Rap's Collective Consciousness:

The Significance and Dynamics of Cypher in Hip Hop Culture

Catherine Porteous

<u>Abstract</u>

Cypher contributes significantly to the 'underground' hip hop scene in New York, as well as further afield; its rich musical and cultural roots can be traced directly from African oral traditions and cultural practices, and it reflects the epitome of hip hop culture by the way it advocates the principles of communication, knowledge and truth whilst enabling empowerment and fulfilment of its participants in a multi-faceted social dynamic. Cypher is unique in terms of its practice, as it requires little to no monetary or material input to take part, and is accessible to people from all backgrounds, but particularly to those from marginalised communities. It is an important musicological phenomenon which, seemingly unconsciously, contributes significantly towards the survival of hip hop; with so much discussion about the 'death' of hip hop, it is refreshing to have the assurance that certain practices within hip hop culture, such as cypher, are very much thriving and playing a large role in the survival, if not the existence, of hip hop culture as a whole.

While there have been significant studies in hip hop culture in the fields of sociology and English studies, there remain relatively few published texts that have been written from a musicological standpoint. This thesis contributes to hip hop scholarship in a pioneering sense, especially since cypher is a form of rap which in itself is rarely investigated. In terms of the theoretical contributions that are made in this study, it is fair to say that cypher has a strong musicological and social role in its practice as well as holding great prominence in African-American culture; it forms an intrinsic part of everyday life for many of its participants. Using a combination of scholarly research and fieldwork methodology, using the latter to be able to account for experiencing cypher first-hand, means that this thesis presents academic research whilst remaining true to the essence of hip hop by *keepin' it real.* With an emphasis on authenticity running throughout hip hop culture, the ability to reflect a genuine understanding of the role and dynamics of cypher has been of paramount importance in order to achieve credibility in the academic field as well as in the hip hop community. This thesis fully supports the notion that cypher has a highly significant role in hip hop culture, and, furthermore, that cypher reflects a team spirit that for some provides a form of cultural compensation and an alternative education; cypher also gives a voice to marginalised individuals and communities. This research marks cypher on the musicological map.

Contents

CYPHER AS A CREATIVE PRACTICE

WHAT CYPHER 'GIVES' IN TERMS OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

List of tracks on accompanying CD

Track	Title	Artist	Album
1	In The Beginning	K'naan	The Dusty Foot Philosopher, 2005, BMG.
2	Move, Daniel	The McIntosh County Shouters	Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia, 1984, Folkways Records.
3	When The Revolution Comes	The Last Poets	The Last Poets, 1970, various.
4	The Revolution Will Not Be Televised	Gil Scott-Heron	Pieces of a Man, 1971, Flying Dutchman/RCA.
5	Picture On the Wall	Natural Ites	Picture on the Wall, 1985, CSA.
6	Rebel Without A Pause	Public Enemy	It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, 1988, Def Jam.
7	The Message	Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five feat. Melle Mel & Duke Boottee	The Message, 1982, Sugar Hill Records.
8	Mississippi Goddam	Nina Simone	Anthology Disc 1, 2003, RCA.
9	Jazz Music	Gang Starr	No More Mr. Nice Guy, 1989, Wild Pitch.
10	What's Going On	Marvin Gaye	What's Going On, 1971, Tamla.
11	Redemption Song	Bob Marley & The Wailers	Uprising, 1980, Tuff Gong/Island.
12	Across Town	Rezhogs feat. Supaman	Lowlife, 2010, Rezhogs.
13	He Got Game	Public Enemy feat. Stephen Stills	He Got Game (Soundtrack), 1998, Def Jam.
14	Freestyle 3	KRS-One feat. Vice Verses & Big Zoo	Live from the Dub, Vol. 3, 2009, EODub.com.
15	Monster 4 x 4 Freestyle	EOW artists- Homeboy Sandman, Gaines (Sleepwalkas), Pack FM & Poison Pen	Live from the Dub, Vol. 4, 2010, EODub.com.
16	The Go In Theory	Pro-Payne & Big Zoo	Live from the Dub, Vol. 2, 2009, EODub.com.
17	Guerrilla Monsoon Rap	Talib Kweli (feat. Black Thought, Kanye West & Pharoahe Monch)	Quality, 2002, Rawkus Records.
18	One Remix	Immortal Technique feat. Akir	Revolutionary Vol. 2, 2003, Viper.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Will Edmondes, for being consistently enthusiastic about my research and for having faith in me. Thanks, Will, for your pearls of wisdom, time and encouragement.

I would also like to thank my parents for giving me the support to do this. Thanks, Dad, for all the cups of tea and thanks, Mam, for the help with the hawk-eye proofreading. I am very lucky to have you both.

I would like to thank my childhood piano teacher, Kay Smith, who is responsible for sparking my interest in music. Thanks, Kay, for giving me a love of music and for always encouraging me to be expressive and open-minded.

Thank you to my lovely friends and family who have always taken the trouble to ask me how it's going. I got there in the end and I have really appreciated your support, interest and kindness. Thanks to those in New York who made me feel so welcome and who took the time to respond to me either in person or by email and blog. Big up to the very talented EODub fam, and to rap gurus DMC and Chuck D for the emails at the start of my research. Also, thanks to the New York Geordies for being so friendly. Special shout out to my good friend, Tav Iniya, in the Boogie Down Bronx – I hope to see you soon.

Finally, there is one little lady who has been a great source of comfort and support – my beautiful 16 year old cat, who twice nearly didn't make it during my write-up. I am not sure if people normally acknowledge their pets but mine has been by my side for the duration of my research and write-up and I feel like she definitely deserves to be mentioned. I am delighted to say that she is purring and snoring next to me as I type. She has brought me much joy and happiness since 1995. I love you, Fizzy – best cat in the whole world. xxx

"Life is a cipher, <u>NOT</u> a battle! Let the energies flow...."

<div align="right">*Kenny Baraka, Rapper & Poet*
September 2011</div>

Introduction

Cypher is an important part of hip hop culture yet very little has been written on the subject, which, aside from my absolute admiration of the practice, is possibly the main reason for this thesis; I have often wondered why people haven't written about cypher before and feel that it would be a great shame for musicology to miss out on this phenomenon, and for the artform to continue to be a part of its participants' everyday lives, without it being fully appreciated for its musicological worth. I believe that cypher should be given the academic consideration and investigation it fully deserves and hope that this thesis contributes in some way. The cypher participants in New York (and further afield) display a wealth of talent in their freestyle rapping; the way they flow, their wittiness, their rhythmic agility, the way they narrate in a highly creative manner, and the way they work as a unit, are qualities that any musicologist would be glad to explore.

This research contributes to musicology in a unique way, due to the various methodological approaches utilised in conjunction with each other, which will be outlined below, and also due to where hip hop is currently placed in academia. While hip hop studies are generally well-established in current scholarship, and as demonstrated by the bibliography, there is a definite void in research around specific characteristics of hip hop culture. Certain aspects, such as cypher, must be fully explored in order to make a contribution to musicology, and ultimately, raise awareness in the academic field, by providing another dimension to existing scholarship, and highlighting that there is certainly scope for future musicological research around the many specific cultural and musical practices within hip hop culture, of which cypher is one of many. In expanding current academic research on rap, and by engaging more creatively in hip hop culture, scholars can contribute a great deal more to an evolving body of work around the many facets of hip hop culture, and highlight the importance of rap, both musically and socially, as a living archive of black vernacular expressivity. It is important for academia to encompass rap's cultural past as a vehicle to increase understanding in order to fully appreciate specific practices in hip hop culture, such as cypher.

It is useful, at this point, to discuss what is meant by 'cypher,' since it specifically comprises what is being investigated in this thesis. Firstly, cypher is a practice in hip hop culture which involves several rappers. In terms of semantics, the word itself also implies the physical set-up of participants, i.e. in a circle, and also of the motion, or physical direction in which the rap travels. Everyone in a cypher gets the chance to take part, and the length of individual participation usually reflects a specific number of bars, which all participants adhere to so that everyone has an equal turn. Cypher is supposed to be completely improvised and constantly moving, both in a physical and content sense; cypher takes place on the street in its raw and original form and youths can be seen forming circles in their neighbourhoods and outside clubs where participants can join and leave as they please, and the same applies to their audience (if any). A slightly more manipulated form of cypher is when cypher events are arranged in clubs at specific set times and venues, where there is a defined audience. Due to the level of skill required by a rapper to participate in a cypher, it is often used as part of a competitive round in a rap competition, such as at End of the Weak (EOW), as well as for non-competitive reasons; I will expand on EOW below. However, I would argue that *organised* cypher is equally as valid as the cypher that takes place on the streets, and for the purpose of this research, both forms will be considered; I will discuss this further in the proceeding chapters. As EOW (New York) MC and host, ProPayne commented,

> I think the cypher is at the cornerstone of Hip Hop. It is how MCs traditionally got together, separated the WEAK from the strong, formed crews, groups etc. and eventually went on to make songs and music together. At the core, cyphering is the root of MC'ing.[1]

It is also important to know that the Five Percent Nation is credited with coining the term 'cypher,' using it to describe a physical circle of people having discussions around supreme mathematics. The numeral '0' reflects the physical layout of a cypher but has additional loaded meanings in Islam, and in Five Percent culture. Religion, particularly Islam, plays a significant part in hip hop culture for certain rappers and Five Percenter culture will be discussed in more detail, in relation to cypher, in Chapter 4. As Miyakowa explores,

---

[1] Selected from responses on my blog at www.eodub.com/kitty

> Once Gods and Earths (Five Percenter men and women) have committed the number and their meanings to memory, they use the numbers to creatively "show and prove" facts and ideas.[2]

In terms of methodology, my fieldwork technique has been problematic to say the least, although the problem stems from emotion rather than any kind of physical barrier. In an endeavour to attach credibility to my research in the academic field, I have also felt a desire to remain true to hip hop, especially with so much emphasis on the authenticity of hip hop and the essence of 'keepin' it real' in my research. In undertaking a thesis on cypher, I have juxtaposed the academic and the ghetto – two polar opposites, from one extreme to another. However, when thinking about the word 'academia,' a way of defining it simply could be something like 'a scholarly community' – an expression, which having carried out this research, is something I regard to be synonymous with the world of rap (and something I wish to convey in this thesis). In an ideal world, Chuck D would read this thesis and tell me that it's cool; achieving recognition is a parallel in both spheres of academia and hip hop culture. With such a huge gap between these spheres, I have aimed to present an honest and significant account of what cypher means and have hopefully added something to both worlds; and in doing so, bridging the gap between them. As Watkins states,

> Hip hop scholars also struggle for recognition beyond the erudite confines of higher education... Additionally, the unease between scholars and hip hop is influenced by the incessant pressure in the movement to valorise all things street – street culture, street philosophers and street credibility.[3]

Predominantly, the field of research I have used for this thesis is NY-centric, focussing on EOW NY events and participants, for case study examples, from 2007 onwards. I chose NY since it is where hip hop was born and has continued to evolve since the late 1970s. I have also taken the opportunity to investigate cypher collectives from further afield in North America, via YouTube, for comparison, to provide a more holistic view on why cypher is a highly significant practice in hip hop culture. I have also used EOW Germany as a comparative example and to highlight that cypher is a global practice within hip hop culture, which mirrors the global spread of hip hop culture itself. The theoretical framework for this thesis is very much based on the findings of my fieldwork in combination with the prior

---

[2] Miyakawa, Felicia M., *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, (Indiana University Press: 2005), p. 25.
[3] Watkins, S. Craig, *Hip Hop Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), p. 246.

work of scholars in the field; I cannot say that one is a primary source and the other a secondary source, as I have come to use them in equal measures. I feel that this will enable me to draw fair conclusions on the significance of cypher, the questions I have set out to answer and give a just account of cypher, rap and reflect a broader understanding of how they fit into hip hop culture respectively.

In terms of fieldwork, I initially set out to take recordings of cypher in its indigenous setting, on the streets of New York, in its most raw and culturally significant form. At an early stage, I felt that the authenticity of the recordings were questionable, since the cypher participants were well aware of me making a recording, therefore, how could it be authentic? This method was useful in undertaking informal interviews, but again, I felt trapped between two polar opposites; I didn't want the cypher participants to feel like I was intruding and putting them under pressure. Luckily, this wasn't the case and I have been reassured by cypher participants that I have spoken to that everything that has been said has been genuine and a true representative of how cypher works and that I haven't at all been a burden. Conversely, for me, the most noteworthy research has been absorbing New York culture and there can never be a better form of research than first-hand experience. To go one step further, perhaps the only way this could be enhanced would be if I was taking part in cypher myself, as a freestyle rapper. While I would now have the advantage in a sense of knowing theoretically about cypher, it is unfortunate that I lack the skill and wit (and experience, talent and possibly the confidence) to actually get out there and spit. A freestyle rap is well beyond the reach of my capabilities and I fully admire anyone who is willing to give it a go. One of my primary concerns of engaging with the cypher community was that I wouldn't fit in with the stereotypical demographics of the rap community; I am a white female with a Geordie accent and it is fair to say that I probably don't look like someone who would typically be expected to turn up to a hip hop club. Even in my home town of Newcastle, I do not 'fit' in to the typical demographic of the hip hop scene, as described in Andy Bennett's research. Where my resonance with hip hop culture lies is, perhaps, as Bennett suggests,

Clearly, one could argue that white working class youth may indeed appropriate black music and aspects of black style in symbolic recognition of their felt affinity with African-American and other black ethnic minority groups.[4]

Bennett also defines the two distinct poles of thought, within the Newcastle hip hop scene and hypothesises that,

> At the centre of this scene a hardcore of hip hop enthusiasts share the belief that their intimate understanding of hip hop's essential 'blackness' as the key to its relevance for the white working class experience guarantees them a form of aesthetic supremacy over other local white hip hop fans who, according to this group have no such understanding of the genre and thus no authentic claim to the title 'hip hopper'. Conversely, a number of other local hip hop enthusiasts firmly reject the notion that hip hop can be understood only in terms of its African-American context and attempt to rework it as a platform for the expression of issues which relate more directly to the day to day experiences of white working class youth.[5]

For me, the issue of authenticity is of paramount importance when investigating participation in hip hop culture, through practices such as cypher, and this has also become a main area of discussion in Harrison's work, concluding that, 'there is no question that hip hop is experience differently within various social contexts.'[6] Harrison also asserts that Bennett's two polar concepts of participation in hip hop culture can be amalgamated, in that, 'acknowledgements of hip hop's essential blackness and non-essential inclusiveness can and do occur simultaneously.'[7]

Going back to how I fitted in, in the hip hop scene in New York, and at EOW, my concern was entirely diminished and I am glad to say that I have been embraced and welcomed by everyone I have approached and encountered thus far - perhaps this is the New York way, but I am more inclined to think that it is the hip hop way and will discuss this in further detail within my case study in section 4.4. The importance of ethnography and participation in hip hop culture is salient to this research, and as Bennett used localised examples to highlight the parallels of appeal to the white working class in Newcastle, I have used localised examples to highlight the demographic and social dynamics of participation in cypher in New York. Bennett's fieldwork technique reflects findings in Newcastle that I hope to be able to ascertain from cypher participation in New York, in that,

---

[4] Bennett, Andy, "Rappin' on the Tyne: white hip hop culture in Northeast England – an ethnographic study" in The Sociological Review, Volume 47, Issue 1, pp. 1 – 24, February 1999, p. 9.
[5] Ibid., p. 10.
[6] Harrison, Anthony Kwame, *Hip Hop Underground* (Philadephia: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 100.
[7] Ibid., p. 102.

> In listening to the 'freestylers,' regulars at Mac's Bar are receiving accounts of their *own* lives depicted via a form of quickfire verbal reference to locations and events, names and faces with which they are all intimately familiar. Again, this instance of hip hop activity is indicative of the close links which prefigure collective notions of authenticity, identity and local experience in hip hop.[8]

Cypher appeals to me in many ways; it is a highly refined intelligent and creative artform, combining music and poetry in the most difficult of situations, and by that, I mean it is completely improvised and therefore performed under pressure. I can see the aestheticism of this practice, despite its rawness, bluntness, complexity and it being a marginalised form of music. It is a subgenre of music in which I hold enormous faith for its cultural, social and musicological impact, its place in contemporary African-American society (and beyond), the way it can compensate communities and also in considering the development of popular music on the whole. Cypher is a contemporary form of social commentary which deals with issues from one extreme to another; the lyrics from an international radio cypher from EOW,[9] starts off with Big Zoo narrating to the listeners:

> Back to the lab at break-neck speed,
> In Paris they smoke more hash than weed,
> So it's difficult for me to get high at the time to say,
> To a chick, "parlez-vous français?"
> Let's dig a little deeper,
> Let's go 8 instead of 4,
> This how we dig deeper and deepen up the score,
> Matter of fact, I wanna hear Warlock next,
> So you heard English, let's hear 8 bars in French

These lyrics give an example of a social commentary of the situation of the cypher in real-time; Big Zoo is in the radio studio with a French rapper (Warlock) and informs the audience that this cypher is going to be multi-lingual. Big Zoo is also implying that there is common ground between cypher participants in that they have shared tales about smoking marijuana, and also that they have been smoking together, and then incorporates signifyin(g) into his very simple opening verse, by using a well-known French phrase. Another example of cypher lyrics, demonstrates the opposite extreme in terms of cypher

---

[8] Bennett, Andy, "Rappin' on the Tyne: white hip hop culture in Northeast England – an ethnographic study" in The Sociological Review, Volume 47, Issue 1, pp. 1 – 24, February 1999, p. 20.
[9] EOW International Radio Freestyle, 25th August 2007: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPXbzafMXZ0

content; often cypher lyrics contain politically charged statements and opinions, as well as narrating life experience, such as the following extracts from a participant in a cypher:[10]

> Yo, word up bro,
> Price of the snow, high or low?
> Heard it's $33 a kilo on the street, he copped a joke
> My nigga just came home, I can tell he got the glow
> Nigga shine like a star, you raw and get doped
>
> Gritty in my city,
> Youngest smoke like hippies,
> Put coke in the skinnies…
>
> No job but I still got work,
> No W4 but if your wrist writes, you might just double your score,
> Living the life to the De-ath
>
> I meditate, I'm diligent,
> I'm young, black, intelligent,
> Being broke is ignorant

These lyrics reflect the struggle of a young black male in New Jersey who wants to work but feels trapped by a lack of opportunities, drug culture and drug dealing in his local area. His lyrics convey his own life experiences and opinions on what it is like for him, on a day-to-day basis, to live in New Jersey. An example of rap lyrics being used as a social commentary can be heard in *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash.[11] This piece of rap from 1982 set the precedent for future rap records as it painted the picture of reality of life in the ghetto, with its opening lyrics:

> It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
> How I keep from going under
> It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
> How I keep from going under
>
> Broken glass everywhere
> People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care
> I can't take the smell, I 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 the baseball bat
> I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far

---

[10] Camden Cypher (New Jersey): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hrf21JWPHLQ at 3 minutes, 17 seconds from 24 year old participant, Seaweed.

[11] Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five, feat. Melle Mel & Duke Boottee, *The Message* (Sugar Hill Records, 1982) and on the accompanying CD, track 7.

'Cause a man with a tow-truck repossessed my car

In music, there is currently nothing else comparable to what cypher achieves in terms of its intricacy and the issues that are raised both literally in the cypher as well as metaphorically, from its practice. Certainly, to me, it makes sense to study cypher and it should be represented as an artform and musicological phenomenon in the academic field. I enjoy black music, became involved with academia having studied popular music and performance aesthetics as a musicology postgraduate and have now had the privilege to have studied cypher, which is something relatively new in terms of musicological scholarship. I hope my research will contribute significantly to the study of cypher, as well as making a contribution to hip hop scholarship in a broader sense, and that more research will be undertaken in this area in the future.

The aim of this thesis is to understand the significance of cypher and to give insight into its cultural past and the issues it overcomes, such as how it survives in a marginalised community and what are the specific conditions and circumstances that make the ingredients of cypher into a 'winning recipe.' The issues investigated in this thesis will contribute to understanding whether cypher could be considered as a freestanding element of hip hop, i.e. looking to see if cypher is really a contributor to hip hop culture that is worthy of 'element' status in itself. Thinking about the common debate about the 'death' of hip hop and looking at cypher in the context of establishing whether cypher enables hip hop culture to live, and whether cypher will play a prominent role in an overdue hip hop renaissance. Establishing cypher's current role in hip hop culture and ascertaining whether cypher is an oral tradition of tomorrow are core themes of this thesis. The sociological consequences and impact of cypher on communities are also dealt with in Chapters 4 and 5, and I have discussed how cypher can support communities and assist with community cohesion – highlighting a very unique aspect of cypher, and rap, as an artform.

In investigating rap in general, it seems that there are two distinct 'strands' of rap which are contrasting in terms of the lyrics, language and attitude on offer; 'message' rap is used to convey a message, either with personal meaning, such as autobiographical details and/or the narration of a personal experience, and 'ego' rap is used to praise oneself by directly extolling one's own attributes, as well as demeaning others. Both strands have been

accounted for in cypher, which is quite unique as usually rap would take only one of the routes in its delivery. Therefore, cypher can be regarded as all-encompassing in terms of its content – something to expand in Chapter 3. For the purpose of this study, I have generalised slightly on the different strands of rap, which still fall into two main categories and which will be explained in the proceeding glossary.

To locate where I stand with regards to hip hop culture and to add a bit of context to my research, I have considered my position from several perspectives and will aim to answer several questions here, such as: 'What does hip hop mean to me?', 'How will my research contribute to the field?', and, 'Why is cypher so important to me?'. I will start at the beginning; though the information in this introduction isn't directly related to my theoretical approach, it has certainly contributed to the route I have taken, which in turn has shaped my position in the field of musicology. Originally, I was a classically trained musician and I am certain that because of this, I can fully appreciate the musical skill required and the levels of musicianship that make for quality rap music; I don't think one necessarily has to be a classical musician to appreciate hip hop, but it certainly helps in paying attention to detail and has provided a good grounding in skills in music analysis. From a young age, I developed a love for Nina Simone and went on to study Black Music and The Roots of Hip Hop at University, which is probably around the time when my interest was sparked on the musicological side of hip hop culture and rap. Prior to this, at age 15, I got a job in an independent record shop in Newcastle, selling records every week to DJs and hip hop aficionados. These people always seemed to be 'cooler' than the other customers and had a genuine love and passion for hip hop, and for me, this established my sense of intrigue about hip hop culture and I knew that it was something special. My Saturday hip hop customers at the record shop wore Fubu tracksuits and seemed to devote their entire weekends to visiting the shop in the hope that they could get their hands on Monday's new releases a couple of days early (which they did, of course), and I admired their dedication to buying records. They were really friendly customers as well, and could talk forever about anything to do with mixing, scratching and rap. However, it was at the point of studying Black Music at university when I became fully aware that hip hop was much more than a musical genre and was able to appreciate that hip hop was an entire culture and something that I would like to study further, from a musicological point of view.

I have been fascinated with hip hop for many years now and I would say that seeing a video of cypher at university really made me think that there was far more to this seemingly everyday practice from the streets of New York. From then on, I had to learn more about hip hop, rap and cypher and my only regret is that I seemed to miss out on hip hop, not only due to my age, with the 'golden age' of hip hop taking place before my time, but because I didn't fully take advantage of my situation at the record shop where I could have learned more from the customers and taken more time to engage with hip hop. As a result, I feel that I may have immersed myself into a culture a little late in life – something which I have possibly over-compensated for (if that's at all possible) in the last few years.

Chapter 1 investigates the origins of cypher and focuses on how rap fits into hip hop culture in a broader sense. It provides a general overview of hip hop's history and summarises the foundations of hip hop culture. As Halifu Osumare points out, 'nowhere has the relationship between art and life been more dramatized than in hip-hop culture.'[12] Small's theories are core to this chapter and the content sets to support them. I have also been mindful of Osumare's theory that,

> The dance and music of the people, which calls forth a life-affirming force in the African sense, was the primary method by which enslaved African peoples negotiated and commented upon their condition. This expressive approach became nuclear to their survival,[13]

which will be discussed in more detail within the Chapter's sections on the significance of rhythm and diaspora respectively, in rap music. Contrary to Tricia Rose's theory that hip hop should be considered as a 'second orality' rather than an evolution from African culture, I argue that rap's survival is still dependent on its very origins; it would be too fine a line to draw between a first and second orality, and rap is in a continuous state of development.

Chapter 1 also tackles specifically musical issues surrounding cypher, although careful consideration will be given to Keyes' assumption that,

> the streets nurture, shape, and embody the hip-hop music aesthetic, creating a genre distinct from other forms of black popular music that evolved after World War II.[14]

---

[12] Osumare, Halifu, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 13.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 122.

