Fight the Power: Subversion in the Oral Tradition of African-American Art

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FIGHT THE POWER: SUBVERSION IN
THE ORAL TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

A Thesis Presented

by

CRAIG DEMELO

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies
Bridgewater State University
Bridgewater, Massachusetts

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in English

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Writing this thesis was as enjoyable as it was informative. I learned a great deal, not only about African American culture and music, but also about the process of writing a protracted, in-depth research assignment (having written nearly a hundred pages, I’m amazed that there were moments in the past when I huffed exasperatedly at conference-length papers). I originally had no intentions of doing the thesis, figuring I could coast happily through my coursework, but I was encouraged by my professor Dr. Davis, who believed I “had the chops” to tackle such a project. Once I heard that—especially from a scholar whom I held in high regard—I felt as though I had to challenge myself. I’ll let you, dear reader, decide if she was right.

I have to thank Dr. Davis, not only for that moment of inspiration, but for being everything an advisor ought to be. Her extensive criticism and commentary, always astute and assiduously prepared, not only made my work here better, but has greatly improved whatever “chops” I had as a writer. Her erudition and wit also made every class and advising meeting useful and enjoyable.

Finally I want to thank my wife and children for their patience. They were more than understanding when Daddy couldn’t play that game or watch that movie or do those dishes at that moment on account of my “homework.” I hope that seeing me accomplish this goal inspires my children to chase their own.
Chapter 1: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen”: Post-Blackness and Hip-hop Criticism

The history of African Americans is a tale of brutality and inhumanity which spans centuries. The vignettes are well-known: whip-scarred backs, lynchings, segregated bathrooms, firehoses and dogs, police shootings. Running parallel to this tragedy is a soundtrack of hope, of perseverance, of rebellion. There is a deep culture of stories and songs—passed on orally, as for years the downtrodden had no means of recording—that did their best to preserve the memories and customs which were at risk of disappearing. It began with the songs sung by slaves. W.E.B. Du Bois referred to these spirituals and “sorrow songs” as the “haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past” (Souls of Black Folk 2). Along with singing, the slaves were raconteurs, stitching yarns of joy, adventure, and cunning, keeping their spirits up despite their woes. These songs and tales persisted and evolved over future generations into some of the most popular forms of American music; faced with unimaginable hardships, the African American slaves managed to sow the seeds of their culture in razed, bloodstained ground.

Unlike most other cultures in which much of the art was produced by the noble or wealthy, African Americans have been consistently creative despite being subjected to centuries of subjugation, violence, and oppression. From this misery has come a wellspring of expressiveness which has evolved over time, from those spirituals and folk tales to rhythm and blues, jazz, and finally hip hop. One quality that typifies African American art: it speaks of pain and is the product of tribulation. It puts into question George Orwell’s proclamation that “the imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity” (Orwell 72). And it confirms James Baldwin when he said that “No people come into possession of a culture without having
paid a heavy price for it” (114). African American art is creative rebellion. It is survival set to music.

Although some believe in a black essence as the defining root of black art, I argue that there is one trait which permeates creativity throughout the centuries of the black experience: subversion. Most African American artists are responding to the state of being a beleaguered minority and seek to rebel against racism in all its forms—from slavery to micro-aggressions and everything in between. In her book about the ordeals of the Congolese, Marta De Heredia discusses subversion and creativity among the marginalized: “Creativity…is defined here as the use of imagination, solidarity and reciprocity to produce anything that allows or improves survival…creativity provides everyday needs…(it) facilitates survival and…is a collective project” (153). These songs and stories, in other words, have been galvanizing among the disenfranchised, helping to develop strong groups and foster determination.

In this essay I will argue that, due to the brutal and inhumane circumstances from which it arises, the oral tradition of African American stories and music is subversive and seeks to alter, satirize, and excoriate the white culture upon which the racist system in America is built. What began as brave and quiet defiance in the southern fields metamorphosed slowly into the brazen and unapologetic apogee of musical rebellion: Hip-hop. I will explore the ways in which Hip-hop has maintained elements of earlier forms of the African American oral tradition and analyze the thread of subversion as it runs from spirituals, folklore, and trickster tales to the lyrics in rap music. The introductory chapter will situate the paper in the context of scholarship about cultural essentialism and Hip-hop criticism. The second chapter will focus on the similarities between sorrow songs and Hip-hop music. The third will explore how elements of trickster tales
persist in the figure of the “hustler.” While the hustler archetype is ubiquitous in rap music, I will focus primarily on Jay-Z by analyzing his autobiography *Decoded* and his lyrics. The fourth chapter will move into the 20th century, exploring the first few decades of the blues. Here, I will examine the subversive sexuality displayed by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, connecting it then to the overt sexuality of some contemporary female rap artists. Finally, in an epilogue I will briefly describe how jazz maintained the thread of subversion and splintered into several others genres which bridged these early forms to Hip-hop music. Hip-hop, with its overtly rebellious, aggressive, and vociferous examination of racial themes may be the latest and loudest of the Africanized responses to racism, oppression, and whiteness, but they all sought to do the same things: unify black Americans, generate hope, and raise a mutinous black fist to those in power.

**Post-Blackness**

While this paper is an effort to explore subversive trends in African American art, at bottom it is an argument in defense of cultural essentialism—the idea that there are some intrinsic traits which may be used to categorize groups of people within a particular culture. The underlying idea is that African American art is a genre unto itself because it is a subversive response to the established power structure. It is always moving uphill, always struggling against a social gravity which has been pulling relentlessly for centuries. As actor and musician Donald Glover tersely and memorably phrased it: “Black culture is a fight” (Fitzpatrick). Although an essentialist view of black art is not new and has long been the subject of controversy, any discussion of it would be incomplete without a brief foray into the historical debate on the topic—a topic which has reemerged in the 21st century.
The question is simple: is African American art a legitimate category? Is there something unique about the creative efforts of African Americans or is art more or less the same across cultures? During the Harlem Renaissance this issue took center stage in a spat between Langston Hughes and George S. Schuyler. This movement from the 1920s and 30s featured a trove of poets, writers, and musicians each embracing blackness and chronicling the African American experience in post-World War I America. According to Jonathan Scott Holloway’s essay on the period, these artists “explored black heritage, cultivated black art forms, and analyzed folk culture. Instead of shunning their roots, these artists sought to identify and celebrate them” (60). Writers like Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and others migrated to the impoverished city, turning it into what one scholar termed “the symbolic center of African America” (Bremer 49). The period was as much about solidarity as it was about art and authenticity; the writers and thinkers were laying the foundation of cultural essentialism, black nationalism, and later “black power.”

During the height of this period George Schuyler—widely regarded now as the first post-racial writer—wrote a vituperative and condescending essay in 1926 called “The Negro Art Hokum.” In it Schuyler repudiated the underlying sentiment of the movement generally and the notion of African American art specifically. For Schuyler, there was nothing intrinsic in art to justify “Negro” or “African American” as descriptors. He derided the concept of “Negro Art” as “self-evident foolishness” (“Negro Art Hokum” 1). There were too many different groups of black people around the world, all of whom were producing different types of art, to claim that there was something inherently “African” or “Negro” about their work, he argued. Instead, the songs, poems, and paintings were all products of their environment, were derivative of local fads
or artistic movements, and were cultivated by their respective cultural circumstances. The art produced was “no more expressive or characteristic of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive or characteristic of the Caucasian race” (1). Schuyler takes his analysis a step further, stating that the real common denominator in the “Negro art” produced in America was its European influence: “As for the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans—such as there is—it is identical in kind with the literature, painting, and sculpture of white Americans: that is, it shows more or less evidence of European influence” (2). Not only did the concept of racial art make no sense to him, but Schuyler argued that it was itself detrimental because it solidified the notion that there were in fact differences between the races—a foundational assertion of racist ideology.

By contrast, Langston Hughes saw the perpetuation of racial differences not as negative, but as empowering. According to Schuyler’s biographer Jeffrey Ferguson, Hughes sought to “oppose Schuyler’s corrosive rhetoric with a language of hope, regeneration, and fulfillment” (Ferguson 188) in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” First, however, Hughes leveled his harshest criticism toward Schuyler and those who shared his view by stating that the desire to rid the world of race was nothing more than the subconscious desire to be white. In essence, Hughes believed proponents of this position were race-traitors. In a world dominated by Caucasians, to espouse the notion that black people—victims of oppression for centuries—ought to forget about the conspicuous pigmentary difference, which was the basis of that oppression, was to wish to reduce the world to a racial baseline of whiteness. Hughes writes, “But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of
American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (Hughes 1). In opposition to Schuyler, Hughes thought they should embrace the difference and explore all of the aspects of their culture: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful…” (3). For Hughes there was a culture which was undeniably black and was a byproduct of a host of causes—not the least of which were the racially motivated inequities of pre-Civil Rights America. To deny race was to pretend these ignominious circumstances were nonexistent or hadn’t happened. This was, for Hughes, beyond consideration. The black art of the Harlem Renaissance, therefore, was not only an anthropological effort to catalogue the artistic works of African Americans, but a bold statement about persistence and self-empowerment through creativity.

While Hughes’ and Schuyler’s positions seem mutually exclusive, there is a distinction to be made between African American art and art made by African Americans. The latter is a creative effort which does not address in any way racial themes or the black experience, but happens to have been made by a person of color. African American art, on the other hand, explicitly deals with race, blackness, and/or life as a black American. In this respect, African American art is absolutely its own genre, replete with its own themes and characteristics. Moreover, the hardships faced by African Americans, which have served as somewhat of a cruel muse, justify the categorization. In an essay about art and social control, Eugene Metcalf discusses the social function of art and how racists viewed the prospect of Black art:

Art represents and sanctifies what is valued in a society; the ability to create and appreciate art implies heightened human sensibility and confers social status and prestige.
A person said to be without art…reputedly show themselves lacking in the qualities that dignify human experience and social interaction. They are said to be “uncultured, “primitive,” unable to participate in refined society. Definitions of art are therefore highly political…During the first centuries of black experience in America, partly to support a social system grounded on the denial of the humanity of black people, whites generally refused to admit that blacks could make art at all. (271) Creating art not only allowed African Americans to comment creatively on their experiences, but it defied the racist stereotypes by demonstrating an ability to construct works of aesthetic value.

Later in the same year of Hughes and Schuyler’s debate, Du Bois chimed in with an essay entitled “Criteria of Negro Art,” firmly planting his flag in Hughes’ camp and declaring the importance of the African American artist. In his typically eloquent style Du Bois states, “Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty…not for sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest” (1). Art, he argued, is propaganda: “It is not the positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world” (2). Du Bois believed that black people should have the right to employ art as a tool to bring about social progress. Based on these considerations it seems fair to side with Hughes and Du Bois and maintain that there is a culture comprising art made by African Americans which deals with the black experience.

The ambivalences of the Harlem Renaissance era—nearly a century ago—have resurfaced today, with black thinkers and artists wishing to simultaneously embrace and
transcend race. Consider the Studio Museum in Harlem Director and Curator Thelma Golden’s impactful 2001 book *Freestyle* in which she coined the phrase “post-black.” In it, she states that post-black art is “characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness” (14). Her position is summarized by philosophy professor Paul C. Taylor: “For Golden’s post-black artists…the traditional meanings of blackness…are too confining. New meanings have emerged: new forms of black identity that are multiple, fluid, and profoundly contingent, along with newly sophisticated understandings of race and identity” (626). Here, one can hear the ghosts of Hughes and Schuyler as contemporary race discussions, which have become more nuanced, vacillate between essentialism and anti-essentialism, between blackening and whitewashing, between race pride and race abandonment. But Golden wasn’t necessarily advocating for post-blackness so much as chronicling a shift in the trend of art. In a 2009 conversation with art history professor Huey Copeland, Golden expounded on the meaning of the term and how it shaped her curation of the Museum:

Post-black was an abbreviation of post-black art, which really referred to our way of talking about a particular kind of practice at a particular moment that engaged with a particular set of issues and a particular ideology. For us, in those conversations of the late 1990s, it was often a way to talk about what we thought was coming next…post-black was not about a particular artistic strategy, but about what had happened over the last thirty years and how artists were moving beyond a place in history and to the present moment. (qtd. in Copeland)
Due to societal changes, more and more black artists were beginning to think of themselves simply as artists who were interested in a variety of topics—not only race. Golden noticed this shift and encapsulated it in the phrase “post-black,” without ever having intended to exhume the discussion about essentialism. Nevertheless, the term “post-black” became a useful phrase and began to shape the way intellectuals and authors were viewing all forms of art produced by African Americans since the 1990s.

The concepts of post-Blackness and post-race were again brought to the fore in 2009 when Barack Obama became the 44th President—and the first of color. This, to many, marked a turning point for America and its troubling history of racial inequity. Satirist and novelist Colson Whitehead wrote a comical piece for the New York Times entitled “The Year of Living Postracially,” which shined a sardonic light on the idea that the election results had finally delivered racism to the ignominious annals of American history. He opens with casual absurdity when he states “One year ago today, we officially became a postracial society. Fifty-three percent of the voters opted for the candidate who would be the first president of African descent, and in doing so eradicated racism forever.” Irony aside, the election of President Obama was truly thought to be the flagship moment in race relations; it was supposed to demonstrate that—as Whitehead wryly phrased it—“…we’ve come a long way as a country.” In a tragic bit of irony, however, the election of our first African American President proved to be more divisive than inclusive; what might have buried racism inadvertently exhumed some of the darker sentiments from our past. It revealed the recalcitrance and resilience of racist ideology. Whitehead, in a moment of pointed irony, asserts his actual opinion in passing: “There are naysayers, however, who believe that we can’t erase centuries of entrenched prejudice, cultivated hatred and
institutionalized dehumanization overnight.” The curious case of Barack Obama, riddled with paradoxes and contradictions, was the event which triggered much academic and journalistic interest in the topic of post-racialism.

In 2011, a pair of books took big swings at the topic: English Professor Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* and author Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*. In the former, Warren argues that while there may have been a time that warranted descriptors such as “African American” or “Negro” to describe literature, those days are over and the qualifying terms are now unnecessary. His analysis—which applied mainly to literature—can be extended to include other artistic media as well. In his opening chapter Warren outlines the bedrock principles of cultural essentialism and then succinctly and formidably deals with each in miniature. First, he lays out two of the arguments, which when taken together, are essential to my thesis:

Some have argued that African American literary texts are distinguished by the way black authors, consciously and unconsciously, have worked and reworked rhetorical practices, myths, folklore, and traditions that derive from the African continent. Others have maintained that African American literary texts are defined by a prolonged engagement with the problem of slavery, system of labor exploitation that was central to the development of not only the United States but the whole of the western world. Those making the latter claim have held that…black literary practice as a whole has been indelibly marked by the ways that enslaved blacks coped with the brutalities… (2)

My work is looking at those “reworked rhetorical practices” and how they have evolved from “myths, folklore, and traditions” to modern day Hip-hop. And I am arguing that due to the
“prolonged engagement with the problem of slavery” and subsequent “brutalities,” African American literature tends to be subversive by its very nature. Before beginning my analysis, it would be best to deal with Professor Warren’s objections to these positions.

