighbor',” Fox News (FOX News Network, September 14, 2022), <https://www.foxnews.com/us/amid-memphis-violence-spree-faith-leaders-call-residents-love-thy-neighbor>.

the most famous Rap artists in history. Their conflict (East Coast vs. West Coast beef) vividly displayed the realities of street life in which they both emerged from. Like most griots, they are worshipped and adored for expressing the joy, and pain of Black life on the streets of America. Their music explore experiences of suicide contemplation, gang conflicts, and police abuse. They both rose to the mainstream creating a new culture of Hip/hop Rap that focused on getting out of ghettos and obtaining the wealth closed off to them for generations. Non-black communities also loved these artist as they were featured in several Hollywood movies and shows (Juice, Gridlock, and Martin). Nevertheless, for some reason their fame and likeliness could not save them from violence.

Fast forward to today, gun violence has killed at least one nationally renowned rapper each year since 2018. In June 2018, rapper XXXtentacion was murdered at the age of 20 in a robbery as he left a motorsports store in Deerbeach, florida. His death came shortly after he peaked at no.7 of the billboard charts with his album single “Sad”. After his death, the single moved to #1 of the billboard hot 100 charts. As great as this sounds, the record labels that he was signed to, Empire music company and Capitol music group, still own the rights to his music leaving his estate with a small portion of ownership⁴⁴. This means that the company can still make money of his image and likeness even after his death.

In March 2019, Los Angeles rapper Nipsey Hussle was gunned down in front of his clothing store being shot at least ten times. His death was a major blow to the Rap community as he was venerated for his ability to speak out against issues like the lack of Black ownership in the music industry and police violence. He also motivated listeners to push through adversity to

⁴⁴ Danielle Letenyei, “Who Owns the Rights to XXXTentacion's Music?,” Market Realist (Market Realist, May 25, 2022), <https://marketrealist.com/p/who-owns-rights-xxxtentacion-music/>.

overcome life obstacles. Beyond his music career, Nipsey was a member of the Rollin 60s Neighborhood Crips but spoke out against rappers who would boast of gang affiliations to gain attention or fame. He wanted to remind them that for too many young people, joining a gang was not necessarily choice but a way of survival.

In 2021, the Memphis rap community was stunned after rapper Young Dolph was shot and killed while ordering cookies at a Cookie store in South Memphis. The rapper was not even currently living in Memphis but just returned home for a visit. He was gunned down in broad daylight. Prior to his death, he was nearly killed in a shooting incident that occurring in Los Angeles. During his entire life, he had experienced close encounters with violence. Dolph was beginning to emerge in American mainstream culture when his fifth studio album “Rich Slave” rose to number 5 on the Billboard 200 chart.

On this album, Dolph expressed the experience of having wealth yet still feeling like a slave. He explained the inspiration of his album in an interview saying, “It’s the reality of being Black in this country,” states Young Dolph. “You can have money, and you can be a benefactor and a leader in your community, but all people see is Black skin. All the bullsh*t I heard about as a kid, we still face in today’s time⁴⁵.” He adds, “Over the years, they have given us a little bit of freedom but it’s only a temporary pacifier. Hopefully, this album makes people understand that even though guys like me are doing well, we’re still affected by racism and inequality. It’s 2020, but the same stuff is still going on.⁴⁶” What Young Dolph describes is the reality of the contradiction when it comes to mainstream Rap artists. While they climb the charts earning

⁴⁵ Trey Alston, “12 Years a Young Dolph,” PAPER (PAPER, August 20, 2020), <https://www.papermag.com/young-dolph-rich-slave-album-interview-2647043304.html>.

⁴⁶ Trey Alston, “12 Years a Young Dolph,” PAPER (PAPER, August 20, 2020), <https://www.papermag.com/young-dolph-rich-slave-album-interview-2647043304.html>.

national reclaim with thousands of streams, they remain locked within the larger impact of structural racism and exploitation that sees them as moneymaking tools rather than storytellers.

Conclusion

The relationship between Rap music and community violence is one that holds many complexities. When it comes to this conundrum, three things can be true at the same time. First, there is validity to role of Rap music in influencing Black youth to become participate in community violence. Oftentimes, Black youth and young adults are affected by structural racism and inequality but are not aware of how the systems shape their lives and mindset. Therefore, for many Black youth, the violence in the music becomes how they see themselves and their Black identity. They internalize anti-blackness without knowing how these things came to be in the music and the role that structural inequality and racist stereotypes plays into it. Subsequently, we see Rap music interpreted in ways that that can led to self and community harm.

Secondly, there is validity in the role of Rap music in influencing police violence and incarceration. This is when interpretations of the music are used by the police state to address community violence by deeming Black youth and young adults as criminals who should be confined to prisons. These interpretations hear violence, gang affiliation, and misogyny as the product of a people who are inherently “bad” and purposely want to terrorize their communities. This interpretation is only concerned with cracking down on the “criminal” without care to understand the humanity of the person participating in community violence.

Lastly, there is validity in Rap music being interpreted to promote community changes and inform organizing. The goal of this paper is to focus on interpretations that could help create solutions for community violence that consider the humanity of Black youth and young adults participating in community violence. This is the importance of an Rap hermeneutical approach.

It digs deep within the commercialization, conspicuous consumption, and violence to center the experiences of joy, pain, hopelessness, and faith. A Rap hermeneutic analyzes and interprets Rap music through the lens of Black theology. To reference the work of Dwight Radcliff in his idea of the hermeneutical tripod he says, “the hermeneutic tripod requires that Hip Hop be a source for Black theology, due to it being part of the Black experience. The Black experience and/or culture have always been a source for theology in the Black context.⁴⁷” Rap music is important tool for organizers because of its engagement with Black theology. Just like the Blues, it uncovers the real-lived experiences of Black youth and young adults living in America through twisted metaphors of violence, pain, sorrow and, desperation as well as imagining a hope for a better tomorrow.