I intend to take this a step further and prove, with examples, that the hip hop music aesthetic also influences, and takes influence from, the 'other forms' of black popular music. Rhythm is one of the main themes here and I have expanded greatly on Small's theory of a 'common beat' within all African music. Here, I have looked at rhythm's role in cypher and its role in hip hop culture, in different forms, for the DJ, and in sampling respectively. I intend to present a genealogy of cypher, on a black music family tree idea of 'genre mapping'. The Chapter will build on discussion in terms of looking at cypher's musical ancestry, with more detail on the musical effects of diaspora on hip hop culture and rap. I will also look at the concept of rhythm as a parallel to consciousness, with both highlighting a common struggle, movement, and understanding of the participants of hip hop culture.

Going back to Keyes' theory above, which will be put into further context in Chapter 1, where I can directly support that,

> the conceptual base of rap music is rooted in a street style. An artist's use of speech, characters, attitude, and crews asserts that the rapper is down with the street.[15]

Chapter 3 also looks at words and language of cypher, and strictly speaking, this chapter provides significant examples of the kind of lyrics in rap music and how they compare to rap music in general. Analyses of lyrics in other forms of black music, such as blues and soul lyrics, will be provided in order to present a comparison of words in black contemporary culture. It is also important to look at what determines 'success' in cypher lyrics and further discussion on signifyin(g) will be presented, linking to previous discussion in Chapter 1.

The theme of marginalisation weaves Chapter 1 into Chapter 2. In addition, I would concur that rap, 'even as it remains a global music, it is firmly rooted in the local and the temporal; it is music about 'where I'm from.'[16] I argue that this quality is what makes rap so suited to disseminating a message; it is human nature to trust someone 'the same as you' – a powerful trait in politics. Cheryl Keyes' general theory that rap is a means of addressing the political and economic unease felt by young black youths while reflecting pride and

---

[15] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 125.

[16] Potter, Russell, *Spectacular Vernaculars* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 27.

cultural values is critical to this chapter. As Nelson George points out, 'for them [rappers], hip-hop is not a record, a concert, a style of dress or a slang phrase. It is the constancy of their lives.'[17]

Going back to Keyes' theory above, which will be put into further context in Chapter 1, where I can directly support that,

> the conceptual base of rap music is rooted in a street style. An artist's use of speech, characters, attitude, and crews asserts that the rapper is down with the street.[18]

Chapter 3 also looks at words and language of cypher, and strictly speaking, this chapter provides significant examples of the kind of lyrics in rap music and how they compare to rap music in general. Analyses of lyrics in other forms of black music, such as blues and soul lyrics, will be provided in order to present a comparison of words in black contemporary culture. It is also important to look at what determines 'success' in cypher lyrics and further discussion on signifyin(g) will be presented, linking to previous discussion in Chapter 1.

Looking at cypher as a creative practice is the main theme of Chapter 4 and will demonstrate the theory of George Lipsitz in terms of its performance aesthetics in that,

> hip hop culture brings to a world audience the core values of music.[.] It blends music and life into an integrated totality, uniting performers, dancers, and listeners in a collaborative endeavour.[19]

Also, in general, it is important to consider in a broader sense the way Lipsitz suggests that it is the ethnic difference in popular music which allows marginalised communities to almost reinforce that difference, not always building positive social change. The key theme of Chapter 4 is around team spirit and how cypher actually contributes in creating a community, in a very positive sense, and how participation brings people together. Here, I will write about my own experiences at EOW New York.

Chapter 5 draws on primarily sociological theories; in this chapter, I will deal with the consequences of hip hop culture for communities and highlight the impact that cypher has on individuals and communities respectively, in a social sense. I will be considering cypher in terms of it being a global phenomenon, as well as the large emphasis it places on the local and immediate community. Ultimately, I wish to demonstrate that hip hop culture provides

---

[17] George, Nelson, "Hip Hop's Founding Fathers Speak the Truth" *That's the Joint* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[18] Ibid., p. 125.
[19] Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verso, 1994), p. 36.

cultural compensation to communities and is something that comes out of nothing, which are both themes inspired by Chuck D.[20] As Chuck D wrote on his blog, the Terrordome,

> By the time I signed with Rick Rubin and Russell Simmon at DEF JAM in 1986, Hank Shocklee, Bill Stephney and I KNEW that a rap song had the ability to change the earth for the better, not unlike the impact of music by Curtis MAYFIELD, JAMES BROWN, NINA SIMONE, THE CLASH and PETE SEEGER. We didn't create this particular style, we just totally believed in it. WE believed that beyond the streets lies the reason for how and why the streets are influenced, and we knew this was not always a good influence. For example, we know that today, "beyond the streets," especially for many youth of color, lie the ever-waiting, booming businesses of jail and death. We wanted to expose masses of youth, especially, to the good and to the peril of what was expected of them. This is why we started Public Enemy.[21]

Throughout this thesis, I am to convey how *cypher* has the ability to change the lives of its participants for the better. It is also worth pointing out Chuck D's connection to the Five Percent Nation, as Miyakawa asserts that

> Public Enemy, seimal for so many reasons, is largely responsible for bringing the Nation of Islam and Louis Farrakhan to the attention of American youth. Chuck D has made no mystery of his mission: "I try to bring the youth into a level where they'll be interested to even begin to get into what the minister's speaking and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, and the reason for self sufficiency in America, and the curiosity to learn more about themselves."[22]

I have used rap lyrics below the titles of each chapter, as points of interest, and I have selected some appropriate lyrics to represent the topic and to convey its content. I have tried to only use lyrics from New York rappers but for a couple of chapters, this isn't the case and I have used lyrics solely for their relevant content. I have made specific references to musical examples to listen to, which provide important detail to support my theoretical framework. I have also provided a soundtrack to this thesis which contains music that's complementary to the core discussions and specific tracks are referred to throughout. Finally, I should point out that I have been influenced by hip hop culture in many ways and the conclusions in this thesis also share similar viewpoints to many cypher participants.

---

[20] As mentioned in section 5.2, hip hop as 'Cultural Compensation' was discussed by Chuck D of Public Enemy in the 2007 BBC Documentary 'Once Upon A Time in New York'. Chuck D believes that hip hop exists in response to cultural deprivation. http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/newyork/sleevenotes/

[21] Chuck D's blog 'Songs that mean Something' 1st March 2012, http://www.publicenemy.com/terrordome/166/songs-that-mean-something.html

[22] Miyakawa, Felicia M., *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission*, (Indiana University Press: 2005), p. 21.

Glossary of Terms

Although a glossary is usually found at the end of a piece of work, this glossary should be thought of as a prelude to the research, in order to put things into context at the very beginning and assist in communicating with a wider audience. The meanings of these terms are my attempt to define them in the way I have come to understand them and are of my own opinion entirely.

Afrocentric   a cultural term meaning that something can be pinpointed as to having African roots and/or African influence on it, i.e. African culture, or essence, is at its core.

Battle   a freestyle rap battle usually takes place between two rappers and the main goal is to insult and outwit your opponent in a completely improvised manner; there is no physical violence condoned despite body-language indicating that a physical fight is brewing. The aim is to 'kill' your opponent with words only and the winner is the rapper who has the sharpest, wittiest and hard-hitting rap. Also known as an MC battle, or battle rap.

Beatboxing   percussive noises made by a person using only their mouth; noises can also develop to sound like entire musical accompaniment but only the voice is used.

Braggadocio   self-praising in a rap, similar to the word 'bragging'; this could be thought of as 'ego' rap; i.e. putting oneself above another and not necessarily always truthful. The self-praise can be exaggerated (or untrue) in order to seem more superior, and consequently, win the battle over the less-superior opponent.

Cypher   a freestyle rap that takes place among several rappers; the word also implies the motion in which the rap takes i.e. in a circle, moving around the participants with each person getting an equal turn. The object of a cypher is that the rap is completely improvised, free-flowing and constantly moving. The term also has religious connotations attached, due to its use as

describing a physical circle of people, like the numeral '0,' used by the Five Percent Nation, when discussing supreme mathematics.

Dirty Dozens a bit like a battle but taking it in turns to insult your opponent, or more accurately, insult your opponent's mother. The most common way to start an insult would be "yo' momma is so fat..." or "yo' momma is so stupid..." and then ends with an insult which is extremely exaggerated and can be highly entertaining to an audience; the 'dozens' are completely improvised. An example: "Yo' momma's so fat, I had to take a train and two busses just to get on her good side." Also known as 'the dozens.'

DJ originally a shortened version of 'Disc Jockey' which has gone on to have a more complex meaning; a DJ is the person who plays records with great skill, often mixing and scratching to show off their skills as well as selecting and providing musical entertainment for a crowd in a setting, such as in a nightclub, and/or providing the accompaniment to an MC or group of rappers. The DJ is considered to be one of the Elements of Hip Hop. Also 'deejay'.

Elements of Hip Hop the 'elements' contribute to making hip hop an entire culture, rather than a genre of music. The four elements generally regarded as making hip hop are the B-Boy (breakdancing), MC, DJ and Graffiti.

End of The Weak a weekly hip hop event that takes place on a Sunday night at Club Pyramid in New York; colloquially known as 'E-O-Dub'. End of The Weak gives MCs the opportunity to showcase their talent as well as competing in events such as the MC Challenge, containing battles and cyphers; it has become a world-wide event with sister events taking place in the UK, Brazil, Germany, France and Argentina. Unofficially, cypher takes place outside the club. Shortened to EOW in this thesis.

Freestyle a wholly improvised rap; often fast-paced and made in the spur of the moment.

Hip Hop	an afrocentric culture, very much based on music and philosophy, and considered to be a way of life by many. Hip Hop is popular with the youths of urban society and typically associated with teenagers from an African-American or ethnic minority background. Influenced by several diasporas, it is made up of 'elements' and there is a very fine line between the mainstream and the underground.
MC	originally a shortened form of 'Master of Ceremonies' and also commonly written as 'emcee'; it can be used in different contexts e.g. the MC of an event would introduce the DJ and guests, the MC is also, fundamentally, a rapper in general.
Rap	the collection of rhyming words which come out of the MC's mouth, encompassing wit, metaphor and reflecting musical skill due to the complex rhythmic patterns formed by these words, delivered either a capella, or with accompaniment by a DJ, beatboxer or musical ensemble. Also used to categorise a genre of music.
Sampling	taking a fragment, or fragments, of music and collating them in a new way to create a new piece of music; often, the original record from which the sample was taken can still be recognised but sometimes the samples are so short that this is no longer possible. Sampling is like recycling music or taking the best bits to be used again; a device to pay respect to cultural and musical past, influences and ancestry.
Signifyin(g)	an extremely subtle form of outwitting; regarded as an afrocentric, indirect means of insulting or showing more intelligence than someone in a sly way.
Spit	a colloquial expression meaning 'to rap'; you spit lyrics, you spit bars.
Mainstream	something that's commercially viable due to being popular with the vast majority of people; in terms of hip hop, mainstream artists are solely interested in making money, at any cost, and disregard the essence of hip hop; music without soul.

Underground the opposite to the mainstream, staying true to its roots; in terms of hip hop, the underground keeps the essence of hip hop alive by not conforming under the pressure to become mainstream; music that has soul.

CHAPTER 1

AN OVERVIEW OF HIP HOP'S HISTORY: SUMMARISING THE FOUNDATIONS OF A CULTURE

"In the beginning, there was a hum from a poet whose pulse fell DRUM, DRUM, DRUM!"

> The lyrics above come from the opening line of 'In the Beginning' from K'naan's debut album, *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* (BMG, 2005). This is apt for an opening chapter in a thesis on hip hop; K'naan encapsulates everything about the essence of hip hop – he tells a story of his personal experiences of the Somali Civil War and his migration as an asylum seeker to Canada as a teenager. His lyrics take you on a journey of harsh truths and his music reflects the influence of many different genres, which one could expect from his cultural influences and the 'diasporic' life he has lived. It is also important to note that the rhythms and musical features in this recording clearly hark back to K'naan's experience of Africa. This chapter will cover the salient cultural contexts that have directly and indirectly contributed to the creation and evolution of hip hop as a culture, and will set the scene for further discussion in later chapters, which focus on specific ethnographic characteristics that have shaped rap as a genre. These characteristics continue to feature as a main characteristic in some form, whether in a musical or sociological context, in all rap music. *In the Beginning* can be heard on the accompanying CD, track 1.

How did it all begin?

Hip hop is a culture that has evolved from many sources; rap is a kind of music which is more culturally rich than any other genre in terms of its conception, audience and impact on African-American popular culture. It is also extremely rich in its 'musical ethnicity' with a wealth of culturally diverse fusions of musical characteristics and hybrids of genres which contribute to the phenomenon that is recognised as rap today. Hip hop is the fruit of diverse anthropological and musical parentage. Rap is the descendant of many musical genres that evolved individually and developed over centuries, crossed over continents and met in a huge melting pot containing a variety of ingredients, each with its own musical and cultural significance.

In its immediate past, hip hop stems from jazz, blues, soul, funk and disco. Looking further into its origins, we can see it has a direct ancestor in African chants and slave music; it has also been shaped through several musical diasporas which have taken place due to anthropological factors such as the slave trade, wars and mass migration. These factors have shifted people and their respective cultures considerably in the last three hundred years which has resulted in the meeting of different cultures, creating a fusion in musical styles, philosophies, ideas, cultures and identities.

The characteristics of rap that echo its cultural past

Looking specifically at rap, we can see the role of the MC is to provide narration. Rap is its own social commentary which can go from one extreme to another: from the state of political affairs to what is currently on special offer in the local store. Humour, satire, misery, bitterness, offensiveness and truthfulness are demonstrated through rap of varying levels on a large scale, but the narrative element in the lyrics is a constant. The MC is always an 'informer' and because of this, we can see that the African griot[23] has had an influence on the way rap has developed as an oral tradition. Also, the African griot plays a significant part in the exposition of cypher. Traditionally, the griot would tell stories that involved a conflict and the winner would be the character that used wit, rather than physical violence, to defeat any opponents. Also, from an African influence is the 'ring shout,' which is both a musical facet and a sociological characteristic of cypher because it is similar to the rhythmic pattern and cyclic motion of a cypher as well as being comparable in the actual performance context of a cypher. The performance reflects a team spirit within a circle with participants displaying similar behaviour, expressiveness and body language. Cypher, therefore, is connected to forms of African religious practice, through its physical and social parallels with ring shout, as Stuckey defines:

> ...the ring shout, which often was but one aspect, however important, of multifaceted African religious observance. The ring shout was the main context in which Africans recognized values common to them. Those values were remarkable because, while of ancient African provenance, they were fertile seed for the bloom of new forms.[24]

Building on this, Floyd later argues that the ring shout 'remained singular to the development of all forms of black music,'[25] which is one of the core principles I have used in basing my research.

The griot directly influenced Jamaican 'toasting' which again is used by an informant, or narrator, to relay a story and can also be improvised, to respond to a situation in the moment. In a broader sense, toasting is a direct ancestor of the modern-day rap. It can be

---

[23] A Griot is an African storyteller and community figure, further detail is provided in section 1.4.

[24] Stuckey, Sterling, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 16.

[25] Floyd Jr., Samuel A., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 53.

heard through many Jamaican music genres such as reggae and dub. Originally, the toasting came as a vocal over music which often reflected traces of braggadocio, chants and rhymes.

Another African influence is evident in rap; the influence of the dirty dozens[26] on freestyle battles is often very obvious and this is also a strong feature in cypher. The 'dozens' is an artform which defuses aggression without any physical violence and is descended from West African oral traditions. There are many parallels between the dirty dozens and cypher; most obviously, these parallels are seen in striving to achieve the goal of being the wittiest, and possibly comical, whilst not holding back in terms of insults. It is encouraged to be as offensive as possible and obnoxious towards the opponent(s). Both the dirty dozens and cypher are informally judged, usually by the audience, which can be noted by the responses that are provoked. Both forms intend to outwit the opponent with insults and generally gain respect from other participants and audience and provide amusement, or entertainment, in doing so.

Finally, signifyin(g) is a means of indirectly demeaning someone, by modifying the meanings and implications that old words often carry. Using the African mythical figure of the Signifying Monkey, who outwits the Lion, to illustrate a definition of the practice of signifyin(g), Gates states that '[the Signifying Monkey] serves at the figure-of-figures, as the trope in which are encoded several other peculiarly black rhetical tropes.'[27] Rap's content can be extremely direct and to-the-point, but with cypher, the subtlety of sarcasm and the use of signifyin(g) as a higher form of wit is appreciated much more. Telling someone what you really think of them is a talent which is admired in cypher, and signifyin(g) is a sophisticated way of doing this – it is also likely to attract more respect from peers and audience members if it can be done in this way. Also, rap can be compared to old slavery work-type songs which often carry examples of signifyin(g); both forms of music resonate with events and musical features of their respective pasts. The call and response characteristic that is displayed in many black traditions such as religious services and in public speaking is also mirrored in most genres of black music, such as gospel, blues and rap. Floyd encapsulates the meaning of signifyin(g), in that

---

[26] See Glossary for a definition of the 'dozens.'
[27] Gates, Henry L., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. Xxi.

Signifyin(g) is figurative, implicative speech; it is a complex rhetorical device that requires the possession and application of appropriate modes of interpretation and understanding on the part of listeners (something the lion did not possess). Signifyin(g) is an art in itself, to which anyone who has the ability has the right – but a right that must be earned through context and conquest.[28]

This definition is highly significant when considering cypher and I will elaborate on the practices of ring shout, griotism, the dozens and signifyin(g) in this Chapter.

Cypher's Musical Ancestry

Cypher is comparable to most forms of Western music in that it utilises musical forms and structures such as theme and variations, exposition, development and recapitulation, verse, bridge, chorus, and call and response. All participants have an equal opportunity to shine in cypher as everyone adheres to 'spitting' a number of bars which is usually set before the cypher begins. However, in practice, this process is far less formal and the number of bars is casually decided upon when the participants get together and the cyclical motion of the process begins, and usually even less formally than that. With MC battles, the number of bars is always set, as the situation is far more competitive than the comparably flexible cypher. Quite often, cypher is reminiscent of the classical theme and variations; although cypher is fully improvised, using variations on material that has already been unveiled in the cypher is a common device, and this is used to prove that the material performed is unprepared, and is therefore a direct response to the material that has just been performed by a fellow participant. Issues and topics that were raised previously in the cypher are built upon and participants engage with and respond to the material that has been offered to the cypher, in turn, provoking more response in the cypher and keeping the cyclical motion in progress. The sense of movement and natural progression is intrinsic to cypher and the sense of continuous development is always apparent.

Cypher is usually witnessed 'on-the-street', *a cappella*, with absolutely no kind of technological or supporting musical accompaniment. The most common examples of cypher accompaniment take the form of beatboxing by the other participants. While one participant freestyles, one or two others in the cypher might take control of providing a beat with human beatboxing techniques, clapping, foot stamping and other vocal noises and effects. When a person finishes their stint at cypher they can then join in with

[28] Floyd Jr., Samuel A., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 54.

accompaniment. Again, this is a totally improvised musical form which works in conjunction with the lyrics that form from the cypher, and also contributes to keeping up the pace, movement and direction of the cypher. At a live hip hop event, the role of providing accompaniment is usually undertaken by a DJ who will take control of the speed and beat of the cypher by using sampled beats and effects to pace the rapper. Sometimes, this can make things more interesting when in the situation of a freestyle or MC competition, as the DJ will make it more challenging by altering the tempo of the beats sporadically, so the freestyler has to respond to that by changing their tempo, thus proving the versatility of the performer; not only can they respond lyrically in their improvisation, but they are also facing the challenge of having no control over the pace of their flow. This characteristic also adds to the variation for the audience and is another element of cypher that affects the aesthetics of performance (and reception) in some way. It is important to note that in rap's immediate past, it was the beat poets such as Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets in the early 1970s who set the scene for rap's birth. Politically charged and reflecting opinion on oppression and struggle were the main themes of poetic content of these artists. 'When the Revolution Comes' by the Last Poets and 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' by Gil Scott-Heron can be heard on the accompanying CD, tracks 3 and 4 respectively.

Aims of this chapter

This chapter sets out to examine the key branches of the hip hop family tree that have contributed to the evolution of rap, and more specifically, the cultural and ethnological features that have directly contributed to the creation of cypher and how traits of old are directly mapped on to a forward-thinking practice. The theories of George Lipsitz and Christopher Small are fundamental in understanding the significance of the past, and the social and musical impact that has occurred as a direct outcome of diaspora. This chapter will set out the key theories and some significant events from the past that are central to understanding the significance of cypher in hip hop culture and without regurgitating what has already been covered in previous ethnomusicological scholarship. As Keyes summarises succinctly

> Though the roots of rap music reside in the African bardic traditions... ...drastic social, political, economic and musical changes external to and internal to black urban communities, particularly in New York City, gave rise to rappin [sic] as a musical genre

during the early 1970s. Rap music emerged, then, as an expressive tool through which its creators responded creatively to changes in their environment.[29]

I will also explore the theory that rhythm in cypher is not just a physical musical characteristic and it has the function of being Small's 'common beat' in the context of consciousness, in that cypher's rhythm, and motion, highlight a common struggle or cultural understanding amongst its many diverse, but mainly marginalised to some extent, participants. Rhythm is the deeply-rooted heartbeat of cypher.

1.1   The History of Hip Hop

Any form of music can be interpreted as a channel of communication, whether this stems from the inexplicable emotional responses that are provoked by sound, or perhaps more literally, by interpreting the meaning of 'communication' thus taking lyrics into account, and considering their purpose as narration. Music is something you feel, not something that is simply heard. In comparison to all other musical styles which have evolved over the last few centuries, rap is possibly the most communicative genre of them all, and invokes consciousness on many levels. Rap exposes and explores a variety of issues that would otherwise be considered difficult to talk about and therefore provides a platform for increasing awareness and engaging those who could be considered to be marginalised in society to varying degrees. Therefore, it is of academic significance to examine the roots of this particular facet of the genre that have enabled it to develop from specific cultural practices. In turn, the consciousness aspect has grown into a regular feature of rap and remains a cornerstone in defining rap's uniqueness.

As chapter 4 will outline in greater detail, there are many parallels between rap and other genres of music, such as folk and punk, and this stems from the way in which a musical genre is central to an entire subculture, impacting on the behaviour, fashion and art that go hand-in-hand with the added interests of their respective audiences or participants. To a great extent, this can cause an ambiguity for the 'outsiders' looking in on a genre and can further contribute to the associated bad reputation that these genres, and subcultures, tend to acquire; primarily, this can be attributed to the general ignorance and a lack of understanding surrounding a

---

[29] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 38.

subculture that is totally unique and steeped in rich history. In hip hop's defence, I can argue that the criminal and misogynist lifestyle that is so often displayed in mainstream rap, which is seen to be celebrated and something to be proud of, earns rap a bad press. But it is important to be clear that this is not necessarily a characteristic of *real* hip hop culture that strives for peace, truth and communication. In order to save this discussion for a more appropriate chapter, the focus here will deal with the issue in hand, which is to consider hip hop's history and what it is specifically, that has played a role in the development of hip hop and rap as a culture and as a musical genre respectively. In turn, this can be investigated further in order to ascertain what *is* cypher and how it exists as a phenomenal modern-day social and musical practice, deeply rooted in black culture, and ingrained, especially, with black music's vibrant past.

In terms of genre genetics, rap has inherited its genes from several cultures, although largely derives from African traditions, in both a social and musical context. Via diaspora and through various stages of cultural evolution, rap has also gained characteristics from other cultures and traditions, including the Caribbean, Latin America and beyond. Because of this, rap could be thought of as being a supercentre in terms of genre status, in that it has picked up traits and modified others on its evolution and has even utilised certain characteristics, including some that could be perceived as those with negative consequences, to its advantage. By this, meaning the negativity from marginalisation and oppression has been turned around and adapted to play to rap's advantage, to 'develop a negative into a positive picture,'[30] using something that can only be described as abhorrent and using it as a subject for material in rap, for dissemination, therefore turning it into a positive. In doing so, this process of 'making the best of what you have' has determined the entire idiom of hip hop culture. As Small points out, in terms of African culture,

> [That] the continent of Africa is the home of one of the great civilizations of the human race there can be no doubt; and at the heart of that civilization lie music and dance. Nowhere else is the affirmation and the celebration of identity and of right social relationships through music and dance more highly cultivated. Not only tribes and peoples, but religious cults, occupational

---

[30] Lyrics from Everything is Everything, Lauryn Hill (Ruffhouse, 1999), also mentioned in Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 139.

groups, age groups and the two sexes, all enact in music and dance those rituals which are the embodiment of selfhood, and an acting-out of those myths which shape and give meaning to life.[31]

This is something that certainly harks true in hip hop culture; there is so much focus on the social element of coming together, having a common purpose and projecting identity in hip hop culture and this is often achieved through the communicative nature of rap, and more specifically, can be demonstrated through the participation in cypher. Small further develops this theory by addressing the issue around individual identity in that

> Music and dance give the individual his or her previous sense of uniqueness, of worth, of place in the scheme of things, and mediate relationships, teach responsibilities and show opportunities. That the human values embodied in the great performance art are wide (one is tempted to say, universal) in their appeal is shown not only in the way in which the art proved its value in the social and psychological, as well as the sheer physical, survival or those Africans, and their descendants, who were enslaved in the New World, but also in the way in which it has gone out to become the dominant music and dance in the west in our time.[32]

One could argue that, in terms of cypher, the key word Small has utilised in this assertion is 'survival'. As well as being a representative of survival in musical terms, with its references to age-old African musical traditions, rap is also a social marker in representing the survival of African culture, despite the added ingredients from other cultures, as a result of diasporas. Rap is a genre with predominantly African roots; it symbolises the survival of its musical and cultural ancestry.