To address the first point concerning African American literary texts, Warren pushes back on the idea by stating that simply collecting works from a period and from a people does not necessarily constitute its own genre. He asserts: “As for the status of the fiction, poetry, and letters written before the Jim Crow era, my claim is that the mere existence of literary texts does not necessarily indicate the existence of a literature” (6). He goes on to point out a disparity in how many black writers were viewed:

1920s’ black writers such as Brown, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay were writers of Negro (African American) literature, while figures such as Phillis Wheatley or Frederick Douglass, had been simply Negroes who were writers—or perhaps one could helpfully say that they were writers who were not yet Negro writers, and that antebellum writing by black Americans became African American literature only retroactively. (7)

Here I would argue again that race isn’t the only necessary trait. In order to qualify as “African American art” one would need to be both African American and artistically addressing one of the many topics subsumed under the thoughts and experiences of that community. It’s not the separate traits—the author’s race and his or her themes—taken individually which could suffice; it is the combination which constitutes the genre. Further, figures like Douglass and Wheatley meet those requirements; if their having been assigned to the genre is retrospective, it’s only because it wasn’t thought of as a genre when they were writing.
To the essentialist’s point that oppressive conditions underscore the category, Warren argues that the progress made since slavery and Jim Crow diminishes the notion that there is still a common foundation of suffering. He states it plainly when he says “I am arguing here that, *mutatis mutandis*, African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, and that the turn to diasporic, transatlantic, global, and other frames indicates a dim awareness that the boundary creating this distinctiveness has eroded” (8). Since the slave trade has ended and the post-Civil Rights era has seen an improvement in the living conditions for African Americans, Warren appears to be arguing that there are no longer a common set of abhorrent circumstances which could be used to justify cultural essentialism. He goes on further to flesh out this claim in greater detail:

…these contextual forces shape a shared set of assumptions about what ought to be represented… as these contexts themselves undergo change, those representational and rhetorical strategies, which at their peak served to enable authors and critics to disclose various “truths” about their society, can begin to atrophy and become conventionalized so that they no longer enable literary texts to come to terms with social change…my argument is that African American literature is not a transhistorical entity…[it] constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within the domain of literary practice that was responsive to conditions that by and large no longer obtain. (8-9)

This argument appears valid, but relies heavily on an assumption of a profound social change. It begs the question: how much have these contexts changed? I would argue that the struggles of African Americans haven’t vanished; they’ve evolved. That is to say that the problems may not be as obviously inhumane and unimaginable as centuries of subjugation and rape or decades of
oppression and segregation, but they’ve taken on new forms such as lack of opportunity, mass incarceration, poverty, police violence, and others. Moreover, the line can be traced from these modern-day societal ills to those very institutions which Warren agrees would have sufficed to establish a genre. Unlike Warren, a cultural essentialist believes that these modern examples of systemic racism pervade—in some manner—life for African Americans, and therefore any attempt to comment on them artistically must be considered the product of a unique category.

Journalist and author Touré approaches the subject from a different angle. His book explores the concept of “Blackness”—particularly asking the question “what does it mean to be Black?” He touches upon issues of identity, colorism, and authenticity in the Black community. In his introductory chapter called “Forty Million Ways to be Black” (at the time the book was published, this was the approximate African American population in the United States) he argues that, while many people have preconceived notions of Blackness, it is too versatile to pin down: “To experience the full possibilities of Blackness, you must break free of the structures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African-American culture and also from within it. These attempts to conscript the potential complexity of Black humanity often fly in the face of the awesome breadth of Black history” (4). Touré is arguing that there is nothing essential in being Black; Blackness is as unique as every individual black person. This point, however, finds some opposition within the Black community itself, where notions of legitimacy still hold currency. He repudiates the idea and summarizes his view succinctly when he states:

Some Blacks may see the range Black identity as something obvious but I know there are many who are unforgiving and intolerant of Black heterogeneity and still believe in concepts like “authentic” or “legitimate” Blackness. There is no such thing…There is no
dogmatically narrow, authentic Blackness because the possibilities for Black identity are infinite. To say something or someone is not Black—or is inauthentically Black—is to sell Blackness short. To limit the potential of Blackness. (4-5)

This concept of the diversity of black experience, culture, and identity is the thrust of Touré’s work. Similar to Thelma Golden, he is pushing back against any labels and descriptive restrictions and declaring that post-Blackness is a period in which black identity is no longer beholden to stereotypes or preconceptions. Moreover, he is leveling his criticism not only at outside forces, but at the detrimental sectarianism of “authenticity” within the black community.

Superficially it appears as though my assertion of an intrinsic trait is mutually exclusive with the free-flowing notion of black identity espoused by Touré. After all, he is arguing that the black community is “too diverse, complex, imaginative, dynamic, fluid, creative, and beautiful to impose restraints on Blackness” (12). Conversely, I’m imposing a “restraint” in the sense that I’m asserting one common characteristic (not on blackness, per se, but on black art). I’m arguing that coursing beneath the diversity, complexity, imagination, dynamics, fluidity, creativity, and beauty is a current of subversion which stems from the historical events which have impacted the community. Even if some African Americans feel removed from the suffering and have been born into privileged circumstances, they would still be operating in a society where such luck is a statistical improbability—a society in which there is still a clear social demarcation.

Perhaps the most formidable argument I’ve come across was made by Michael Eric Dyson in the foreword to Touré’s book. In an eloquent exposition, Dyson discusses the “sheer plasticity of Blackness” and how it “conforms to such a bewildering array of identities and
struggles” (xii). He then goes on to analyze the double-edged sword of allowing historical and
subsequent injustices to be key components of black culture:

The experiences of millions of Black souls could hardly be summarized in myths of
unity aimed at freeing us from the vicious unanimity of identity imposed on us by
ignorant racists. Black folk have historically fought the menace of the third-person
they...with the equally elusive unity of the first person plural pronoun we...Such an
understandable strategy has had a whiplash effect: even as we lashed out against racists
by proving in word and deed that we weren’t the savages they said we were, our efforts
to define who ‘we’ are cut against the complexity of our Blackness...It made sense for
Blacks to unify against oppressive forces as a strategy of racial combat, but it made less
sense to adopt that strategy as a means to define the race. (xiv)

Here, Dyson is acknowledging the ways in which “oppressive forces” helped to “unify” African
Americans. This runs parallel with my argument of a common thread of subversion. Black
people have—for centuries—banded together, at first to survive and later to rebel. His second
point gives me pause. Like Touré and others in this post-blackness era, Dyson doesn’t believe
that African Americans should be defined by their relationship with tragedy. It is understandable
that they might prefer those circumstances to be footnotes in—rather than substantial aspects of
—their cultural genealogy.

I think, however, it is quixotic to imagine divorcing the tragic history from the emergent
culture. Unfortunately, there is a power structure which has existed in the world since time
immemorial. The balance of power being what it is, it is to be expected that the identity of
African Americans will be somewhat intertwined with this history and with that struggle. Until
that balance shifts or truly becomes a balance, African American culture will always be a response to the dominant culture. There can be a multiplicity of responses—beautiful, creative, volatile, observant, satirical, etc.—but they will all be emerging from within the context of a societal hierarchy. Even work like Touré’s—which is pushing back on these ideas—is itself a response to the response. Thus, it subverts the notion of “blackness” which was intended to be subversive in the first place.

Finally, understanding this historical and continuing debate is imperative in any discussion about African American art, especially today as people continue to push for a “post” society—post-race, post-soul, post-identity. The thrust of my work here presupposes that African American art—namely its songs and stories—is indeed its own genre. And while I understand the desire to shed the labels and disentangle the harrowing history from the culture, I think there is something profound and empowering that is at risk of being lost in the sprint to a post-racial society. Blackness and black art—in all their iterations—are a testament to the fortitude and resilience of a people. The same fire that burned beneath the surface of Malcolm and Martin’s speeches is the same that can be heard in Negro spirituals and folktales, in Hughes’ poems, in Morrison’s books, in Coltrane’s saxophone, in Simone’s voice, in Pryor’s comedy, in Jay-Z’s lyrics. Touré said being black is “an extraordinary gift bestowing access to an unbelievably rich legacy of joy. It’ll lift you to ecstasy and give you pain that can make you stronger than you imagined possible” (4). The unifying spirit of blackness and black art is a willingness and a desire to fight back against an unjust world. There are indeed an infinite number of ways to be black, and black people shouldn’t be defined by their history. But to push for a world without race is to suffocate that flame and to squander that gift.
Hip-hop Criticism

Since the 1980s, Hip-hop has been the subject of a growing number of academic papers. Scholars have explored the recurring tropes and trends and the cultural impact of what is still a fairly young art form. While it has been heralded as a socially conscious genre and an efficacious form of protest music, there are myriad essays criticizing Hip-hop’s tendency toward misogyny, violence, crime, and materialism. My essay is primarily concerned with cultural essentialism, but it also pushes back at three of these criticisms—violence, crime, and materialism (the misogyny is indeed impossible to justify). In short, I argue that these themes are deliberately subversive in different ways. Violence and crime are often necessary for African Americans to survive in a world where the deck is so egregiously stacked against them. Materialism is an understandable vice given that wealth of any kind has been systematically denied to African Americans for centuries. Before I delve into the various works of the oral tradition, I will survey some of these criticisms and provide further context in which to place my essay.

One of the key debates within the scholarly discussion of Hip-hop music revolves around whether these lyrical themes are perpetuating stereotypes or accurately representing impoverished urban communities. In an article entitled “Blame it on Hip-hop,” Christina Reyna summarizes this debate effectively when she states:

Those who denounce rap point to the prevalence of rap lyrics that contain messages of violence, misogyny, and the glorification of criminal lifestyles. They assert that rap music and the culture that surrounds it are responsible for the degradation of the African American community, especially its young men…the culture that dominates urban, black
communities is a street culture that values crime as a means for attaining wealth and status…Another perspective is that rap music does not glorify the criminal lifestyle, but rather represents the voice of a disenfranchised people who have been excluded from conventional paths to success, and have had to survive in a society where poverty, crime, and systemic discrimination are daily realities. (362)

My essay is in line with the second view. Hip-hop music—like the art forms which preceded it—is a reflection of the day-to-day realities of a significant portion of the African American community. And while I do believe some imagery and tropes, such as the gangsta, hustler, or pimp archetypes, have been commodified and exploited by the capitalist music industry, I don’t see Hip-hop music as history professor Jeffrey Ogbar sees it—as occasionally offering “a neominstrelsy of pernicious stereotypes about black people” (Ogbar 160). At the very least, exploring Hip-hop lyrics and the surrounding culture unveils a sort of chicken-and-egg paradox: is Hip-hop shaping the culture or is the culture shaping Hip-hop? Is the music causing stereotypes or is it revealing them? My essay presupposes that while this relationship can be circular, the surrounding circumstances—particularly the societal power structure—is the predominant factor in Hip-hop music (and black culture by extension).

To say that Hip-hop music contains themes of violence and criminality is uncontroversial. Every scholarly paper begins from the point that violence and aggression feature prominently in many rap songs. The discussions instead focus on the cultural impact, the underlying justifications, and the ongoing debates within the Hip-hop community. Professor Jeffrey Ogbar has done extensive work in this area—studying the ways in which the perception of rap differs across communities. In one article about culture wars and self-criticism, Ogbar addresses the
criticisms aimed at Hip-hop music by white politicians and pundits in the 1990s who, he argues, did not understand the context of these songs. He states:

While the leading critics of the gangsta rappers gained the spotlight, many observers began to construct a monolithic view of hip-hop as an art form characterized by misogyny and violently hedonistic lyrics…The very diverse and complex world of hip-hop was thus reduced to a simple, one-dimensional art form devoid of serious political analysis and substantive cultural observations or social responsibility. (“Slouching Toward Bork” 165)

Ogbar, a critic of Hip-hop himself, believed that there were legitimate concerns about some themes in rap music, but the approach by the mainstream critics were driven by misunderstanding. He believed that the most astute criticisms of were taking place within the genre itself, where rappers and others steeped in the culture understood both the causes and drawbacks of expressing certain views in song. He argued that in the midst of the national discussion “there remain very articulate and passionate voices of criticism from within the hip-hop community. From rappers to magazine editors, many have criticized both the violent, hypermaterialistic, sexist gangsta and the politicians and culture critics who denounce rap music” (165). His analysis is unique in that he provides quotes and lyrics from a variety of Hip-hop artists, some of whom denounce the trend, some embrace it, and some presumably torn between recognizing both its lucravitensness and moral shortcomings. Jeru the Damager, the Roots, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and others were highly critical of rap’s tendency to glorify violence and the gangster lifestyle. Known firebrands Public Enemy took a slightly different—almost Marxist—approach, blaming the gangster image in rap music on commercialism. They saw
“gangsta rappers as ‘slaves’ to the rhythm of the master for their glorification of pathology and destruction at the behest of the White power structure” (Ogbar 175). In other words, the portrayal of glorified criminality was serving the white men in power by simultaneously producing profits in the record industry and deleteriously impacting the black youth in urban communities.

To the contrary, several rappers like Tupac Shakur, Ice Cube, and Snoop Dogg believed that the “rap game” was a direct product of living situations in the ghetto, and any resulting criticism was being directed at the wrong place. When asked about critical comments from Bob Dole and C. Delores Tucker, Shakur responded: “If these people actually cared about protecting the children like they say they do, they'd spend more time trying to improve the conditions in the ghettos where the kids are coming up” (qtd. in Ogbar 179). A female rapper named Yo-Yo echoed this point when she stated that "rappers are a product of America. Attack the world rappers live in, not the words they use to describe it” (qtd. in Ogbar 178). These rappers took a “don’t shoot the messenger” approach to their analysis. By their lights, Hip-hop artists were simply delivering the news of what was happening in the ghetto. They weren’t glorifying it, necessarily; they were making the best of a bad situation. The real blame was to be placed on the construction and perpetuation of the environments which served as breeding grounds for the behavior depicted in rap songs.

My argument is similar: criminality and violence are subversive responses to the established power structure. Had history not unfolded the way it did, there would be no power structure against which to rebel. African Americans would have had opportunities; they wouldn’t have been slowly confined to impoverished communities, given subpar educations, and
forced to gravitate to pernicious methods of survival. And thus, there would be no reason to document these tribulations in song form. To put it simply: without racial oppression, there would be no Hip-hop music—and certainly none about violence and crime.

Other scholars suggest that the criminality and aggression in Hip-hop is just a reflection of the violence which pervades the rest of American culture. In an article entitled “Rap Music and its Violent Progeny” the authors argue that rather than being a product of abysmal living conditions, Hip-hop music is just one of the many aspects of American culture which is steeped in violence: “America for all her protests against violent rap lyrics has failed to acknowledge her role in the creation of this relatively new art form. Evidence of America's preoccupation with violent activity is pervasive and can be found, for example, in virtually all of the entertainment industry” (Richardson 175). From video games and television to feature films and comic books, violence is certainly not unique to rap music.

In her article “Fear of a Black Planet” Tricia Rose takes a different line when she argues that the problem with violence in rap is more a problem of perception, which is entangled with a discursive (and racist) predisposition to distrust black people. The genre is unjustly painted as intrinsically problematic, and this—she argues—stems from a deeper fear about the emergence of black political and cultural influence. She states:

Young African Americans are positioned in fundamentally antagonistic relationships to the institutions that most prominently frame and constrain their lives. The public school system, the police, and the popular media perceive and construct them as a dangerous internal element in urban America—an element that if allowed to roam about freely will threaten the social order, an element that must be policed. The social construction of rap
and rap-related violence is fundamentally linked to the social discourse on Black containment and fears of a Black planet. (279)

Similar to my point, Rose sees Hip-hop music—or the culture generally—as being at odds with the power structure. That dynamic produces a prejudice in which the powers that be perceive the music (unjustly) as intrinsically violent, rather than a means to decry the brutal realities and inequities of the ghetto.

While there are diverse opinions voiced in scholarship revolving around the violent themes, materialism is universally seen as one of the most detrimental aspects of Hip-hop music. There may be justification for violence and crime, but seemingly all scholars view the unabashed pursuit and displays of wealth and ostentation as devoid of any redeeming quality. Jeffrey Ogbar laments the way in which many rappers revel in the “fantasy mobster world” where “rabid materialism” is king (Slouching Toward Bork 168). He sites several examples of rappers who criticized the lifestyle, some even going so far as to lampoon the trend: “The Roots…unleashed a barrage of rhymes criticizing the gaudy fantasy world of some rappers…In the video for ‘What They do’ The Roots parody the ubiquitous materialism and Big Willie lifestyles of some rappers… [they] deride the make-believe world of some rap artists” (169).