Interpretation is critically important for organizers. We see the various ways that Rap music has been interpreted by different groups of people as well as its impact. It makes some want to pick up guns, for others it makes them want to throw Black people behind bars, and for others it sparks the need for structural change. The hope for this paper is that community organizers, faith leaders, and activists, can begin to see the value of Rap music and a Rap hermeneutical approach as a significant tool to understand community violence by identifying how Rap music engages Black spirituality in nuanced forms. These interpretations hear violence, gang affiliation, and misogyny as the product of a people who are inherently “bad” and purposely want to terrorize their communities. It is only concerned with cracking down on “criminals” without a care to understand the humanity of the person participating in community

⁴⁷ Radcliffe, Dwight A. Jr. (2018) "Hip Hop Hermeneutics: How the Culture Influences Preachers," *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/jhhs/vol5/iss1/7>

violence.

Lastly, there is validity in Rap music being interpreted to promote community changes and inform organizing. The goal of this paper is to focus on interpretations that could help create solutions for community violence that focus on the humanity of Black youth and young adults irrationally participating in community violence. This is the importance of a Rap hermeneutical approach. It digs deep within the commercialization, conspicuous consumption, and violence to center the experiences of joy, pain, hopelessness, and faith. A Rap hermeneutic analyzes and interprets Rap music through the lens of Black theology. To reference the work of Dwight Radcliffe in his idea of the hermeneutical tripod he says, “the hermeneutic tripod requires that Hip Hop be a source for Black theology, due to it being part of the Black experience. The Black experience and/or culture have always been a source for theology in the Black context⁴⁸” Rap music is an important tool for organizers because of its engagement with Black theology. Just like the Blues, it uncovers the real-lived experiences of Black youth and young adults living in America through twisted metaphors of violence, pain, sorrow and desperation as well as imagining a hope for a better tomorrow.

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Rap hermeneutical approach as a significant tool to understand community violence by identifying how Rap music engages Black spirituality in nuanced forms.

RPL Method: Ways Organizing Groups in Memphis Can Use Rap Hermeneutic

In Memphis, Tennessee organizers have been seeking nuanced ways to curb the rise in violent crime. The surge in homicides in 2020 awoken community organizers to the severity of violence. Patrick Lawler, CEO of Youth Village, has used his nonprofit to counsel children with mental health or behavioral problems across the country. In 2020 he began to question what the community was doing to reduce gun violence and how his own organization could be more involved. Therefore, Youth Village launched an initiative called Memphis Allies, that raised \$16 million to target seven neighborhoods in Memphis with the most reported homicides.

They planned to build a Credible Messenger program, a program that has been implemented in various U.S Cities, that sends members of the community and mental health professionals to help mitigate conflict rather than deploying police. Youth Village engage research and trauma-informed models to address the increase in violence. However, their work has been highly criticized by other community groups and faith leaders. Rev. Earle Fisher, who leads a large Baptist church in Memphis, expressed his skepticism in the ability of Youth Villages to address Gun violence because of their “lack of experience with the problem”⁴⁹.

One problem Youth Village is facing, is that they are a white-led group trying to address gun violence in poor Black communities. They are accused of receiving philanthropic donations that should go to Black-led non-profits. As Youth Village continues to work through these

⁴⁹ Thalia Beaty, “Memphis Nonprofit Puts Money behind Drive to Curb Gun Deaths,” AP NEWS (Associated Press, December 8, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/health-violence-business-united-states-government-microsoft-corp-0348726af1ea38082941126844666337>.

challenges they must continue to learn from the real-lived experiences of those who have participated in violence and those who have been impacted by violence. The group stated in their efforts to understand the root issues of violence they have had conversations around factors such as music, sneakers and sports.

It is apparent that the organizers at Youth Village are concerned with ways that Rap music contributes to the increase in violence. While many Black youth and young adults are influenced by the music, organizers at Youth Village could use a Rap hermeneutical approach to understand the various codes and colloquialisms embedded in the music that give insight into the experience of community violence for Black youth and young adults. For example, in Pooh Shiesty's song, "See Me Comin", he describes a vivid experience of community violence in Memphis. The lyrics say;

"I learnt the game watchin' my O-G and it was dope up in the kitchen
I up the chopper and it ain't gon' blast without my men in position
Don't no member get left behind, yeah, I'm bringin' them by the winnin'
And to all the ones in the sky, keep standin' on the side of me , wait 'til I finish⁵⁰"

Here Memphis Rap artist Pooh Shiesty is describing the ways in which Black youth and young adults are introduced to drugs use and community violence through older family members, often times older cousins. This speaks to the generational impact of drugs and violence that does not just begin with youth. Organizers can learn from these lyrics the values and codes that street organizations or "gangs" live by. Violence is oftentimes concentrated within particular groups

⁵⁰ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/poohshiesty/seemecomin.html>

because they just do not see themselves as street organizations but as organizations that closely follow militaristic ideals and values where they see themselves on the frontlines with their comrades in order to get money for survival and/or respect.

As Pooh Shiesty uncovers in the lyrics, they believe that fellow members within their organizations who have lost their lives to violence at the hands of rival gang members, are watching over them as they get retribution for their dead. These lyrics offer insight for organizers to address Black youth and young adults in ways that takes an immense sense of care and patience because of the level of allegiance and bond that each member of the organization has with the organization itself and with their fellow members. Street organizations are often the very few places where Black youth and young adults can feel a sense of belonging or purpose, even if unhealthy. Organizers should think seriously about using a Rap hermeneutic to examine the relationship that Black youth and young adults have to community violence to create ways to for them to feel belonging and purpose in non-violent groups.