Why is New York central to hip hop culture?

New York has always been the epicentre of hip hop culture and it is important to consider why this is and how it came to be. Hip hop's conception may have been a long time in the making but New York certainly provided an ideal birth place for the culture – a city built on multiple diasporas and with the right ingredients of people, cultural fusions, technological development, a sense of 'home' for the vast numbers of uprooted peoples and the bringing-together of a history so vast and ethnically diverse that the ethnological conditions were right for hip hop to

---

[31] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 29.
[32] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 29.

flourish; all of these chance ingredients have enabled hip hop culture to be nurtured and to develop. Despite hip hop's now global appeal, it has always had its immediate roots in New York. This gives the culture, and therefore the genre of rap, its own place, association of belonging and contributes to its identity which prides itself on living in the local, with a grass-roots ethos. Therefore, although cypher can be witnessed taking place on the streets all over the world, its home is New York, *because* this is the home of hip hop, and the place where it started.

Hip hop's history is absolutely central to the culture and although it could be said that this is true of all cultures, the defining difference is that hip hop consistently harks back to the past, celebrates its roots and constantly pays homage to its ancestry; this is quite a distinctive attribute for a musical genre. In terms of historical events or eras that have directly contributed to hip hop's existence, one of the most significant influences would be the Civil Rights Movement from the late 1950s onwards. Keyes cements this theory further in investigating the impact of movement of Africans to their new home in the Americas,

> In the New World, Africans were enslaved and forced to learn a culture and language different from their own. In the face of this alien context, blacks transformed the new culture and language of the Western world through an African prism. The way in which they modified, reshaped, and transformed African systems of thought resonates in contemporary culture.[33]

In other parts of America, and beyond, various other historical events have had an impact on hip hop culture, for example, the Los Angeles Riots in 1992 has influenced Westside rap enormously and has continued to feature heavily as a salient theme in other sources of media from popular culture. 'Westside' is a colloquial term used in hip hop culture to refer to rap from the Western Coast of the USA, predominantly from California,[34] and is frequently used as a term amongst participants in hip hop culture. Hip hop has been shaped from a series of events that have occurred one after the other; its evolution has been continuous and its conception is therefore impossible to pinpoint due to events taking place in turn, but

---

[33] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 21.

[34] Similarly, the term 'Eastside' indicates rap from the Eastern Coast of the USA, and, specifically, is usually used to label rap from the New York boroughs.

it is certainly fair to say that hip hop culture was conceived in Africa. As Small summarises:

> When Africans and Europeans encountered one another in the Americas, the first as slaves and the second either as masters or despised underdogs, in many cases scarcely better off than the slaves, these musical practices underwent profound modification on both sides to give us that kind of music we call Afro-American. It changed, not once and for all, but in a continuous process of accommodation according to the shifting relations of people of African, European and mixed descent, but the two fundamental sets of attitudes have remained remarkably stable and resistant to social, economic and technological change – inevitably, since if music has any meaning at all it must be as the medium through which assumptions about relationships are explored, affirmed and celebrated.[35]

Thinking about what has been the defining moment for hip hop's 'birth' as a culture is problematic. Most scholars will cite the release of the 1979 classic rap record 'Rappers' Delight' by the Sugarhill Gang as its first significant event, and certainly for rap, this was, without a doubt, a significant moment, but while most scholars in the field consider this as the *beginning* of hip hop culture, perhaps it could be argued that this record is used as an appropriate milestone to mark the transition of hip hop to popular culture and to mark the start of its journey towards a global audience. As well as this, the actual term 'hip hop' was coined in the late 1970s, but certainly, as a culture, hip hop had been gaining momentum for a long time prior to this decade. Keyes asserts that The Black Arts Movement provided the pathway on rap's route to becoming a recognised genre in itself.

The call and response musical device, descended from African music, could also be considered metaphorically, in the context that the entire culture of hip hop is based on a response to a previous event, era or 'call.' Perhaps this is purely coincidence but call and response has a far greater meaning in rap than just being a musical feature; and I would go as far as to say that the concept is another fundamental pillar in hip hop culture.

Several records from the early 1970s reflect all the elements of hip hop culture, and display all of the musical characteristics to allow them to be loosely

---

[35] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 21.

pigeon-holed within the genre of rap, but 'Rappers' Delight' provides hip hop historians with a clean break and certainly gives them an exact point in time to mark the start of what became hip hop's *next* phase; the 1970s did not give birth to hip hop culture, nor rap, but it was a certainly a defining era for the culture as the social, musical and technological conditions of the decade almost became the mechanism for hip hop's inception elsewhere in the world and allowed the genre to bloom beyond its local roots in New York. Again, as Keyes points out, there were artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, who were, no doubt, the forefathers of rap and set the scene for the proceeding decade which saw rap take off as a genre. An important concept of the poetry from the Black Arts Movement, which is particularly resonant with cypher, is that, as Keyes asserts

> Poetic skills were not judged on rhyme per se but rather on one's ability to articulate themes relevant to African American life. Poetic lines were executed in a rhythmic fashion using breath cadences, alliteration, repetition, and expletives for emphasis.[36]

As outlined in finer detail in Chapter 4, with regards to the 'judging' of cypher, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the wit aspect that is demonstrated in its practice; by no means are the rhythmic devices and linguistic features such as alliteration irrelevant, but they are very slightly subordinate in comparison to the actual *content* of the rap itself. This is exactly what Keyes describes above, and this paves the way for a potential argument that one could pursue, in saying that cypher is closer to black poetry, than black music. In essence, it could be said that the way in which cypher is judged, dictates where it is best placed in terms of defining where the artform sits in black contemporary culture.

1.2   The Process and Development of Black Music to Rap

Looking at the evidence presented up to this point in my thesis, it is clear that hip hop culture, and specifically rap music, has resulted from diasporas and rap's musical ancestry can be teased out further here in an alternative, or perhaps, 'genrelogical' format. Rap's musical family tree is as rich and diverse as hip hop's

---

[36] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 33-4.

cultural and historical past and each of its musical ancestors have played their respective parts in the evolution and continuous development of rap and its many subgenres. Here, I will focus on, in greater detail, the musical and social conditions, and milestones, of several musical genres that have gone on to shape rap into how it is today, and, where applicable, how it has directly contributed to the musical characteristics and social dynamics of cypher. In order to give a logical presentation of data, I will start with the music and traditions of Africa, taking a genrelogical approach, and, where appropriate, mapping genres in terms of their geographic origins, as well as taking a chronological approach within each regional cluster of genres.

Back to The Motherland

Ring shout, griotism and slave music

A point worth noting from Lipsitz is that

> While clearly grounded in the philosophies and techniques of African music, the radical nature of hip hop comes less from its origins than from its uses. The flexibility of African musical forms encourages innovation and adaptation – a blending of old and new forms into dynamic forward-looking totalities.[37]

This statement encapsulates exactly what hip hop culture does and further adds to the descriptions of the afrocentricity of signifyin(g) provided by Stuckey and Floyd mentioned earlier. It is also important to be aware that this encouragement of innovation is what constantly drives hip hop culture, and, in another sense, also contributes to the cyclical and constantly moving motion of cypher. There is no doubt that West African musical and cultural practices were the initial precursor for rap and should still be credited with the building of the foundations that enabled hip hop culture to come about and develop. The concept of 'The Motherland' is of high relevance when considering where, geographically, and in terms of musical genres, hip hop's conception can be pinpointed. The African influence in hip hop culture has survived to this day and I fully agree with Keyes that

> Poetic language of African peoples eventually flourished in the New World as testimony of enslavement. Under the strictures of institutionalized slavery,

---

[37] Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verson, 1994), p. 37.

blacks were forced into human bondage. Out of such conditions came black vernacular expressions that documented one's existence, hopes, and desires.[38]

I would argue further here that the final sentiment in the above statement wholly sums up the way in which cypher presents itself as a modern-day vessel of everyday life through its unique platform of communication amongst cypher's participants. Rap often provides narration of everyday life in a very personal context and it could be said that this is a direct characteristic of the African vernacular. Ring shout, griotism and slave music enabled the continuation of musical and social African practices throughout the various diasporas, as mentioned previously, that have resulted in the characteristics that define the nature of rap, and especially, in a social sense, the rich cultural features seen in the practice of cypher today.

Moving on to African American Folk Music

Slave songs and work songs progressed from original West African musical and oral traditions. Due to the movement of African people to the Americas to become slaves, much of their African music was influenced by the Christian hymns that were part of their new lives. As Christianity spread throughout the enslaved African people, so too did the popularity in 'Spirituals' which exemplified the meeting of two distinct styles of music – the African and the European. Without wanting to cut short the details of African American Folk Music and how it contributed to the development of new musical genres, such as Cakewalk, there is one particular facet that is highly significant to the development of existing black musical culture to the practice of rap. As Keyes points out around the fact that slaves were practically 'thrown together' in their living quarters and daily life

> While it is obvious that the art of preaching or sermonizing took precedent in black religious contexts, expressions that emerged out of secular or recreational pastimes included storytelling and song forms such as field hollers and work songs, precursors to the blues. Although the institution of slavery ended officially with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, African-derived locution, phraseology, and musical forms forged in the crucible of bondage continued to survive and evolve into newer modes of expression.[39]

So while Christianity and its associated music had a role in the development of Spirituals from African music, it was the secular elements of worship, such as the

---

[38] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 22.

[39] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 24.

coming together of slaves sharing a common struggle, that have been a greater influence on the practices associated with hip hop culture. In previous scholarship, it has also been thought that slave music has included coded messages that could be passed on to other slaves in order to escape slavery and reach freedom.

Blues

Blues stemmed directly from the spirituals mentioned above, and, as Small correctly asserts around the closely related gospel music,

> Those practices which we saw noted by the editor of *Slave Songs of the United States* are still in evidence today: rhythmic elaboration, pitch bending, hand-clapping on the off beats, stamping and swaying, call and response and dense improvised harmonic and heterophonic textures, and above all an emotional intensity without parallel in European or Euro-American musicking (to my ears and mind, the excitement generated by a virtuoso performance in the classical concert hall seems shallow and self-absorbed by comparison).[40]

Both the musical features and the 'emotional intensity' that Small mentions, is fundamental to the way rap has evolved and have become absolutely crucial influences on the musical and social characteristics of cypher. Furthermore, I would agree with Small that,

> The singers who began singing solo or in small groups in the churches were not generally formally trained, nor did they think of their singing as 'art'; it began as a spontaneous outpouring of religious emotion from the individuals within that community which was the congregation, interacting with it, the spontaneity mediated always through the idiom which came most naturally to the singers – that of the folksongs, hymns and hollers which were at around the same time giving rise to that other great Afro-American form, the blues.[41]

This point highlights the fact that gospel and blues are intrinsically linked and demonstrates the parallels between the format and practice of cypher and the blues, or speaking generally, the parallels between rap and African American folk music. One would also like to note Small's reference to the word 'blues' and, in many ways, the following statement absolutely rings true of cypher, in that

> In its original sense, the word 'blues' refers to feelings of unaccountable and pervasive depression, and in this sense it is of quite old English usage. That such depression should have been common among black Americans in the period after the failure of the great hopes engendered by Emancipation is scarcely surprising, and the first thing we have to understand about the blues as a style of musicking is that it is not just 'about' the blues as a state of mind but, rather, it is a performance which, in articulating and examining that state

---

[40] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 104.
[41] Ibid., pp. 104 - 105.

of mind, enables those taking part in the performance to overcome, or at least to alleviate it.[42]

Jazz

An important parallel between rap and jazz, which perhaps would normally be overlooked, is the fact that both genres have diverse roots but have somehow blossomed under the social and cultural conditions of New York specifically.

Although most agree that jazz took shape New Orleans, it's New York where most of its major movements – swing, bop, free jazz, and fusion – had their genesis.[43]

Musically, jazz has so many parallels to rap that I can assert that jazz is one of rap's closest and most direct ancestors. In terms of the musical freedom that is expressed in jazz, and particularly in free or improvised jazz, one can immediately see the similarity with the freedom that cypher provides in terms of its feature of free improvisation amongst participants. Similarly, in considering the freedom felt by audience members and performers alike, promotes an environment where one can relax and feel enjoyment in letting loose outside the confines of certain musical genres that reflect structure and strict organisation in their musical form and in the restrictive settings of performances and events.

Self-expression through music for a jazz musician, or through lyrics for a cypher participant, is something very personal and it is important for both performers to have the ability to engage with fellow performers and audience. This engagement allows for a feeling of community and team spirit to grow. The New York jazz scene gave rise to the development of ragtime, swing and Bebop, highlighting the versatility of a musical genre built on African American roots and the natural sense of progression and forward-thinking of their respective pioneers. All of these genres were created from rich cultural and musical roots and in response to the demand and needs of their audiences.

You know you got soul

While Rhythm & Blues formed in the USA as a hybrid genre of blues and jazz, soul emerged as a further hybrid of R&B and genres such as Gospel, as previously

---

[42] Ibid., p. 197.
[43] Unterberger, Richie, *Music USA* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), p. 1.

mentioned. At this point in time (roughly around the mid-late 1950s), many musical styles and genres under the general umbrella of 'contemporary black music' merged and formed other subgenres of music, which will be discussed throughout this thesis. Something significant about soul, in terms of its relationship with rap, is the element of consciousness that is present in each genre. Both genres literally have 'soul'. Themes in soul songs reflect struggle, whether about the trials and tribulations of love in everyday life, to much bigger issues such as the socio-economic and political state of the world. Examples of this could include *I Got You (I Feel Good)* by James Brown[44] – an upbeat, fun and entertaining soul song, and Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*[45] which highlights the issues of Civil Rights and anti-war and the song generally questions the political and social climate of the time. I agree with Small that

> The term 'soul', which emerged in the mid-1960s, was in itself a sign of the confidence of black people in their own culture (not new, but newly exposed for all to see), since it signifies those qualities of warmth, communality and emotional honesty which black people believe themselves to possess, not without reason, to the envy of whites.[46]

Music of the Caribbean

Perhaps it is appropriate here to assess the contribution to rap music that has been provided by music of the Caribbean and music with Caribbean origins. Reggae, dub and calypso all have a place in the melting pot of rap; there are a few characteristics of Caribbean musical genres that are worth noting here. The coincidence that many West Indian people migrated to New York is undoubtedly one of the most significant events in hip hop culture's creation and many scholars and hip hop participants credit Kingston-born DJ Kool Herc, who then moved to the Bronx, with being the original pioneer of hip hop.

Reggae

As blues and soul developed in New York, reggae grew as a genre of music in Jamaica which in itself had rich musical roots, stemming from ska music and

---

[44] James Brown, I Got You (I Feel Good) (King, 1965)
[45] Marvin Gaye, What's Going On (Tamla, 1971). Included on the accompanying CD, track 10.
[46] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 215.

containing elements of the distinct influences of jazz and blues. In comparison with the other genres discussed previously in this section, a parallel in the thematic content of reggae lyrics can be drawn. The way in which themes around social struggle are raised within genres, such as soul, is also demonstrated in reggae music, with a lot of reggae containing lyrics that reflect political issues and a sense of social unrest. Although released in 1980, a good example of reggae reflecting consciousness is Bob Marley's *Redemption Song.*[47]

The musical idiom of reggae has also migrated into rap, not as obviously as the previously mentioned African characteristics that are seen in rap music but traces of reggae in a looser sense are apparent. These traces include the fact that there is much emphasis placed on rhythm and one would argue that rhythm is the heartbeat of reggae. As Small asserts

> In musical terms, one can perceive in reggae, not an Africanization in the sense of the deliberate adoption of specifically African techniques, but rather a re-integration of scattered African elements from both Jamaican and American popular music: the return to a percussive approach throughout the whole musical texture, even on instruments not commonly thought of as percussive like the electric guitar and organ;[48]

The influence of Rastafarianism influence on reggae music should not be ignored and the spirituality reflected in this religion seems to mirror hip hop culture's affinity with enlightenment in terms of spirituality, such as the belief of the 5%ers (Chapter 4) and also in the sense of self-fulfilment and the development of social awareness (Chapter 5).

Toasting

Finally, the art of toasting comes directly from Jamaican music and it is without doubt that this was the parent of the MC. Before being rooted in Jamaican music, toasting stemmed from influences such as the African griot. Toasting has played a huge role in hip hop culture. It was originally used to motivate audiences in the form of comments and wit over music that was played on sound systems, and,

---

[47] Bob Marley, Redemption Song (Island Records, 1980). This track can be found on the accompanying CD, track 11. Another example of reggae can be heard on track 5 with Picture on the Wall by the Naturalites.
[48] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 452.

fundamentally, found its way to the Bronx through Kool Herc. Further discussion around toasting will take place in Chapter 3. For now, one will present Small's view that

> The way that certain black disco deejays in Harlem and The Bronx, as well as certain Jamaican sound-system men, developed this art further and in a highly unexpected manner is the story of rap and of toasting, the first of which I have already discussed; apparently independent in their origins but now intertwining in the discos of New York and London, the two arts are manifestations of the black genius for humanizing the mechanical in surprising way, a genius that can be seen, too, in the spray-painted designs on the cars of the New York subway trains.[49]

Other points to note

All of the genres mentioned above have contributed to the conception of rap and hip hop culture. All of them have paved the way for further developments in contemporary black music and the creation of newer genres such as rock 'n' roll, funk, disco, salsa and their many respective spin-offs, hybrids and subgenres, some of which have contributed directly to the formation of rap. There will be more unravelling of genres and their role in the conception of rap further on in this thesis and for now it is relevant to say that diaspora, certain moments in history, such as the Civil War, and cultural practices and traditions, as well as religion, have all contributed to the way in which each musical genre has been shaped.

1.3   Rap, as a Result of Diaspora

It is important to fully understand what diaspora means in order to proceed with this section; an explanation can be sought from Bohlman in order to put diaspora into context in terms of hip hop culture.

> Diaspora is a condition of placelessness, and as such it has become one of the places most articulated by world music. The music of diaspora at once describes the conditions of being displaced from a homeland, and it inscribes the history and geography that connect a displaced culture to that homeland, or at the very least to a place claimed as home. The music of diaspora is about places of being and places of becoming, of connecting the present with its absence of place to the past and the future, where place can be imagined as real.[50]

---

[49]Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 402.
[50] Bohlman, Philip V., *World Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 115.

Certainly, the latter part of Bohlman's explanation of diaspora in world music is applicable to rap and one can draw out that diaspora is all to do with connecting people and places, connecting the old and new, a core theme of the final chapter. As ascertained in previous sections of this chapter, rap has been the product of the combining of different musical styles and different cultures, and would not have evolved in such a way had it not been for the several diasporas which have enabled these styles and cultures to meet.

I argue that due to the cultural make-up of New York, predominantly composed of migrants, or people who are descendants from migrant communities, the pioneers of hip hop culture were subconsciously striving for something of their own with which to engage. With feelings of placelessness, as described by Bohlman, it is only natural that people in new places as a result of diaspora, would seek to carve out something of their own. Similarly, one could also assert that perhaps people from migrant communities would be more likely to feel the need to strive to fit in, bringing issues of identity and belonging to the forefront of hip hop culture. Hip hop culture's all-encompassing ethos meant, and continues to mean, that people who have engaged with hip hop culture in varying degrees would be more likely to feel a sense of belonging and a sense of identity, without feeling like they were completely turning their back on their original cultural traditions. Rap seamlessly blends old and new whilst incorporating features of individual cultures, such as the subgenres mentioned in previous sections of this chapter, like Puerto Rican rap. For many of hip hop's participants, hip hop culture and rap represents *them.* As Krims points out:

> Here it is important to recall how consistently geographic and localized notions of "representing" generally are, and the extent to which establishing an identity may often become a process of negation. The presence of New York often becomes a matter of the effects of its absence: for artists who arose outside the New York/Los Angeles axis (to whatever extent that axis might always have been fantasized, rather that lived in an everyday sense) have long imprinted their authenticity as local, geographically base, and specifically in oppositional relation to New York.[51]

---

[51] Krims, Adam, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 124.

However, one would also note that the conception and subsequent birth and development of hip hop culture seems far more natural than the assumptions outlined above may imply at first. A 'strive for belonging' would indicate a great deal of effort, and the birth of hip hop culture was far more natural, and something that seemed to evolve subconsciously, with no requirement of emotional investment or concerted effort. As previously mentioned, migrant communities are more likely to feel marginalised in society and hip hop culture provides something to engage with, and become part of, in a non-judgemental and all-inclusive collective movement. It is therefore only natural that hip hop culture grew and especially since it became a voice for the voiceless, and an effective platform for communication and social engagement, which will be discussed in more detail in section 3.2. Hip hop culture almost serves as an umbrella group for those who feel that they *belong* to, or feel a connection with, any aspect of hip hop culture. While it is possible for an individual to feel a sense of belonging to many groups in society, for example groups such as young people, unemployed people, people from an ethnic minority and so on, hip hop culture encompasses several of these kinds of groups, allowing engagement and inclusion with people from many different cultural and social backgrounds.

In addition to the assertion above, that because hip hop culture, and consequently rap, are diasporic by nature, I suggest that it is therefore natural for rap to lend itself as the base for many spin-off genres of music, influenced by newer diasporic movement and incorporating features of several more cultures. Hip hop culture continues to foster a melting pot of 'new' influences and new talent and seems open to this exciting prospect, in terms of having a role in what one would deem as safeguarding hip hop culture's future and continuing to nurture and encourage its newer participants. I argue that hip hop culture's birth, as a result of interwoven diasporic cultures and musical styles, further enables hip hop to fulfil its *purpose* in spreading knowledge and truth by aiding communication. By this, I mean that rap fills a void in the lives of many individuals and communities, and becomes a platform for communication amongst diasporic communities. These communities are often marginalised, as discussed, as a theory already established in section 2.2.

However, rap communicates much more than a message and hip hop culture has also been a response in provocation of oppression. As Lipsitz summarises,

> The diasporic conversation within hip hop, Afrobeat, jazz and many other Black musical forms provides a powerful illustration of the potential for contemporary commercialized leisure to carry images, ideas, and icons of enormous political importance between cultures. Whatever role they serve in the profit-making calculations of the music industry, these expressions also serve as exemplars of post-colonial culture with direct relevance to the rise of new social movements emerging in response to the imperatives of global capital and its attendant austerity and oppression.[52]

In addition to this valid point, Osumare also points out the significance of hip hop around the globe and how marginalised communities have adopted hip hop culture, and in doing so, are able to communicate a message of their own

> A significant chronicling of the global hip-hop phenomenon began not surprisingly with the *New York Times*. On August 23, 1992, in its Arts & Leisure section, the newspaper had a major feature called "The Many Accents of Rap," a story about rap music in various parts of the globe. Written by several different authors and divided into sections on Russia, China, India, Japan, West Africa, Eastern Europe, France, England and Mexico, the byline on the first page read: "The American artform is hopscotching the globe. But how well does it travel?"[53]

Hip hop culture has travelled, and continues to travel, very well. It does indeed now reflect many accents from around the world, and, perhaps more accurately, *represents* for people from many different cultures and various backgrounds. Furthermore, the attribute of hip hop having 'many accents' is likely to be due to hip hop's diasporic nature which enables it to travel so well and *translates* seamlessly into something that's meaningful for people from other cultures too. Hip hop holds a wide appeal for those from many different communities around the world and enables them to engage with something that gives them a sense of belonging and identity in an environment that perhaps parallels a 1970s New York to some extent, in terms of the feelings of its marginalised inhabitants, the general lack of opportunities and prosperity and a socio-political feeling of unrest, which is felt the world over for many different reasons by people in many different situations. Osumare reaffirms this, in that

---

[52] Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verso 1994), p. 27.
[53] Osumare, Halifu, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 11.