In “Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle,” Derek Conrad Murray provides a balanced analysis of rap as a legitimate art form with serious flaws. One such flaw is rampant materialism. He states pointedly:

On the down side, hip-hop's materialism and "bling-bling" excesses have dominated the music in recent years. Ridiculous displays of wealth (luxurious, multimillion-dollar mansions, exotic cars, and copious amounts of platinum diamond-encrusted jewelry)
have become the aesthetic of choice. Many rap videos, with their million-dollar budgets, have degenerated into nothing more than excessive "ghetto" mini-melodramas that in many respects overshadow and control the success of the music. (6)

While Hip-hop has broken down barriers and become a successful form of protest music, providing insight into urban life, the excesses depicted in both the lyrics and videos have become so ubiquitous as to almost make the genre seem like a parody of itself. Thus, these hyperbolic displays diminish Hip-hop’s artistic legitimacy, especially among those who know little else of the genre.

In “Rap’s Unruly Body,” Annette Saddik is one of the few who does offer a justification for materialism, likening it to the American Dream. She states that the “celebration of immediate wealth and pleasure in videos that show copious gold jewelry, bright colors, fast cars, and scantily dressed women as objects is a complex comment on the contradictions of the American Dream for black men” (114). The ostentatious displays in rap videos represent the desired goal for the African American male who knows little of luxury. Saddik also asserts that “the pressures of economically disenfranchised urban black Americans” force them to purse wealth despite the fact that they understand the “hypocrisies of the capitalist, patriarchal of the mainstream American Dream” (114).

Later in this essay I take a similar line to Saddik. I argue that materialism is understandable given the fact that wealth—and for a time, any possessions whatsoever—was systematically denied to African Americans. From slavery up through Jim Crow, black people were unable to amass savings, own property, or otherwise develop financial independence. Even recently there have been policies and laws which have made it difficult for the community to
take out school loans, small business loans, and mortgages. Given these difficulties, the egregious demonstrations of ostentation by successful Hip-hop artists is completely understandable.

Hip-hop music has always been steeped in controversy. By its very nature it is a genre designed to disturb the status quo. Thus it often finds itself under siege from critics and academics of all stripes. Many of the criticisms are certainly valid, but some of the opprobrium directed at rap artists fails to fully consider the context in which rap is created. It is my contention that in most of the instances where rap artists are being provocative, it is a deliberate attempt to subvert the power structure. Whether they are painting pictures of crime, glorifying violence, or reveling in the excesses of material wealth, African American Hip-hop artists are responding to a world which has done its level best to keep them down.
Chapter 2: “Wait til’ I put on my crown”: The Subversiveness of Hope in Sorrow Songs and Hip-hop

The rhythms and melodies which made the arduous transatlantic trip from Africa were the principal tools of rebellion and survival for the slave. They provided a means to maintain identity, to express humanity, to alleviate grief, and to preserve optimism in the face of unbearable circumstances. The songs, which—following the conversion to Christianity—were mostly religious, spoke often of God and heaven, of a better world to come. They were sung in unison, or in call-and-response, creating among the laborers a united and melodic front—and perhaps a diffusion of misery. In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass asserted that “Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears” (9). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois was slightly more positive in his assessment of the songs, stating:

The Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.

(Souls105)

Whether mournful or optimistic, the songs were an integral component of the life of the slave and the emergent culture.
Regardless of how one views spirituals, the very act of singing in these conditions was subversive. The prevailing rationale of slavery was that black people were subhuman; they were considered essentially animals—or more precisely 3/5 human according to the U.S. Constitution—whose sole purpose was to be efficient workers. This bit of inhumane casuistry served as the bedrock justification for the brutality of the system and helped to oppress the slaves not only physically, but psychologically. Thus, to sing songs was to boldly assert one’s humanity. And to sing while in pain and exhausted was to be artistically defiant. In an article about spirituals, Kerran L. Sanger argues that the songs were an effective form of resistance, allowing the slaves to communicate with each other, while contradicting the stereotypical worldview of the masters. She states:

Slaves used the spirituals to reveal themselves to each other, and to provide an alternative definition of self that challenged white claims. The spirituals, both in the act of singing and in the words of the songs, became a critical part of countermanding the master’s ideology about slaves. This was a form of rhetorical resistance that both limited the slaves’ worth to their masters and, more importantly, enabled slaves to refute the very definitions and assumptions on which this psychological oppression was based. As they refuted those definitions, they replaced them with ones of their own making. (179) The sorrow songs, which Du Bois called “songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men” (105), allowed the slaves to construct their own reality and to somewhat soften the blows of injustice.

Hip-hop music embodies much of the same motivations as these original spirituals. It too seeks to battle discrimination and dream aloud, albeit more emphatically. And while spirituals
were concerned with spiritual wealth, rap music was concerned with actual wealth. Nevertheless, they cover much of the same topics. As Joseph Winters phrased it, “themes of loss, suffering and trauma reverberate throughout the sorrow songs and Hip-hop music” (9). Hip-hop artists may not be hindered like the huddled masses in the fields, but they are still rhythmically, melodically, and lyrically dealing with strife and standing up to “the man,” which in this case is not the master, but the residual racism, which—much like these songs—has also evolved.

In fact, many Hip-hop songs make direct references to slavery and plantation imagery, often drawing parallels between the systemic racism of the two epochs. In his song “Alright” Kendrick Lamar states “What you want? A house or a car?/ Forty acres and a mule? A piano, guitar?” (Genius.com)¹. By referencing the allotment promised to freed slaves following the Civil War, he’s lampooning the ways in which whites have used goods to extort and assuage black people. In his song “Hip-Hop,” Mos Def draws a line back through history when he states “We went from picking cotton to chain gang line-chopping/to be-bopping to hip-hopping…The industry just built a better cell block.” Here, he moves through the exploitation of blacks from slavery through Jim Crow and jazz before finally equating the music industry with the prison complex. In his most recent album, Jay-Z mocks the color-distinctions made by African Americans by using some slave terminology: “Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga/ rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga/ Still nigga. Still nigga.” Here he’s stating that these sectarian distinctions are meaningless in light of the racism that still exists and harms all black people. In other words, regardless of how black people see themselves, they are still often

¹ Unless expressly stated, all lyrics have been obtained from the online lyric website www.genius.com.
lumped into the same category by racists. There are countless examples of rappers referencing slavery, sampling sorrow songs, or quoting spirituals; the link between the two genres is clear.

There are four basic characteristics which appear in both Hip-hop and spirituals, and each is in its own way subversive. The first is the development of community through common language. As Sanger states, “The spirituals were crucial to the slaves' success in resisting negative white oppression by giving slaves a way to create a sense of community or esprit de corps… the African-American looked to build and sustain relationships with others by sharing their songs. In so doing, they created a supportive climate…” (181). Much of the subject matter of these spirituals involved expressing the pain of their abhorrent predicament. The songs were wrought with emotion, often sounding as miserable as the lyrics. Du Bois states, “Day after day the songs of the callous, the wail of the motherless, and the muttered curses of the wretched echoed…” (Souls 52). In the song “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” the speaker articulates the lost, unloved feeling of the slave and how that misery can feel like dying:

…Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
a long way from home, a long way from home
Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone
way up in a heavenly land (Spencer)²

That theme of motherlessness and a yearning for heaven recurs in “Oh, Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells” when it states: “Peter, go ring dem bells, I heard from Heaven today. I wonder where my mother is gone.” Being separated from their mothers was a common occurrence for slaves; thus these songs tapped into a common experience of grief through which they could strengthen their relationships.

² Unless stated otherwise, all spirituals are taken from a collection edited by Francis G. Spencer.
Hip-hop has also tackled the issue of single parent upbringings and disputed families. Typically, however, most songs refer to an absentee father, rather than mother. In the song “Moment of Clarity” Jay-Z recounts his estranged father’s death:

Pops died, didn’t cry, didn’t know him that well  
between him doing heroin and me doing crack sales  
Put that in a eggshell, standing at the tabernacle  
Rather the church, pretended to be hurt wouldn’t work  
So a smirk was all on my face  
Like damn, that man’s face looks just like my face

For Jay-Z, his father’s absence hardened him, making him appear callous as he remained stoic at the funeral service. Tupac had a similar epiphany in “Dear Mama” when he observed his feelings at the death of his absentee father:

Now ain't nobody tell us it was fair  
No love from my daddy cause the coward wasn't there  
He passed away and I didn't cry, cause my anger  
Wouldn't let me feel for a stranger  
They say I'm wrong and I'm heartless, but all along  
I was looking for a father he was gone

The distinction here is that the slaves were lamenting their lost parent—who had presumably been forcibly removed from their lives, while the Hip-hop artists typically harbor animosity toward the parent (usually the father) who, in their estimation, is at fault.3

In addition to broken families, African American slaves had the torment of enslavement in common. Many of the songs discussed emotional fatigue and pain, each song sounding simultaneously like a brave resolution and a desperate battle against hopelessness. In “I've Been in the Storm so Long,” the speaker presents through repetition—a common tactic in these songs—the woe felt by the slaves as they long for some reprieve:

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3 Sociologists generally agree that broken homes—particularly ones due to incarcerated fathers—are the result of systemic racism which still exists; however, many rap artists have neglected these mitigating factors, choosing instead to view the parental absence as a result of either a conscious decision or carelessness.
Oh let me tell my mother, how I come along,
Oh give me little time to pray,
And a cast my crown at Jesus feet,
Oh give me little time to pray.

I've been in the storm so long,
I've been in the storm so long, children,
I've been in the storm so long,
Oh give me little time to pray

This same theme is seen in “I’m A Rolling,” a song which asks for help and acknowledges the inequities of the world:

O brothers won’t you help me?
O brothers won’t you help me to pray?
O brothers won’t you help me,

O sisters won’t you help me?
O sisters won’t you help me to pray?
O sisters won’t you help me,

O preachers won’t you help me?
O preachers won’t you help me to pray?
O preachers won’t you help me,

I'm a-rolling, I'm a-rolling,
I'm a-rolling thro' an unfriendly world,
I'm a-rolling, I'm a-rolling thro' an unfriendly world

Another example of a song that explicitly references hardships is “Hard Trials.” In it the speaker posits self-deprecatingly that the misery of the slave is the deserved punishment of the sinner:

De fox have hole in de ground;
An' de bird have nest in de air,
An' ev'rything have a hiding place,
But we poor sinners have none.
Now ain't that hard trials, tribulations?
Ain't that hard trials tribulations
I'm bound to leave this world…
Their predicament is equated to the natural habitats of animals. It ends again with a reference to death, which would be preferential in these circumstances.

American slaves, all of whom were brought from various places, did not have the same culture. These songs helped what were essentially groups of oppressed strangers congeal into their own culture. As Sanger states, “The slaves used both the act of singing and the words of the songs to unify the group. This strategy helped create a common core among slaves brought to America from all over Africa, who shared little or nothing in the way of culture with the other Africans with whom they lived and worked” (182). To summarize, the sorrow songs and spirituals were a galvanizing force for the American slaves because they provided catharsis and a creative outlet through which they could vent aloud, pray, and hope for better times, thereby fostering a sense of belonging.

Hip-hop has functioned similarly in African American communities since the late 1970s. It has also explored these themes and was born of hardships. And while the rappers in recent history weren’t subjugated in the same way as slaves, systemic racism was very much a factor in these bleak circumstances. In an essay about Hip-hop and culture, Michael Eric Dyson gives a socioeconomic explanation as to the origins of Hip-hop music:

In reality, the severe 70s busted the economic boom of the 60s. The fallout was felt in restructured automobile industries and collapsed steel mills…there was the depletion of social services…public spaces for black recreation were gutted by Reaganomics or violently transformed by lethal drug economics. Hip-hop was born in these bleak conditions. Hip-hoppers joined pleasure and rage while turning the details of their difficult lives into craft and capital. (1034)
Throughout the history of Hip-hop music, rappers have been painting pictures of these austere environments. In what is regarded by many as the first socially conscious Hip-hop song, Grandmaster Flash’s 1982 single “The Message” portrays the realities of living in an impoverished urban community:

Broken glass everywhere
People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far
'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

This song stood in stark contrast to the jovial party music which had characterized earlier songs in the genre. One salient difference between Hip-hop and the sorrow songs is clear in the lines of Flash’s chorus when he states “Don’t push me cause I’m close to the edge/I’m trying not to lose my head.” Here, he is nearly driven to violence or crime by these conditions. Slaves, on the other hand, were often unable to respond physically and were forced to suffer stoically.

Since Grandmaster Flash’s classic, there have been a profusion of songs describing lives of destitution. In his opus to his mother “Dear Mama,” Tupac recounts his childhood stating: “I shed tears with my baby sister/over the years we was poorer than the other little kids.” And later, he marvels at how his single mother was able to provide:

I could see you coming home after work late
in the kitchen tryin’ to fix us a hot plate
just working with the scraps you was given
My mama made miracles every Thanksgiving

Snoop Dogg describes the struggle and the reliance on government assistance in “Life in the Projects” when he says:
…Goodness grief
everybody waiting on the first and fifteenth…
you open up the freezer and say ‘god please,’
I wish I had more of that government cheese

Jay-Z reflects similarly in his song “Renegade” about life in public housing when he says:
“…my back to the wall, ashy knuckles/ pockets filled with a lot of lint, not a cent, gotta vent/
a lot of innocent lives lost on the project bench…” The Notorious B.I.G. offered similar
thoughts in his hit single “Juicy” in which he juxtaposed his current success with the difficulties
of his early life:

Remember when we used to eat sardines for dinner
…no more public housing
Thinking back on my one room shack…
birthdays was the worst days

These songs serve as a testimony to the abject poverty experienced by many in the urban
communities, and, perhaps more importantly, they expressed to the listener that these situations
were not insurmountable.

Hip-hop explored these themes and gave their respective communities something to
which they could relate. They shined a light on the darker aspects of American culture—things
which weren’t being portrayed in other genres. As Joseph Winters states, hip hop music “gives a
voice to neglected dimensions of American life—drug addiction, poverty, homelessness,
prostitution, labor strikes, police harassment, prison life, suicide, and low-quality
education” (14). In the same way that slaves would sing together, rap music became the anthem
for the downtrodden. Dyson described the transmutation of tribulation to art: “At their best,
rappers shape the tortuous twists of urban fate into lyrical elegies. They represent lives
swallowed by too little love or opportunity” (1034). These songs were ubiquitous in ghettos
everywhere, allowing Hip-hop artists to speak “for less visible or vocal peers” (1034) who may have felt voiceless. Hip-hop music has undoubtedly been one of the central components of African American culture and a point of solidarity among the disenfranchised. This is subversive because rather than allow these situations to be utterly destructive, both the slaves and Hip-hop artists harnessed their respective predicaments and produced art which was employed as a defense mechanism, as a point of solidarity, and as a proud proclamation of perseverance.

Another common characteristic of these two genres is the exploration of hopes and dreams. Looking longingly at a brighter future has long been a pastime for African Americans, who have known comparatively little of freedom, comfort, or luxury. For the slaves—most of whom probably never considered liberation as a possibility—their hopes were pinned to their religious beliefs. Frederick Douglass—who had experienced these songs firsthand—stated that these spirituals “breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains” (8). They believed that God was on their side and that there was cosmic justice waiting for them in the next life. As W.E.B. Du Bois stated:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. (Souls 110)
This pervasive hope was the bedrock of the sorrow songs, providing slaves with some purchase against their misery.