In engaging the methodological and analytical assumptions about religion, it becomes apparent why a Rap hermeneutical approach becomes an important tool for community organizers seeking to address community violence and mass incarceration. This approach acknowledges that organizers must go beyond normative assumptions around religion and spiritual experiences to understand how these very experiences operate implicitly even within something that does not appear to convey any notion of spirituality or religious ideas. In this case, it becomes Rap music. With a critical lens, organizers would be able to understand how Pooh Shiesty is actually detailing a spiritual experience for those apart of street organizations. Even as members commit violent acts, they still believe in the idea of ancestors or angels that offer a sense of support for them. Although complex, Shiesty's lyrics suggest that participants of

community violence still contain a sense of spiritual connectedness or reverence to others in their organizations as well as the dead. This idea alone can help organizers uncover the humanity of those connected to community violence and the desperate need for rehabilitation and mental health support to develop their spirituality in healthy life-giving ways.

With the tension between Youth Village and Faith leaders, importance of understanding Religions as internally diverse that also evolve and change is clearly conveyed. Various clergy members and faith leaders have been vocal about the dire need to address community violence in Memphis. We can look at faith leaders like, Imam Shaykh Hamza Abdul Malik whose central aim is to encourage faith institutions to address issues of poverty and the ways that it contributes to community violence. We can also look at Rev. Earle Fisher whose understanding of addressing community violence must be in holding the City government accountable and making sure that Black-led organizations are at the forefront.

Furthermore, within this diversity of organizing approaches influenced by religious ideas, it is critically important for non-faith based groups like Youth village to have a sense of religious literacy. Youth Village staffs employees from faith-based nonprofits like Neighborhood Christian Centers and LifeLine success⁵¹. Therefore, even as they operate outside of religious frameworks, the staffers they employee engage religious values and understandings in their approach to community violence. Therefore, religious literacy becomes critical in their conversations and strategic thinking around solutions that address community violence.

The importance of a Rap hermeneutical approach to community violence can be adequately explored through Galtung's Direct, Structural, and Cultural forms of Volence and Peace. It goes without saying the devastating impact of community violence on the community

⁵¹ Thalia Beaty, "Memphis Nonprofit Puts Money behind Drive to Curb Gun Deaths," AP NEWS (Associated Press, December 8, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/health-violence-business-united-states-government-microsoft-corp-0348726af1ea38082941126844666337>.

itself and the larger society. When it comes to community violence, mothers prematurely bury sons and even grandmothers are out living their grandchildren. It is an experience that Black women face around the country. Precious Black lives are gunned down, oftentimes, by other precious Black lives who are spiritually, physically, and mentally unwell. This direct violence is heavily reflected in Rap music. A harm that carries over and traumatizes the next generations. We can see this from the 90s with rappers like Tupac to today.

Through a structural frame, community violence is manufactured. Hoods and ghettos are created and violence is then bred. Practices such as redlining, predatory lending, intentional economic divestment in Black communities, inadequate access to healthcare, and the placement of chemical and waste plants in communities of color all convey forms of structural violence. The impact of this violence is again embedded in the music. If we turn back to the lyrics of Pooh Shiesty, we can see how drug use and distribution becomes a primary way for people living in poor Black communities to obtain enough money to sustain themselves and their families. It is an unfortunate reality that is the product of structural violence and inequality.

Lastly, cultural violence affects both the oppressor and the oppressed. For the oppressed, it morphs itself into internalized anti-blackness that pervades the everyday life. Ideas of Blackness become confined to images of criminality, poverty, and incompetency. It is no coincidence that community violence is significantly prevalent amongst Black communities in particular. It is cultural violence that erased the history of Black people and replaced this history with European religious histories that center and value whiteness.

In the same way, cultural violence is detrimental to the oppressor. It offers false notions and ideals around whiteness that creates a superiority complex that is spiritually destructive. The cultural violence of white supremacy, in this case of Rap music, ignores the lived experiences of

Black people. It results into what Cornel West refers to as “spiritual decay” where in his words, “everybody wants their brand to be so commodified, rather than to find their cause and be so courageous that they’re willing to pay a cost and take a risk for their cause, not just their careers. That’s a spiritual decay right there, and that cuts across region, race, class, gender, sexual orientation—across the board⁵².” Spiritual decay is the product of cultural violence and it can impact both, I argue, the oppressed and the oppressor. Both suffer from the cultural harms of white supremacy.

Therefore, religious literacy becomes important for community organizers engaging a Rap hermeneutical approach. It is important to understand the nuances of religious expressions, values, and ideals engaged by the those affected by various forms of violence and by those afflicting violence. Religious literacy in its most nuanced form is critical for organizers addressing community violence in Memphis. This will support organizers in identifying the root issues of community violence and the mental, physical, and spiritual impact on Black communities as well as the larger society.

⁵² Vinson Cunningham, “Cornel West Sees a Spiritual Decay in the Culture,” *The New Yorker*, March 9, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/cornel-west-sees-a-spiritual-decay-in-the-culture?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Cornel+West+sees+a+spiritual+decay+in+the+culture&utm_campaign=ni_newsletter.

Creative Project – Annotated

Click speaker below to play mix



Project Pat – North North

Description: The single North North gives a vivid image of life in North Memphis where Project Pat was born and raised. He has talked about his experience growing up in Memphis and especially within the era of Crack Cocaine. Drugs, poverty, and guns became the recipe for violence, as he describes the level of this violence in this song. In an interview, Project Pat described his experience in Memphis saying, Like any other inner urban city, just like Baltimore, just like St. Louis or DC or Detroit is—drug infested. The project I grew up in is abandoned. I just stayed focused and got a blessing. It was the ghetto so you know how that goes—not to put the same old sob story out there because everybody always do.” In an interview with Dr. Stacey L. Spencer on his podcast Spiritual Conversations, Project Pat mentions being engaged in violence at an early age. He says, “I can remember fighting over cheese in elementary school. When I first got into it with a gang I was eight years old.”. Project Pat speaks to the lives of these traumatized by violence at very early age⁵³.