> Worldwide, many ethnic and immigrant groups, perceived as not indigenous
> to a particular society are often relegated to second-class citizenship, resulting
> in a marginalized status. For youths among these "lower class" groups, hip-
> hop becomes a way of giving voice to their unrest. Class status is measured in
> financial wealth, political power, and family status in most societies, often
> inherited, but sometimes ascribed through mechanisms of social mobility. For
> whole populations who have been assigned a lower social status in a
> particular society, it becomes difficult, if next to impossible, to alter that
> status.[54]

This statement further highlights that marginalisation, and oppression can both reflect a vicious circle, with little or no chance of finding a way out, for many people affected by diaspora. This includes many African Americans, as well as other diasporic cultures who have found 'home' in New York. To a great extent, this points towards an actual *need* for an artform, or practice, such as hip hop culture, rap and cypher, in order to provide that voice for the voiceless and to allow people to take part in a movement in which they are wholly accepted and where they can feel like they are being heard, spreading a message, and even that they are making a difference. Hebdige also makes a relevant point here which links back to the Caribbean's social (rather than specifically musical) connection with hip hop, in saying that,

> Rap did for poor blacks in America in the 1980s what reggae had done for the
> "sufferers" in Jamaica, a decade earlier. It got them noticed again and it
> helped to forge a sense of identity and pride within the local community. Like
> reggae, the music later found an international audience. And then the sense
> of identity and pride that went along with rap became available to other
> people who listened to the music. The hip hop attitude and culture grew up
> with the music wherever rap was performed or played.[55]

The issues of identity and pride continue to thrive as core outcomes of hip hop culture and the practice of cypher further adds to the potential for such outcomes which hold great importance in terms of social development for many communities. This is a recurring theme in hip hop scholarship and Rose has also picked up on the parallel in hip hop culture between diaspora and communication and states that

> Regional, and increasingly national, differences and syndications in hip hop
> have been solidifying and will continue to do so. In some cases these

---

[54] Osumare, Halifu, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 70.

[55] Hebdige, Dick, *Cut 'n' Mix* (New York & London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 136-7.

differences are established by references to local streets and events, neighborhoods and leisure activities, preferences for dance steps, clothing, musical samples, and vocal accents. At the same time, cross-regional syndicates of rappers, writers, and dancers fortify hip hop's communal vocabulary. In every region, hip hop articulates a sense of entitlement and takes pleasure in aggressive insubordination.[56]

It is this 'communal vocabulary' that Rose mentions which allows hip hop culture to be directly translated into the social situation of many people from different cultures and communities around the world, therefore resulting in hip hop culture having a global resonance. In *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity,* Krims picks up on the point of the link between localism, the corresponding issue of identity and how rap has fitted in to other cultures on a global scale and concludes,

Indeed, global aspects of rap music resonate in remarkably familiar patterns, even in such far-flung environments as Amsterdam and Edmonton. The touchstone of authenticity in public representations of hip-hop culture and rap music has long been some notion of urban locality and ethnic and/or class marginality. The seeming unlimited amount of variation that such a scheme allows can account for the fact that hip-hop and rap seem to have penetrated virtually every crevice in which the international record industry registers a significant presence.[57]

It is fair to say that rap is definitely a genre which has been born out of diaspora, but more accurately, it is a genre which has been born out of the oppression and marginalisation that communities have faced as a result of diaspora. Oppression and marginalisation are both indicators of a common bond between certain communities and hip hop culture's ethos of inclusivity allows for a rewarding mutual relationships between rap and its participants, as individuals and as communities. Considering cypher as one of the many aspects of hip hop culture, I argue that cypher is absolutely one of the most accessible parts of hip hop culture for people from marginalised backgrounds to engage with. The rawness of the practice allows for little material or monetary input which must maximise the chances for the engagement of cypher's participants. As well as this aspect, although cypher is an art of the streets, and typically not recorded music, one would surmise that it actually reaches an audience just as wide as recorded rap, in the context of Auslander's

---

[56] Rose, Tricia, (1996) "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style, and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop", In Gordon, Avery F. And Newfield, Christopher, (eds.) **Mapping Multiculturalism** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 440.

[57] Krims, Adam, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 198.

concept of 'liveness' which is mainly applicable to performance in a theatre kind of setting, but also supports the theory here that a video of cypher is still cypher, just as in his point on television as a 'live medium,'

> makes its historical relationship to the theatre different from that of film, and enabled television to colonize liveness, the one aspect of theatrical presentation that film could not replicate.[58]

Cypher reaching a wide audience is due to the fact that people have seen how cypher is done in New York, which has then been taken and shared amongst other communities, spreading in a way similar to that of another form of oral tradition, and via international movements such as EOW, and through videos on the internet. Crucially, the diaspora that has resulted in the marginalisation of certain communities, and particularly the African American community of New York, and has provided the social conditions in which rap has been able to thrive, should be considered as a multiple diaspora, as it is the inter-weaving, and the cross-fertlisation, of several diasporas that have all played their respective roles in the creation and evolution of rap.

1.4 African Oral Traditions

As already established in this chapter, Africa has played a significant part in the development of hip hop culture, historically, socially and musically. Although hip hop has evolved out of a culturally diverse melting pot, it is the African ingredient that has given hip hop its biggest flavour. There are several musical and social features present in cypher that stem directly from African origins and these will be outlined in this section.

The concept of *The Motherland*

Before elaborating on the African oral traditions that have contributed to the way in which rap is practiced, and in turn, the way in which cypher is practiced, one must consider the certain African sociological elements that have withstood the many diasporas that shaped the United States of America and why they still play a big part in the everyday lives of many 'regular' citizens, and especially those who are

---

[58] Auslander, Philip, *Liveness* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 13.

involved in hip hop culture in some way. One has so often heard of *The Motherland*, as a concept that usually refers to a place of birth, or perhaps the place of birth of ancestors. It is a scientific fact that all human life began in Africa. In terms of rap, it is important to discuss why this fact carries a deep resonance with many African-Americans to this day, and why, as a result, the hark back to the Motherland features as a consistent theme, or concept, that is referred to. *Jazz Music* by Gang Starr[59] demonstrates this concept, and specifically connects jazz musicians to their African roots, in the opening lines:

> The music started in the hearts and drums, from another land
> Played for everyone, by sons, of the motherland
> Sendin' out a message of peace, to everybody and
> Came across the oceans in chains and shame
> Easing the pain
> And it was without name
> Until some men in New Orleans on Rampart Street
> Put out the sounds, and then they gave it a beat
> I'm talkin' 'bout Jelly Roll, King, and Satch
> I'm talkin' 'bout the music that had no match
> Yes, the music, and it was born down there,
> We're gonna use it, so make the horn sound clear
> It's jazz music

I would also argue that the samples chosen by Gang Starr for *Jazz Music,* are signifyin(g) rap's (as well as jazz's) cultural past, such as by choosing Ramsey Lewis's *Les Fleurs*, which was also covered by Minnie Riperton[60], thus highlighting the historical context of jazz. Similarly, the lyrics of *Word to the Mother (Land)* by Big Daddy Kane and *Def Jam in the Motherland* by LL Cool J reflect consideration of black oppression. Lyrics in one of Big Daddy Kane's verses within *Word to the Mother (Land),*[61] reflects a distinct acknowledgement of African roots:

> I say the mother, as in the motherland
> But on the other hand, another man
> Tackled and shackled our ancestors
> But we beat him with freedom, so let's bless the
> Country that we all came from
> Because the moral of it all is we shall overcome
> The cream will keep rising

---

[59] Jazz Music from *No More Mr. Nice Guy* by Gang Starr (Wild Pitch/EMI Records, 1989).
[60] Les Fleurs from *Les Fleurs* by Ramsey Lewis (Columbia, 1983) & Minnie Riperton, Les Fleurs from *Come to My Garden* (GRT, 1970).
[61] Word to the Mother (Land) from *Long Live the Kane* by Big Daddy Kane (Cold Chillin'/Warner Bros., 1988).

> We be sizing
> Up, the Asiatic one is enterprising
> Building and building to carry on
> All the way from Malcolm X to Farrakhan
> Martin Luther was a tutor, many were pupils
> Those who fell victim were those without scruples

The historical context of rap, and of black music in general, is reaffirmed in artists using The Motherland. By this, one could look at Public Enemy's security entourage, known as the 'S1Ws' – or Security of the First World – due to Africa literally being the first world of human life, rather than using the term 'third world', that highlights its socio-economic climate and poverty-stricken countries, and people, who continually struggle just to survive.

Although America is a relatively 'new' country, its inhabitants tend to have an inbuilt sense of national pride, which is displayed by the Pledge of Allegiance[62] that children recite in all US schools, and by the way the flag of the United States is displayed in the majority of schools and public places; this is something that is not typical of European countries. Despite this overwhelming sense of *America* in the US, members of the hip hop community tend to place just as much emphasis on *Africa*, if not more so. The Motherland is something that is highly significant in rap music. Not only does it provide the cultural and historical background that forms the foundations of hip hop culture, but it also provides participants with a sense of pride, gives a contribution to identity, builds a sense of community and also brings a touch of reminiscence and, perhaps an element of nostalgia, to the forefront of the genre that is constantly referring back to its rich past. The connection to Africa allows people to subconsciously engage with African musical and social practices, as well as perhaps giving rappers an added dimension to their artistic license and creativity.

The African Griot

It is important here to expand on griotism. A griot is a storyteller from a West African culture who would traditionally recite stories and occasionally embellish

---

[62] "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." (revised version, 1954)

these with poetry and music. As defined in the Encyclopaedia of African American History, and relevant to this section:

> A griot is a member of a hereditary caste of praise singers, poets, genealogists, storytellers, musicians and oral historians in West African society... The role of the griot is multifaceted... Aspects of the griots craft in terms of poetics, music, and the centrality of orality survive in African and African American culture. These characteristics include call-and-response, repetition, contrapuntal rhythms, and the use of symbolism and metaphor to represent events or people in time. Elements such as these are present in blues, jazz and hip-hop music today.[63]

Although this is an artform that is still practiced in parts of Africa today, it is widely regarded as having evolved, or to be serving a different purpose to what it would have done in times gone by, and most likely to be a practice over one thousand years old. As a griot does not write down any information or accounts, griotism is an oral tradition and would have been crucial to communities for keeping a record of the past. Wit and humour are key characteristics in griotism, as well as referencing past and historical events or stories; it is these features that run in parallel with the cypher of today.

Although a griot would not be 'competing' with others, or working as part of a team, griotism is a practice that is evident in most rap and especially cypher, indicating that this is an oral tradition that has directly contributed to the way in which cypher is performed. To have the ability to deliver a story to an audience with wit and humour in an articulate and creative style is what all budding rappers and cypher participants aspire to; it is the single most important performance skill needed in order to sustain the continuity within a cypher, and, therefore, is what is needed in order to make a contribution to the dynamics of cypher. Participants can then go on to develop and establish the 'flow', at which point the performance skill aspect enables survival of the fittest. Traditionally, there would only be one griot per village in West Africa; in rap, the rapper or rappers take on the role of griot, or narrator, while their audience listen and participate from the 'outside.' With cypher, the performance dynamics differ slightly, and this enables each participant an equal chance to take on the role of 'griot' with their audience engaged physically and

---

[63] Williams, Hettie V., 'Griot' in Alexander, Leslie M. & Rucker, Walter C., (Eds.), **Encyclopaedia of African American History**, Volume 1 (ABC-CLIO, California: 2010), pp. 47 – 48.

emotionally closer than with a typical live musical performance. Despite the difference between having one griot per African village, and several 'griots' taking part in a cypher, the social dynamics between griot and listeners, or audience, show a parallel in terms of the *closeness* of the two sides, creating a fusion between the two and an opportunity for the sense of community to flourish, as mentioned previously, and a point worthy of further discussion in Chapters 4 and 5.

Ring shout

Ring shout is a particularly significant practice with regards to cypher; this African musical and cultural practice mainly took place amongst African slaves as a form of religious praise in the mid to late 19th Century. The physical features of ring shout parallel with certain aspects of cypher. Although dance was the most prominent feature of ring shout, the musical accompaniment was absolutely critical to the process. As Small affirms,

> In general the evangelical Christian sects into which most of the slaves were baptized disapproved of dancing, and many slaves resolutely refused to dance at all after being received into the church (it was common also to find converts refusing to take part in secular singing, even in such apparently harmless activities as worksongs). They did, however, engage in a form of religious dance known as the chant, or ring chant, in which they moved in a circle accompanying themselves with song, handclapping and 'patting juba' (clapping themselves on the thighs), lifting their feet hardly at all from the floor and never crossing them;[64]

This highlights that the ring shout enabled the African people engulfed by slavery to continue their religious practices, albeit modified, despite other cultural beliefs and rules over self-expression that were forced on them in their homes, in parts of America; although in this sense, 'home' represents its very antonym, since they were in a new place, engulfed with oppression and cruelty and being forced to work as slaves. Small continues the discussion around the issue of not lifting or crossing feet, in that

> …the churches apparently conceded that dancing without crossing the feet was not really dancing at all, and so was permissible to the saved. The chant was disapproved by those concerned with black 'improvement' (that is,

---

[64] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder 1987), p. 98.

assimilation into the ways of the whites) after Emancipation, and in time disappeared.[65]

The physical and social features of the ring shout, such as its cyclical movement and the body language of its participants mirror the way a cypher takes place. As well as this, it is important to consider the musical characteristics of the ring shout and the essential element to look at is rhythm; it plays such a vital part in all rap music, as well as in cypher, which will be looked at in greater detail in 1.8 (in a musical context) as well as a discussion of its presence and role in cypher today in 4.4. Ramsey supports the notion that in general, African practices were viewed as un-Christian, or perhaps impure, when they arrived in the West through African slavery; this is quite ironic given the criminal, immoral and humiliating custom of slavery and what its evils have inflicted on innocent people (and their cultural identities). As Ramsey states

> From the beginning, the syncretism that characterized the ring chant was condemned as heathenish, barbaric, and profane in much the same spirit as miscegenation was.[66]

Call & Response

Call and response is a salient feature in all forms of contemporary black music, as well as featuring heavily in Western popular music. Originally, this feature was prominent in African music which sowed the seed for its development into the musical genres previously mentioned, such as jazz and blues, as well as in rap music when it was transported over the continents, once again through slavery. An example of Call and Response can be heard in *Move, Daniel*[67] which is performed by the McIntosh County Singers, the clear back and forth movement, between singers can be heard through lyrics such as:

> Move, Daniel, move, Daniel
> Move, Daniel, move, Daniel
> Move, Daniel, move, Daniel
> Move, Daniel, move, Daniel

---

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ramsey Jr., Guthrie P, *Race Music* (California: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 190-1.

[67] McIntosh County Singers, Move, Daniel, from *Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia* (Folkways, 1984), also heard on the accompanying CD, track 2.

Oh, Lord, pray, sinner, come
Oh, Lord, sinner gone to hell
Move, Daniel, move, Daniel
Move, Daniel, move, Daniel
Go the other way, Daniel
Go the other way, Daniel
Rock, Daniel, rock, Daniel
Rock, Daniel, rock, Daniel
Shout, Daniel, shout, Daniel
Shout, Daniel, shout, Daniel
Oh, Lord, pray, sinner, come
Oh, Lord, sinner gone to hell

Call and response is especially significant to cypher as it encourages the interaction and participation between a performer and their audience in this context. This 'team effort' approach to cypher and how call and response allows for a certain kind of dynamic amongst a group of participants, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Call and response also has a lot in common with religious services, with questions and answers. In rap, call and response is both a musical and lyrical feature; on one hand, rhythmically, a pattern or rhythmic phrase has been established and 'asked' and in response, a similar, or perhaps a contrasting rhythm will be presented as the 'answer'. Rappers are admired for rhythmic complexity in the delivery of their lyrics; this could be considered as rhythmic wit. On the other hand, the call and response feature can be interpreted literally, in a lyrical sense, such as the rapper or MC asks a question in their lyrics, and then the audience, or other members of their group, will answer the question in their respective lyrics. Call and response provides a very versatile tool for rap, including cypher, as it is a mechanism that can be utilised to promote a continuous flow and movement between rappers, and between a participant and their audience; the cyclical motion of cypher is supported by the use of call and response. Keyes makes the point that

> While tonal inflections help the performer to convey the meaning of an utterance, call and response creates a sense of cohesion between performer and auditor. Call and response is ubiquitous to the African American aesthetic in that it synchronizes speakers and listeners within a performance event, but

more importantly, it is the life force of black communication. Without this interchange, black communication is lifeless.[68]

Perhaps the word 'lifeless' is too harsh here, as I consider it unfair to assume that without call and response there would be no energy in communication. However, I do not dispute that call and response provides a much-needed driving force in rap's fluidity and contributes to the slick delivery of rap lyrics.

A final point to make about call and response is the way it is also used to make everyone feel involved in the rap process. Small correctly states that African cultures encourage everyone to take part in musical and cultural practices and

> [it] is assumed that everyone is musical, that all are capable of taking part in some capacity in the communal work of music making. Musicking is in fact thought of as being as basic a form of social interaction as talking.[69]

Slave music

The term 'slave music' is problematic in a sense that slavery should never have existed in the first place. Slavery meant that African people were forced to adapt and modify their musical cultures in order to preserve any fragment of their African musical traditions once in slavery. However, straight away, I can reflect on the parallels with rap, and particularly cypher. The fact that a musical genre has emerged from adversity, oppression and marginalisation rings true for both. While slave music could only preserve a fraction of the rich African musical past, it was still something, and a form of music that all enslaved people could join in with, despite the bleak lives they must have been living, and the strict opposition within the culture of the New World, that forbade many African musical and cultural practices. It is important here to consider what Rose points out in that

> …during all of the nineteenth and well over half of the twentieth centuries, the general belief among Western intellectuals was that African societies and cultures were inferior to Western culture; thus, black Americans' retention and revision of African cultural traditions was not considered valuable. In fact, it was often perceived as an impediment for black Americans' developing civilization.[70]

---

[68] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004),p. 26.
[69] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 26.
[70] Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), p. 65.

With this in mind, one can begin to reflect on the kind of impact that this has had on the development of hip hop culture and on rap as a genre. How much more 'African' would rap be if European influences had not been forced upon African people during the nineteenth century, in parallel with the restriction of their African musical and cultural practices? With African musical and cultural influence present in all rap music today, one can begin to appreciate the lengths to which enslaved African people went to, in order to preserve their culture. There is no denying that all of these cultural traditions have been diluted but the fact that they remain omnipresent in contemporary black music today, is testament to the cultural memory that has been engrained by Africans into many forms of Western music today. More influences from other parts of the world, through several diasporas, have contributed positively to the development of hip hop culture and rap music, and one can conclude that all black music stems from "fusions, hybrids and cultural combinations of African and European influences."[71] In a sense then, rap brings together the surviving, perhaps best, elements of multiple cultures from around the world and fuses them to create a genre that continues to be culturally rich in its roots and reflective of its cultural past. When I hear contemporary black music of any genre, but especially with rap, and even more significant when considering cypher, I would argue that what Small points out about religious black music, the same rings true;

> the sound may be different (how different? one wonders) but the emotional atmosphere is unmistakable, as is the social function of the performance, which is the affirmation and celebration of identity and of community, no less essential now than it was then.[72]

1.5   Signifyin(g)

The art of signifyin(g) is pertinent to rap music and in a certain context it proves especially relevant to the practice of cypher. Signifyin(g) is an African American form of expressive storytelling and closely related to the Griotism mentioned in section 1.3. Therefore, the connection between signifyin(g) and the griot further highlights another direct link between cypher and hip hop's cultural past. Signifyin(g) survives in the lyrics, music and gestures of hip hop culture on

---

[71] Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), p. 65.
[72] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 113.

varying levels. Looking at why signifyin(g) is so important in cypher can be boiled down to the fact that the use of wit and metaphor in signifyin(g) is of paramount importance in the art of being lyrically or verbally deceptive to one another, which therefore reflects another parallel between signifyin(g) and cypher (and also MC battles). The definition of signifyin(g) is highly problematic for its scholars to agree as it takes form at various levels, with only slightly subtle differences between each instance, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. is regarded to be the pioneer and at the forefront of academic scholarship on the matter. As a footnote to 'The Signifying Monkey,' Gates Jr. summarises that

> "Signifying" refers to a wide variety of African American verbal games involving ritual insult, competition, innuendo, parody, and other forms of loaded expression.[73]

To build on this concept further, Kelley observes

> Of course, the line between rap music's gritty realism, storytelling and straight-up signifyin(g)is not always clear to listeners, nor is it supposed to be. Hip hop, particularly gangsta rap, also attracts listeners for whom the "ghetto" is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom.[74]

In summary, signifyin(g), in the context outlined by Kelley above, is a practice that further blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction in rap. On one hand, rap lyrics that speak the truth are considered to be *real* hip hop, but there is also often an underlying sense of trying to exaggerate and stretch the truth in rap lyrics and especially within a cypher situation. Signifyin(g), in terms of the lyrical content of cypher, will be looked at in greater detail in Chapter 3, as it is also closely tied to the words and metaphor that are used in rap, as well as the art of braggadocio, which involves demeaning others by means of appearing to boost one's own status by bragging, whether realistic or wholly exaggerated.

Taking into consideration 'oppositional' signifyin(g)[75] and linking it to rap, one is drawn immediately to the use of sampling. In terms of African American literature,

---

[73] Gates Jr. Henry Louis, and McKay, Nellie Y., (eds) *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), p. 42, footnote 1.
[74] Kelley, Robin D. G., *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 38-9.
[75] Theme throughout in Gates Jr., Henry L., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

one would isolate an idea from another author and build on it with a new set of meanings, thus creating something new from the old. Similarly, sampling takes elements from past pieces of music which are then used in a different way to how they were used originally and consequently become incorporated into something new, yet something that retains an element of the past. Therefore, the main parallel between these two processes is the fact that both represent a way of paying homage to their respective pasts. Both signifyin(g) and sampling are processes that are highly respectful of their respective cultural and historical ancestries. Using a particular sample in a rap record can convey a hidden message, which, as a contradiction in itself, is also quite a direct message, due its very being there – this is because the sample is something that has been a deliberate choice by those who are now using it, therefore its use highlights that a particular musical feature that has been purposeful, thought through and indicates a certain preference by its user(s).

Secondly, the converse form of oppositional signifyin(g) is classed as 'cooperative' signifyin(g).[76] This is perhaps less relevant to the practice of cypher, as it involves direct repetition in a 'mocking' sense of the word – a characteristic which would seem more likely to occur in MC battles than in cypher. As Chapter 4 will explore in greater detail, cypher is very much about teamwork and therefore mockery of a fellow participant of cypher does not have much of a place. Certainly mockery and fun-poking can be witnessed in cypher, but only in the sense of displaying a good sense of humour, and with its collective ethos, cypher is more about mutual support amongst individuals than mockery, or humiliation of a fellow cypher participant. Looking at where an example of this kind of signifyin(g) would take place, it is relevant to consider the context in which an MC battle occurs. The demeaning of opponents in an MC battle would use mockery, and therefore MC battles demonstrate the use of cooperative signifyin(g) in a better way than cypher. Keyes provides a clear example of signifyin(g) which helps to define and understand this verbal feature that is dependent on interplay between individuals, in that

> Signifyin occurs when one makes an indirect statement about a situation or another person; the meaning if often allusive and, in some cases, indeterminate. I recall from my southern background an incident involving a

---

[76] Theme throughout in Gates Jr., Henry L., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

married man's attempt to flirt with an unmarried woman. Aware of his marital status, the unmarried woman reminds the man, through indirection, that he is married. Her response places the man in an indeterminate position as to continue or cease from flirting.

Married Man: Hey mama, you sho' look good to me today.
Unmarried Woman: Oh, by the way, how's yo' wife?[77]

With cypher, although the aim is to deliver a slick improvised rap, quite often participants incorporate elements of interplay into their raps. This interplay allows for a smooth transition from person to person within the cypher, and perhaps provides something for participants to focus on. Interplay also reinforces the momentum of cypher and helps to drive the continuous cyclical movement of participation from within. Signifyin(g) can be regarded as an artform in itself due to the sophistication and the fine balance between subtlety and bluntness that are required in order to execute a successful delivery. Signifyin(g) relies on a great deal of assertiveness, wit and a thorough understanding of street style in order to be demonstrated effectively. To a great extent, the ability to engage in signifyin(g) is completely subconscious and one would assert that it is something that forms part of everyday culture, and part of general 'banter' within the communities who are more likely to be a part of hip hop culture.