A great number of sorrow songs feature God, angels, heaven, the devil, and other religious allusions, indicating that in the mind of the slave, the most likely course to freedom was through death. In perhaps the quintessential slave song, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” the narrator is referring to a group of angels in the distance that is coming to bring her to heaven:

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home;
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home;
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,
Coming for to carry me home.

Swing Low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

Here, in light of the fact that there were no terrestrial heroes on the horizon, the angels are the liberators, coming to relieve the toiling slaves and break their chains. God’s chariot is coming to take them home, and “home” in this case is heaven.

The same theme of a celestial resting place is explored in “I Don’t feel No-ways tired.” In that song, the speaker describes the quest for a better home, in a call-and-response, with the refrain of “Hallelujah”:

Oh I'm seeking for a city, Hallelujah,
For a city in to the Heaven, Hallelujah,
Oh the brethren travel with me, Hallelujah,
say will you go 'long with me, Hallelujah.
We will travel on together, Hallelujah,
Gwine to pull down Satan's kingdom, Hallelujah,
gwine to build up the walls o' Zion, Hallelujah.

Lord I don't feel no ways tired, children
Oh, glory Hallelujah!
For I hope to shout glory when this world is on fire,
Children Oh! glory Hallelujah.

“Satan’s Kingdom” could be construed as the white man’s world, which the slaves fantasize about destroying. The subsequent reference to Zion shows a desire for a promised land of their own, something like Israel. The last stanza here is openly subversive as it imagines the slaves escaping to heaven during a fiery reckoning for the unjust world. In fact, according to Sanger, some negro spirituals were prohibited on plantations because the lyrics made the masters think that they might revolt (189).

A third example of this yearning for heaven comes in “Roll, Jordan, Roll” in which the narrator repeats a message for different audiences and resolves with clearly stated posthumous aspirations:

O brother,
You ought t'have been there,
Yes, my Lord!
A-sitting in the kingdom,
To hear Jordan roll.

O sister,
You ought t'have been there,
Yes, my Lord!
A-sitting in the kingdom,
To hear Jordan roll.

Roll, Jordan, roll,
Roll, Jordan roll,
I want to go to heaven when I die,
To hear Jordan roll.
The religiosity of the spirituals was motivational; *hang in there*, they seemed to say, *better days are coming*.

While the predominant motif in slave songs is religious and optimistic in nature, Hip-hop takes a secular approach, with countless songs offering solace to the troubled with visions of a better life. Often their message is inspirational, advocating for the young black people listening to the music to pursue their goals and not succumb to the trappings of the system. Today, they appear to argue, the troubled blacks in America don’t need to wait for heaven; they can try to make life better for themselves in the here and now. The Notorious B.I.G., in a song called “Sky’s the Limit,” proclaims “The sky is the limit and you know that you can have what you want, be what you want.” Jay-Z emboldens his fans with several lines such as “Remind yourself/ nobody built like you, you design yourself,” “I’d rather die enormous than live dormant,” and “All I got is dreams. Nobody else believes/ Nobody else can see. Nobody else but me.” Kanye West offers his own call to action in his song “Champion” in which he states, “When it feel like living harder than dying/For me giving up is way harder than trying.” From Tupac’s “Keep Ya Head up” to Jadakiss’ “We Gon’ make it,” Hip-hop has no shortage of songs selling the importance of hope and ambition.

Negro spirituals weren’t only aspiring to heaven. In “Wait till I put on my crown” the speaker combines religious imagery with regal references to earthly success:

I came this night for to sing and pray,
Oh yes! Oh yes!
To drive old Satan far away,
Oh yes! Oh yes!
That heavenly home is bright and fair,
Oh yes! Oh yes!
But very few can enter there,
Oh yes! Oh wait ‘till I put on my crown
Wait 'till I put on my crown
Oh yes, Oh yes.

Here, the slaves are envisioning the reward for their suffering, while also intimating a comeuppance for their oppressors. The prize is clearly heaven, which “very few can enter,” but the crown is a symbol for earthly wealth and power. They’re not only driving away “old satan,” which could represent their cruel masters, they also appear to be saying, *just you wait until I’m on top.* This particular spiritual is important because it provides a hint of the materialism—the wealth many rappers feel is due them for their years of poverty—and the threatening defiance which pervades Hip-hop music.

This thread of fantasy—imagining (or bragging about) their own heaven, comprising material wealth and prosperity—is a popular theme in Hip-hop music. Beginning largely in the 1990s, rappers began to exemplify the adage that “success is the best revenge,” with many spending song after song cataloguing the fruits of their labor. It would appear that nothing is quite as subversive and deliciously vindicating as sharing in the riches which have been denied to their people for centuries. In an article about metaphors and themes in Hip-hop, Scott Crossly states, “Materialism constitutes another recurrent theme in rap. Rap advertises the ideal of conspicuous consumption, and rappers expend those things associated with materialism, including luxury cars, women, technology, clothes, and jewelry” (507). In his song “Juicy” from 1994 The Notorious B.I.G. unabashedly lists his excesses:

Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis
When I was dead broke man I couldn’t picture this
50-inch screen, money green leather sofa
got two rides the limousine with the chauffeur
Phone bill about two G’s flat
no need to worry my accountant handles that
And my whole crew is lounging…

The references to this phenomenon in Hip-hop are ubiquitous. In “Last Call” Kanye punningly tells us that he has a “Mayonnaise-colored Benz/ I push miracle whips.” And in “Run This Town” he explains that this pursuit is his sole goal:

Police escort, everybody passports/
This the life that everybody asks for
This the fast life, we are on a crash course/
What you think I rap for? To push a fucking Rav-4?

The incredulity in the last line is palpable. West is asserting that if being wealthy is an option, why would he, or anyone for that matter, be financially complacent—or worse, revert back to penury? Even Nas—often viewed as a “conscious rapper”—has lines like “My tennis shoes Gucci, old school pea soup green/ Jean Lee suit on, Veuve Clicquot champagne” and “Rocking Roberto Carvalli…convertible Mazi/…in 97 the six, 98 the Bentley, and now it’s the Ghost Phantom…”

For many rappers, freedom comes in the form of wealth and acquisitions. This point is often made by juxtaposing slavery with materialism. J. Cole has ironically referenced “chains” and “whips” in his songs. In “Blow up” he states:

Uh, I’m blowing up and bitch I’m still me
But what’s the cost to live your dream, do you feel me?
Everything glittering ain’t what you think it will be
Funny how money, chains and whips make me feel free

Here, Cole is acknowledging the potential downsides of materialism, but in the end succumbs to the allure and the liberating feeling of success. He makes a similar reference in “I Get up” when he states, “Soon as my dough straight…I’ll put some chains on my niggas like I own slaves.”

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4 Chains and whips are slang for necklaces and cars respectively.
takes this metaphor even further in his song “Chaining Day.” The song simultaneously relishes in and admonishes the materialistic culture in which Cole finds himself. He raps, “Look at me, pathetic nigga, this chain that I bought/ You mix greed, pain and fame, this the heinous result.” He laments the fact that he has become the stereotypical rapper who is squandering his money on jewelry. In the chorus he expressly states that his latest necklace was “my last piece I swear/ My guilt heavy as this piece I wear/they even iced out Jesus’ hair.” And at the end he states emphatically—making the comparison clear—“Don’t take my chains from me/ cause I love this slavery.” In *The Sociolinguistics of Hip-Hop as Critical Conscience: Dissatisfaction and Dissent*, the authors state,

> Playing with the polysemy of the word *chain*, which can refer both to necklaces and the chains that his enslaved ancestors were forced to wear, J.Cole dedicated an entire song to his own avarice, describing his desire to buy new jewelry as a form of slavery and pointing out the irony of indulging in one of the deadly sins—greed—by buying jewelry in the image of Christ. (Ross 182)

Cole provides a balanced analysis of materialism, presenting both the justification behind it with the explicit understanding that it is a hypocritical and avoidable vice.

While materialism is an inescapable theme in Hip-hop music, there has been a growing anti-materialist movement in the genre. The general view is that the pursuit of profit and demonstrable extravagance can be traced to the predicament of having lived without for years. But this has some drawbacks. According to Crossley: “Whatever the connection between an

5 The title is a reference to both the film “Training Day” and the day in which Africans were subjugated by European settlers.

6 “Ice” means diamonds. To “ice” something means to cover it with diamonds. Thus, his Jesus medallion features hair made of diamonds.
alleged African American hyper-materialism and a ‘racial reflex’ ingrained in black people as a result of their having once been sold as chattel, materialist notions and their consequences have seriously affected African Americans' collective pursuit of the American dream” (507). The fear is that Hip-hop influences young African Americans to spend their money foolishly rather than investing and looking to the future. One way, then, for rap artists to subvert the power structure is to advise subsequent generations as to how they might avoid mindless spending and climb the social ladder. This is captured in Jay-Z’s “Story of O.J.” where he mocks wasteful extravagance and gives financial advice:

You wanna know what's more important
than throwin' away money at a strip club? Credit
You ever wonder why Jewish people own all the property in America?
This how they did it
Financial freedom… my only hope
Fuck living rich and dying broke

Here he is advocating for “financial freedom.” He’s encouraging young African Americans to think about “long money” rather than the immediate gratification that comes with consumerism. In his song “Success” Jay-Z is almost bored with how much he has accumulated:

…All I got is this big house
, couple cars, I don’t bring half that shits out…
I’ve got watches I ain’t seen in months
Apartment at the Trump I only slept in once

In the song, Jay-Z recognizes the negativity and pointlessness of materialism when he states “What do I think of success? It sucks….truth be told I had more fun when I was piss-poor. I’m pissed off…” Nevertheless, his repeated references to ostentation indicate that these objects are worth pursuing.
This battle between wanting to live garishly and recognizing the pointlessness of materialism is reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness.” In his *Souls of Black Folk* he states:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (3-4).

This duplicity encapsulates a key element of the Hip-hop artist, who simultaneously wants to rebel against the racist system which has marginalized him while fervently pursuing wealth and thereby contributing to that very capitalist system. When the artist was struggling and observing the success of those in the neighborhood or on television, they were essentially “measuring their soul by the tape of the world” which views value in terms of wealth. Thus to feel a sense a pride and accomplishment, one doesn’t need education or other accolades; one needs material goods to display their worth. Given that many African Americans have experienced destitution and have ancestors who were slaves, there is a deep understanding of financial depravation. For centuries it was impossible for the vast majority of black Americans to accrue wealth. Because of this, the
American Dream evolved from the basic necessities and occasional luxuries of the average family to over-the-top indulgence and gaudiness.

Several artists have offered justifications for their materialism. In his song “2Face” J.Cole reflects on his ambivalence:

Yeah the mental state of a young black genius conflicted
The fast life I done seen on the screen is addictive
Money and clothes I done dreamed about…
Hey tell me am I wrong for visualizing material shit I never had?
Waving gats instead of flags, the American Dream

Here, Cole is acknowledging the allure of celebrity culture, but he laments the extremes to which African Americans go to achieve those ends. Jay-Z provides similar, and perhaps universal, justification in his song with Kanye West entitled “Niggas in Paris.” The song is a magnum opus of materialism, with mentions of private jets, owning sports franchises, and foreign excursions. But in one section Jay-Z manages to perfectly summarize the mindset of a true rags-to-riches story:

(Ball so hard) This shit weird
We ain't even 'posed to be here
(Ball so hard) Since we here
it's only right that we'd be fair…
(Ball so hard) Got a broken clock,
Rollies that don't tick tock
Audemars that's losing time
Hidden behind all these big rocks
(Ball so hard) I'm shocked too
I'm supposed to be locked up too
If you escaped what I've escaped
You'd be in Paris getting fucked up too

While mixing in references to his high end watches, he points out that “we” (He and Kanye and and by extension wealthy African Americans) aren’t supposed to be rich and gallivanting in France. He argues that they should, at least in terms of probability, be dead or in prison. His
current predicament is rare, a point he states explicitly on the same album when he says, “I only spot a few blacks the higher I go.” By Jay-Z’s lights, seeing as how he defied the odds, he has no intention of letting his fortune—wealth and luck—languish.

The pursuit and display of wealth is subversive because it runs counter to years of history where black people were oppressed and financially insolvent. Now, Hip-hop—an art form which embodies black culture—has enabled some number of African Americans to make staggering amounts of money which otherwise would’ve likely ended in white bank accounts. Thus, to drive around in six-figure automobiles, wearing diamond necklaces and watches, and flying first class is a proverbial middle-finger to the society which has made such a vision unlikely. J.Cole captures this sentiment well in his song “Sideline Story” when he states:

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Up in 1st class, laugh even though it's not funny
See a white man wonder how the fuck I got money
While he sit in coach, hate to see me walk past him
Young black, pants sag, headphones blastin’
Know what he askin’, "how did he manage?"
"With all the cards against him, he used them to his advantage!"
Slang we be speakin' probably soundin' like Spanish
Then I fuck they heads up when a nigga show manners
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The mere appearance of J.Cole—his wardrobe, his manner—in that setting is surprising and subverts common notions of race and class. And that subversiveness is largely why many Hip-hop artists feel the need to flaunt their wealth.

Negro spirituals and Hip-hop music don’t appear to be similar on the surface; separated by centuries and stylistically different, the two genres are worlds apart. But at bottom they both stem from the misfortune of being born into a challenging environment. They both were about pursuing wealth. For slaves it was spiritual wealth, while for rappers it was about accumulating
earthly possessions. And they both managed to—in their own ways—strengthen a community, build hope, and push back against a world that sought to subdue them.
Chapter 3: “When my back’s against the wall…I react”: Tricksters and Hustlers in Folktales and Hip-hop

Along with the sorrow songs, African slaves brought with them the tradition of storytelling. Tales of courage, heartache, and humor—told in the patois of the slave—were pervasive. While the spirituals, sung aloud in the fields, were often hopeful and cathartic responses to brutality, the folklore stories were told in secret, passed down usually at night, and sought to preserve the authentic traditions of their oppressed community. As anthropologist Franz Boas states in the preface to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, these clandestine folktales provided a way for the slave to “exclude the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life” (xiii). Even Hurston acknowledges how difficult it was to gain access to these fictions when she states that African Americans are “most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by” (2). Boas goes on to state that the tales themselves chronicle “the Negro’s reaction to everyday events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions…” and that they are essential “for understanding historically the character of American Negro life” (xiv).

African American folklore was not only about self-preservation and tradition. There was something overtly subversive in these yarns—more so than in the spirituals. Many of these stories featured “trickster” characters who consistently outsmarted their bigger, stronger, and more socially powerful counterparts. These figures began as animals such as Brer Rabbit and the spider Anansi, but later became the vague “Johns” and “Jacks.” But they all shared similar characteristics: resourcefulness, wit, and courage lurking beneath a demeanor of feigned ignorance, apathy, or imbecility. Given their social circumstances, African Americans couldn’t
actually undermine their captors for fear of punishment (although some brave slaves rebelled), so these stories provided a release—a sort of revenge fantasy in which they were the heroes over the bumbling and callous slave owners. As Sharon Lynnette Jones states in her book on Hurston, “While they may have been physically imprisoned by their masters, their minds were free to create great fantasies of escape and victory over their opponents” (133). Speaking specifically on tricksters, Ayana Smith similarly captures the essence of the recurring character when she states:

The trickster represents everything one would like to do but cannot. The trickster therefore presents an alternative, vicarious existence that contrasts with the strict boundaries of slave existence. In a society with limited roles available to African-Americans, the trickster provides an outlet for the expression of socially unacceptable themes. (180)

The tricksters were characters for whom the slaves could root and with whom they could identify.