Rap Hermeneutical Meaning : In North Memphis you are liable to see or hear about gun violence. Headlines of victims shot and killed circulate news outlets daily. At the source of this violence is a survival of the fittest environment that breeds violence. North North captures what life is like living with this reality of violence. In North Memphis Black families have witnessed family members gunned down in front of them. Project Pat tells a vivid and dark story of the North side of town.

Yeah nigga. It's official. North North. It's on nigga.
Crackin' niggas jaws
Runnin hoes into walls
Niggas yellin "North North!"
Hoes screamin "North North!"

⁵³ *YouTube*, 2021. <https://youtu.be/seZbPQZVTRo>.

On the north side of town (North North!)
Lurk the killers and the thugs (North North!)
Those who never show no pity (North North!)
Come up short, feel the slugs (North North!)
Upper tone to ya dome (North North!)
When it's over then that's it (North North!)
Ain't gon' be no comin' back (North North!)
You's a victim of this shit (North North!)
Heard the clique (North North!)
Then the gun blast (North North!)
Then yo' body fall (North North!)
In a hood (North North!)
Where this gang shit wrote all on the wall (North North!)
You can call who you want (North North!)
But the police ain't gon' come (North North!)
Till the killers leave the scene (North North!)
And the shit's already done (North North!)
Any one of you lames dumpin stolars to yo' fo (North North!)
If it's anna on yo' chest, I'ma bring it to yo' do' (North North!)
Heidy ho, like I'm ?? (North North!)
Like I'm Lone Ranger (North North!)
Hollows in the chamber (North North!)
Now yo' life's in danger (North North!)
Project not a stranger (North North!)
To dra-ma-ci-dal life (North North!)
Get yo' ass blowed (North North!)
Off in front-of-kids-and-wife (North North!)
Nigga what's beef (North North!)
You can see me in the street (North North!)
I'ma show you what's real (North North!)
When the glock's in yo' grill (North North!)
You can die out here (North North!)
Motherfucker don't pay (North North!)
With the don't play (North North!)
Let the AK forty spray (North North!)
Dead body lay (North North!)
Who's to say (North North!)
Who's gonna get brains (North North!)
Blowed out (North North!)
In front of hoes (North North!)
You weak niggas (North North!)
Love to show out (North North!)
Bouts to slice up the blunt (North North!)
With the razor (North North!)
Fill it with 'dro and get blowed (North North!)
Somethin' major (North North!)
Page my dawgs who stay strapped (North North!)
With them youngsters (North North!)
Or bust on them rollers chief 187 soldiers (North North!)
Mass outta town (North North!)
We slang crack (North North!)
Till we flippin ki's glock to back (North North!)
'cause for a mill (North North!)

We some dinner thieves (North North!)
 Be's the player who runs game (North North!)
 Kind of chickery candy paint and chrome twanks (North North!)
 When I pickery (North North!)
 Hickory dickory (North North!)
 Gimme some (North North!)
 Oh, you slobbering? (North North!)
 That's how you niggas be gettin' caught (North North!)
 In a robbery (North North!)
 Possibly niggas squeeze on the trigger (North North!)
 Then you peel away (North North!)
 North Memphis (North North!)
 This type of shit happen everyday (North North!)
 You can die out here (North North!)
 Motherfucker don't pay (North North!)
 With the don't play (North North!)
 Let the AK forty spray (North North!)
 Dead body lay (North North!)
 Who's to say (North North!)
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 North Memphis (North North!)
 This type of shit happen everyday (North North!)

A Crumb to 2 a Brick – La Chat

Description: The song references the crack cocaine era where many people sold cocaine in order to survive. La chat details the experience of selling crack cocaine from a female perspective and what it is like to navigate the ghetto as a poor black woman. It was drugs that offered the economic mobility but unfortunately came with violence and police abuse.

Rap Hermeneutical meaning: In Memphis and the surrounding county, there were a record number of homicides (179) in 1986. During the same year, there was a marked increase in medical examiner cases where tests were positive for cocaine or its metabolites⁵⁴. 1986 alone, there were 53 cocaine related deaths, all manners, and 31 cocaine related homicides⁵⁵. A Crumb to 2 a Brick offers insight the impact of drugs on the community and the ways it becomes a recipe for violence.

I flip a crumb 2 a brick
 A brick 2 some rocks
 Some rocks 2 a juice
 (Now we chopping up them for food)
 A chevy 2 a lac
 A lac 2 a vet
 A vet 2 a benz
 (With this dough we makin' ends nigga)
 I flip a crumb 2 a brick
 A brick 2 some rocks
 Some rocks 2 a juice
 (Now we chopping up them for food)
 A chevy 2 a lac
 A lac 2 a vet
 A vet 2 a benz
 (With this dough we makin' ends nigga)
 You can call Mrs. Serv On, cause I get my hustle on
 Looking for some donkey kong, got me blowing up my phone
 So you wanna get along, got no money but you (?)
 I'ma break you off a crumb, leave me in the early morn'
 Always trapped up with a tone, I will shoot you in yo dome.
 All you robbers got me wrong, I will show up at yo' home
 Gotta make my money job, Fuck wit me and you'll be gone
 Always striking for they call, La' Chat gotta make it known
 I be bout' that money mane, For the top is where I aim
 I don't play no looser games, Niggas always say my name
 Shit I be the one to blame, When they ain't to booming thangs
 In these streets they got to fight, Mane you know I can't be lien'
 Always strugglin' for they chains, Try my best to maintain
 Watch them shoot it in they thang, It be throbbin' in the brain

⁵⁴ Harruff, R. C., Francisco, J. T., Elkins, S. K., Phillips, A. M., & Fernandez, G. S. (1988). Cocaine and homicide in Memphis and Shelby county: an epidemic of violence. *Journal of forensic sciences*, 33(5), 1231–1237.