To a certain extent, subtlety is absolutely parallel to bluntness in signifyin(g) and the artistic quality stems from being able to balance the two successfully. As mentioned previously in this Chapter, the use of wit and humour are central to the practice of cypher, and it is these features that link cypher to African oral traditions such as griotism. So much of hip hop culture is encapsulated in cypher, and one might assert that this is due to the amount of African cultural and musical practices that have survived as oral traditions and which manifest in the present through artforms such as cypher. With this in mind, I can make a direct link that stems between cypher and griotism by the way both are built on foundations that have signifyin(g) at their respective cores. Primarily, with all forms of African oral traditions, an emphasis is placed on communication and all have narration as a key element. Signifyin(g) allows for *another* means of communication, or at least adds a

---

[77] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 24.

further dimension to standard narration through music, and can also be used as a device to showcase wit, verbal art and expression. Again, signifyin(g) is present in practices such as the dirty dozens, another manifestation of ancestry in African oral traditions. As Mitchell-Kernan asserts

> Signifying can be a tactic employed in verbal duelling which is engaged in as an end in itself; it is signifying in this context which has been the subject of most previous analysis. Signifying, however, also refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection. This kind of signifying might best be viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourse.[78]

In utilising signifyin(g) within cypher, participants are *more* equipped to be extremely sarcastic amongst their peers, to the point of offensiveness, but due to the subtlety involved, achieve a higher level of respect from their peers; cypher is more about having a joke than the direct demeaning of opponents, such as within an MC battle situation. Signifyin(g) offers cypher participants the opportunity to demonstrate a very subtle form of wit within the artform, and allows for something to be said in such as way, as if it hadn't been said. As Gates asserts,

> Profoundly, rap is a music that makes room for young black performers to address black audiences (and anyone else who may be listening) in virtuoso-rhyming language, about serious matters of disempowerment and spiritual drift and the urgent, booming need for fundamental change.[79]

This statement is especially applicable to the practice of cypher. Although it is certainly true of rap music in general, there is an extra quality about the language that is used in cypher. Perhaps this is down to its improvised nature but one would assume that being 'virtuoso' also means to be able to deliver lyrics that entail complex literary or linguistic thought, such as being able to successfully undertake signifyin(g). One would also argue that although perhaps not always a conscious decision to echo hip hop's cultural and musical past, the very use of signifyin(g) itself indirectly plays homage to rap's African roots and becomes a cultural gesture to

---

[78] Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia, (1972), 'Signifying, loud-talking, and marking' in Kochman, Thomas (ed.), *Rappin' and stylin' out* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press), p. 314.
[79] Gates Jr. Henry Louis, and McKay, Nellie Y., (eds) *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), pp. 60-1.

acknowledge its past. The *art* of signifyin(g) though, is to make a point without being overly abrupt and I would agree with Mitchell-Kernan that,

> One of the defining characteristics of signifying is its indirect intent or metaphorical reference. This indirection appears to be almost purely stylistic. It may sometimes have the function of being euphemistic or diplomatic, but its art characteristics remain in the forefront even in such cases. Without the element of indirection, a speech act would not be considered signifying.[80]

When taken at face value, a statement or comment can appear to be a compliment, or at least, might even seem to be displaying envy, or an appreciation of something. However, in deconstructing a compliment, for example, you can begin to see an underhand, yet subtle dig, if one has been intended. Mitchell-Kernan provides good examples of what one argues could be termed as an 'inverted compliment'. As she explains:

> Another tactic of the signifier is to allude to something which somehow has humor value or negative import for the hearer in a casual fashion – information-dropping.
>
> [Example] Thelma, these kids look more and more like their fathers every day. *(Signifying about the fact that the children do not all have the same father)*.[81]

On the face of it, the example above could be seen as being a compliment or just a factual statement, but by using it, someone has signified that the children have different fathers, and therefore this could be interpreted as being a dig, or criticism. In *not* stating something, a whole lot more can actually be implied and this is certainly the main characteristic of signifyin(g). In summary, on the face of things, statements are fairly harmless, but in looking beyond the surface, one can begin to decipher that there is more to such words than meets the eye. Regardless of the extent to which signifyin(g) occurs, it reflects knowledge of and the ability to participate in a black oral tradition, as well as a practical ability to utilise and manipulate language in a style that is appropriate to hip hop culture, and, more specifically, appropriate to the linguistic control that is demonstrated within the practice of cypher, and rap in a general sense, alike. Looking at the content of rap lyrics, and specifically the lyrics in cypher and MC battles, the way in which it is

---

[80] Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia, (1972), 'Signifying, loud-talking, and marking' in Kochman, Thomas (ed.), *Rappin' and stylin' out* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press), p. 326.
[81] Ibid., p. 325.

acceptable to be verbally abusive to one another, especially if undertaken in a witty or humorous manner, you can begin to see that there is *more* going on. In using the defining characteristic of derogatory terms and language that would typically be regarded as offensive, one agrees with Mitchell-Kernan that

> Such features serve to define the style being used, indicating its tone and describing the setting and participants as being appropriate to the use of such an artistic style. Further, such features indicate that it should be recognized that a verbal duel is occurring and that what is said is meant in a joking, perhaps also threatening, manner. A slight switch in code may carry implications for other components in the speech act. Because verbal duelling treads a fine line between play and real aggression, it is a kind of linguistic activity which requires strict adherence to socio-linguistic rules.[82]

It is also important to note that without some kind of cultural parallel between the participants involved in an act of signifyin(g), much of the message may be completely lost. It could be argued, therefore, that in order to maintain momentum in any exchange of signifyin(g), or to maintain the cyclical motion within a cypher, participants who are unknown to one another must 'scope out' their peers and in doing so, assess the knowledge, and possibly intelligence, of their peers to work out how far any message through signifyin(g) will be understood. As Mitchell-Kernan summarises:

> To correctly decode the message, a hearer must be finely tuned to values which he observes in relation to all other components of the speech act. To do so he must rely on his conscious or unconscious knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules attached to this usage. Meaning, often assumed by linguists to be signalled entirely through code features, is actually dependent upon a consideration of other components of a speech act.[83]

For now, I can conclude that signifyin(g) is a verbal art and is central to communication in black contemporary culture. I would argue further that signifyin(g) is a highly sophisticated artform in itself and anchors the lineage of African oral traditions from their roots to their manifestation in contemporary society. It is of paramount importance to the development of street consciousness and hip hop culture and there will be further discussion on this matter in Chapter 3.

---

[82] Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia, (1972), 'Signifying, loud-talking, and marking' in Kochman, Thomas (ed.), *Rappin' and stylin' out* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press), p. 328.
[83] Ibid., pp. 328-9.

1.6   Caribbean and Latino influences into the mix

With much emphasis placed on the African ancestry of hip hop culture in this chapter thus far, it is important to consider the impact of other cultures on rap music and how they have also influenced and shaped rap's musical and social characteristics. Although already touched on in 1.2, this section will consider the influence of reggae, dub and other West Indian musical styles that have played their part in making hip hop culture what it is today. It is also important to consider the impact of individual migrants from the Caribbean who arrived in New York and went on to become the pioneers of hip hop as a whole new subculture and movement. As Monson comments on Gilroy's scholarship,

> The Caribbean antecedents of hip hop, transported to New York from Jamaica, which frequently go unacknowledged, are a particular sore point for Gilroy, who asks "what is it about black America's writing elite which means that they need to claim this diasporic cultural form in such an assertively nationalist way?"[84]

Perhaps Gilroy has been overly critical here in his views on black American scholarship, Monson's point is valid nonetheless and one aims to address this, not by analysing how or why this has been the case, but by seeking to support the theory that rap's Caribbean roots need to be acknowledged here. It is especially pertinent given that New York was the main settling point of the majority of Caribbean immigrants in the early 20th Century, and became home to another major cultural community through diaspora. It is unfortunate to note that people from the Caribbean diaspora immediately became a marginalised group of people upon their arrival in New York and their prospects and opportunities were very bleak. The significance of marginalisation within hip hop culture and its impact on rap, including cypher, will be discussed in the proceeding chapter. In a positive context, the influence of Caribbean music in its new home contributed significantly to the development of rap, and in a good way. As Keyes points out,

> With a large concentration of West Indians in New York City, the musical scene would soon be altered. In an effort to create contexts similar to

---

[84] Monson, Ingrid, (Ed.), Introduction, *The African Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 5, quoting Gilroy (1993, p. 34).

Jamaican dancehall culture, U.S. street DJs followed suit, creating outdoor discotheques in local parks.[85]

People such as DJ Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, with their Caribbean roots, are absolutely central to the creation and evolution of hip hop culture and it is highly relevant to investigate their respective roles in connection to the development of rap. There is an almost double sense of relevance due to the way in which they made New York their home, as well as the home of hip hop culture. In agreement with George

> Caribbean culture clearly informed hip hop's Holy Trinity – Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool Herc. Two of them, Flash and Herc, were either born in the Caribbean or had close relatives from there. In Bam's case, non-American black music had been essential to his aesthetic.[86]

Furthermore, Krims also attests this theory and argues that differing cultural influences are conducive in encouraging the continual rejuvenation and development of rap music, in stating that,

> The effects of global rap music are by no means one-way from the United States outward; in addition to the well-known formative (and ever-renewing) role of Jamaican music in rap, hip-hop culture and rap continue to respond to forces outside the United States, as one might witness in the relatively recent revival of popular interest in DJing, spurred in part by forces in Japanese and European hip-hop culture.[87]

Rap's varied genetic make-up was vital for the creation of hip hop culture and without the central melting pot of New York, with its cultural diversity stemming from several diasporas, it is difficult to say whether hip hop would exist today. Similarly, several spin off genres of rap music have resulted from further diasporas, such as the development of 'Reggaetón' from a mixture of reggae, Puerto Rican rhythms and North American hip hop. It should also be noted that many communities have adopted hip hop as their own, and several migrant communities that have been established in New York, have embraced hip hop culture to the extent where it has become part of their everyday lives, such as Puerto Rican hip

---

[85] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 54-5.
[86] George, Nelson, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 57. Also mentioned in Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verso 1994), p. 39, in Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 54 and in others.
[87] Krims, Adam, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 5.

hop, as documented by scholars such as Juan Flores. There will be more about the impact of indigenous music on rap in section 1.7, in particular, focusing on the influence, if any, of Native American culture on hip hop; the section will also look at how Native Americans are also a community who have adopted hip hop but. For now, I will focus on the Caribbean and Latino influences on hip hop culture.

Before the meeting and mixing of all of the different musical styles in New York that contributed to the creation of hip hop culture, it is wise to note that several diasporas had already taken place elsewhere and at different times, thus making an indirect contribution to the melting pot. These previous diasporas would have subsequent impact on musical styles, and, as Lipsitz notes,

> Of course Caribbean music had long been familiar in Africa. The British government stationed West Indian regiments in West Africa as early as the 1830s, and their syncopated brass band and gumbey musics gained immediate popularity. The adaba variety of Nigerian highlife bears traces of calypso, while that nation's juju music uses the Brazilian samba drum.[88]

This assertion highlights that the creation of rap has something of a 'chicken and egg' situation, and further supports the idea that hip hop culture had been a long time in the making and didn't simply occur due to the particular diasporas that built New York. Certainly, the cultural foundations of New York *enabled* the birth of hip hop culture, but its conception occurred a long time before its birth and had multiple starting points, not only in Africa but amongst Caribbean and Latino communities. Again, George addresses this situation by stating that

> One of the prevailing assumptions around hip hop is that it was, at some early moment, solely African American created, owned, controlled and consumed. It's an appealing origin myth – but the evidence just isn't there to support it. Start with who 'invented' hip hop: In its days as an evolving street culture, Latino dancers and tastemakers – later internationally known as breakers – were integral to its evolution, because of the synergy between what the mobile DJs played and what excited the breakers.[89]

The key word that George uses in this statement is 'synergy'. To a great extent, synergy is what makes hip hop culture *work;* the synergy between different styles within the musical features of rap, the synergy amongst hip hop's participants and especially between those from various marginalised communities, and the synergy

---

[88] Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads,* (New York & London: Verso: 1994), p. 42, footnote 55.
[89] George, Nelson, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 57.

between the present day and hip hop's cultural past. I would also argue that a definite synergy cab be found between the previously mentioned pioneers of hip hop culture, Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc, and the way in which they interacted with a new place, New York, and made it their home. There is a constant dialogue between multiple layers of all characteristics that have contributed to the formation and development of hip hop culture.

The continuous fusion of musical and cultural practices from different regions has enabled hip hop culture to be constantly evolving and changing shape as time has moved forward. It is interesting to note that hip hop's *function* within a community largely remains the same for people from different cultures and this provides food for thought for Chapter 4 which will focus on cultural identity and the role that rap and hip hop culture play in the issue of identity, especially within the migrant communities that can often be classed as being marginalised. I fully agree with Flores' theory that the Jamaican element in hip hop culture has filled a cultural void between Puerto Ricans and African Americans in hip hop. Firstly, Flores asserts that

> Hip hop emerged as a cultural space shared by Puerto Ricans and Blacks, a sharing that once again articulates their congruent and intermingling placement in the impinging political and economic geography. It is also a sharing in which, as the story of rap reveals, the dissonances are as telling as the harmonies, and the distances as heartfelt as the intimacy. The Puerto Ricans' nagging intimation that they are treading on Black turf and working in a tradition of performative expression most directly traceable to James Brown and Jimmy Castor, the dozens and the blues, makes rap into a terrain that is as much contested as it is coinhabited on equal terms.[90]

Flores goes on to address this issue and concludes with the following assertion that

> Jamaican dubbing, with its strong Caribbean resonance, serves as a bridge in this respect, just as reggae in more recent years is helping to link rap to otherwise disparate musical trends, especially in its reggaespañol dancehall versions. In the historical perspective of Black and Puerto Rican interaction, rap is thus a lesson in cultural negotiation and transactions as much as fusions and crossovers, especially as those terms are bandied about in mainstream parlance.[91]

---

[90] Flores, Juan, *From Bomba to Hip Hop* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 138.
[91] Ibid.

This theory moves forward to discussing the distinctly Caribbean musical features that have been inherited by hip hop culture. The feature most relevant to cypher is Jamaican toasting and, mentioned previously, I will expand on this feature in due course. Keyes sets the scene as to a possible explanation of Jamaican ancestry in rap, in stating that

> By the late 1950s, Jamaican DJs shifted their musical taste from American popular music to something uniquely Jamaican. Prince Buster, a sound system DJ, provided this transition. At the time, the Jamaican popular music scene turned toward its own musical resources in the invention of "ska" a forerunner of rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall.[92]

It seems that a pattern of a continuous 'Jamaican revival' has become part of hip hop culture, and can be witnessed in several of hip hop's spin-off genres globally, including the emergence and growing popularity of Dubstep in the UK, which has grown from its origins of dub (from Jamaica) and drum & bass. Keyes further adds that,

> Alongside ska, several changes took place in Jamaica during the 1960s: the proliferation of the Rastafari movement; the change in political power; and the maturation and globalization of Jamaica's popular musical culture (through the reggae music of Bob Marley and the Wailers). These musical and socio-political tides were most evident with Jamaica's youth culture. Dancehall or sound system culture remained closely linked to Jamaica's working class. Soon it would be emblematic of a thriving youth culture known as "rude boys" or "rudies."[93]

Although perhaps not the *main* influence on rap and hip hop culture, the response to a society undergoing radical change from Jamaica's youth, as documented by Keyes above, demonstrates a parallel with hip hop culture and its own participants. Although the Jamaican musical and social features that helped to shape hip hop culture present their own unique identity and cultural significance, it is worth noting that, despite Jamaica's own sound, one is still drawn back to Africa. Bohlman concisely summarises this by saying

> Bob Marley came to symbolize the double consciousness of diaspora by making several different kinds of connections to Africa, but the primary quality of each was to underscore the commonality of Jamaicans and Africans. Both were engaged in struggle, at one level against the forces of historical

---

[92] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 52.
[93] Ibid., p. 53.

oppression, slavery, and colonialism, and at another against global economic politics.[94]

Perhaps it is this double consciousness of diaspora which has been subsequently engrained into hip hop culture and in doing so has made rap an accessible genre for those from similarly marginalised backgrounds. As all of rap's musical influences stem from styles and genres which could be classed as diasporic in their own right, it is no surprise that rap's accessibility has contributed to hip hop's global appeal.

One of the most salient musical characteristics in rap to have come from Caribbean influences is toasting. Conversely, one could argue that toasting itself stems from African griotism, and is therefore not a purely Jamaican artform. However, due to its frequent use in most genres of music to come from Jamaica, and the way in which it has been utilised in contemporary black music, there is no doubt that the practice of toasting is Jamaican to its core. Toasting evolved in Jamaica and became an intrinsic part of the musical set at parties and social occasions, and involved the MC encouraging the audience, though chanting and providing humour, over the music. The rhythmic complexity in the lyrics of toasting reflects a direct relationship to rap music, and particularly with the practice of cypher. Similarly, the improvisatory nature of both toasting and cypher makes for a close link between the two. One would argue that toasting is *the* oral tradition of Jamaica. The amount of wit, use of metaphor and the presence of braggadocio in cypher, and also in MC battles, highlights a direct relationship to toasting. Another bond that can be seen in the relationship between rap and toasting is, as Keyes draws attention to

> The link between the Bronx and Kingston is substantial, though in general it has been unmentioned or simply glossed over in previous works on rap music and hip-hop culture. Toasting and Djing were initially employed simultaneously in the Jamaican tradition. The model for this combination can be traced to Kingston and the development of sound system or dancehall culture.[95]

In summary, music from the Caribbean (and from within Latino cultures) has provided a key branch in influencing and subsequently developing hip hop culture and, particularly, rap music. The Caribbean influence has had direct impact on the

[94] Bohlman, Philip V., *World Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 119.
[95] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 50.

cultural and musical contexts of the practice of cypher. Equally, the relationship between reggae and rap seems to be something which is mutually influential and facilitates the continual rejuvenation and evolution of the two respective genres. In agreement with Keyes, one would also argue that

> The musical fusion of Jamaican dancehall and African American-based funk music and the verbal art performance of both cultures contributes to the distinctiveness of rap music.[96]

An example of where reggae and New York hip hop have worked in collaboration is the album *Distant Relatives* which is a collaborative album from reggae musician, Damian Marley (son of Bob Marley), and NY rapper, Nas.[97] The album demonstrates a hybrid of musical styles yet builds on the themes of common ancestry and the issue of struggle and marginalisation. This collaborative album is a working example of the relationship between reggae and rap, as mentioned above, and demonstrates the affinity between hip hop and its Caribbean roots.

1.7   The Influence (if any) of Indigenous Music on Rap

There is a general perception and one which is quite accurate, that rap is a form of black music and the demographic of the majority of its participants are African American. As outlined in the previous section, there is clear evidence of a musical, cultural and ethnographical link to Africa, and to the Caribbean, but far less consideration has been given to the actual 'American' element, if any, in rap's cultural and musical influences. In a genre celebrated for being born in New York, it seems to be far less American than African in its roots. Although one could see this as something quite obviously to do with the fact that America in its current form is a relatively 'new' country, in general terms, that has been founded on multiple diasporas and therefore has cultural ancestry that seems to *belong* elsewhere. This raises the question, is there any part of native America, or even part of 'the American' in rap music? Also, to what extent does rap resonate with the modern-day American?

---

[96] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 66.
[97] Nas & Damian Marley, *Distant Relatives (*Universal Republic/Def Jam, 2010) .

The contribution of reggae to rap highlights the fact that a genre of music that is usually more-or-less deemed to be indigenous, reggae, grown from Jamaican musical traditions, had a highly significant influence and impact on the shaping of rap. Conversely, I argue though that reggae is not legitimately 'indigenous' as in itself is a genre formed as a result of the musical and cultural fusions that go hand-in-hand with diaspora. It is difficult to know where to draw the line in music when trying to establish its level of indigenousness. In centuries in the future, will rap be considered an indigenous music of America? Certainly, in some parts of the world, hip hop has been adopted as part of other cultures and therefore, could go on to be classed as an indigenous genre of music in years to come. A good example of where hip hop has been embraced and adopted outside America is in Mexico, and in other Latino cultures where hip hop culture has become part of people's everyday lives too, further supporting the theory that hip hop is not just for the African-American community.

To an extent, hip hop culture has been adopted into Native American culture, with artists such as Rezhogs[98] gaining success as rap artists in Native American communities. There are a few reasons one might speculate that the adoption of hip hop in other cultures has seemed so natural and happens to *fit* with other cultures. Firstly, rap is a marginalised genre of music with typically marginalised audience and participants. Hip hop has grown out of several diasporas and is therefore suited to adapting to fit with the social and musical practices of 'other' cultures; it is highly versatile. Finally, with so many of hip hop's early participants having Latino ancestry and roots, it is easy to see how the word of hip hop culture spread to relatives and friends of Puerto Ricans, for example, in their old countries, as well as including parts of their heritage within their engagement with rap music, thus contributing to the cultural melting pot of rap.

Although rap might reflect its predominantly African roots, as well as other cultural influences, it is nonetheless an original form of music. While this may seem to be a contradiction due to the fact that rap uses pastiche to some extent, and

---

[98] http://www.rezhogs.com/ website for Rezhogs – a rap group whose members are of Native American descent. A Rezhogs track has been provided on the accompanying CD, track 12.

given the way its participants appropriate their past, with the utilisation of practices such as sampling in rap, one cannot ignore rap's uniqueness as a musical genre. Hip hop culture in itself basically builds on recyclable elements of its diverse musical and social heritage. It is original in the sense that it actually *does* this unique form of reprocessing to create something new. In terms of cypher, I argue that it is its rawness that corresponds to the practice of indigenous music; cypher can take place without the need for technology and yet it stays fresh by the constant rejuvenation in the moment by its participants. In a world where a great deal of time and money is spent on high quality musical technology and a great deal of emphasis is placed on high production values, even within hip hop culture, cypher provides a refreshing contrast and highlights that the simplicity and rawness in its practice make it very accessible, and, perhaps even timeless. The spirit of certain kinds of indigenous music certainly lives on in cypher through this particular facet of rawness and sense of minimalism, almost tribal in its character.

Going back to questioning to what extent rap can be considered as American, it is fair to say that there is little to no evidence of any influence of Native American music or culture in rap. This is not to say that rap is therefore not American. What *is* important here is that while there may be no visible crossover in musical practices between Native America and its newer inhabitants, there is a definite cultural resonance between certain elements in hip hop and the indigenous music of America. One would argue further that this cultural resonance can be divided into clear streams. Firstly, there are many parallels with Native Americans and Africans. Whilst both cultures suffered at the hands of slavery, a common bond of marginalisation is apparent. I am also curious to know whether during this period of slavery and interaction between cultures, a crossover in their respective musical traditions was brought about, but unfortunately there seems to be little evidence of this. The parallel in oppression and marginalisation between both cultures is therefore very valid nonetheless. The second strand of cultural resonance with rap and the indigenous music of America, is very much rooted in the presence of rhythm. Both African and Native American musical practices reflect complex rhythmic patterns and drumming is present in every musical performance or event. There will

be more on rhythm in the proceeding section of this chapter but I would finally like to note that the theory of a link between rhythm and cultural consciousness in African musical traditions, as mentioned previously, can also be applied here to a sense of similar consciousness, soul or spirit, in Native American musical practice.

In Native American culture, not only does the drum provide accompaniment to chanting and at social and spiritual events, but it is a tool that is used to encourage progression and provides a heartbeat to a community, or the pulse of participation, in both a physical *and* social context. Rhythm is used in a similar, very spiritual way within Native American music. While I do not wish to confuse spirituality and religion, it is fair to say that rhythm plays its part in both of these contexts and Native Americans live in accordance with deeply-rooted spiritual beliefs. Over the years of slavery, this spirituality was influenced by the introduction of new religions and practices, and specifically through the teachings and associated musical practices in Christianity. In an additional connection between Christianity and its links with slavery, and therefore its connection to the birth of hip hop culture through gospel, it is worth noting Small's point that

> In adapting Christianity to their intellectual heritage and present needs, thus laying the foundation for a style of Christianity that is still very much present in the black churches today, the slaves also took its musical styles, introducing into the Protestant hymnody of that time and place forms which left room for the expression at the time and time of both individual and communal feeling. Neither their faith nor their music was in any way a retreat from reality, however intolerable; they were means by which the slaves succeeded in preserving a sense of personal worth, of community and hope for the future in the face of a society that denied to them all three.[99]

Here, Small raises an extremely important point in highlighting that the ethos of preservation have been rooted in hip hop culture since its conception; this has been used as an opportunity for self-expression and to feel part of a community. This is especially pertinent to people from marginalised communities as a result of diaspora and a feature which binds together Native Americans and those affected by slavery, through a common feeling of wanting to preserve their heritage through their social and cultural practices, including music. Religion in general has played a major role in several diasporas and religion is closely linked to marginalisation.

---

[99] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 95.

Another area in hip hop culture which seems to have been pervaded by Native American cultural practices is in breakdancing. The particular element of the 'up rock'[100] dance move in breakdancing seems to mirror a form of dance, 'the fancy dance' in Native American culture.[101] The Fancy Dance is a ritual dance in Native American culture that is used as a war dance, and demonstrates a very tribal character. In comparison to cypher, the Fancy Dance also highlights a few parallels. In summary, these parallels include the way participants of each respective artform have the opportunity to express themselves and communicate through their performance. Also, each artform does not entail any physical violence. I would assert that the Fancy Dance is more comparable to MC battles than to cypher. This is due to the fact that although breakdancing can occur in crews, up rocking is usually executed in a context closer to the MC battle, in a one-on-one situation and in a 'dance fight'[102] format. There is also the element of freestyling in up rocking, as within the MC battle context; rhythm, and timing, is crucial to the success of both of these artforms. Perhaps the examples given here indicate that many indigenous influences, and therefore a bigger part of Native America, are represented in hip hop culture than previously thought, and contrary to earlier comments in this section.

Although not an example of any influence of Native American culture on hip hop culture, but a valid point to highlight here nonetheless, is the connection between Native Americans and New York. The geographical area of New York was inhabited by Native Americans until Europeans began to settle there in the 16th and 17th Centuries. When the Native American communities dispersed at this point, perhaps a connection lingered between people and the area of their geographical origin. However, the main connection, albeit distant, that I would like to address here is a situation which occurred much more recently. It is often overlooked that skyline of New York is dominated by skyscrapers which were built by members of Native American communities. Native Americans contributed to the *physical* aspect of making New York the 'cultural capital' of the world in the early to mid 20th

---

[100] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c12CNiUV4AQ&feature=related This is a video of breakdancing instruction on the 'Up Rock'.