In 20th century Hip-hop music, the trickster character metamorphosed into the “hustler” archetype—people who were forced to use their own resourcefulness and wit to navigate the white-controlled world which had systemically left them impoverished, incarcerated, or otherwise bereft of opportunity. Shelley Fisher Fishkin addresses this sentiment in her book on Mark Twain when she states that tricksters embody the philosophy of survival for the slave—a philosophy which has remained with African Americans: “The White man is unethical and the black man is victim. The black man must deal with such unethical behavior as he is able…Thus to be black in America and survive necessitates being a trickster” (66). In this section I will
explore the ways in which these folklore trends and Hip-hop tropes—namely the use of intelligence and the unapologetic desire to survive by any means—subverted the power structure then and now.

One of the most important collections of African American folklore was Joel Chandler Harris’s late 19th century work about the fictional raconteur Uncle Remus. A former slave Remus recounted stories about Brer Rabbit to a young white child. Told in the authentic dialect of the slave, Remus relayed the many exploits and misadventures of this troublesome hare with great zeal. Most of the stories took on similar plots—Brer Rabbit seeking food or shelter—and then duping and fleeing from a host of other animals in the process. In one story, Brer Rabbit infiltrates a beautiful garden owned by a “Mr. Man.” Nightly, the rabbit would take his share of crops and escape. This deception was portrayed as justifiable by Remus: “Dey look fine an’ dey tas’e fine, an’ long to’rds de shank er de mornin’, Brer Rabbit ’ud creep thoo de crack er de fence an’ nibble at um. He’d take de greens, but leave his tracks, mo’ speshually right atter a rain. Takin’ an’ leavin’—it’s de way er de worl’” (Harris 7). It’s no accident that the owner of the Joe Chandler Harris’ work is not without controversy. The fictional storyteller Uncle Remus is seen by many as a stereotypical minstrel character, and Harris’ romanticized depiction of the antebellum south has disconcerted many critics. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Jennifer Burton address Harris in their encyclopedic book on African American Folktales. They state that many critics believe Harris’ work to be tainted by “the minstrel aspects of the project…[and] by the collection’s frame narrative. In the utopian depiction of Southern plantation life as one community, deep bonds of affection join slave cabins to ‘big houses’ and mansions…” (Gates 179). Harris’ anodyne vision of the South is considered an affront to the brutal realities of the South during this period.

Harris, many argued, whitewashed the folk tales which eventually inspired Disney’s “Song of the South.” Novelist and activist Alice Walker described the film as an insult, stating “Uncle Remus in the movie saw fit largely to ignore his own children and grandchildren in order to pass on our heritage—indeed our birthright—to patronizing white children, who seemed to regard him as a kind of talking teddy bear” (Gates 179). Walker and others believed above all that Remus, the genial and avuncular raconteur, was a cheap interpretation which made a mockery of their beloved culture.

Not everyone was so opprobrious. Gates cites scholar Robert Bone who rationalized it like this: “To neglect the Brer Rabbit tales because a white man was the first to write them down is to betray the black man’s folk tradition” (Gates 180). Finally, Gates himself weighs in, finding a balance between the audacity and utility of Harris’ efforts: “…Harris may have been an interloper and intruder in the cabins where he went to eavesdrop and collect. He may also have created a grotesquely distorted picture of plantation life as serene…But he did create a record of sorts, one that allows us to see, if only through a glass darkly, evening diversions in an era lacking…every form of art requiring more than the human voice” (180). While controversial, Harris’ work is the first collection of the Brer Rabbit tales, they are viewed as accurate, and they manage to convey the themes important to my analysis.
garden is the universal-sounding “Mr. Man”—redolent of the nameless “The Man” which became the metonym for white authority in the early 20th century and against whom much ire has been levied by aggrieved minorities. This is because all landowners and men of privilege were indeed more or less the same in that they lacked two conspicuous traits: poorness and blackness. Later in the story, when Mr. Man sends some dogs after the thief, Brer Rabbit manages to convince Brer Fox, Brer Wolf and others that the cause of the commotion was a barbecue: “Why, deyer tryin’ fer drive me ter de big bobbycue on de creek. Dey all ax me, an’ when I ’fuse dey say deyer gwine ter make me go any how. Dey aint no fun in bein’ ez populous ez what I is” (11-12). The other animals foolishly race straight for the dogs and leave Brer Rabbit alone to enjoy his stolen sustenance.

Brer Rabbit’s actions were understandable for Remus (and other storytellers of the time) because the rabbit needed to survive in a world of predators and obstructions. In an article about folklore from the 1960s, Marshall Fishwick observes:

[Remus] is a moralist. All animals, he insists, have to watch out for themselves, especially if they have no hoofs, breaks, or horns. It was understood in Harris’ time, and is still conceded that these tales are not merely about animals. They are parables of the Negro race. Uncle Remus symbolizes the Negro who accepts life rather than revolt against it. With humor and cunning he makes the best of things, and finds many satisfactions in the world of wonder and cosmic retribution. (79)

Surrounded by predators like the fox and the wolf—explicit representations of white people—the rabbit was constantly on guard and used resourcefulness to survive. Similarly devoid of an intimidating defense mechanism like the rabbit, African Americans needed to rely on cunning.
Thus, Remus—who was himself (fictional composite though he may have been) a victim of dire circumstances—sympathized with Brer Rabbit’s survival techniques and found the determined, albeit devious, underdog a source of great humor and catharsis. Many of his escapades were sheerly comical, with the Rabbit tricking some larger animal for no other reason than entertainment. Nevertheless, Brer Rabbit set the stage for other notable tricksters.

Hurston’s important work *Mules and Men* features a number of similar tales involving clever slaves, typically named John or sometimes Jack. In one particularly long story called “Ah’ll Beatcher Makin’ Money,” John—through a combination of craftiness, supernatural power, and talent as a fortune-teller—manages to become rich and get “Ole Massa” to kill his horse, his grandmother, and eventually himself. It is perhaps the most brutal of the comeuppances in the book. The revenge is possible because of Massa’s greed and idiocy. John uses his fortune-teller abilities to acquire some wealth in town. When Massa sees it, he demands to know how he can do it as well. Of course, lacking the requisite supernatural skills, Ole Massa just looks stupid after every effort. Finally at the end, John tells him his latest purchases were due to his being thrown in the river:

Massa ast, “Reckon if Ah let you throw me in de river, Ah'd make all dat?"
"Yeah, Massa, Ah know so.” John got ole Massa in de sack and keered 'im down to de river. John didn't forgit his weights. He put de weights on ole Massa and jus' befo' he threwed 'im out he said, "Goodbye, Massa, Ah hope you find all you lookin' for."
And dat wuz de las' of ole Massa. (45-46).

Here is perhaps the apogee of revenge for the slave. In her critique of Hurston’s work, Jones writes that “His master’s oppressiveness is no match ultimately for John’s mental capacities” and
that this story represents “a wish-fulfillment for the slaves” (133). He manages to liberate himself, kill the man who had enslaved him, and amass great wealth using essentially his mind.

While John was able occasionally to exact revenge on Ole Massa and earn his freedom, most of the time his trickery was used for survival. In one tale, when Massa leaves John in charge of the plantation, he throws a ball for the other slaves. When Massa returns he is apoplectic to find so many black people in his home. As punishment, he plans on lynching John. John—with the help of his friend—concocts a plan where he will pray aloud under the lynching tree and his friend, who is hiding in the tree, will use matches to make it seem as though his prayers are being heard by God:

"Now, John," said Massa, "have you got any last words to say?"
"Yes sir, Ah want to pray."
"Pray and Pray damn quick. I'm clean out of patience with you, John."
So John knelt down. "O Lord, here Ah am at de foot of de Persimmon tree. If you're gointer destroy Old Massa tonight, with his wife and chillun and everything he got, lemme see it lightnin'."
Jack up the tree, struck a match.
Ole Massa caught hold of John and said: “John, don't Pray no More.”
John said, "Oh Yes, turn me loose so Ah can pray. O Lord, here Ah am tonight callin' on Thee and Thee alone. If You are gointer destroy Ole Massa tonight his wife and chillun and all he got, Ah want to see it lightnin."
Jack struck another match and Ole Massa started to run. He give John his freedom and a heap of land and stock. (83)

Through these stories Jones states, “John becomes an important symbol of emancipation” (133).

There are several of this variety where John is able to swindle Massa into letting him live or setting him free.
While in some of these tales things don’t end well for John, for the most part these stories produce moments of hilarity. In an article about subversion and ethnic humor, Joseph Boskin states:

[The trickster tale] represents an accommodation to white society and functions as a mechanism for survival. Slaves used veiled humorous language to vent anger, just as they employed coded sayings to mask true feelings. The John-Master stories illuminate this process. John cusses out his massa whenever he pleases—whenever the massa is up at the big house and John is down in the field. John steals food and lies his way out of trouble…Blacks chortled as they slipped past white scrutiny…(91)

Humor—itself subversive—was a powerful tool for the slave, simultaneously providing catharsis and hope through the wily character of John.

A few of Hurston’s tales depict John as less flippant or conniving and simply as a noble person. In “‘Member Youse a Nigga” John saves Massa’s drowning children, works hard for a year to raise up a load of crops, and earns his freedom from a fairly generous and thankful Massa:

So Friday come, and Massa said, "Well, de day done come that I said I'd set you free. I hate to do it, but I don't like to make myself out a lie. I hate to git rid of a good nigger lak you."

So he went in de house and give John one of his old suits of clothes to put on. So John put it on and come in to shake hands and tell 'em goodbye. De children they cry, go. So John took his bundle and put it on his stick and hung it crost his shoulder.

Well, Ole John started on down de road…

Fur as John could hear 'im down de road he wuz hollerin', "John, Oh John! De children loves you. And I love you. De Missy like you."

John would holler back, "Yassuh."

"But 'member youse a nigger, tho!"
Ole Massa kept callin' 'im and his voice was pitiful. But John kept right on steppin' to Canada. (90)

Here, the Massa interrupts his own moment of humanity to remind John of his place. Despite his hard work, heroism, and well-deserved freedom, John is only a black man. This story, while uplifting in the sense that it depicts a slave being rewarded for his hard work, is a painful reminder of their uphill battle. Free or not free, there is an unambiguous racial divide in America. And in order to survive or achieve some measure of equality, African Americans need to be determined, thick-skinned, clever, and lucky.

These trickster tales are subversive, not only because they depict scenarios in which the slaves win and the masters lose, but also because they humanize the slaves. The prevailing sentiment of the period was that black people were unintelligent, lazy, and incapable of feelings or manners. They weren’t fully human, after all. These folk stories, however, paint a different picture. The slaves were wise—chock full of clever adages and useful idioms. They were hard workers. They were quick-witted, often creating life-saving schemes at a moment’s notice. They were often kind and respectful to their captors and tormentors—despite their enslavement. Conversely, it was the slaveowners who demonstrated the very traits they had assumed were part and parcel of the African American community. And in the trickster tales we see the greatest irony that it wasn’t only the presumed physical superiority of the slaves (a stereotype which persists for African Americans even today) which enabled them to survive; it was their intelligence. As Jones phrases it, these tales are powerful because “...the slave John defies and defeated his master through both physical and intellectual ability, illustrating the idea that blacks
are not inferior to whites” (133). Trickster tales turned the tables on notions of race in more ways than one.

In the 1980s and 90s, during the height of the disastrous “War on Drugs,” Hip-hop artists began chronicling the experiences of the “hustler.” This ubiquitous figure, much like the trickster, used cunning and resourcefulness to survive. But unlike their enslaved predecessors, the hustlers weren’t using their wits to battle overt subjugation. Rather they were exploiting the drug trade in order to escape the modern versions of enslavement—abject destitution, searing inequity, mass incarceration, and lack of opportunity. In her paper “The Rhetoric of the Hip-Hop Hustler,” Marylou R. Naumoff defines the hustler in starkly American terms, painting this rap archetype with the classic and often unrealistic, hard work ethos of the American Dream. She states:

…the Hustler, much like the traditional Self-Made Man, is extremely individualistic and self-motivated…we are witnessing the appearance of a new version of the Self-Made Man and by extension the accompanying discourses of the American dream and the bootstrap myth. The hero of this reconfiguration is what I have termed the hip hop Hustler. (9)

But I argue there is more to the hustler figure than merely selfish ambition. The term is never applied in the genre to people who find success through traditional avenues. Doctors and lawyers and firefighters, for example, aren’t described with the word. To be a hustler is to adopt an any-means-necessary attitude with the means being—at least at first—illegal. In her article about the context of rap music, Jennifer Lena states that “hardcore rap lyrics feature a ‘hustler’ as a protagonist. The hustler dominates or victimizes others using force and seduction; hustlers…
personify accomplishment against the odds; they live in a world of reverse power where the oppressed are powerful” (486). While the traditional trickster would often steal, typically they subverted power through the careful employment of intelligence. By contrast, the hustler subverted the power structure forcefully, brazenly, and unapologetically, gaining wealth and reputation in the process. The strategy of choice for hustlers was crime, which is intrinsically subversive.

In his encyclopedic history of Hip-hop culture, Jeff Chang describes the ways in which failed Reagan policies led to a flood of cocaine into the United States from South America, creating a competitive and lucrative illegal market for the downtrodden in urban cities like Los Angeles and New York City. Chang writes, “At the other end of the pipeline, the illiterate, jobless and hopeless…turned into vulture capitalists to feed their ghetto clienteles the illicit spoils of war” (209). This began during the Reagan administration, but by the 1990s, the epidemic was in full swing and hustling began to feature prominently in Hip-hop music. Many Hip-hop artists have tackled the subject. Some have opted to describe the inner workings of drug dealing, while others have focused on the justification behind engaging in the enterprise. Some have depicted it as a glamorous endeavor, others as a necessary evil. The Notorious B.I.G. opens his track “Everyday Struggle” lamenting the difficulties of his day as he peddles crack cocaine to survive:

I know how it feel to wake up fucked up
Pockets broke as hell, another rock to sell
People look at you like you's the user
Selling drugs to all the losers, mad buddha abuser
But they don't know about your stress-filled day
Baby on the way, mad bills to pay

He offers a similar thought in the preamble to his hit “Juicy” when he mockingly dedicates the track to “…all the people that lived above the buildings that I was hustlin’ in front of called the police on me when I was just tryin' to make some money to feed my daughter…” His choice to sell drugs was an attempt, much like more traditional jobs, to make ends meet.

Similarly, Tupac tersely mentions selling drugs in his song “Dear Mama” when he states “Even though I sell rocks/ it feels good put money in your mailbox/ I love paying rent when the rent’s due/ I hope you got the diamond necklace that I sent to you.” Again, the trade suffices to pay the bills and to reimburse and reward his mother for her loyalty and parental dedication.

In one of Hip-hop’s most memorable story tracks, KRS-One tells a tale about a good kid who was drawn into the drug trade through necessity and winds up evolving from small time dealing to violence. The first verse vividly captures the mentality of the teenaged hustler in the projects who first achieves financial independence through selling drugs.

I’m in junior high with a b plus grade
At the end of the day I don't hit the arcade
…The very next day while I’m off to class
My moms goes to work cold busting her ass
My sisters cute but she got no gear
I got three pairs of pants and with my brother I share
See there in school see I'm made a fool
With one and a half pair of pants you ain't cool
But there's no dollars for nothing else
I got beans, rice, and bread on my shelf
Every day I see my mother struggling
Now it's time I've got to do something
I look for work I get dissed like a jerk
I do odd jobs and come home like a slob
So here comes Rob his gold and chivalry
He gives me two hundred for a quick delivery
I do it once, I do it twice
Now there's steak with the beans and rice
My mother's nervous but she knows the deal
My sister's gear now has sex appeal
My brothers my partner and we're getting paper
...My family's happy everything is new

Here, the B+ student wants to alleviate the burden on his single mother and provide adequate clothing for his sister and brother, but he is unable to find legitimate work. There are social costs to being broke, and while he may have been able to thrive as a student, he felt as though his best option for survival was selling drugs. The immediate returns on the risk compel him to continue.