⁵⁵ Harruff, R. C., Francisco, J. T., Elkins, S. K., Phillips, A. M., & Fernandez, G. S. (1988). Cocaine and homicide in Memphis and Shelby county: an epidemic of violence. *Journal of forensic sciences*, 33(5), 1231–1237.

I be causing plenty pain, (?)
 Servin to much cocaine, Theya'll gone love me when I'm game
 I flip a crumb 2 a brick
 A brick 2 some rocks
 Some rocks 2 a juice
 (Now we chopping up them for food)
 A chevy 2 a lac
 A lac 2 a vet
 A vet 2 a benz
 (With this dough we makin' ends nigga)
 I flip a crumb 2 a brick
 A brick 2 some rocks
 Some rocks 2 a juice
 (Now we chopping up them for food)
 A chevy 2 a lac
 A lac 2 a vet
 A vet 2 a benz
 (With this dough we makin' ends nigga)
 I be posted on the tracks, Slanging rocks back-to-back
 Shit I even fuck with packs, Everybody know La' Chat
 Mayn I'm gone make a kill, Flip from rocks to servin' deals
 Catch me on the corner still, Cause I'm out to make a mill'
 Niggas thinkin' that I'm heavy, Cause I'm ridin in there chevy
 (?) cause i'm sweaty, Got that hoe bumped down and ready
 I'm a bitch about that skrilla, Got more work than half you niggas
 Just to keep it on the realla, I'm a buy a drug dealer
 Thuggin' on yo' fuckin block, Keep my eye up on the (?)
 I ain't tryin to make it hot, So I get from spot to spot
 Got to keep my 9 on me, Always ready fo' some heat
 I don't know if you got beef, It's so hot out in the streets
 But this how I choose to live, Thanks the lord to be forgiven
 This is how I pay my bills, This is how I eat a meal
 I would give it up one day, When that day I can not say
 Cause I feel I'm livin' straight, Slangin' dope what keep me paid
 I flip a crumb 2 a brick
 A brick 2 some rocks
 Some rocks 2 a juice
 (Now we chopping up them for food)
 A chevy 2 a lac
 A lac 2 a vet
 A vet 2 a benz
 (With this dough we makin' ends nigga.
 ..ends nigga...ends nigga...ends nigga)

Yo Gotti – Red, White, and Blue

Description: This song was released in 2012 as single on Yo Gotti’s sixth album, *Live From the Kitchen*. *Live from the Kitchen* debuted at number 12 on the billboard charts with 16,000 copies in its first week of sales in the United States⁵⁶. To date, the album has sold 36,000 copies in the United States One of the songs of the album “5 Star” peaked at number 79 on the US Billboard Hot 100. The album’s reference of Live From the Kitchen speaks to the kitchen where drugs are manufactured⁵⁷.

Rap Hermeneutical meaning:

The single Red, White, and Blue reflects on the conditions of America for many Black Men living life on the streets. Yo Gotti begins addressing the consistent recruitment of Black men by the U.S Military. His response put simply is that he is not going to overseas to fight a war when his own community itself is a war zone. He says:

*Yeah, I'm into it with niggas right around the corner from me
I ain't gotta go out the motherfucking country to shoot them choppers nigga, hah*

So many disadvantaged Black communities are similar to war zones with the level of violence and poverty. The single Red, White, and Blue gives insight to America’s biggest contradiction in supporting war abroad but not addressing the war zones within its own backyards. Yo gotti shares what Red, White and Blue means to him, which is not patriotism, but gang life and street life.

United States of America, nigga
Land of the free
Nigga what you'd do for your country?
You know what I'd do for mine?
Everything but go to war, nigga
Yeah, I'm into it with niggas right around the corner from me
I ain't gotta go out the motherfucking country to shoot them choppers nigga, hah
Colombians, Mexicans
Even got some work from the Dominicans (hey!)
American, land of the free
National anthem shit
My country 'tis of thee
Red, white, and blue (hey!)

⁵⁶ “HipHopDX,” YouTube (YouTube), accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/user/HipHopDX>.

⁵⁷ HipHopDX,” YouTube (YouTube), accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/user/HipHopDX>.

Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Crip and Blood shit
 Nigga I salute
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Cocaine shit
 Nigga I salute
 Colombians and Mexicans, I'm tryna re-up (I am)
 Stop the beat let's get something understood, I stay G'd up
 Maybach with my feet up, AK when I creep up
 My young niggas rep Blood Gang, my OGs rep Hoover
 All I got is shooters, all we do is shoot up
 Little bad bitch got no aim, she must work at Hooters
 Remember being in New York when the towers blew up
 Now I got a 911 Porsche with the blue guts
 Rims'll make you throw up, something to make you blow up
 Niggas getting little money, when you gon' grow up?
 Louis from the toe up (fresh)
 Street nigga, so what? (I am)
 Louis XIII and I just tell them bitches poor up (work)
 Colombians, Mexicans
 Even got some work from the Dominicans (hey!)
 American, land of the free
 National anthem shit
 My country 'tis of thee
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Crip and Blood shit
 Nigga I salute
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Cocaine shit
 Nigga I salute
 Voila, haha, 18 wheeler fulla'
 Pounds of midget green and thirty bricks inside a Honda
 He don't speak any English, all he know is numbers
 That's my mans, he plug me and he gon' get me through the summer (hey!)
 He don't know my name, him there just a runner
 He pick it up and drop it off then he gets him yonder
 Land of the free, run up if you wanna
 Suicide mission, we got choppers in this Hummer
 Red, white, and blue, I'm no politician
 But I live in a white house so I feel presidential