[101] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ini9rvGWtaw This is a video of the Native American Indian Men's Fancy Dance Championship at the First Nations Pow Wow at the University of Washington in Seattle, 2007.

[102] As demonstrated in the video shown in the footnote above.

Century, with their seemingly fearless approach to heights and adeptness in steel work and construction. Hip hop culture has contributed *socially* to New York, and vice versa, with New York providing the ideal base for hip hop culture to grow. So to a certain extent, one would argue that there is an element of Native American spirit in hip hop culture by proxy. Unterberger confirms that rap has a place in contemporary Native American culture in that,

> No tradition is immutable, and Native American music is in a period of unprecedented development. While traditional functions continue, and even thrive, Native American music has also expanded into the commercial world of recording and concert tours. The impetus is a reassertion of Native American identity. After widespread suppression earlier in the century, music is once again a vehicle for Native concerns and cultural values. It is notably manifested through a variety of hybrid styles splicing together the old and the new. Young Native Americans listen to contemporary styles just as fervently as their peers of other ethnic backgrounds, and so rap, rock, country, and reggae rhythms have joined the powwow drum as a means of conveying ideas and images.[103]

We can see that the parallel between Native American culture and hip hop culture is present, in that music serves as a channel of communication in each culture respectively but it is also fair to summarise that hip hop culture has been built on the result of several diasporas, and rap music has emerged from the respective styles and fusions to come out of these diasporas. As Lipsitz states

> Hip hop culture brings to a world audience the core values of music from most sub-Saharan African cultures. It blends music and life into an integrated totality, uniting performers, dancers, and listeners in a collaborative endeavour.[104]

Whilst there are parallels between America's indigenous music of Native American traditions and rap, through the significance placed on rhythm, and also through the common struggle, or marginalisation, felt by their respective members or participants, there is no evidence to be able to say specifically that indigenous American music has had an influence on rap. Conversely, there is still a valid connection between Native American music and rap, with the adoption of rap as genre popular with the youth of Native American descendants today. It is also worth mentioning here that there is a tenuous link between Native America and hip hop in

---

[103] Unterberger, Richie, *Music USA* (London: Rough Guides, 1999), p. 364.
[104] Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verso, 1994), p. 36.

that Melle Mel, one of the pioneers of hip hop, identifies as being of Cherokee descent, but there are no sources to prove this. The indigenous music that has influenced rap is that of African and Caribbean traditions, as outlined in previous sections, with the African diaspora being the main event to have subsequent consequences and impact on the shaping and development of rap music as a genre. In partial agreement with Lipsitz

> While clearly grounded in the philosophies and techniques of African music, the radical nature of hip hop comes less from its origins than from its uses. The flexibility of African musical forms encourages innovation and adaptation – a blending of old and new forms into dynamic forward-looking totalities.[105]

I would also argue here that part of hip hop's 'radical' nature does indeed stem from the spirit of the philosophy and cultural practices of its African ancestors; hip hop's nature did not form in such a way that it was as a response to be useful. Whilst hip hop's uses are highly significant here, they should be regarded separately to hip hop's origins for the purpose of establishing the roots of hip hop and the influence (if any) of indigenous music on rap. To a great extent, rap continues to resonate with its participants and audience all over the world, and from different cultural and social backgrounds, although one would argue that rap's greatest resonance today continues to be with the marginalised communities who engage with it, particularly the young African-Americans of New York. Cypher represents a great deal of cultural resonance for many of its participants and continues to reflect an afrocentric ethos, despite it being a fully 'American' participatory musical practice that links to its cultural past on many levels.

1.8   Rhythm

As Small asserts

> rhythm is to the African musician what harmony is to the European – the central organizing principle of the art. In practically all African music making there is a rhythmic polyphony, with at least two different rhythms proceeding in counterpoint with each other, held together only by the existence of a common beat; even the downbeats will quite likely not coincide in different parts.[106]

---

[105] Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verso, 1994), p. 37.
[106] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue,* (Calder, London: 1987), p. 25.

One would argue that Small's concept of the 'common beat' as the *musical* idiom of African music, or of black music in general, represents much more than a musical characteristic. It could be said that the common beat represents a shared consciousness amongst black musicians due to an ever-present sense of a common struggle within black communities. As mentioned in previous sections, this recurring sense of struggle within many styles of contemporary black music could be attributed to the fact that many black people have become part of marginalised communities. Marginalisation in this sense has occurred particularly as a result of diaspora to some extent, but especially due to black culture's past association with slavery and discontent at the hands of white people, and this concept will be revisited and looked at in further detail in Chapter 4.

It is a widely regarded assumption that a sense of rhythm is intrinsic to and embedded in black culture and, conversely, a perception of a definite lack of rhythm in white people, in a stereotypical view on white culture, is ever present. There have been several references in popular culture to this particular stereotype of white people with no sense of rhythm, including the inferiority of white people as musicians, athletes and sportsmen as perceived by black people (and actually by white people too). An example of this stereotype is evidenced the 1992 film, *White Men Can't Jump.* This film focussed on the assumptions of black basketball players' thoughts about a potential new team-mate, a fellow basketball player, and that this player would not be as good as the rest of the team because he is white, and based an assumption of his sporting ability on this fact (but who actually turned out to be better than these players). [107] Ultimately, the film highlights an example of signifyin(g) to some extent, with the basketball players outwitted in a sense, and almost being hustled, by their white peer. Similarly, there is a widespread ideology that 'white men can't dance', built into both black and white cultures, which attracts many videos and online opinions set to both prove (and disprove) this train of thought. In a chapter entitled 'White Men Can't Rap,' written by an MC, The Black Dot, he comments,

---

[107] Shelton, Ron, (Director) *White Men Can't Jump* (20th Century Fox, 1992).

You ever seen white people try to dance to black music? When we listen to the beat we hear, boom bud at, boom boom bu dat tss ts, boom dat, boom boom bud at tss. This is what white people hear when they listen to the same beat, boom dat boom dat tss tss boom dat boom dat boom dat tss. They start dancing all off beat and you sittin' there scratchin' your head like, what the fuck are they listening to? Oh and don't let it be reggae music, that'll really fuck them up! The key is the silent beat. You have to have rhythm to pick it up. You have to feel it.[108]

While it is a generalisation, there may be an element of relevance, or truth, in the theory that there is something inbuilt into black culture around rhythm that white culture lacks. As Small goes on to describe,

This emphasis on rhythm implies also the existence among Africans of what has been termed a 'metronome sense' – an ability to hear the music in terms of that common beat even when it is not explicitly sounded. It is assumed that musician, dancers and listeners alike are able to supply it for themselves, making it possible to create rhythmic structures of a complexity and sophistication unknown in European music.[109]

In rap music, rhythm is a crucial element and provides the foundation on which to build rap's other musical features. Quite often, in rap, the rhythm is defined by a break sampled from a previous record thus meaning rap literally builds on its musical ancestry through rhythm. Linking back to section 1.6, it was Kool Herc who pioneered the use of break beats, as a means to prolong the *best* part of a record, usually by taking just a small snippet lasting a couple of bars, and repeating this sample to augment it into a much longer section of music, much to the delight of his audience.[110] Clearly, rhythm is highly significant in hip hop culture and in agreement with Osumare, and to explain further

The original impetus in hip-hop culture was the break beat – the percussion breaks that included congas, bongos, bells, and shakers – within songs that were looped together to extend the rhythmic interlude for the "break" dancers. The percussive break rhythms continue to globally inspire the communal ritual of the underground hip-hop subculture.[111]

In terms of cypher, rhythm is no less important but is used in a slightly different context to rap music in general. The *flow* in cypher lyrics from participants is

[108] Black Dot, The, *Hip Hop Decoded* (New York: MOME Publishing, 2006), p. 75.

[109] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Clader 1987), pp. 25-6.

[110] More about the use of breakbeat and an explanation from Kool Herc as to the social conditions that provoked its practice in section 4.1.

[111] Osumare, Halifu, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007), p. 47.

underpinned by rhythm in a couple of contexts. Firstly, a participant must be able to demonstrate a flow with their lyrical improvisation in cypher. This flow is punctuated and creatively syllabically grouped by the participant in direct response to the rhythm over which they spit their lyrics. As Edwards states,

> The rhythm and rhyme of the flow are as important to rapping as melody and rhythm are to playing musical instruments.[112]

And, furthermore, he asserts that,

> MCs agree that a strong flow is extremely valuable, either as a way of conveying the content clearly and effectively or as an element that takes center stage to impress the listener. Even artists who focus more on the content of the lyrics still stress how important flow is. Creating a song's flow is often the main priority for MCs, as it has an immediate impact and largely determines what the song sounds like.[113]

Edwards' point about flow here is also valid to cypher and ultimately points to a conclusion that flow, and therefore rhythm, is salient to the slick delivery of lyrics of cypher participants. I would argue further that, based on the points above, rhythm in hip hop culture facilitates effective communication. Communication is essential for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge as well as being a core theme that contributes to the foundation of the philosophy of hip hop culture. Edwards' first point above is echoed in a sense, by Small's assertion that

> As one might expect also, percussive sounds are prominent in African music; even the sounds of voices, flutes and stringed instruments may be given a percussive edge, while musicians like to introduce into their instrumental sound a good deal of indefinitely-pitched 'noise', even with such definite-pitch instruments as the xylophone and *mbira.*[114]

This is especially relevant to rap in terms of thinking about the way lyrics and words are grouped and positioned by rappers to create a certain flow in their music. To a great extent, one would argue that the lyrics in rap, and especially in cypher, are therefore utilised as an instrument. This theory links with other sections in terms of thinking about rap as a marginalised genre of music due to the lack of material wealth of rap's participants who can't afford musical instruments and formal lessons, and how rap therefore appears to come from 'nothing' - which is the core theme of the final section in this thesis.

---

[112] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 64.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 26.

Rhythm can be *perceived* rather than being physically present in music, for example, in some performances, there is no physical musical accompaniment yet participants work with an implied rhythm. Equally, a rhythmic accompaniment in cypher can be present by using handclapping or beatboxing, or in the case of an arranged cypher event such as at EOW or in an MC Battle situation, a DJ may provide the rhythmic support. As Osumare asserts, affirming the significance of rhythm in many cultures worldwide, that

> Rhythm is the foundation of the emcee's oral phrasing and metaphoric allusions that create a dense polyrhythmic *bricolage.* In global hip-hop, rap music's approach to the layered, polyrhythmic aspects of the Africanist aesthetic unites with other world music, such as the Hawaiian hula *ipu* rhythms, *bhangra* music emanating from Punjabi-Asian British pop culture in London, and *kwaito* music of South Africa.[115]

Secondly, the feeling of rhythm amongst cypher participants in a collective sense is what facilitates the cyclical movement of cypher participation and maintains momentum amongst participants of the group; in other words, the flow of the cypher, rather than a literal flow of cypher lyrics. There is more about rhythmic accompaniment in cypher and MC battles respectively in section 4.2. In addition to the previous discussion here, rhythm can be utilised in a call and response situation. Osumare uses the example of call and response between a DJ and their audience and,

> At the root of this social connection is communication; hence the implicit dialogic aspect of the Africanist aesthetic. The cross rhythms of West African Ewe drumming, for example, literally "talk" to each other within the music, just as the soloist and chorus do in call-and-response gospel music. Similarly, social dialogue ensues between the emcee and the club crowd, as he/she lyrically flows over looped beats and sampled old-school "joints," leaving space for the knowledgeable audience to chime in to the musical hook.[116]

This statement further supports the argument that rhythm facilitates and supports communication on several levels within most forms of black music, but specifically within rap. The communicative aspect of cypher depends on rhythm for its success. In terms of determining the 'success' of an example of cypher, one can argue that rhythm is a crucial factor in making things work. A synchronicity between

---

[115] Osumare, Halifu, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007), p. 43.
[116] Ibid., p. 48.

participants in both a musical and in terms of a shared consciousness context is determined mostly by *rhythm* of some sort. It is this synchronicity between participants that could be described as a groove; Monson's explanation of groove, as a 'rhythmic feeling' and synchronicity amongst jazz musicians, can also be adapted slightly to fit perfectly with the similar tension and feeling amongst cypher participants whilst taking part in cypher

> There is an inherent tension within the jazz ensemble between the individual and the group. On the one hand, the aesthetic of the music is centered on the inventiveness and uniqueness of individual solo expression; on the other, climactic moments of musical expression require the cohesiveness and participation of the entire ensemble. In an improvisational music, such as jazz, the interaction between group and individual greatly affects the ultimate composition and development of the music.[117]

Cypher is about synchronicity amongst its participants; it is a fine art of balancing and supporting the individual in creativity and expression, whilst thriving as a team. In an example of cypher, its participants are all *in,* or *feeling*, the groove. Furthermore, Monson adds,

> The use of the term *feeling* as a synonym for *groove* underscores the emotional and interpersonal character of groove – something negotiated between musicians that is larger than themselves. Good time in this sense produces not only the physical patting of the feet but an emotional response as well.[118]

Monson's theory of the groove in jazz music and how it bonds feelings and provokes emotional responses amongst jazz musicians within a performance, exactly underpins the way dynamics between participants in cypher are demonstrated. Considering cypher as an improvisatory practice will be discussed in more detail in 4.1, but for now, it is worth noting that

> The background issue to keep in mind is that at any given moment in a performance, the improvising artist is always making musical choices in relationship to what everyone else is doing. These cooperative choices, moreover, have a great deal to do with achieving (or failing to achieve) a satisfying musical journey – the feeling of wholeness and exhilaration, the pleasure that accompanies a performance well done.[119]

---

[117] Monson, Ingrid, *Saying Something* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 66 -7.
[118] Ibid., p. 68.
[119] Ibid., p. 27.

Although cypher is not strictly a *performance* in the way Monson describes the interplay between musicians in a jazz ensemble here, there are notable parallels between jazz and cypher, which, ultimately boil down to their respective participants, including audience members, being part of a groove. That groove stems from a musical and cultural common rhythm and feeling.

In more recent work on rhythm, Fink addresses the issue of how rhythm and race are entwined and, in analysing popular black music, highlights the cultural difference between black vs. white from a musicological standpoint. Going back to the concept of 'groove,' Fink points out that rhythm is the central element, with the ability to sexualise music; rhythm is also used communicate with an audience. For example, a piece of music (or DJ), 'cutting out and then reintroducing a track's "four-on-the-floor" beat is a structural gesture, a teasing kind of communication with a dancing audience.'[120] This further supports the notion of *feeling* in music and how, certainly in the Western world, we can easily fall into the groove of a piece of music. Fink concludes that, popular black music, or

> Groove-based popular music is undeniably erotic; but it has little to do with
> *jouissance* as the collapse of (musical) discourse, an erotic self-abandonment more
> attractive to cultural theorists than pop-music producers and consumers. African
> American rhythm has a complex, structured erotics which, under analysis, reveals
> itself to white ears as an uncanny reflection not of difference, but of sameness. It
> relies on the same iron (capacity for maximizing pleasure through) self-control that
> we think we run to grooves to escape.[121]

Rap is dependent on rhythm for a rapper to execute a slick delivery of their lyrics. A personal favourite example of how a rapper plays around with rhythm can be heard in *My Melody* by Eric B. & Rakim. Rakim cleverly breaks down his lyrics into lines which utilise silence and syncopation where the listener would normally expect the lyrics to follow a more uniform rhythm or rhyming pattern. The lyrics of the first verse immediately throw off the listener by starting on the forth beat:

> Turn up the bass, check out my melody, hand out a cigar
> I'm lettin' knowledge be born and my name's the R
> A-K-I-M not like the rest of them, I'm not on a list

---

[120] Fink, Robert, 'Goal-Directed Soul? Analyzing Rhythmic Teleology in African American Popular Music', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (Vol. 64, No. 1, Spring 2011, pp. 179 – 238), p. 196.
[121] Ibid., p. 197.

That's what I'm sayin' I drop science like a scientist
My melody's in a code, the very next episode
Has the mic often distoritin' ready to explode
I keep the mic at Fahrenheit, freeze MCs to make 'em cold
The listeners' system is kickin' like solar
As I memorise, advertise like a poet
Keep you goin' when I'm flowin', smooth enough, you know with the rough
That's why the moral of my story I tell will be
Nobody beats the R, check out my melody[122]

The second verse, again, mixes up what the listener expects to hear, by separating the line, 'so what, I'm a mic-, -rophone fiend, addicted as soon as I seen' which displays Rakim's ability as a rapper to play with and manipulate lyrics around rhythm.

Finally, it is relevant in this section to discuss how the practice of sampling is absolutely rooted in rhythm and how one can build entire records out of small samples of rhythmic or melodic patterns, as musical phrases in their own right. As Krims describes

> Layering generalizes the notion of "break beats" well-known to rap scholars. The generalization describes entire songs, though, not just selected parts. Specifically, layering refers to the practice of building musical textures by overlapping multiple looped tracks.[123]

Successful sampling for rap artists depends on finding a suitable section of music, that can be utilised in a way in which the listeners of the subsequent rap tune can feel its groove. To some extent, groove simply implies resonance, but perhaps, one might assert that groove is something in a piece of music which invokes the 'metronome sense' amongst its listeners and audience, as outlined by Small above. As Monson goes on to elaborate on the notion of groove in jazz,

> Phil Bowler called it a "mutual feeling of agreement." Both Richard Davis and Kenny Washington emphasized the interpersonal aspect of groove by comparing it to "walking down the street" with someone. Davis's description likened groove to a romantic or familial relationship, Washington's to walking "arm-in-arm" with someone.[124]

---

[122] Eric B & Rakim, My Melody, *Paid In Full* (4th & B.way/Island, 1987). Video available to view here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a91rv2vTl4o
[123] Krims, Adam, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 54.
[124] Monson quoting jazz musicians in, Monson, Ingrid, *Saying Something* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 68.

As previously mentioned in this chapter, hip hop culture is in a state of constant development in terms of its musical characteristics as well as in the context of rap's consciousness aspect, and there is an inbuilt drive in hip hop culture that continues to move hip hop forward. One would argue that this drive is fuelled and channelled by rhythm, which is maintained in a sense by synchronicity amongst participants. All participants in cypher seem to be 'tuned in' and in the groove when witnessing first-hand and taking part in cypher. In summary, and in agreement with Osumare,

> Rhythm as a dynamic force is directly connected to the pulse of the human heart as well as the cycles of nature. Hence, the answer to why hip-hop is so compelling to youth around the globe can be discovered in the most basic human connection: the rhythmic lifeforce itself.[125]

1.8i   ***Conclusions from Chapter 1***

From the research presented in Chapter 1, I can draw several conclusions around the origins of hip hop culture that are highly significant and that are particularly noteworthy in relation to the practice of cypher. Fundamentally, rap is an Afrocentric genre of music which has inherited many African musical and cultural genes that have made a significant contribution to the shaping of rap and hip hop culture. The fusion of cultures and musical styles within hip hop culture has occurred as a direct outcome of its diasporic nature and rap reflects musical and social characteristics that echo its cultural past, predominantly stemming from West Africa, as well as the later addition of features inherited from Caribbean cultures. One of the main concluding points to note here is that rap has become a social commentary whose roots can be traced to the African griot. Rap continues to be a very 'social' form of music and one would argue that this is due to its parallels with griotism, where a great deal of emphasis is placed on the narration of everyday life and utilised as a form of communication between individuals.

Hip hop culture resulted from many musical and social conditions through diaspora, particularly of Africa and the Caribbean. For many people,

---

[125] Osumare, Halifu, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 43.

New York provided the birthplace for hip hop culture and since then, there has been a great cultural resonance between New York and hip hop. Cypher is a communication vessel for everyday people to channel their everyday experiences. This highlights that the African vernacular continues to thrive within rap music, and especially within the practice of cypher, and I can conclude that the conditions as a result of African and Caribbean diasporas have been central to the shaping of rap music as well as being central in influencing the dynamics and philosophy of hip hop culture. It should also be noted here that the practice of rap has been influenced by the secular, and perhaps social, elements of worship, and many parallels can be seen between the formats and function of rap and worship respectively. Rap is open to further developments in a musical sense, such as spin-off and hybrid genres, and this can be attributed to the fact that rap has a diasporic nature and is therefore best placed to be open to progression.

Call and response has been highlighted at various points in this chapter and I conclude that this is relevant to rap in terms of a musical and cultural sense. On one hand the literal presence of call and response is present in rap music, and especially in situations such as MC battle and cypher, and on the other hand, call and response can be considered in a much broader philosophical context which might assert that rap is the response which has manifested from a 'call' by one's musical and cultural ancestors. Similarly, the genres of blues and gospel can be thought of in this way and both these genres have a great deal of resonance with their respective audiences. Equally, these audiences would be of a wide and varied demographic, but generally speaking, they would be composed of mainly marginalised or oppressed people to a certain extent. The parallel between these audiences and rap's marginalised audience (and participants) again demonstrates a cultural resonance.

The Caribbean influences on music in New York added a further dimension to the emergence of the Afrocentric genre of rap. These influences brought something new and contrasting to the melting pot of New York,

whilst being complementary at the same time, due to their own influence of African music from previous periods of diaspora between the West Indies and Africa. It is the introduction of new musical and cultural influences that fuelled the birth and subsequent development of hip hop culture and new influences and fusions contribute to keeping rap fresh today. The parallels in political and social circumstances between the people of Africa and the Caribbean, further bonded their cultural practices and communities and this meeting of cultures under a very specific set of circumstances can be attributed to the fluidity of New York. I assert that hip hop culture is a direct manifestation of cultural synergy and the mutual understanding and experiences of diasporic people who came together in the hub of New York.

Signifyin(g) was explored here due to signifyin(g)'s large association with Africa, and therefore primarily indicative of rap's African beginnings. It is also a highly significant form of verbal communication in many forms of black culture and I would argue that signifyin(g) is central to rap's narrative ethos, and closely related to griotism. In terms of rapping skills, and the ability to participate in cypher, I assert that signifyin(g) as a means of communication is a tool that can be utilised to add a further dimension of sophistication to rap lyrics or within cypher and encourages the articulation of words and metaphors which is a central facet in the success of a participant in cypher.

Ultimately, these conclusions all support the argument that rap is a manifestation of survival. This can be applied in two kinds of context; firstly, African cultural and musical practices have survived and continue to live within the practice of rap. Musical characteristics, such as the call and response feature within rap, show a direct living descendant of the original African ancestor. Secondly, the African griot is about the survival of an African oral tradition, with the function of keeping the history, stories and experiences of communities alive, which is a function common to cypher. Signifyin(g) represents part of survival in an everyday sense; survival in the street sense means that one must have an understanding of what's going on in a social sense, as in street consciousness. If one can execute signifyin(g)

then the tools are there to engage in banter with peers, make it more interesting and demonstrate a sense of humour, which contributes to the survival of street consciousness. The Motherland is represented in hip hop culture and rap has an Afrocentric heart. Representation of Africa in hip hop are demonstrated directly, through mentions in the lyrics and themes pursued by rap artists, and indirectly, through the subconscious use of signifyin(g), storytelling and many other musical characteristics such as call and response, that have survived several diasporas and centuries, without losing any Afrocentricity.

All of these conclusions are significant to the practice of cypher and help to put the proceeding chapters into context, in terms of the roots of hip hop culture. Similarly, the conclusions drawn here lead into Chapter 2 which will look at how diasporic communities tend to be marginalised and how rap communicates a message, thus building on the broader conclusions of this chapter which highlight that rap is a product of musical and cultural styles to have survived African diaspora. Furthermore, using rap as a means of communication enhances the street consciousness of its many participants which is central to hip hop culture's philosophy.

I can conclude that musical genres such as blues, soul, reggae and rap all convey a large amount of self-expression for their artists and communicate a great deal to their audiences, as well as channelling a message that could be considered to be *on behalf of* their audience. Usually this message would be focussed on a common struggle and the need to strive for equality. Visible cultural influence is not a necessity in rap or hip hop culture for a community to feel some kind of cultural resonance with either of these things. Quite often, there are other connections present, such as parallels in philosophy or in past oppression, and this has allowed people from Native American communities, for example, to be able to feel that rap has some relevance as well as resonance with them as individuals and communities. This further demonstrates that hip hop culture can have a synergy with many other cultures from around the world and there is always

a common bond present, which can be attributed usually, to the impact of marginalisation to some degree. The attention to cultural roots and authenticity within hip hop culture is important to all participants due to its rich cultural and musical past and this has been demonstrated throughout the course of hip hop's development. In agreement with Harrison,

> Within the contexts of music scenes, most notable underground hip hop music scenes, authenticity is not only an attribute of the music and the people who make it, it is also ascribed (or denied) to any social actor who vies for acceptance.[126]

Finally, I assert that the main conclusion to be drawn from this chapter is that rhythm is much more than a musical characteristic. Rhythm symbolises a shared consciousness amongst people from many cultures and in certain cases, provides the common bond that brings that element of cultural resonance to people who perhaps would not usually engage with hip hop culture. Rhythm is absolutely crucial to rap music and creates the foundation for the other elements of music and lyrics to be built on. Rhythm provides the driving force in terms of lyrical flow in cypher, as well as providing the energy which keeps up momentum and encourages movement within cypher. The proceeding chapter will focus on flow and how lyrics play an important role in rap, and how lyrics are vital to the survival of cypher. For marginalised communities, it is the 'voice' rap gives, to those who feel a need to be represented, and heard, in some way. To a great extent, the narrative aspect that allows rap to communicate the everyday experience adds a quality of aestheticism in hip hop culture, as well as allowing rap to continue its evolution as an oral tradition of tomorrow.