By the end of the song, however, his entrepreneurial efforts almost get him killed. There are countless songs in which artists express similar desperation and resort to hustling as a way to assuage their destitution.

The artist who explored this terrain with the most depth and consistency over his twenty-year career is Jay-Z. Every one of his albums features songs and verses about his experiences in the “dope game” and later how those requisite skills served him in the music industry. In the ensuing pages I will explore Jay-Z’s lyrics and delve into Decoded, his autobiography. The book and his songs will demonstrate that Jay-Z is the prototypical “hustler” figure, and moreover, shares a number of characteristics with the subversive trickster.

First, there is the consistency in the social strata. Like the slaves, the contemporary African American, urban poor were—for all intents and purposes—second-class citizens. The fundamental difficulties of being poor and the influx of drugs in the ghetto provide the groundwork for the hustler. Naumoff, in her analysis of the hustler, enumerates Jay-Z’s motivations when she says that he sought to demonstrate:
…that American systems and institutions have historically created the conditions of
poverty and crime in urban, black America and by extension strongly prevent the success
of young, black men…[and]…that because of the challenges and inequalities that limited
him, he actually embodies American ideals and virtues more so than those who are not
disadvantaged by the system. (94)

Jay-Z elaborates on this several times in his book. In one particularly powerful section he
describes how poor people are aware of the “government” from birth—they live in public
housing, receive a block of cheese, and have regular visits from assorted agencies. He notes,
“From the time we’re small children we go to crumbling public schools that tell us all we need to
know about what the government thinks of us” (154). He states this less ambiguously when he
says “…America, as I understood the concept, hated my black ass” (154). This is important
because to understand the hustler, one must be aware of the environment which fosters both a
disregard—or perhaps even hatred—for the rigged system and the depravation which creates
desperation.

A theme often iterated in Jay-Z’s lyrics is how he was forced into hustling based on these
circumstances. In his song “Say Hello” —in which the chorus states “Say hello to the bad guy/
they say I’m a bad guy/I come from the bottom but now I’m mad fly/”— he offers perhaps his
most succinct justification as to why he and others gravitated toward illegitimacy:

They saying I’m the bad guy, why’s that?
Cause when my back’s against the wall, nigga, I react
…We ain't thugs for the sake of just bein’ thugs
Nobody do that where we grew at, nigga, duh
The poverty line we not above
So out comes the mask and gloves cause we ain't feeling the love
We ain't doin crime for the sake of doing crimes
We movin dimes cause we ain't doin fine
One out of three of us is locked up doing time
You know what this type of shit can do to a nigga mind

Here his assertion is clear: the African Americans who hustle are driven to extremis by social circumstances such as poverty and incarceration, not simply a desire to break the law. Not unlike Brer Rabbit stealing from Mr. Man’s farm, Jay-Z and his contemporaries—and “hustlers” by extension—are trying to improve their lot in life, even if it means shirking the rule of law. In that same song, he actually makes the connection to slavery explicit when he laments the fact that he had never received any allotment and was required to take matters into his own hands:

“Ya’ll ain’t give me forty acres a mule/ so I got my Glock 40 now I’m cool.”

Another similarity between the trickster and the hustler is both tell tales which were intended to educate as well as entertain. According to Tolagbe Ogunleye’s work on African American folklore, “The ultimate strength of folklore resides in its power to communicate the social and cultural identities of the eras. This makes folklore a highly effective medium for teaching African American children about their legacy, as well as the most effective and earnest means of weaving, even thriving, through life’s adversities” (436). Hip-hop functions in a similar manner, with hustler tales serving as both a window into ghetto life and as a cautionary tale about the dangers of such a perilous career. In his song “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” Jay-Z expresses this idea explicitly when he speaks to the younger black males who might see his lifestyle as enticing:

Hov is back, life stories told through rap
Niggas acting like I sold you crack
Like I told you sell drugs; no, Hov did that
So hopefully you won’t have to go through that

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8 Jay-Z, pulling from the hebrew word Jehovah - which means “God” - would often refer to himself as the “God emcee J-Hova.” This was further trimmed to simply Hova or Hov.
I was raised in the projects, roaches and rats
Smokers out back sellin' their mama's sofa
Lookouts on the corner focused on the ave
Ladies in the window, focused on the kinfolk
Me under a lamppost, why I got my hand closed?
Crack's in my palm, watching the long arm of the law
So you know I’ve seen it all before…

Here, he is giving the listener insight into his life story, but he clearly states that he doesn’t advise people to follow in his footsteps. In his autobiography he is unambiguous about the difficulties of the “game” when he states “When people say hustling is easy money they couldn’t be more wrong. Paranoia and fear worm their way into every interaction you have…It can wear you down” (42). He hopes that, even though his story turned out well, he can educate and persuade young people to take more traditional avenues to success. The life of the hustler is one in which nothing is guaranteed.

Later on the same album in a song called “Renegade” he describes how he uses rap music as a way to paint pictures of the ghetto while also helping the youth cope with their abysmal circumstances:

…I’m influenced by the ghetto you ruined
The same dude you gave nothin’, I made somethin' doin’
What I do, through and through and
I give you the news with a twist, it's just his ghetto point of view
The renegade, you been afraid I penetrate pop culture
Bring ‘em a lot closer to the block where they pop toasters…
I bring you through the ghetto without ridin' round
Hidin' down, duckin' strays from frustrated youths stuck in they ways…
How you rate music that thugs with nothin' relate to it?
I help them see they way through it…
Jay-Z sees his profession as a form of journalism combined with a type of motivational speaking. As a person with a platform he uses his songs to bring the listener “a lot closer to the block” and “through the ghetto.” And ultimately he is helping the “frustrated youths” “see their way through” this quagmire. In his autobiography, he offers line by line commentary for his songs.

For “Renegade” he states:

This is one of the things that makes me — and all serious rappers — renegades: When we report the news, it doesn’t sound the same as when you hear it from CNN. Most of us come from communities where people were just supposed to stay in their corners quietly, live and die without disturbing the master narrative of American society. Simply speaking our truths, which flew in the face of the American myth, made us rebels. (105)

The words “renegade” and “rebel” speak to the intrinsic subversiveness of telling these stories. Like the folklore of centuries past, African American rappers were orally relaying the tales of their tragic lives—tales which were unthinkable and often unknown by most of the white world who had been either complicit in or oblivious to (or both) the immiseration of African American communities. And for Jay-Z, his particular story was in many ways American—capitalistic and entrepreneurial—but was rooted in a criminality which was anathema to the “American Dream.”

Later in his book Jay-Z elaborates on the idea that “hustling” has become the new “struggle.” Young black men in the 1990s weren’t fighting for the same things as their legendary predecessors like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., but they were in engaged in a similar battle for survival and financial independence. All the while, they were feared by the people in the neighborhoods. He states “…what hustlers were going through in the streets—dissed and feared by teachers and parents and neighbors and cops, broke, working a corner to try to get
some bread for basic shit...[was] more than some glamorous alternative to having a real job” (23). Despite the fact that it occasionally looked “cool” to be a hustler, it wasn’t the preferred method of acquiring income. It was difficult and dangerous, hence the word “struggle.” He goes on to expound on the word:

[Struggle] is a loaded term. It’s usually used to talk about civil rights or black power...not the kind of nickel-and-dime, just-to-get-by struggle...Our struggle wasn’t organized or even coherent. There were no leaders of this “movement.” There wasn’t even a list of demands. Our struggle was truly a something-out-of-nothing, do-or-die situation.

The fucked-up thing was that it led some of us to sell drugs on our own blocks and get caught up in the material spoils of that life. (24)

By and large, hustling was done out of necessity. In the austere urban cities where jobs were scarce and drugs were plentiful, it was the obvious way to earn a living. The young hustler “is getting a shot at a dream...he sees the guy who gets rich and drives the nice car and thinks, yep, that’ll be me” (75). As Jay-Z points out, the hustlers often became enamored with the “material spoils” that came along with the sudden wealth of drug dealing.

Much like how the tricksters in early folklore began to exploit their intellectual inferiors for entertainment purposes, hustlers eventually went above and beyond mere survival. They weren’t selling just enough drugs to pay the bills on time; they were becoming “vulture capitalists,” pursuing greater profits—almost pathologically—in an attempt to not only defeat poverty, but to amass wealth. This was doubly subversive: not only were black men able to stave off poverty by capitalizing on the drugs imported into their communities by white people, but some were able to become obscenely wealthy—wealthier even than most of the white
community. To put it another way: hustlers used the very poison meant to destroy the ghettos to achieve power and success. Jay-Z justifies the pursuit of ostentation several times. In his song “D’Evils,” Jay-Z brings together these threads—the difficulties of hustling, the repudiation of menial jobs, and the insatiable desire for wealth—in one of his most often recited lines:

Whoever said illegal was the easy way out
  couldn’t understand the mechanics
  and the workings of the underworld, granted
Nine to five is how you survive,
  I ain’t trying to survive
  I’m trying to live it to the limit and love it a lot

Here Jay seems to be tacitly admitting that there may have been other options but that they weren’t enticing; perhaps he could have made ends meet without resorting to crime, but he would have inevitably hovered around the poverty line like so many others. In one section he discusses how a popular job for kids his age was working at McDonald’s. He said a job like that “seemed like an act of surrender to a world that hated us. I never even considered it as a possibility” (75). Instead, he opted for hustling. In the commentary for “D’Evils,” Jay echoes Marylou R. Naumoff when he states that there is an underlying philosophy to the hustler’s frame of mind:

The first defense of a lot of people who take the criminal route is that they had no choice, which is almost true: Most of us had choices, but the choices were bleak. The street life was tough and morally compromised and sometimes ugly, but a dead-end nine-to-five job at permanent entry level wasn’t all that attractive either. The righteous seed in a hustler’s mentality was this: He wanted something more for himself. (51)
It was that *something more* which led Jay-Z and other hustlers into the aforementioned materialism that so pervades Hip-hop music. The reward should be commensurate with the risk. If hustlers were going to flirt with death and jail time, then they might as well be rich for their troubles. This sentiment is encapsulated in his lapidary line from his song “Can I live?” when he states: “Easily explain how we adapt to crime: I’d rather die enormous than live dormant…”

The final aspect of the hustler archetype—as portrayed by Jay-Z—is perhaps the most subversive. Not only does Jay-Z justify his exploits and warn the project youth about the dangers, but he has spent a considerable amount of time rhyming about just how good he has been at hustling, both in the streets and as a fully legitimate Hip-hop mogul. Since his debut in 1996 he has become one of the wealthiest rappers of all-time—broadening his market (or his “side hustles”) to include clothing, sports management, high class art dealing, and real estate. He attributes his success in these areas to his mentality. This is subversive because he has transitioned from simply a rapper to a person who *controls* the rap industry in many ways. Typically, black artists were operating under the auspices of old, white business owners (referred to by Kanye West and others as a form of “New Slavery”). But Jay-Z is “self-made” and gives no percentage of his earnings to a white-owned corporation. In his song “Moment of Clarity” he states “The music business hate me/ cause the industry ain’t make me/.” This third act of Jay-Z’s hustler persona—much like the slave John in “Ah’ll Beatcher Makin’ Money”—has survived systemic racism and achieved the ultimate form of revenge: extreme wealth and prosperity.

In his song “U Don’t Know,” Jay-Z makes the clear connection between hustling in the streets and the music industry. In the first verse he reminds the reader of the turbulent streets from whence he came:
I'm from the streets where the hood could swallow 'em
And bullets'll follow 'em
And there's so much coke that you could run the slalom
And cops comb this shit top to bottom
They say that we are prone to violence, but it's home sweet home
Where personalities clash and chrome meets chrome
The coke prices up and down like it's Wall Street, Holmes
But this is worse than the Dow Jones, your brains are now blown
All over that brown Brougham, one slip, you are now gone
Welcome to Hell, where you are welcome to sell

With the carefree demeanor of a man who has managed to escape the game, Jay-Z can now reflect poetically on the dangers from the comfortable viewpoint of success—mixing in wealthy stock market references with the jargon of the inner city drug dealer. Next he bridges his years as a crack peddler to his success in music and beyond:

I came into this motherfucker a hundred grand strong
Nine to be exact, from grindin' G-packs
Put this shit in motion, ain't no rewinding me back
Could make 40 off a brick, but one rhyme could beat that
And if somebody woulda told 'em that Hov' would sell clothing
Not in this lifetime, wasn't in my right mind
That's another difference that's between me and them
I smartened up, opened the market up
One million, two million, three million, four
In eighteen months, eighty million more…
You are now lookin' at one smart black boy
Momma ain't raised no fool
Put me anywhere on God's green earth, I'll triple my worth

Here Jay-Z states that he sold enough drugs ("grinding G-packs") to raise enough money to record his debut album. He realized that the earning potential in music was high and didn’t carry the same threat of death or imprisonment. Then, due to his hustler mentality, he diversified his
investments and became unimaginably successful. The last line hearkens back to his days in the
street where he was able to regularly make his money multiply.

From here Jay-Z takes the ostentation and opulence to nearly parodic levels. On a couple
of his later albums he feverishly mentions foreign cities, automobiles, expensive artists, and
clothing companies that would be opaque to the average listener. He is flaunting his wealth
extravagantly—almost obnoxiously. The word “rich” no longer applies. He is approaching a net
worth of almost a billion dollars. His is a tale of rags-to-riches that has practically gone off the
deep end. His albums *Magna Carta...Holy Grail* and *4:44* are riddled with references to his
lavish lifestyle. Here is one from a song called “Picasso”:

It ain't hard to tell, I'm the new Jean Michel
Surrounded by Warhols, my whole team ball
Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel
I just wanna live life colossal
Leonardo Da Vinci flows
Riccardo Tisci Givenchy clothes
See me throning at the Met
Vogueing on these niggas, champagne on my breath, yes
House like the Louvre or the Tate Modern
Cause I be going ape at the auction
Oh what a feeling, aw, fuck it, I want a trillion
Sleeping every night next to Mona Lisa
The modern day version with better features
Yellow Basquiat in my kitchen corner

On other songs he mentions expensive watches like Hublot and Audemar, as well as Ace of
Spade champagne and Tom Ford clothing. One can’t be sure if Jay-Z actually loves fine art and
expensive things or if he likes what the mere acquisition of these items means. Lurking beneath
all of these bourgeois purchases is the realization that Jay-Z was once the crack-dealing hustler
perched on the street corner, carrying a gun. Now he has managed to acquire the kind of money that allows him to be frivolous, buying exorbitantly priced clothing and “investing” in masterpieces and artifacts which are only found at the most prestigious auctions in extravagant, foreign cities.