I pledge allegiance to the flag, United Streets of America
 In God we trust, in one we stand, I'll always be a hustler
 Work
 Colombians, Mexicans
 Even got some work from the Dominicans (hey!)
 American, land of the free
 National anthem shit
 My country 'tis of thee
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Crip and Blood shit
 Nigga I salute
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Cocaine shit
 Nigga I salute
 The block Frank Sinatra, thirty thousand feet up in the air, eating lobster
 Doing what I gotsta'
 Catch me at the tables, hundred thousand a marker (cash)
 Goons gon' hit you with five, loud when we spark ya (pah)
 Fucking with the wrong set, ain't even perform yet (uh-uh)
 Short one to AC, Vegas we took the long jet
 Blue chip in the field, red one on the horn bet
 Money straight, work good, the neck ain't did me wrong yet
 Poppy, they come in powder form 'til we rock 'em up (ha)
 Land of the free, but they tryna lock me up
 Ha, I'm in the trap 'til the sky change
 Drug dealer nightmares, millionaire migraines
 Work, what
 Colombians, Mexicans
 Even got some work from the Dominicans (hey!)
 American, land of the free
 National anthem shit
 My country 'tis of thee
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Crip and Blood shit
 Nigga I salute
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Red, white, and blue (hey!)
 Cocaine shit
 Nigga I salute

Duke Deuce – Respect

Description: The single appears on Duke Deuce’s album *MEMPHIS MASSACRE III*, that released for Halloween 2022. In this album you can hear the strong influence of early Memphis Rap sound. With the album, Duke casts himself as a gleefully troublemaker nicknamed “Deucifer,” whose only concern is “tearing up the club (having a great time at parties).

Rap hermeneutical meaning:

The single Respect speaks to the most important principle in street culture. Respect is something people are willing to die over. Many interpersonal conflicts that lead to violence take place because someone felt disrespected, challenged, or wounded pride. Duke’s strategic word play invites the listener into communities in Memphis where violence often occurs over very small issues.

[Intro: Duke Deuce & *Glockianna*]

Check it, I got the whole motherfucking mafia (**Ayoza, you wrong for this shit**) filled in this bitch, nigga (*Fuck a nigga talking 'bout, old broke ass ho*)

Made me a mafia, nigga

Ms. Made Mafia (*Bad, that we know*), y'all know what the fuck goin' on (*Big Glock, it's when I step*)

Whole lotta trippin' in this bitch (*Miss Made Mafia*), you need some crunk motherfucking- , take off, ho (*What the fuck! Bitch*)

Bitch, nigga

[Chorus: Duke Deuce]

You ain't gotta like, but you sure gon' respect it

R. E. S. P. E. C. T., bet they gon' respect a G

You ain't gotta like, but you sure gon' respect it

R. E. S. P. E. C. T., bet they gon' respect a G (Ayy, ayy)

[Verse 1: Duke Deuce]

This shit here too far from soft, claim you buck, then buck the law

Fuck what you don't listen too, that shit ain't crunk, we turn it off (Ayy, ayy)

Know we going up on 'em

Play pussy, we gon' buck on 'em

Hard where we come from, forever drop our nuts on 'em (Fuck 'em)

All my niggas we're fucking MACS

VVS's, ice attack

King of Crunk I'm back, facts, they keep on begging for more of that crack (More of that crack)

Hating on me, them niggas wack (Niggas wack)

Fuck you thought, I keep a MAC

Phatty, phat-phat, got some in this GAT that'll put your bitch ass on your back (Ay-ay-ayy)

Uh, don't get stomped in these high top Rees (High top Rees)
 Wanna see me gangsta walk, that's gon' cost you a fee (Cost you a fee)
 I got money, plus I'm funny, so she want me, bitch, please (Bitch, please)
 Tryna get some out a P, gotta get it off your knees (Gotta get it off your knees)
 Nigga dissed me in the hood, I was somewhere overseas (Yeah, yeah)
 Catch that nigga in the hood, I'ma beat that boy to sleep (Yeah, yeah, yeah)
 Thought that it was over stood (What?) that I'm a motherfuckin' G (What?)
 If it come from Ayoza (What?) you know it's murder on the beat (What the fuck!)

[Chorus: Duke Deuce]

You ain't gotta like, but you sure gon' respect it
 R. E. S. P. E. C. T., bet they gon' respect a G
 You ain't gotta like, but you sure gon' respect it
 R. E. S. P. E. C. T., bet they gon' respect a G

[Verse 2: Lil Thad]

Nigga play around with this shit, we burn his ass like cayenne
 So many Glocks up in the car, I can't even pick what gen
 I catch a opp, I leave him slump, gon' send me straight back to the pen
 We robbed your bitch ass baby daddy, made his ho ass jump the fence
 5.56, 7.62, we knocked his bitch ass out his clothes
 Let me find out you a duck, we take you down for all ya 'bows
 I just copped a brand new FN, aim that bitch straight at ya nose
 Plug playin' with that work, we cross him out like Derrick Rose

[Verse 3: Dubba G & *Glockianna*]

Bitch, you don't want the smoke with these 7.62's
 Pull up on a nigga block, now he a shitty lil' dude
 Ever since my nigga died, I been losing some screws
 Bitch it ain't no second chance, you gon' win or you lose
 We gone stomp a nigga ass like a HBCU
 She gon' suck a nigga dick while I'm counting theses blues
 I'm on I-22 with these 'bows on cruise
 You might not think that bitch be fucking (*Glocky*), but these hoes gon' choose

[Verse 4: *Glockianna*]

I bet I get my respect (Respect), I'm keeping my foot on they neck (What)
 It's the queen of crunk (What you on?), I set it off, get stomped in yo' chest (What?)
 You hoes can't fuck with my people (What you on?)
 It's strictly war when I see ya (You don't want war)
 It's big *Glockianna* (What you on?), Miss Made, my mafia evil (What you on?)
 Ol' talkin' ass (What you on?) dog ass (What?), weak ass hoes (What you on?)
 Selling pussy in high school (What you on?), ho, you getting exposed (What you on?)