---

[126] Harrison, Anthony K., *Hip Hop Underground* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009) p. 116.

CHAPTER 2

REVOLUTIONARY RAP AND HIP HOP AS A MARGINALISED CULTURE

"Yes, the rhythm the rebel, without a pause I'm lowering my level"

> Lyrics taken from 'Rebel Without a Pause' from *It Takes A Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back;* an album by Public Enemy, released in 1988 and considered one of the most influential and politically charged rap albums of all time, even now, over 20 years later. Chuck D of Public Enemy is considered to be a political activist as well as a rapper.

Music itself can be marginalised. Anything other than that which is usually described as the 'mainstream' is somehow marginalised due to the discourse of society in general. There is always an underdog, or *other.* The implicit codes of behaviour that are embedded in all genres of music and what can be considered as the semiotics of music, are uniquely disseminated in rap - a form of music which appropriates its past but especially relates to and resonates with certain groups of people and particularly those who could be classed as marginalised.

The characteristic of rap that connects hip hop to 'message' is its ability to highlight the negative aspects of society through a narrative, a dialogue between its participants, between the performer and audience. For many, rap is utilised as an important channel of communication, in raising the awareness of issues such as social inequality and racial discrimination to a platform for discussion. Rap lyrics generally draw attention to inequality and oppression on varying levels; firstly issues are raised through lyrics and in turn, community spirit builds as rappers criticise these negative experiences. Community cohesion is encouraged by bringing everyone together in terms of sharing similar experiences and increasing the feeling of solidarity amongst the participants of hip hop culture. The memory of racial oppression is still apparent in all hip hop today and is referenced in almost all current rap. However, rap can be used to channel aggressive energy into positive energy; a useful tool in today's society which is plagued with disagreement and inequality. Rap is a refreshingly peaceful mode of communication in a world that is full of violence and conflict. The concept of team spirit within hip hop, and also, specifically within the practice of cypher, will be explored in greater detail in 4.3.

When comparing material deprivation and musical deprivation, you can see that both result from marginalisation to some extent – just as material resources are unfairly distributed in society, so are musical resources. To make a generalisation, but fair observation, it is automatically assumed in most musicological scholarship today that classical music is for the upper classes - those who can afford to go to piano lessons and buy tickets for the opera. Hip Hop is for lower class black male youths who come from communities that do not benefit from such affluence and good educational facilities. In a way, this could be perceived as being a good thing for hip hop culture as rap can culturally compensate communities who otherwise have very little in terms of material resources and basic life essentials. However, this generalisation about the demographic of hip hop's participants and deprivation is contradicted by Schloss,[127] who asserts that in terms of musical production, it's the few who can afford to purchase items of music technology that can then produce hip hop. As Harrison points out,

> Underground hip hop emerged at a time when developments and price reductions in music production and distribution technologies began carving out greater space for independent hip hop artists to commodify and circulate their music. Through local DiY practices and upstart record labels, a generation of independent hip hoppers succeeded in setting up viable alternatives to the commercial rap industry.[128]

In terms of cypher, there really is no material cost to participate and looking at cypher as a form of cultural compensation and rap as a form of education will be discussed as topics in Chapter 5.

Hip hop is a deprived form of music as it receives no institutional support and is always the underdog in terms of performance venues and the social class of its audience and participants. While having institutional support is not the criteria for a non-deprived artform, having it minimises any barriers which stem from marginalisation, in both a financial and social context. The quote above raises an important point with regard to material and social wealth. Furthermore, Harrison also makes the point that

> The technologies of underground hip hop production – including music production software, studio boards, samplers, keyboards, four-through-twenty-four-track recorders, and costly microphones – also contributed to its distinctly middle-class

---

[127] A core theme throughout in Schloss, Joseph G., *Making Beats* (New England: University Press of New England, 2004).

[128] Harrison, Anthony K., *Hip Hop Underground* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 31.

character. I do not say this to suggest that the accumulation of (or access to) this equipment was beyond the reach of aspiring hip hoppers from poor and working-class backgrounds; that would be an oversimplification. However, where a lack of financial means is an issue, greater levels of diligence and resourcefulness are required.[129]

I would argue that rap makes the most of its marginalised situation and manipulates any social barriers to its advantage; this is in the sense that although hip hop can often seem to be an exclusive culture, on the other hand, it is a completely inclusive way of life – there are no 'inward' barriers and it is this openness that allows for engagement with people from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures. I am not suggesting that all cypher participants have hard lives and this is something that I will clarify in greater detail in Chapter 4, but for now, a comment on my blog from EOW (Berlin) MC, Amewu, helps to summarise the situation of a typical cypher participant, and the reasons why they take part:

> Cyphering can aid communities because where I come from many kids just get in trouble because they are bored and have nothing to do and nowhere to go. Just met some in the metro station recently that were cyphering and joined them. It's also a good way to get in contact with people you don't know. And if you are good at it or at least deliver some entertainment it's a good way to get respect from strangers and leave a good first impression that you can build on.[130]

Participants of rap feel a great sense of belonging to hip hop culture, often to the extent where it is an unnoticeable aspect of their lives – just the everyday norm and where there is no conscious decision to become involved in hip hop culture. It is simply something that they have always known and have not ever felt a need to question why, or how, hip hop became a part of their life experience. Speaking to cypher participants informally, I learned that cypher is embedded into normal daily life, and is something that has always been present in their lives.

The semiotics of rap are highly relevant when looking at the significance of cypher in hip hop culture, as well as looking at the social significance of hip hop as a genre. Looking at the unwritten rules and the implicit codes of behaviour set by and for participants, provides an interesting perspective from which an 'outside' observer of hip hop culture might be best placed in order to gain some insight as to how hip hop culture works, and, more specifically, see why it works. Again, identity and autonomy are demonstrated to be salient issues in hip

---

[129] Harrison, Anthony K., *Hip Hop Underground* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 32.
[130] Selected from responses on my blog page at www.eodub.com/kitty

hop culture through semiotics. Feeling part of and being part of a community is absolutely critical for many of the furthest marginalised people who engage with hip hop culture. By this, I mean that in a life where there is very little in terms of opportunity, morale and material wealth, hip hop can provide the consistency, interest and human engagement (or socialising) that is necessary for most people to have happy and healthy lives and experiences. For many, hip hop is an essential feature of the everyday. Rap provides a channel of communication for its participants and in turn, provides the platform for the social engagement aspect of hip hop culture. This chapter investigates four salient themes around the practice of cypher, as well as how these themes relate to rap in a broader sense, and all of which are inextricably intertwined. I will investigate the semiotics in rap, rap as *message* and will consider why rap is a marginalised artform, in the sense of its participants coming from marginalised backgrounds; some participants are literally marginalised, by the certain social, cultural and material boundaries that are commonly inflicted upon the genre by those who are 'outsiders' or those who are unaware of hip hop culture. The aesthetic and cultural sophistication and strive for truth that engulfs the genre of rap, as well as hip hop culture, is important to consider when investigating cypher as a marginalised artform.

2.1   Semiotics in Rap and the Rules of Hip Hop

There are no written rules in rap, but as with all genres of music, there is an unwritten and unspoken code that rappers and their audiences follow; this code seems to be followed by those who are involved in hip hop culture and provides participants with the feeling of empowerment due to them making the choice to follow the social and musical rules which will be discussed in this section. There is further investigation around this topic in Chapters 4 and 5, with more focus on the rules and etiquette associated with the practice of rap and the subsequent development of social awareness for those partaking in hip hop culture. This section seeks to examine the unwritten rules of hip hop and the semiotics in the music itself that underpin the very essence of hip hop.

Fundamentally, to strip down hip hop and find out what is at its core, it is important to go beyond what is commonly regarded as its elements (the DJ, the MC, Break-dancing and Graffiti, as discussed in 1.1) and look at the bigger picture. In hip hop culture, something more is beyond the surface; the unspoken rules, the utmost

commitment from its participants (and by this meaning the rappers, their followers, fans, and audiences) and the absolutely unrivalled passion and enthusiasm that is demonstrated worldwide and enables hip hop culture to survive. Contrary to popular opinion, which is an opinion usually formed as a result of 'mainstream' hip hop and its general themes of making money, taking drugs and misogyny, across all eras of hip hop's existence, the reputation of *real*, or true, hip hop then suffers by association. Lyrics by artists such as Nelly exemplify this point, as in *Country Grammar*,[131] which clearly highlights the themes of making money and taking drugs, and the gangster lifestyle. The music video for this song further supports the theme of misogyny:

> I'm goin down down baby, yo' street in a Range Rover
> Street sweeper baby, cocked ready to let it go
> Shimmy shimmy cocoa what? Listen to it pound
> Light it up and take a puff, pass it to me now
>
> Mmmmm, you can find me, in St. Louis rollin on dubs
> Smokin on dubs in clubs, blowin up like cocoa puffs
> Sippin Bud, gettin perved and getting dubbed
> Daps and hugs, mean mugs and shoulder shrugs
> And it's all because, 'ccumulated enough scratch
> just to navigate it, wood decorated on chrome
> and it's candy painted, fans fainted - while I'm entertainin
> Wild ain't it? How me and money end up hangin
> I hang with Hannibal Lector (HOT SHIT!) so feel me when I bring it
> Sing it loud (what?)
> I'm from the Lou and I'm proud
> Run a mile - for the cause, I'm righteous above the law
> Playa my style's raw, I'm "Born to Mack" like Todd Shaw
> Forget the fame, and the glamour
> Give me D's wit a rubber hammer
> My grammar be's ebonics, gin tonic and chronic
> Fuck bionic it's ironic, slammin niggaz like Onyx
> Lunatics til the day I die
> I run more game than the Bulls and Sonics

Ignorance does not help hip hop culture and therefore what it is really about is something that is not usually considered. By nature, people tend to jump to conclusions without the full facts. After extensive research in terms of undertaking fieldwork, digesting scholarship, listening and emerging myself in hip hop culture, I

---

[131] Nelly, Country Grammar, *Country Grammar* (Fo' Reel/Universal, 2000). Video available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkEgZI7No8A

can assert that hip hop prides itself on having values such as knowledge, truth, communication, respect, freedom, inclusiveness, consciousness and enlightenment, and reflects an implicit sense of collective social and moral responsibilities.

Due to its actual practice in a physical sense, cypher takes the facets of inclusiveness and communication to the next level. Equally, it further promotes respect, knowledge and consciousness as these are features that are direct outcomes of taking part in cypher, whether as a participant or as an observer. I would argue that cypher goes beyond awareness and truth and that by engaging with the practice, one is demonstrating survival and representing the concept of survival of the fittest. In terms of rap, this can be mirrored in different contexts; the fact that the cypher is taking place despite the likelihood that its participants have faced some kind of adversity in the past either directly or indirectly. In a direct sense, for example, by surviving gang culture, or by displaying highly sophisticated and creative thinking when education may be poor, or by being part of a marginalised community. In an indirect sense, by representing a rich cultural past and ancestors who survived when faced with Civil War, slavery, poverty and racial prejudice on a daily basis. For various participants of cypher and in different ways, cypher can be regarded as a 'saviour,'[132] and this will be explored in greater detail in the proceeding chapters.

In terms of 'spreading a message', cypher has pros and cons. The characteristic of rawness and the live performance aspect of cypher that contributes to its authenticity can also be a pitfall – cypher is typically practiced in-the-moment and is therefore only recorded, under usual circumstances, at staged events. Recording music is the easiest way to disseminate to a wider audience, and since the internet revolution, there is no better way to get your message (or music) across (the world). This, therefore, seems to put cypher at a disadvantage in terms of participants getting their message across but equally, there is a fine balance to maintain in order for cypher to retain its authenticity and genuineness, in a more

---

[132] In terms of 'cultural compensation' in the context of the practice of rap, please see Chapter 4. For greater exploration around hip hop's involvement in cultural and social development and crime reduction, please see Chapter 5.

underground context. It could be argued that in any instance of cypher, whatever the message that participants are trying to share, is being achieved, albeit in a local, rather than 'glocal' sense; this reflects the essence of hip hop in that rap is an effective means of communication and cypher plays its role in the dissemination of information and is also an important channel of communication. Rap raises awareness of many issues and becomes a source of aspiration and admiration – seeing likeminded individuals get their message across, via practices such as cypher, proves that you don't have to be a famous rapper to share knowledge, truth and understanding.

Cypher is a mechanism that allows people to engage with their peers and issues that are relevant to them. For an artform that achieves so much in terms of social and musical development, rap is so often wrongly dismissed as an inferior genre of music. It can contribute to communities so positively and one can strongly argue that the musical and lyrical content is most worthy of academic study and should achieve more recognition for its creativity, ingenuity and technicality. At times, rap has been revolutionary, which may sound extreme but there is no doubt that it is worthy of this accolade, and is an issue that will be explored in further detail in this chapter.

The semiotics of rap are fundamental in understanding the social significance of cypher, and Fabbri's assertion that

> every genre is defined by a community of varying structure which accepts the rules and whose members participate in various forms during the course of a musical event,[133]

certainly rings true when considering its participants and its practice. To some extent, in a literal sense, and to use a phrase of Fabbri, cypher could be considered to be 'sophisticated song,' which, 'always tries, through its lyrics, arrangements, record sleeves, etc. to connote a social position superior to that of its consumers.'[134] This also links back to signifyin(g). However, with cypher, the superior social position can only be achieved by gaining respect from an audience and peers, and even then, the deep-

---

[133] Fabbri, Franco (1981) "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications" in Horn, D. And Tagg, P. (eds.) **Popular Music Perspectives**, *(Göteborg and Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music),* p. 58.
[134] Ibid. p. 71

rooted hip hop philosophy emphasises equality and strives for social development. Of course, superiority has its place in cypher, within the lyrics, as the literal content of the practice; outside of words and in a social context, there is no place for superiority in cypher; all participants are equals.

Continuing along the lines of thinking of cypher as a mechanism, I have seen that cypher links together people with things in common; in the very loosest sense, it could be said that people from similar communities are bound to have similar interests, but looking at cypher in a sociological and cultural context, cypher enables its participants to link with each other, across various communities, and provides the opportunity for individuals to engage with one another through their shared cultural history, heritage and experiences. As Small points out,

> the tendency of human beings to form themselves into groups of like-minded, or like-feeling, individuals is often taken for granted, but is interesting. All of us in fact belong simultaneously to a number of groups... all of which overlap one into another but do not necessarily coincide.[135]

In turn, this further drives the issues of autonomy and identity to the crux of hip hop culture. Cypher provides a platform through which people can share, relate and feel a sense of identity. For many of its participants, cypher is an essential tool in being able to communicate. Without cypher, it could be assumed that many of its participants would become disengaged, isolated and would have limited means to channel creative energy, especially in a positive direction. Furthermore, in agreement with Small

> each member of a group looks to the others for validation of his or her own sense of self and self-esteem in that part of life with which the group concerns itself.[136]

and, therefore,

> for each individual his or her place in society is a kind of aggregate of the various groups to which he or she belongs.[137]

There is more about this in Chapter 5 in terms of considering cypher as cultural compensation, as well as how hip hop can actually prevent crime.

---

[135] Small, Christopher, (1987), *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 121
[136] Ibid., p. 122.
[137] Ibid.

As previously discussed in this section, and in getting back to semiotics, participants of hip hop culture choose to follow the unspoken rules of the culture. In the reverse of this situation, there is the unfortunate circumstance of participants possibly choosing the wrong path to follow in life; by this, I mean that rappers and participants may make fundamentally poor decisions and behave inappropriately, because they are choosing to follow patterns of behaviour that are demonstrated in the mainstream, and following an ideology of what they believe will help to make them popular in the mainstream. Engaging in the gangsta lifestyle, which has undoubtedly been glamorised by the mainstream rap music videos that promote misogyny, crime and violence, is something which many young and impressionable youths may aspire to. Unfortunately, this is not an accurate reflection of all the good that comes out of engaging in hip hop culture. It is not surprising, that hip hop on the whole has earned such a bad reputation. On one hand, this reputation is unfair, as it can be argued that what is perceived by society and what is actively demonstrated by certain rappers in the public eye, does not reflect the actual thoughts and views of the participants who participate whole-heartedly, in the underground hip hop scene, and who believe in what true hip hop stands for and wish to promote truth, knowledge and a sense of community for all who take part and as witnessed at events such as EOW.

To a great extent, cultural identity plays a great part in understanding the semiotics of rap music. As discussed in Chapter 1, black poetic speech and African cultural or musical practices that are present in rap music, can be interpreted as signs of cultural identity. In another context, the lyrics of rap can provide a musicologist with some very literal semiotics to consider. Here, I will look at rap lyrics as a basic model of communication, without digging deeper into their metaphorical meanings just now.[138] In summary, while considering the semiotics of rap, it is important to remember that in the presentation of rap music to an audience, the physical sounds will be identical for all audience members, but the salient difference is that each audience member will not necessarily *hear* the same thing; there will be differences in the way all members of the audience have

---

[138] Metaphor will be covered in more detail in Chapter 3.

decoded the signifiers in the music. In general terms though, members of a hip hop audience, or crowd, will tend to interpret the music in a similar way, and will therefore understand the meaning in its intended context. As Tagg rightly states,

> There are two main advantages in using intersubjective observation in music semiotics: (i) it allows you to state that a certain proportion of a certain body of people at a certain time under certain conditions in a certain sociocultural context responded in a certain way to certain music; (ii) it calls for no musicological expertise whatsoever.[139]

Tagg also goes on to further define what we now know as 'intersubjective observation' and explains that it

> [p]rovides vital information on many aspects of the basic communication process... in relation to a particular body of music, especially in terms of reception and response. It also allows you to posit viable hypotheses about the 'intended message,' as well as about which structural elements within the 'channel' may or may not be related to which responses to the music.[140]

It is particularly important to consider this concept when interpreting what rap music actually means. What this specifically highlights is that rap will not mean the same thing to everyone, due to differing socio-cultural situations, and in particular, a lack of knowledge around hip hop culture will certainly mean that rap music will not be interpreted by a listener, or observer, as intended by its creator. Much of Public Enemy's musical output requires little intersubjective observation as any message is often spelled out from a song title. As Chuck D explains on his blog[141]

> Public Enemy songs, usually written from the title forward, attempt to reflect the power of change from the very first word, projecting heavyweight titles that allow a mind to open to their meaning, to travel up down and around it. We try to have the titles alone speak for themselves. Songs like FIGHT THE POWER, BROTHERS GONNA WORK IT OUT, 911 IS A JOKE, GIVE THE PEEPS WHAT THEY NEED, and album titles such as FEAR OF A BLACK PLANET, THERE'S A POISON GOIN' ON, and our most recent two albums, due out within months of this writing: MOST OF MY HEROES STILL DONT APPEAR ON NO STAMP and THE EVIL EMPIRE OF EVERYTHING.

I would assert that any intersubjective observation on the part of an audience of Public Enemy supports the message.

---

[139] Tagg, Philip, **Introductory notes to the Semiotics of Music** (1999) Version 3: Liverpool/Brisbane, p. 34.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Chuck D's blog, 1st March 2012: http://www.publicenemy.com/terrordome/166/songs-that-mean-something.html

This also shows that the unwritten and unspoken rules that were mentioned at the beginning of this section are of greater cultural wealth than perhaps previously thought; unspoken rules are the tools that are very much needed in making rap an understood genre and in turn, increase the level of engagement and participation amongst those who are part of hip hop culture. It could also be said that the communication tool aspect of cypher is its most important facet; to be able to understand an instance of rap or cypher lyrics involves code-breaking and interpretation of the highest level of sophistication within a form of black vernacular speech. In understanding the semiotics of cypher is a sense of ownership and the feeling of 'belonging' to a unique and privileged movement; privileged in the sense of its exclusivity and richness in diversity, but not at all in the context of material wealth. Thompson succinctly summarises the function of rap in contemporary black America:

> Rap is the black CNN. Widely attributed to Public Enemy's Chuck D, this view implies that rap informs the culture at large about ideas current in the black community. It follows that hip-hop lyrics mean the way messages do. They are meant to be true as they conform to regular patterns of meaning. So there should be a straight line from a fact to an idea about it in the lyricist's mind to the lyric's meaning. This communicative-message model of hip hop lyrical meaning holds that a successful hip- hop lyric must be a genuine testimony about the lyricist's real self, telling the truth from the standpoint of a real person.[142]

I would agree to a large extent that what Thompson says here is accurate; however, knowing the complexity of certain rap lyrics, and respect being earned by cypher participants for using highly sophisticated wit and metaphor, I would argue that this statement is possibly a bit too clear-cut. The meaning in rap is always present but the lyrics and musical features, as well as the experience of a musical event, have to be carefully decoded in order to fully understand and appreciate it.

2.2 Marginalisation in Rap

One of the unique qualities of hip hop culture is the way in which a response to marginalisation is processed by both a participant, at any level, and from its audience, looking in on hip hop culture from a different perspective. In terms of

---

[142] Thompson, Stephen L., (2005) "Knowwhatumsayin? How Hip-Hop Lyrics Mean." In Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) **Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason** Illinois: Open Court, p. 119.

music, rap can be seen as a form of high art by those who have an understanding, empathy or respect for the genre, and on the other hand, at times, rap can be seen as a socially and musically 'lower' form of art or genre of music, to the extent where many of rap's critics don't even consider rap to be a genre or a form of actual music at all. Rap is so culturally rich that I would argue that marginalisation is almost essential for rap's existence, as well as the fact that marginalisation seems to be celebrated, by participants of hip hop culture, in a variety of contexts, which I will outline below.

Racial and cultural marginalisation is highlighted in rap, primarily through the ethnicity and cultural backgrounds of its participants. The majority of cypher is practiced in areas of ethnic minority communities and where its participants and audience generally have a similar racial and cultural background; this closely relates to social class and upbringing due to the physical geographical areas in which rap music came from, and continues to thrive in. Rap came from the ghetto and was easily accessible to this community due to the inclusive ethos of hip hop culture and the negligible monetary cost to its participants and audience in taking part. As Small succinctly summarises in a statement that wholeheartedly rings true for cypher,

> Popular music is popular not only because it is accessible to all listeners, without the need for formal training or classes in musical appreciation, but also because it is accessible to all performers. This means, not that no skills are required, but rather that there are no institutional barriers to the acquisition of skills; anyone with a mind to do so can engage in performance, just as anyone can acquire the skills of language and engage in conversation. And anyone is capable of making a creative contribution to the development of his or her own chosen musical style.[143]

In essence, part of the key to cypher is to do with its accessibility and although marginalisation is also a salient contributing factor that has shaped and defined the practice to an extent, cypher can't be accused of imposing boundaries and barriers that would discourage anyone from participating; in fact, cypher does the very opposite.

In advocating an all-inclusive philosophy, hip hop can be seen indirectly as being more superior than those who snub it as a subculture, or musical genre (as

---

[143]Small, Christopher *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987)), p. 380.

rap). In deliberately focussing for self-betterment, as well as community benefit, participants deliberately disengage from the politics of social standing, thus rises above negativity and stands as a musical genre with truth and respect are at its core. This contrasts with other genres of music whose participants and audiences are guilty of placing too much emphasis on climbing the social ladder and putting on unnecessary airs and graces in order to appear to be superior. One can question the motive of those attending musical performances and concerts of certain musical genres for such dubious reasons – do they have a genuine deep appreciation, or curiosity, at least, about the genre of music in which they are participating? Or are they simply in attendance to reflect their upward social status? Perhaps it is neither of these things and their participation in a genre is just the 'done' thing. In fairness, participation in rap music, and engaging with hip hop culture, has become such an everyday occurrence for its participants that it too has been absorbed into the banal backdrop of everyday life. Rap becomes a part of normality for many people from marginalised communities. There seems to be a great deal of pressure on participants from within all genres of music to fit in socially with fellow participants, as briefly mentioned in the previous section around the investigation on audience behaviour. I argue that for most participants of hip hop culture, their involvement is fuelled by genuine appreciation and love of the genre, rather than for the desire to fit in, although for many, participation is most likely to be a far less conscious decision, and stems from being part of the norm, in a marginalised community.