Aside from wealth, Jay-Z never loses sight of the fact that, as a black man, his story is an unlikely one. Cognizant of race, in several songs he espouses a black power message, using himself as an example of what is possible for the youth in black America. In a song with Kanye West called “Murder to Excellence” from an album called *Watch the Throne*, Jay-Z and West acknowledge the difficulties they were both able to transcend, revel in their successes, and push a message of hope for the next generation. In one verse Jay-Z accosts the black youth who kill each other and tells them to aspire to something higher:

Too much enemy fire to catch a friendly
Strays from the same shade nigga, we on the same team
Giving you respect, I expect the same thing
All-black everything, nigga you know my fresh code
I’m out here fighting for you, don’t increase my stress load
Niggas watching the throne, very happy to be you
Power to the people, when you see me, see you

He is attempting to get black people to come together, rather than be torn apart by gang violence. And when they see him and Kanye doing well—when they’re “watching the throne”—they should realize that he was exactly like them, and he made it. Later in that same song, the mood shifts and Jay-Z intones “Black excellence, opulence, decadence, in tuxes next to the president… I only spot a few blacks the higher I go/.” The theme is progress, and while he is an example of how far a young black man can ascend, there are too few like him who have made the journey.
Another aspect of trickster tales and folklore is the way in which they maintained an historical thread for African Americans. Jay-Z’s catalogue of songs is unique in that they are redolent of criminality and materialism and yet fully aware of history—referencing everything from Che Guevara to Rosa Parks, from the Harlem Renaissance to Louis Farrakhan. Jay-Z manages to ride a fine line between glorifying less-than-admirable aspects of the “game” and paying homage to important black figures. For the former he’s answered well for himself, acknowledging that part of the hustle means making hit songs that are generally devoid of substance:

They only know what the single is, and singled that out
To be the meaning of what he is about…
But no dummy, that's the shit I'm sprinkling
The album with to keep the registers ringing
In real life, I'm much more distinguished

Each of his albums, in order to maximize profits, must contain a number of vapid songs which will keep the consumer happy—not unlike the crack fiends from his past life. But on those same albums appear songs like “The Ruler’s Back” which states: “I’m representing for the seat where Rosa Parks sat/ Where Malcolm got shot, where Martin Luther was popped.” On “Murder to Excellence, he states “I arrived on the day Fred Hampton died/ Real niggas just multiply.” Here, he acknowledges that the day of his birth coincided with the assassination of a young Black Panther in 1969. He even stays up on current events, mentioning on the same song “This is for the memory of Danroy Henry,” a young man killed by police in 2010. Whether it’s a song about President Obama on “My President is Black” or a music video for “The Story of O.J.” which references a bevy of racially-charged moments in U.S. History, Jay-Z has never been afraid to
use his platform to break from “hustling” and discuss social and political issues. Like folklore, his rap songs are oral histories of a whole people. Finally, similarly to the noble nature of the slave “John” in “Member Youse a Nigga,” who saved Massa’s drowning children, Jay-Z has proven to be quite the philanthropist, using the spoils of his hustling to give back to the community from which he escaped. In “Moment of Clarity” he talks about how hustling has enabled him to be philanthropic:

And you been hustling since your inception
Fuck perception! Go with what makes sense
Since I know what I'm up against
We as rappers must decide what's most important
And I can't help the poor if I'm one of them
So I got rich and gave back, to me that's the win-win

During one song when his reputation as someone who cared about the ghetto was impugned, Jay-Z responded in a song called “Blueprint 2” in which he referenced his many charitable efforts.

He won't break you a crumb of the little bit that he makes
And this is with whom you want to place your faith?
I put dollars on mine, ask Columbine
When the Twin Towers dropped, I was the first in line
Donatin' proceeds off every ticket sold
When I was out on the road, that's how you judge Hov, no?
Ain't I supposed to be absorbed in myself?
Every time there's a tragedy, I'm the first one to help
They call me this misogynist, but they don't call me the dude
To take his dollars to give gifts at the projects

According to *Essence* magazine, Jay-Z and his wife Beyonce have been two of Hip-hop’s most generous philanthropists, donating to a variety of causes including hurricane relief, Red Cross, 

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United Way and countless others. Despite his obvious determination to acquire wealth, it appears Jay-Z has been generous when it comes to helping his community.

Jay-Z is a perfect example of the Hip-hop hustler character and how it is reminiscent of the trickster. His illegitimate career was born of dire circumstances, and his preliminary motivation was survival. Eventually he found success and evolved into the picture of lavish and well-deserved grandeur. His principal talent was his mind, namely his initiative, business savvy, and determination. Late in his book, in passing, he captures this when he says “That drive is what got me where I am and in some ways is who I am” (283). Jay-Z, and hustlers in general, subverted the power structure several times over by using illegal measures to get rich, transitioning to legitimate wealth in the rap industry, and living long enough to share their story with the world. And like tricksters, these oral Hip-hop stories survive and paint pictures of intelligence, resourcefulness, and resilience in a world which can be difficult.
Chapter 4: “Put a Little Sugar in my Bowl”: Subversive Sexuality in the Blues and Hip-hop

In the late 19th century during the Reconstruction era, former slaves and descendants of slaves in the South took elements of old spirituals and created a form of music which became known as the blues. Much like those earlier sorrow songs, the blues provided an avenue to tell stories and channel misery into art. One scholar aptly describes the music as “a surplus emotion, a mixture of despair, revolt, and cathartic laughter begotten by racial violence in the 1890s and desperately seeking creative outlet” (Gussow 7). Unlike the slave songs, however, the blues arrived at a time when African Americans were free to openly voice their discontent and declare their humanity without fear of punishment, and in so doing, they created a musical genre which would profoundly influence American music and culture.

With the advent of recording and radio, the blues exploded in popularity and became the predecessor of subsequent forms of American music such as jazz, rock and roll, country, funk, and Hip-hop. Its influence is summarized perfectly by blues legend Willie Dixon: “The blues are the roots and the other musics are the fruits” (Filene 127). In an era still marked by classical numbers, ragtime, brass bands, and vaudeville, the blues brought musical simplicity and deeply personal lyrics to the forefront of American culture. And like the spirituals and folk tales, the blues were another alchemistic attempt by African Americans to transfigure misery to merriment, dishonor to dignity, and fight back against the people in power.

One of the reasons blues songs were considered powerful and subversive was the context in which they were written. In the late 1800s, talented African Americans were performing in minstrel shows, in which their blackness was the subject of ridicule and a source of humor. Consider the first black recording artist George W. Johnson, who achieved great success singing
songs that were wrought with stereotypes and written by white songwriters. His first hit “The Laughing Song” paints a picture of the jovial black man, smiling and laughing as he is subjected to derision by white people:

As I was coming around the corner I heard some people say.  
Here comes the dandy darkie, here he comes this way.  
His heel is like a snow plod, his mouth is like a trap  
and when he opens it gently you will see a fearful gap  
and then I laughed  

At first, the song sounds as though Johnson is laughing rebelliously in the face of racism, but considering the white songwriter, it seems more likely that Johnson is being depicted as a clownish, minstrel character, laughing contentedly and accepting his place in society.  

This trope of the black man as a silly simpleton recurs in Johnson’s second hit “The Whistling Coon”:

Oh I've seen in my time some very funny folks  
But the funniest of all I know  
Is a colored individual as sure as you're alive  
As black as any black crow  
You can talk until you're tired but you'll never get a word  
From this very funny queer old coon  
He's a knock-kneed, double-jointed hunky-punky mook  
But he's happy when he whistles in tune  

Oh he's got a pair of lips like a pound of liver, split  
And a nose like an india-rubber shoe  
He's a limpy, happy, chuckle-headed huckleberry nigga  
And he whistles like a happy killy loon  
He's an independent, free-and-easy bad and greasy ham  
With a cranium like a big baboon  
Oh I never heard him talk to anybody in my life  
But he's happy when he whistles in tune  

Oh he'll whistle in the morning through the day and through the night  
and he whistles when he goes to bed  
He whistles like a locomotive engine in his sleep
And he whistled when his wife was dead
One day a fellow hit him with a brick upon the mouth
His face swelled like a big balloon
But it didn't faze the merry happy huckleberry nigga
And he whistled up the same old tune

Here, Johnson is casually singing about a bevy of offensive, physical stereotypes and employing derogatory terms. The person whom he is describing appears to be oblivious to everything but his tune. Songs like this made black people seem harmless, simple, and inherently musical. The latter stereotype continued up through the 20th century.

In contrast to this vaudevillian trend, authentic blues music, which was written and performed by African Americans, was revolutionary. They were no longer simply miming out the embarrassing lyrics written by white composers; they were actually commenting on the issues affecting their community and asserting their humanity—trends which would follow in the many genres which would grow from these “roots.” They served the same purposes—common language, building solidarity and hope, catharsis, preserving tradition—as the sorrow songs and folktales. The blues featured songs lamenting the difficulties of poverty, racism, prison, lost love, and any other issue about which a black person may have felt “blue.” But one topic which featured prominently, and which persists today, is sex, which one critic called “the quintessential subject matter of the blues” (Rutter 81).

Sexuality was a popular theme of blues music for both African American male and female artists, who were “historically configured as excessive, with unrestrained desires…this narrative of excess and pathology has seriously limited…black and brown sexualities” (Cooper 725). Thus, to discuss sexual themes openly in either an erotic or humorous way allowed these artists to declare that they were sexual beings and to subvert common misconceptions. Rather
than simply accept stereotypical depictions, these artists took ownership of their sexuality, asserting that their predilections were not shameful or egregious.

Also, sex had been used as an instrument of power by white people over black people, both through rape and false accusations of rape, which would often lead to lynching. In her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Y. Davis breaks down the power dynamic as she explains why the issue of sex was so important to blues singers:

The birth of the blues coincided with a period of militant activism by middle-class black women directed at white racists for whom rape was a weapon of terror, and at white employers who routinely used sexual violence as a racialized means of asserting power over their female domestic help…false rape charges against black men [were] a justification for the widespread lynchings of the period. Black men were habitually represented as savage, sex-crazed rapists, bent on violating the physical and spiritual purity of white womanhood. (33-34)

With this sexual oppression and unjust perception of African Americans, it seems reasonable that both male and female blues artists would seek to comment on sex and attack the notions that African Americans were either sexually submissive or abnormally concupiscent. In the same way that they were denied equality with regard to education, financial independence, and other opportunities, African Americans were denied the ability to be normal, sexual beings. Thus, one of the most significant ways in which the blues were subversive was their approach to this carnal issue. While there were black male blues singers who tackled the subject, I’ve chosen to deal primarily with the female artists.
Ma Rainey, the first black female recording artist, who was referred to as the “Mother of the Blues,” was doubly subversive. First, she was a black artist who was making a lucrative living when such opportunities for black people were rare, and second, she was a woman whose songs were overtly sexual. In her booming, soulful voice she would display her sexuality unabashedly. In one of her hits, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” she unambiguously discusses her posterior and its effect on the males in her audience:

The other night at a swell affair  
Soon as the boys found out that I was there  
They said, “I want to see that dance you call the black bottom  
All the boys in the neighborhood  
They say your black bottom is really good  
Come on and show me your black bottom…”

Now I'm gonna show y'all my black bottom  
They stay to see that dance  
Wait until you see me do my big black bottom  
I'll put you in a trance

A full-figured woman, Rainey was embracing her sexuality and the power of the female form during a period of sexual reticence.

Ma Rainey would also regularly discuss lustful feelings. In The Mother of Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey Sandra Lieb states that one prevalent theme in Rainey’s songs is “the intense sexual love between men and women…most strikingly, she sings of mature, highly sexual women” (82). In “Farewell Daddy Blues” she intones: “I’m wild about my daddy, I want him all the time…” In her song “Lawd, Send me a Man” she tells the listener that she isn’t finicky when it comes to taking a lover: “Send me a Zulu, a voodoo, any old man/ I’m not particular, boys, I’ll take what I can” (Davis 24). In terms of sexuality, there was no feigned modesty or
subtlety. As Davis states, the bold display of sexual themes “launches a brazen challenge to dominant notions of women’s subordination” (22). Ma Rainey was the first to alert the world that women—particularly black women—were unapologetically sexual beings. While this may have been the stereotypical view of black women, Rainey chose to embrace it rather than repudiate it, thereby wresting some control from those who chose to generalize.10

While Ma Rainey was the first black singer to discuss sex openly, her protégé Bessie Smith took the art of sexual innuendo to new heights. She exuded sensuality and her lyrics featured a sexually liberated voice which was decades ahead of its time. In “Empty Bed Blues” she vividly and artistically describes her lover and laments the fact that he has gone:

He's a deep-sea diver, with a stroke that can't go wrong
He can touch the bottom, and his wind holds out so long
Oh, he knows how to thrill me and he thrills me night and day…
He's got a new way of loving, almost takes my breath away

Oh, he's got that sweet something and I told my girlfriend Lou…
But the way she's ravin', she must have gone and tried it too
When my bed get empty, make me feel awful mean and blue
My springs are gettin' rusty, sleepin' single like I do…

He came home one evening with his spirit way up high…
What he had to give me, made me ring my hands and cry
He give me a lesson that I never had before
When he got through teachin' me, from my elbow down was sore
He boiled my first cabbage and he made it awful hot…
When he put in the bacon, it overflowed the pot…

10 This subversive ability to take a trope designed to disparage and redefine it occurs later with the recasting of “nigga” into a term of endearment.
For the 1920s, this type of unapologetic sexuality was a stark departure from the modest songs produced by the whites of the era. Smith’s sexual imagery wasn’t merely suggestive, and her metaphors didn’t require a wink or a nod. In her song “You’ve Got to Give me Some” she heads to the well again, conjuring up the lascivious from the banality of the everyday:

Loving is the thing I crave
For your love I’ll be your slave
You gotta give me some, yes give me some…
Said mister Jones to old butcher Pete
I want a piece of your good old meat…
Sweet as candy in a candy shop
Is just your sweet sweet lollipop…
I love all day suckers, you gotta give me some
To the milkman I heard Mary scream
Said she wanted a lots of cream…

Catch it when you come sir, you gotta give me some
Hear my cryin’ on my bended knees
If you wanna put my soul at ease
You gotta give me some, please give me some…

Many of these lyrical tropes—employing various phallic objects salaciously, implied references to fellatio—have appeared since Bessie Smith, but she was the first to use them so blatantly in popular music.

In one of her most famous songs “Need a Little Sugar in my Bowl” she opines longingly about her sexual needs using more food metaphors:

Seem like the whole world's wrong
Since my man's been gone
I need a little sugar in my bowl

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1) As a point of reference, in the same decade white singer Edith Day had a hit with a song in which she stated innocently: “In my sweet little Alice blue gown/ When I first wandered down into town/I was so proud inside, as I felt every eye, And in every shop window I primped, passing by.”
I need a little hot dog on my roll…
I need a little steam-heat on my floor…
What's the matter hard papa
Come on and save your mama's soul…
I need a some sugar in my bowl

Get off your knees, I can't see what you're drivin' at
It's dark down there looks like a snake!
C'mon here and drop somethin' here in my bowl…

Unlike some other blues songs which were about the loss of love and material troubles, Bessie Smith and other African American female artists placed an importance on sexual satisfaction. They treated love differently than the songs of the period. According to Davis:

Their representations of sexual relationships are not constructed in accordance with the sentimentality of the American popular song tradition. Romantic love is seldom romanticized in the blues. No authentic blues woman could, in good faith, sing with conviction about a dashing prince whisking her into the “happily-ever-after.” Only a few songs…situate love relationships and sexual desire within a strictly masculinist discursive framework. The classic blues women sang of female aspirations for happiness and frequently associated these aspirations with sexual desire… (23).

The blues were often about singing of what one once had or didn’t have. For some, their needs were material, but for women like Bessie Smith, they were sexual. As Emily Rutter phrased in her article about the two blues legends: “Similar to Rainey's stage persona, the characteristically extravagant and sensual image Smith projected advertised both her financial independence and her liberated views toward sexuality and monogamy, striking qualities in an early twentieth-
century woman” (Rutter 81). Physical intimacy is an integral part of the human experience; singing during a period of explicit racial and gender inequality, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were proudly declaring that women were as sexual as men, and black folks shared the same urges as whites. And while the prevailing view among whites was that black people were oversexed, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were simply presenting a more liberated sexuality than the predominant austerity and prudishness of the period.

In addition to being open about heterosexual desires, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were ahead of their time because of the way in which they addressed lesbianism. As Rutter phrases it, “…Rainey and Smith spoke of sex in frank terms and about heterosexual and homosexual liaisons” (72). Many of their songs involved women who were fed up with the roughness and infidelity of men and chose instead to pursue intimacy with other females. This was subversive because it was subverting not only notions of race and sex, but heterosexuality—the only socially acceptable and legal form of amorousness.