Keep on talking out your neck (What you on?), you gon' get yo' ass fold (What you on?)
 Ain't no bitch in my blood (What you on?), ho, and that's on my soul (Woah)

[Chorus: Duke Deuce]

You ain't gotta like, but you sure gon' respect it
 R. E. S. P. E. C. T., bet they gon' respect a G
 You ain't gotta like, but you sure gon' respect it
 R. E. S. P. E. C. T., bet they gon' respect a G

[Outro: Duke Deuce]

R-R-R.E

R-R-R-R. E. S. P. E. C. T

R. E. S. P. E. C. T

R-R-R-R-R-R-R-R-R. E. S. P. E. C. T. bet they gon' respect a G

Embed

Lil Double O – Fight that Switch

Description: The single Fight that Switch is featured on Lil Double O's first album entitled Walk Down Gang. Back in the day, Lil Double O used to kick it with his friends who also rapped. At the time as a teenager, he was involved in street activity and never saw music in his future until he lost two of his closest friends—one to a murder and one to a jail sentence. Afterwards, he decided to carry their dreams of being artist.

Rap Hermeneutical message: Lil Double O was traumatized by violence at early age. While he was just a baby, his father was murdered in front of him. This was an event that he carried with him daily as well as the grief and anger of having a parent taken from him. Ultimately, this struggle played out in his involvement in street organizations and illegal activity. In the song Fight that Switch, he talks about community violence often times arising out of interpersonal or gang conflicts. He also talk about his own mental and spiritual struggles with navigating his conditions. He says:

Came from the block, wakin' 'round with demons
 Growin' up with no pops, probably was the reason, ayy

Here we see Rapper Lil Double O expressing his trauma caused by violence. The story of Lil Double O is unfortunately the story of so many young black men forced to navigate poverty and violence.

I was fifteen, earned my stripes
 You the type of nigga ain't even have no pipe
 Grown-ass nigga, tryna play with your life
 He ain't a grown man, that's a baby boy
 Think this shit like a movie, tryna pull up on bikes
 We take niggas life (Helluva made this beat, baby)
 Big Glock ten milli' knock trees down, a nigga body can't fight
 Nigga can't fight that switch (smash, smash, Big Walk Down)
 Uh, hop out and walk somethin' down with that blick
 Show a lil' nigga that you handle the business
 I ain't been on a mission, it's been a lil' minute
 Fuck the gang unit, I ain't tellin' my victim
 If I got some beef with some niggas, they know I'ma finish
 You pushin' a foreign, but I heard you rented it
 Pushin' a foreign, but it's rented
 Uh, we gettin' money for real, we ain't trippin'
 Nigga be sayin' they pushin' that P, whole time, nigga be sittin' back bitchin'
 Whole time, nigga be chasin' these bitches
 'Stead of gettin' mad at the ho
 Need to tie up your gang 'cause you lame to these bitches (no bap)
 Need to switch up the lane, gotta change up and get it
 Came from the block, wakin' 'round with demons
 Growin' up with no pops, probably was the reason, ayy
 He ain't really got aim, put a beam, we spray
 We was first in the city to scream, "Free Baby" (no bap)
 If I said it, I mean it, I mean what I say
 Niggas die every minute, so you might as well pray
 I'd probably be in jail for a murder if it wasn't for this rap shit
 Double 0 ain't with that cap shit, I'm tryna spray
 Can't stop, my team full of snipers
 Uh, we gettin' active, fuck who don't like it
 Plug send a hundred 'bows of that shit, need a diaper
 Bitch, I got a green beam, but I'm a green heart fuckin' sniper, ho
 Niggas broke
 Niggas be livin' off clout, so the free give 'em hope
 Yeah, .300 Blackout, Double gon' act out
 Like, fuck what they talkin' 'bout, put on a ski, let's roll
 It's just me and doggy in this SRT
 Racin' the Track' verse the 'Cat like Need for Speed
 Walkin' just like we some No Limit soldiers
 But me and my niggas ain't met Master P
 Mixin' up different dead opps 'til our fuckin' head pop
 Now we hop out the whip like the new Wiz Khalifa
 Young nigga rich, but he still on the bullshit
 Growin' up, I used to look up to Chief Keef
 Nigga can't fight that switch (smash, smash, Big Walk Down)
 Uh, hop out and walk somethin' down with that blick
 Show a lil' nigga that you handle the business
 I ain't been on a mission, it's been a lil' minute