Ma Rainey’s lyrics were polymorphous in their sexuality. In “Don’t Fish in My Sea” she accosts her drunk, unfaithful husband and considers a lesbian tryst as revenge:

My daddy come home this mornin’, drunk as he could be…
I know that he's done got bad on me
He used to stay out late, now he don't come home at all
I know there's another mule been kicking in my stable
If you don't like my ocean, don't fish in my sea…
I ain't had no loving since God knows when
That's the reason I'm through with these no-good, trifling Men
You'll never miss the sunshine till the rain begin to fall..

12 There are strong rumors that the relationship between the two singers became more than professional during their time performing together in the 1920s. see https://www.biography.com/news/bessie-smith-ma-rainey-biography
You'll never miss your ham till another mule be in your stall

This song was important because she was tacitly discussing her bisexuality, a notion which was rare during this period. In her song “Prove it on me” Rainey makes her proclivities a little clearer when she states:

Went out last night, had a great big fight
Everything seemed to go on wrong
I looked up, to my surprise
The gal I was with was gone

Where she went, I don't know
I mean to follow everywhere she goes;
Folks say I'm crooked. I didn't know where she took it
I want the whole world to know

They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me;
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men

Here Rainey was openly expressing her homosexuality, an issue which had been anathema in America due to the predominant religious beliefs of the time.

Bessie Smith dedicated less time lyrically to her homosexual interests, but there are references in her work. In “Boy in a Boat”\(^\text{13}\) she states:

When you see two women walking hand in hand.
Just look 'em over and try to understand.
They'll go to these parties have their lights down low.
Only those parties where women can go.
You think I'm lying, just ask Tack Anne.

\(^{13}\) “Boy in a boat” is slang for the clitoris.
Took many a broad from many a man…

Ever since the year tooty-two
Lot of these dames girls have nothing to do
Uncle Sam started giving a fighting chance
Packed up all the men sent them off to France
Sent them over there those Germans to hunt
The women at home can try all the new stunts…

Here she is asserting that wartime provided an ample supply of women and conspicuous lack of men. Like her mentor, Smith was an equal opportunity lover, demonstrating a revolutionary level of sexual open-mindedness and agency. Davis asserts that “sexuality was one of the few realms in which masses of African American women could exercise autonomy…Denial of sexual agency was in an important respect the denial of freedom for working-class black women” (44). Thus, being unambiguously sexual in song was a way for Smith and Rainey to take control and declare the freedom of black women. And to proclaim their love of women, in an era where such behavior could land a person in jail, was another rebellious and subversive maneuver by these legendary songstresses.

The overt sexuality of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith set the stage for the sexual revolution that would explode decades later. Through the middle of the 20th century, other types of music, like Rock and Roll and Pop, began trafficking in innuendo and dealing with sexual themes more and more. By the 1990s, Hip-hop artists were exploring sex enthusiastically, with numerous songs leaving little to the imagination. The female artists were just as brazen as their male counterparts. While Smith was offering sexuality via metaphors, these rappers were cutting to the chase and eschewing playful euphemism.
In 1996 Lil’ Kim came out with a record called *Hard Core* in which she presented some of the most egregiously lewd lyrics ever heard. Responding to the misogynistic trends of 1990s rap, in which women were “bitches” and “hoes,” Kim wrested back some power by asserting feminine sexuality in hyperbolic fashion. In “Not Tonight” she alerts her lover that she is not interested in intercourse, but instead she demands cunnilingus: “I don’t want d*** tonight. Eat my p**** right.” Kim took the Mafia tropes and asserted herself as “Queen B,” depicting herself as the powerful one in her interactions with males. In the song “Queen Bitch” she states: Bet I wet ya like hurricanes and typhoons/Got buffoons eating my p**** while I watch cartoons.” Here she is inverting the power dynamic, receiving oral sex rather than giving, and forcing the male to be the submissive.

In a later hit entitled “How Many Licks?” Kim proudly recounts her many sexual exploits. The song, with its lollipop reference is reminiscent of Bessie Smith’s “You’ve got to Give Me Some.” In the song she raps: “I've been a lot of places, seen a lot of faces/ Ah hell I even fuck with different races/.” For Lil’ Kim, there was nothing to be ashamed of for women who wanted to take multiple, diverse sexual partners.

A decade later, Nicki Minaj would mirror this concept in her song “Anaconda.” She recounts, by name, several lovers and the various ways in which they would satisfy her:

This dude named Michael used to ride motorcycles
D*** bigger than a tower, I ain't talking about Eiffel's
Real country-ass nigga, let me play with his rifle
P**** put his ass to sleep, now he calling me NyQuil

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14 For a tour-de-force of gratuitously sexual lyrics, see: “Big Momma Thang,” “Spend a Little Doe,” “Dreams,” or essentially any Lil’ Kim song.

15 It means exactly what you think it means.
Kim and Minaj were behaving in what might be considered a stereotypically male way by discussing their sexual conquests. In so doing, they were subverting the widespread notion that promiscuity was only masculine or that it was shameful.

Another point of similarity between Kim and Minaj is that in most of their songs, the men are not only sexually submissive, but they also lavish the women with gifts on account of how prolific they are in the bedroom. In Kim’s song “How Many Licks?” she recounts one particularly obsessed lover named John who “had a Queen Bee Rules tattoo on his arm… he’d buy me a horse, a Porsche and a farm.” In Minaj’s “Anaconda” one man “Bought me Alexander McQueen, he was keeping me stylish.” There are countless references to material rewards, but this is not to be conflated with prostitution. The women here are so powerful that the men are the chasers, the bribers, and flatterers. Again, they are inverting the dynamic and placing the women, as it were, on top.

In 2002, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot had a hit record with “Work it,” a sexual song which was a departure from her party songs. In the song she is soliciting sex from a man directly. She states:

I'd like to get to know ya so I could show ya
Put the p***** on ya like I told ya
Give me all your numbers so I can phone ya
…then call me over
Not on the bed, lay me on your sofa…
You do or you don't or you will or won't ya?
Go downtown and eat it like a vulture…
Sex me so good I say blah-blah-blah
Work it, I need a glass of water
Boy, oh boy, it's good to know ya
In that same song she asks, “If you’ve got a big *elephant noise* let me search ya, and find out how hard I gotta work ya…I put my thing down flip it and reverse it.” Here, much like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Elliot is stating plainly what she wants from her lover. In a genre that was dominated by males demanding sex with women, Missy was taking control and giving orders.

In 2003, Kelis had a mega-hit “Milkshake” which echoed Ma Rainey’s “Black Bottom Blues.” In both, the local boys were marveling at the speaker’s body and sexuality:

My milkshake brings all the boys the yard  
And they’re like “it’s better than yours  
Damn right, it’s better than yours

Ma Rainey’s black bottom prompted “All the boys in the neighborhood” to “say your black bottom is really good.” Here, both artists are celebrating their sexual form and, rather than shunning the attention that it garners them, they revel in it.

In an article about Hip-hop and feminism Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris argue that these sexually explicit artists shifted the typical narrative in which women were simply instruments of pleasure. The songs, they argued, encouraged other women to explore and embrace their sexuality. They state that the rap songs were “coming up with language to talk about both the pleasure and pain of sex and sexuality outside a singular heteropatriarchal lens while also looking at the nexus of hierarchal structures that shape our sexual selves” (Cooper 724). Hip-hop (and other forms of music) had established and maintained the notion that sex was something intrinsically masculine (and heterosexual), with

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16 The elephant sound here is cleverly serving two purposes. It is censoring an inappropriate word for the male penis, which in this case—to Missy Elliot—resembles an elephant trunk.
women serving only to satisfy men. Artists like Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Missy Elliot, Nicki Minaj and others, subverted this idea by asserting their sexual desires and shifting the balance of power.

Finally, while it’s been nearly a century since Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were crooning about the love of women, lesbianism is still an issue struggling for acceptance in the Hip-hop community. The flamboyant display of heterosexuality has been embraced utterly, but the depiction of homosexuality is anathema. As Cooper, Durham, and Morris state: “There are often serious reprisals for people of color, and women of color in particular, when we freely express sexual agency and desire” (725). Many artists have met with controversy and shame for voicing these desires; thus it is nearly impossible to find contemporary, mainstream female Hip-hop artists rapping about lesbianism.

Nevertheless, Hip-hop has still, for the most part, followed in the tracks made by Smith and Rainey, and served as a liberating and subversive avenue for female artists to assert their sexuality. The industry, which remains predominantly male and (unfortunately) obstinately heterosexual, has produced a great number of powerful women who are no longer simply dancing, scantily-clad, in the background of music videos. Today, African American women in Hip-hop have managed to turn their sexuality into something powerful, beautiful, and lucrative. From Rainey and Smith to today, female blues and Hip-hop artists have again taken the sexual power dynamic and—to borrow a useful phrase from Missy Elliot—flipped it and reversed it.
Epilogue

Following the blues, jazz became the dominant genre in popular music in the early 20th century. The ubiquity of this free-flowing style in post World War I America prompted the 1920s to be dubbed “the jazz age.” Next in a long tradition of African American ingenuity, jazz provided another opportunity for black artists to express themselves, giving voice to their grievances, values, and culture. Much like its artistic predecessors, jazz offered insight into the life of African Americans. Douglas Henry Daniels encapsulates this significance when he states:

In recent years cultural historians have acknowledged the appropriateness of Afro-American music as a primary source of chronicling black history. Spirituals, shouts, and work songs express the nature and the contours of black culture in the nineteenth century, while gospel, blues, and jazz reflect Afro-American values, life, and history in the twentieth century. (Daniels 14)

There is a soundtrack to the history of African Americans, and jazz represents one of the most important and influential genres in that history. And while jazz is primarily instrumental, I felt compelled to include a brief digression in this disquisition on the oral tradition because of the ways in which it was subversive and laid the groundwork for subsequent forms of music.

Jazz emerged in an era of ragtime and show tunes. The popular numbers of the day were the “swing” songs played by big bands which were led primarily by white band leaders.17 Before jazz had been accepted by mainstream white America, it was exploding in black night clubs in major cities in the south and midwest. It was the music for the black working class.

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17 Some of the famous band leaders included Ben Bernie, Ted Lewis, and Paul Whiteman.
One scholar describes the ways in which the creation of jazz mirrored the atmosphere during the period:

“Jazz”…is the revolutionary music of the 20th century…It is the music that embodies and expresses the contradiction of the century, fundamentally rooted to the world's division between oppressor…and the liberation struggle of the oppressed…Its musical and stylistic innovations reflect the changes in the 20th-century life of the African American… [it] is the music of the emerging African American proletariat… (Ho 284)

Similarly to how spirituals emerged from the struggle of slavery and the blues from the difficulties of the post-reconstruction era, jazz was the product of class struggle, with many of the musicians working long hours during the day before playing at night.

The success of jazz was itself subversive because it rendered the white music of the period obsolete. Before long jazz overtook “swing,” and figures like Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller became household names. While these gentlemen presented amiable and anodyne personae to white America, together they did create one of the earliest jazz songs about race. In a 1929 song called “Black and Blue”—written by Waller and performed by Armstrong—the speaker openly laments the difficulties of being black in a white world:

All my life through, I’ve been so black and blue

Even the mouse ran from my house
They laugh at you, and scorn you too
What did I do to be so black and blue?

I'm white - inside - but that don't help my case
Cause I can't hide what is in my face

How would it end? Ain't got a friend
My only sin is in my skin
What did I do to be so black and blue?

To be black was to be subjected to ridicule by humans and animals alike. Less rebellious and more woeful, the song intones that everyone is “white inside,” with “white” being the standard of normalcy. The speaker believed that society viewed blackness as a sin. This song was a world away from the more jovial numbers which had garnered Waller and Armstrong acclaim.  

In the 1930s and 1940s jazz songs would more overtly address African American themes and social issues. According to Charles Hersch, jazz improvisation “from the beginning had political themes for African Americans…some composers took up racial themes. Duke Ellington… saw his music as a celebration of black culture” (Hersch 98). In songs like “Take the A Train” and “Drop me off in Harlem,” Ellington brought the predominantly black inner city to the mainstream, depicting it as an idyllic destination, preferable even to the South: “You can keep your Dixie/ there’s no one down in Dixie /who can take me 'way from my hot Harlem/ Harlem has those southern skies…” In 1935 he wrote a jazz opus entitled “A Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life” which went with a short film. In 1941 he wrote a song called “Jump for Joy” in which he tells his presumably black listeners to celebrate the fact that life has improved for African Americans since the days of slavery:

Fare thee well, land of cotton
Cotton lisle is out of style
Honey child
Jump for joy

18 See Armstrong’s 1920’s songs such as: “Heebie Jeebies,” “Potato Head Blues,” “Muggles,” or “West End Blues.” See also: Waller’s “Squeeze me,” “Ain’t misbehavin’,” and “Honeysuckle Rose.”

19 “Take the A Train” was written by African American composer William Strayhorn.
Don't you grieve, little Eve
All the hounds I do believe
Have been killed
Ain't ya thrilled?
Jump for joy

Decades before the turbulent uproar the 1960s, Duke Ellington was summoning elements of the blues and of spirituals, bringing them to jazz, and lyrically addressing racism in pre-Civil Rights America.

Perhaps the quintessential jazz song which dealt with race was “Strange Fruit.” The song was made famous by Billie Holliday in 1939 and was subsequently covered by a number of African American artists. The song paints a horrible image of a lynching in the South, metaphorically likening the hanging body of a black person with fruit:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

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20 “Strange Fruit” was written by a Russian Jewish immigrant named Abel Meeropol.

21 For a particularly rousing rendition, see Nina Simone’s version.
The lines oscillate between bucolic serenity and graphic, grotesque imagery. Never before had a song so unapologetically and descriptively tackled the subject of racially motivated cruelty.

As jazz grew in popularity, it was co-opted by white artists. Many former swing band leaders began composing original works and incorporating songs by artists like Duke Ellington into their repertoires. In response to this stylistic adoption, many black jazz artists decided to further change jazz as to distance themselves from the white artists who had so brazenly appropriated the genre. This prompted the creation of “bebop”—an iteration of jazz predicated on virtuosic musicianship. According to Hersch:

In the forties…many jazz musicians reacted against the cooptation of their music by mainstream white society by creating new styles that could not be so easily assimilated. The first such style became known as "bebop" (or “bop”)….the beboppers' rebellion was musical. They created jazz that was so difficult that whites could not easily copy it and so intense that one was unlikely to dance to it or even listen casually. (99)

Deliberately subversive and a far cry from the smoother melodies of early jazz, bebop was aggressive and demanding; it asserted the African American players of the period as musical juggernauts.

Jazz continued to evolve, splintering off into rhythm and blues, soul, and later funk. And regardless of the genre, the heart and soul of jazz—a desire to rebel against societal and musical norms—persisted. Its influence can even be seen in Hip-hop music. Many rap producers create beats by sampling and altering other styles, thereby inventing new sounds. Rapping uses the rhythm and vocal percussion of scatting. Freestyle cyphers are the lyrical version of the
improvisation found in jazz solos and jam sessions. And of course lyrically, Hip-hop has tackled many of the same themes as its predecessor.

The oral tradition of African American art is diverse, impressive, and inspiring. To move through the centuries, reading the stories and hearing the songs, is to observe the battle between greatest and most abhorrent aspects of humanity: perseverance, hope, and creativity in the face of hatred, brutality, and injustice. From a crucible of misery, a vibrant culture has been forged, which continues to be influential in America. Nobody knows what new traditions lay in the future, but so long as there is a power imbalance, African American art will be subversive and will continue to, in the immortal words of Public Enemy, “fight the power.”
Works Cited