Fuck the gang unit, I ain't tellin' my victim
 If I got some beef with some niggas, they know I'ma finish
 You pushin' a foreign, but I heard you rented it
 Pushin' a foreign, but it's rented
 Uh, we gettin' money for real, we ain't trippin'
 Nigga be sayin' they pushin' that P, whole time, nigga be sittin' back bitchin'
 Whole time, nigga be chasin' these bitches
 'Stead of gettin' mad at the ho
 Need to tie up your gang 'cause you lame to these bitches (no bap)
 Need to switch up the lane, gotta change up and get it
 Yeah, only lie I'ma tell is in front of your honor
 She better not be with him, I'm poppin' his mama
 Dumpin' this Drac', wood hot as a sauna
 Switch on the blick with a drum at the bottom
 All of my opps know exactly who shot 'em
 Spin and I miss, then I'm spinnin' tomorrow
 I had Tubman set up like the Carter
 Make it harder, get it out the water
 However you want it, my wrist game proper
 Yellow Perc', two 30 popper
 I'ma send a nigga to the doctor
 One up top, I ain't gotta cock it
 If he beef with me, then he got shot up
 Big snake, I'm an anaconda
 Con gang, home of the robbers
 55 Riata Drive dada
 Drillin' out a Charger, me and Bopper
 Hit it with the acetone lock up
 Never seen a nigga dodge a chopper
 Snake him, couple grand to his partner
 I done shot more niggas than the doctor
 Make a grown man scream and holler
 If I want him dead, then you can't stop it
 The whole city scared to come to papa
 Nigga can't fight that switch (smash, smash, Big Walk Down)
 Uh, hop out and walk somethin' down with that blick
 Show a lil' nigga that you handle the business
 I ain't been on a mission, it's been a lil' minute
 Fuck the gang unit, I ain't tellin' my victim
 If I got some beef with some niggas, they know I'ma finish
 You pushin' a foreign, but I heard you rented it
 Pushin' a foreign, but it's rented
 Uh, we gettin' money for real, we ain't trippin'
 Nigga be sayin' they pushin' that P, whole time, nigga be sittin' back bitchin'
 Whole time, nigga be chasin' these bitches
 'Stead of gettin' mad at the ho
 Need to tie up your gang 'cause you lame to these bitches (no bap)
 Need to switch up the lane, gotta change up and get it

Finese2tymes feat Gucci Mane – Gucci Flow

Description: Finese2Tymes released his mixtape 90 Days soon after being released from serving five years in prison. He spoke about how the album encapsulate his personal journey in Memphis in the most vulnerable form, and he is seeking to change the culture with his sound in an interview with hotnewhiphop.com. He says, Just going through what I've been going through. Being in jail; being down so long, being locked up all my life like that, you know what I'm saying? I was listening to music on the street, and I wanted to become different. Everybody come on the same type of flavor, and then I just did it with a different flavor and they gon' kick it. And they gon' feel me⁵⁸” The album is summary of the music produced in the within 90 days of his release.

Rap Hermeneutical meaning: Finese2tymes is loved for his raw and uncut music highlighting common life of the streets. In his single Gucci Flow he describes his life growing up in Memphis, and surviving incarceration. A bar of the lyrics speak on the everyday norms of street life in Memphis for young black youth saying:

If you weren't sellin' dope, you was killin' and pimpin' (pimp)
Robbin' and stealin' (rob), whatever to get it, just get it (just get it)

In Gucci Flow, Finese2tymes shares the conditions of underserved communities in Memphis struggling to make ends meet just to experience some form of economic mobility. The single helps us understand how violence is breed, when communities are intentionally built upon survival mode.

Finesse, too hard
A million dollars don't excite me (at all)
Model bitches can't entice me (at all)
Still a street nigga, white jumpsuit, black Glock, dirty white Nikes
Still'll put them things in a rental (finesse 'em)
Crack his head down the middle (I got 'em)
And I'm certified everywhere I go (go)
I don't need a vouch, I'm official (I'm him)
They wanna stop me, like Jeffrey Simmons (Jeffrey Simmons)
I'm from Memphis, I grew up and walked to Simmons (eastside)
If you ain't from the block, you the opposition (opposition)
If you weren't sellin' dope, you was killin' and pimpin' (pimp)
Robbin' and stealin' (rob), whatever to get it, just get it (just get it)

⁵⁸ Gabriel Bras Nevaes, “Finesse2Tymes Talks New Mixtape, ‘90 Days,’ Overcoming Grudges & the Value of Freedom,” HotNewHipHop, December 2, 2022, <https://www.hotnewhiphop.com/602827-finesse2tymes-talks-new-mixtape-90-days-overcoming-grudges-the-value-of-freedom>.

Ain't just on me, it's in me (in me)
I speak the truth, I'm the realest
I ain't just dedicated, I'm committed (committed)
Pull up, white polo-tee, Palm Angels sweat, VVS baguettes, they know I was next
Locked down, twenty-three hours, one hour rec, look at me now
Everything together (everything), if I changed, I changed for the better
Everybody won't shine with me, but we ain't stayin' in the rain together
Can't hang together (go)
Gucci finessin', these niggas regressin'
Call me a clone, but I call it progressin' (well, damn)
I went to jail and it taught me a lesson
I took a bird and turned it to a blessin'
Wop got a fetish for chasin' the lettuce
She try finesse me to get some baguetties (ho)
Niggas pathetic, diss me and regret it
I took the cash and let them take the credit (wow)
Life is hectic, keep it kosher steady, don't need no medic (woo)
Lost in Vegas, I ain't sweat it, picked up a bag and I ain't bet it (no)
My niggas rich with millions, but we felons
Your niggas did the killings, but they tellin' (pussy)
Every time I hit the county, I was sellin'
Brother front the pack, I was seven (true)
Matter of fact, I was into .7s
Jay showin' love, call me Kevin
Forgive me, Lord, I really need a reverend (huh)
Play with Wop, you're on your way to heaven (Lord)
Gucci pulled up in a 911 (skrrt)
Raisin' terror, like it's 9/11 (yoom)
Took a nigga weapon without a weapon (wow)
He screamin', "Help, " but knowin' they can't help him (it's Gucci)

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