Attending a musical event just to be seen reflects a great deal of ignorance. How would the performer feel if they knew that that was the main motivation for the presence of certain audience members? Any performing musician has undertaken a great deal of training, rehearsal and critique to reach a point where they feel they are ready and their material, or 'cultural goods,' is of the highest standard before they perform. Just because cypher is mainly improvised, there is no escape for the performers in terms of receiving feedback from their peers and audience. The actual performance skills in cypher are still rehearsed and critiqued, just like with all musical genres, the main difference is that most of the preparation is done in the moment. This is a characteristic that makes cypher unique: the level of

sophistication and wit that is needed for a rapper to gain respect from their peers and audience, surpasses any form of musical creativity, purely because while 'something' has come from 'nothing,'[144] there has still been a building-up process which reflects more of a team effort approach, with the audience being included from the very start. One would also hypothesise that in cypher, the quest to be the very best is not necessarily the main priority of its participants, and that more emphasis is placed on being part of it, without any boundaries to get in the way. Cypher is a form of rap that is even more raw and genuine due to the nature of its performance, practice and participants. Its lyrics are a direct manifestation of the celebration of marginalisation and its performance highlights that

> the musicians and their audiences are jointly, and in however confused a way, working to explore, affirm and celebrate their identity; the techniques may often be crude, even rudimentary, but the message they bring is always clear: This is who we are.[145]

Rap has an appeal on both a global and grassroots scale and similarly, with cypher, even though it is a more specific rap practice, it always remains true to its roots, regardless of where and who is taking part. The international EOW movement is testament to these values and further supports the notion that because a genre has a worldwide appeal, it can still be considered as being underground and very much focussed on its roots.

Cypher participants' everyday experiences of marginalisation are shared through their participation in cypher, to the extent where the content of the cypher lyrics could be considered as analyses, or evaluations, of life experiences. This is how marginalisation is celebrated, as the braggadocio in the cypher enables and encourages participants to be proud of where they come from, what they have been through and what they can learn from it. Sharing is a fundamental concept in cypher and harks back to the storytelling aspect of the African Griot, as documented in 1.2, and although stories tend to be exaggerated and embellished, I have never witnessed a sense of shame or embarrassment being conveyed in cypher in terms of racial, cultural or social background. If anything, a great deal of humour is conveyed,

---

[144] Please refer to Chapter 5, especially 5.4 'Something out of Nothing' for a more in-depth analysis of this concept.
[145] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (Calder, London: 1987), p. 392.

and this can be seen in cypher-related practices such as the Dirty Dozens, where participants enjoy mocking each other, as well as themselves. Similarly, in African American comedy, comedians such as Richard Pryor tended to use his experience of marginalisation and racial discrimination as a core theme in his material, thus using certain cultural barriers to his advantage. Equally, Chris Rock utilises a similar style in the delivery of his material by exploiting negative racial and cultural experiences to his advantage, through humorous narration.[146]

A sense of regret or loss, or even just a slight hint of nostalgia, can often be detected in the content of lyrics, but typically the pattern of the cypher involves identifying any positives that have subsequently emerged from something that the artist feels that, although may be a source of regret, in sharing the experience, some good can come out of it. Again, this demonstrates the peer support that cypher provides to communities – particularly for disenfranchised youths, who may feel unable to seek help or support from peers, or elsewhere under normal circumstances, but they may feel able to rap and share their problems or raise issues through the means of participating in cypher, whilst feeling that they are understood and united in their struggles and experiences.

Rap is a marginalised genre which has evolved from a myriad of marginalised cultures and musical genres, previously discussed in Chapter 1. Its musical idiom indicates that rap is related to African musical styles, as well as the more 'recent' genres such as blues and jazz. Equally, hip hop as a culture, has evolved from not only the meeting and mixture of several musical practices, but the meeting of several marginalised cultures which all ended up in the melting pot of New York. Members of these communities went on to become part of a newly formed and highly diasporic marginalised society. The key to any culture is the sharing of practices and experiences, almost ritualistic, amongst a community, or group of people. On one hand, I would agree that "cultures are not as stable as narratives of

---

[146] There are numerous examples to demonstrate this point, especially the comedy sketches focusing on differences between Black and White, for example, Chris Rock's comparisons of black women and white women (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwzRvgIZ3Wc) but a personal favourite is Richard Pryor's 'Differences Between White Funerals and Black Funerals': http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEePCR_k5aU

roots and belonging sometimes suggest. They are, in fact, always in flux"[147] but it is important and especially relevant when it comes to hip hop culture to consider that

> our roots confer meaning on our world and help make life worth living. And people who become unwillingly dislocated from their cultural backgrounds are likely to experience considerable psychological distress.[148]

This seems to imply that marginalisation could be seen as the common characteristic in many cultures that is actually a large contributing factor in binding people together. In other words, the main shared experience of participants of hip hop culture resides in the concept of marginalisation, to some extent. Within each marginalised community, there is a degree of subconscious 'cultural preservation' and I argue that this stems from the fact that marginalised people tend to have very little in the way of material possessions, money and opportunities, and therefore their ancestry and cultural past provides a great deal of wealth that becomes their most precious asset that must be preserved for future generations. As Taylor asserts,

> [t]he broader point has to do with the politics and techniques of cultural preservation. And the steady stream of public inquiries into the state of hip hop – in light of the commercialization of gangsta rap, or the east-west feuds, or the rise of dirty divas like Lil' Kim – shows that cultural preservation is a crucial part of the hip hop agenda.[149]

This further supports the theory, in Chapter 1, that rap is a musical snapshot in time of a continuously evolving culture, that harks back to its past and respects its ancestry, while celebrating its marginalised past and present. Rap uses marginalisation to its advantage in terms of the content that is needed to create lyrics and form a narrative. Quite often, experiences of marginalisation are turned into narratives within a rap, which is also a mechanism of communication in order to tell stories, to recount everyday experiences. It can also be used as a hook to attract a wider audience who may share similar experiences. The issue of identity and cultural belonging is intrinsic to the contributing factors that make hip hop culture what it is - marginalisation, therefore, specifically contributes to how participants of hip hop culture define themselves. As Rose summarises succinctly:

---

[147] Taylor, Paul C., (2005) "Does Hip Hop Belong To Me? The Philosophy of Race and Culture", In Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) **Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason,** Illinois: Open Court, p. 84.
[148] Ibid., p. 83.
[149] Ibid., p. 84.

> Hip hop culture emerged as a source of alternative identity formation and social statues for youth in a community whose older local support institutions has been all but demolished along with large sectors of its built environment. Alternative local identities were forged in fashion, language, street names, and most importantly, in the establishment of neighbourhood crews and posses.[150]

This again supports the idea that marginalisation has played a critical part in the evolution of hip hop culture, and the concept of marginalisation here is relevant in different contexts, for example, social marginalisation and physical marginalisation. Furthermore, I would agree that

> Hip hop emerges from complex cultural exchanges and larger social and political conditions of disillusionment and alienation. Graffiti and rap were especially aggressive public displays of counterpresence and voice. Each asserted the right to write – to inscribe one's identity on an environment that seemed Teflon-resistant to its young people of color, an environment that made legitimate avenues for material and social participation inaccessible.[151]

In this case, I could argue that hip hop culture's very existence has depended on marginalisation, rather than it simply being a contributing factor to its evolution. The very nature of marginalisation dictates that those who are confined by limitations are bound to aspire to better things, certainly in terms of cultural and social contexts, but above all, having a sense of belonging, and most importantly, a cultural identity. Participation in hip hop culture provides all these things for those who are marginalised in society to some extent. Cypher is a part of hip hop culture that, although a practice that takes great skill to master, is something in which all members of the hip hop community can engage, whether as a participant, or more loosely, as an audience member.

It could certainly be said that rap music, and hip hop culture on the whole, are positive outcomes that have emerged from the confines of marginalisation to a great extent, and this is especially relevant when considering the dynamics of cypher. I assert that marginalisation has provided the glue that holds hip hop culture together, and provides a common bond for its participants.

---

[150]Rose, Tricia, (1996) "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style, and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop", In Gordon, Avery F. And Newfield, Christopher, (eds.) **Mapping Multiculturalism,** Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 433.
[151] Ibid., pp. 439-40.

2.3 The Message

Rap is frequently used as a platform to address certain issues with its participants, audience, and with those who engage in hip hop culture. To a greater extent, rap is a mechanism for channelling information and communication is possibly the most salient feature of rap. Communication can also be regarded as being the main facet of hip hop culture in general. The dissemination of knowledge, as well as opinion, is paramount in terms of keeping hip hop culture alive, in a phase of growth, and constantly moving and developing. For participants of rap, hip hop culture is so deeply embedded in their everyday lives that it provides a much-needed sense of familiarity and encourages engagement with the genre. In turn, this allows for a means of communication that is comfortable, accessible and normal for its participants to interact with. For participants who may feel that their voice is oppressed, whether through social, cultural or economic barriers, rap provides an opportunity to share opinions and to be heard, providing a much needed forum for cultural discourse and social dialogue. These qualities make rap especially suited to the dissemination of information and communication, and places it ideally amongst participants of hip hop culture to spread the word. Similarly, with cypher, it allows for opinions to be shared and heard, thus engaging members of the communities who would usually be considered to be disenfranchised or those deemed to be marginalised in society.

How literally you take rap depends on the kind of rap you're listening to; the message isn't always literal, due to the complex linguistic devices that are utilised by a rapper - and this is something to be discussed in greater detail in the proceeding chapter. So much emphasis is placed on metaphorical meanings and colloquialisms that to an outsider, rap can seem extremely inaccessible and incomprehensible. Looking beyond the surface and considering rap in a far deeper context, the concept of channelling a message is particularly significant for rap and cypher. The way in which the striving for truth in hip hop culture is always conveyed through rap, and especially via the practice of cypher, is a refreshing alternative slant on a genre that has acquired such a bad press. In addition to seeking and spreading a philosophy of truth, I suggest that one of rap's core purposes is to reaffirm messages from the

past. Explicit references from hip hop's past are always present in rap; its black cultural and historical past are commonly referred to, in all musical, lyrical and social contexts of its practice. Taking into consideration sampling, as an example of a characteristic that allows for new music to hark back to its musical ancestry, similar consideration can be given to words and metaphor, which allow for new music to relay a message. This relay creates a dialogue between the old and new, especially when the message refers to messages of the past which is indicative of rap's unique placement in terms of its cultural, musical and historical past and its relationship with its roots.

The motive(s) of rappers are often called into question when considering 'the message' within their lyrics, and from other gestures, often with a seemingly political, and perhaps anarchical, agenda. In terms of politically-charged rap, and rap that is deliberately provocative in its content, there is often a great deal of emphasis placed on being blunt, transparent and to-the-point, as well as being usually very openly anti-establishment. Taking this bluntness into consideration and combining it with the sensitivity that surrounds political comment and debate in general, a public outcry can often be a direct outcome. In turn, this can lead to an overall ban of a particular rap record, thus contributing to more negative publicity construed by the media and further contributing to hip hop's bad reputation. Those who are unaware of hip hop culture's merits, are therefore even less likely to ever find out, as the poor reputation that hip hop has earned by certain mainstream artists and rap that can be considered radical then drives people away further. The air of caution that surrounds hip hop, due largely from warnings from the media, and an ill-informed establishment, translates to complete avoidance from potential newcomers to engage in hip hop culture. Rose succinctly summarises the difference between what can be seen as 'true' rap, i.e. from conscious rappers, and that from those of the mainstream, in that

> Many conscious rappers are on commercially powerful record labels (or have distribution deals with them), but what generally distinguishes their music from commercial rap is that it avoids pandering to the worst images of young black people, favors more socially conscious content, and is not nearly as heavily promoted as that of artists who rely on the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity. Those considered "underground" are generally progressively minded artists,

some of who have not been signed to a major record label and tend to operate in local DIY (do it yourself) networks, online, or through local, marginally commercial distribution networks.[152]

Although rap is a continuously developing genre, the wounds that have been unjustly inflicted on the reputation of *true* hip hop culture have contributed to the one step forward, two steps back cycle that it seems to be caught up in and this has caused critics and even its participants to declare that 'hip hop is *dead*.' As Dyson wrote in 2007:

> When hip hop legend Nas uttered the words "Hip hop is dead," he joined a long list of prophets and fed-up practitioners who've announced the death of a field, only to jump-start a new phase of its growth… Great rhetoric has lost its sway as noble verbal art has been replaced by mindless redundancy of theme – broads, booze and bling. The thug persona has replaced skilful exploration of the thug's predicament: hustling in a culture where crime is the only option of the economically vulnerable. Beyond questions of craft, there's the archetypal record executive who's more interested in releasing records by artists revelling in rims rather than rhymes, and in bouncing bosoms and belligerent behinds more than setting young brains on fire with knowledge of their people's plight.[153]

Whilst the genre is no longer in its golden era, it is by no means dead, and I argue that certain practices such as cypher keep hip hop alive; will cypher contribute to a second golden age, once more in the future? With such a speculative view, and in the meantime, I intend to reflect on the impact and significance of cypher in the present. Taking into account 'the message' and in contemplating the deciphering of a message in rap lyrics, it is of interest to think about what it is the rapper seeks to achieve by taking part in and delivering a certain rap in cypher, and why. Using an alternative approach to lyrical analysis, we can begin to unravel the often complex metaphor to reveal an underlying message that varies between sub-genres of rap, the various rappers and to a great extent, the level of comprehension and understanding felt by their audiences.

Whilst a message can sometimes be considered to be lost on the majority of those that listen to rap, only a few certain people will actually *hear* its message; this is quite often a deliberately constructed situation by a rapper, which is delivered

---

[152] Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2008), pp. 241 - 242.
[153] Michael Eric Dyson 'Is Hip Hop Dead?' in Ebony magazine, June 2007, p. 60.

with an intent to get their message across to those who will relate to it or understand it. Conversely, this means that there has also been deliberate consideration in choosing a message that other people will *not* understand. In looking at how those people who are not supposed to understand the message don't understand it, you can fairly assume that this is due to significant cultural or linguistic differences. In these differences, I argue that rap therefore is not as open to interpretation, and certain people are deliberately excluded from receiving the same message as its intended audience. What might appear to the everyday listener as a cluster of words, or perhaps some highly sophisticated words with a poetic streak, or a clever rhyme, is actually a carefully constructed and subtly communicated message to others. An analytical approach to rap lyrics is appropriate in this case, in order to decipher a message (if any) in a lyric or verse, and this also helps to establish what the message is actually conveying, what its actual point is, and who it is intended for. It is also important not to ignore the fact that rap isn't just about the message that one can disseminate through words and music. I argue that one can also make a statement through the medium of fashion, art or musical characteristics which all have their place in defining the elements of hip hop culture. By this, a message can be conveyed by a distinct code of fashion that is adhered to as well as advancements in graffiti art, and sampling, respectively, for those who are fully engaged in hip hop culture. Semiotics in rap, are therefore intrinsically linked to 'the message.'

In parallel to the development of hip hop culture were developments in audio and visual technology, and to a large extent, the two go hand in hand. It is therefore also important to consider that a statement can be made through other sources of media, and certainly hip hop utilised this advancement in technology to its advantage. As rap made its mark on the musical map, music video began to gain momentum as a means to promote the latest records released by artists. In summary, video became a huge development for the mass marketing of commercial music and music video became the main tool of communication for pop musicians and producing a music video became a normal part of the promotion of the release of any new single. Once again, this was both a blessing and a curse to hip hop culture. On one hand, many artists perceived to be representative of hip hop culture

to a mainstream audience further added to the bad reputation that was earned by rap, with thanks in part to the typical features in rap music videos – including explicit scenes involving misogynistic behaviour as well as overt advocacy for gang culture, criminal behaviour, violence and drug use. Therefore, it is not surprising that these images, used over and over again in mainstream rap videos, promote the feeling that rap, and hip hop culture in general, is a highly negative and wrongful way of life in which to engage. In contrast, and as Edwards asserts,

> A number of MCs like to focus on conscious content, content that is generally positive or calls for some sort of change or advancement. It often deals with political or social issues, or explores subjects such as relationships in ways that are insightful rather than exploitative. This kind of content can sometimes be difficult to write.[154]

Here, I would add that the 'difficult to write' conscious raps can therefore be supported by music video. If a rap is difficult to write, then it can be assumed that the message might be difficult to convey, and the added element of video can provide a visual aid to the dissemination of the message. In terms of cypher, it is important to note that it must be even more difficult to be able to create a conscious rap in-the-moment, as well as actually conveying a message which is then understood by an audience, with no support from additional media, such as music video.

Conversely, rap artists such as Public Enemy used music video to their advantage, in terms of conveying a message, with videos to correspond with their musical releases and, for example, taking into account the video for *Fight the Power*,[155] I argue that the imagery used is very specific and relevant to the message that Public Enemy is channelling. The vintage video clips about the passing of the Civil Rights bill introduce the video, then Chuck D cuts in to call in to dismiss it as '1963 nonsense' and that 'we ain't rollin' like that no more. As a matter of fact the young black Americans we rollin' up with... press conferences, and straight up rallies, am I right?' The entire video for *Fight the Power* is staged as a race rally. In this

---

[154] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 14.
[155] Video available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_t13-0Joyc and also discussed in greater detail in section 3.4 when exploring 'Deeper Meaning in Rap Lyrics.'

sense, although the video isn't the main medium of communication, it fully complements the message and adds a further dimension for audiences to process and take on board what actually is being said. Music video provides a visual gauge which further enhances communication and interpretation of the message. I fully agree with Tagg that

> If social and psychological fear or resentment of certain music and what it is heard as representing interfere with the communication of intended musical messages, deep identification with a certain music can do the same in reverse.[156]

Additionally, Keyes' point around the censorship of rap further supports the notion that due to the bad reputation of hip hop, people's views are unlikely to change, and,

> Despite the global success of hip-hop arts, its musical component became the center of controversy in the mid-1980s. News reporters focussed on concert fights and deaths at rap music concerts and remained silent about the various benefit rap concerts, such as "Say No to Drugs," that concluded peacefully.[157]

Furthermore, Keyes succinctly addresses the issue mentioned previously around the misunderstanding around what hip hop really stands for, due to the actions and words of rappers in the mainstream. In effect, the outcome of this became a direct punishment and misrepresentation of true hip hop. As Keyes emphasises,

> Rappers' portrayals of gangstas, thugs, pushers, pimps, and sex kittens – complicated by the artists' real-life brushes with the law (life imitating art or vice versa) – led the public to question the moral value of all rap music. As a result, rap music encountered much hostility from urban radio supporters who coerced certain stations to curtail their airplay of rap records or forced them to stop playing rap music altogether.[158]

With a reception like this, the message had even less chance of being *heard*, and therefore hip hop culture in general had an even bigger struggle on its hands. This struggle, and the barriers that true hip hop faced and continues to face, highlights that practices such as cypher are crucial in order for its participants, and therefore marginalised communities, to have their voices heard and have their message efficiently communicated, regardless of how *far* the message may physically travel.

---

[156] Tagg, Philip, **Introductory notes to the Semiotics of Music**, (1999) Version 3: Liverpool/Brisbane, p. 12.
[157] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 162.
[158] Ibid.

The issue of communication here also links back to Chapter 1 which outlines an argument for rap stemming directly from African oral traditions. Fundamentally, I argue that regardless of the lyrical content and any interpretations of metaphor within rap lyrics, cypher itself is an actual manifestation of 'the message,' and has been a direct outcome of all the social and musical conditions that joined and evolved via diasporas that directly contributed to the conception and birth of hip hop culture. In a sense, 'the message' in hip hop culture is hereditary and has branched over several generations as an African oral tradition. The Griot is significant again here, with the sole purpose to disseminate information and stories, whilst incorporating wit and entertainment for the people in their community. Hip hop fulfils this role in contemporary black America, and, fundamentally, cypher reflects an agenda very close to that of griotism, in the sense that it channels information and is centred around communication. Cypher is not just based on one person though, it is very much a team-based practice and individuals are encouraged to work together, with a common cause, and with a common message. Chapter 4 will dig deeper into the dynamics of cypher collectives and the concept of teamwork within rap.

2.4   Cypher as a marginalised artform
What *makes* cypher a marginalised practice?

As previously discussed in this chapter, the marginalisation in society that is faced by many participants and advocates of hip hop culture, can be used advantageously within rap music, as well as in hip hop culture on the whole.

> Certainly, a strong case could be made that the history of hip-hop culture demonstrates precisely how marginalized cultural practices can be deployed to reinforce, at least as much as to challenge, dominant discourses (so-called "gangsta rap" being only the most famous example).[159]

In agreement with this statement by Krims, in a sense, marginalisation assists in breaking down certain social and cultural barriers and in turn becomes an all-inclusive subculture. Rap became an easily accessible genre for the marginalised, and gives people a valuable sense of ownership, cultural identity and belonging, as well

---

[159] Krims, Adam, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 8.

as being open to participation from those from all social backgrounds. As Keyes states:

> Rap music developed in the United States in complex relation to diverse factors that include geopolitics, shifts in the music industry and the music of the streets, and changes in federal government policies. In response to these factors, inner-city youths – DJs, MCs graffiti writers, and b-boys and b-girls – forged an arts movement that evolved in the streets called hip-hop.[160]

In terms of social history, the parallels we can see between artists such as Chuck D of Public Enemy and historical leaders, such as Martin Luther King, highlights the fact that rap serves as a platform for social engagement and representation. For many, artists such as Chuck D and KRS-One have become role models, and figureheads, for those who engage with hip hop culture. The way that hip hop culture has seemed to invert many social class barriers on a worldwide scale further demonstrates its ability to connect with a wide-range of people from all backgrounds. Although hip hop may appear to discriminate against those who come from social classes perceived to be high, one would argue that hip hop is actually all-encompassing and rap is listened to by people from all social viewpoints. However, hip hop doesn't *aim* to appeal to all people; it is very much a culture that accepts those who want to be part of it, and who seek it, rather than hip hop enthusiasts and artists actively recruiting for new audiences. Participants of hip hop culture tend to adhere to this 'take it or leave it' approach and generally reflect a mindset of being there to take part if you choose and welcoming others to join in, rather than forcing cultural and musical practices on others.

It is interesting to consider that often, in hip hop culture, financial and entrepreneurial success can be tinged with potentially negative connotations. For instance, with other genres, for example in pop music, a person who has made their fortune or has made a great success from being a musician or from working within the music industry is celebrated for being enterprising, hard-working and forward-thinking. In rap, when similar success occurs, the person can be seen as having sold-out, exploitative of a genre, and even a whole culture, and is often labelled as a mogul. Although 'mogul' is a word that can often be used to describe a dominating

---

[160] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 40.

and respected force in a specific area of business, it is still a word which, in the context of rap, seems to have implicit negative connotations and association. Could this be down to the fact that people from marginalised communities feel like their marginalised situation is where they belong? I disagree with Reynolds who states that

> Inevitably, those who are excluded from full status in society only want that status, and its material trappings, more severely.[161]

I also argue that the majority of this statement rings true of certain aspects of hip hop culture in the mainstream, but stress that the element about material wealth has not been witnessed at any of the EOW events, nor reflected in the attitudes of any of the participants whilst conducting my fieldwork. Hip hop culture is not about material wealth. Cypher is not about material wealth either, but certainly, the lack of material wealth in ghetto communities, certainly adds to what makes cypher a marginalised practice.

The concept of recycling is apparent in rap music, with sampling being a highly creative and thoughtful process for most artists. The idea of utilising a segment of music that is likely to hold some sort of musical or social significance to hip hop culture is a really unique feature of rap. Again, this is another practice in hip hop culture that is often perceived to be plagiarising, or stealing, by rap's critics; this could not be further from the truth in terms of what sampling involves. It is a highly creative method of composition which utilises and takes the best bits from past music and uses it to its advantage.

Rap, in a sense, is using parts of its past to create something new, and to use an analogy, it is like restoring an antique to its former glory with an individual and contemporary twist. Sampling is a resourceful, intelligent, and creative process and allows once more for hip hop culture to hark back to its musical past and highlight the importance of its history. There is no sense of desperation for something that is completely new in rap. Innovation in ideas as to how best and creatively one can use samples is all the newness that rap requires. Perhaps this is one of the qualities of

---

[161] Reynolds, Simon, *Bring The Noise* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 21.

rap that can be most admired – there is no sense of rush in rap's continuing evolution. As Reynolds rightly summarises

> Hip hop's pleasure lies in nakedness. The music is stripped, fleshless, free of frills or plumage, streamlined for efficiency. But in terms of motivation, too, there's a minimalism or nakedness. Hip hop reflects straight values and aspirations, but as in a kind of distorting mirror, one that strips away the veils of protocol and ideology, the cant about freedom and enterprise and choice. Hip hop reveals the impolite reality of capitalism – dog eat dog struggle.[162]

In agreement with Schloss, around his work on sampling, he asserts that DJs, 'pay dues' to music and musicians of the past and their choice in samples can

> Feel or display a commitment to hip-hop tradition through the conscious or unconscious reinscription of the value of deejaying.[163]

To a great extent, it is the concept of nakedness in hip hop culture that adds to its authenticity and certainly plays a large part in understanding and learning to appreciate the aesthetic value of rap. The rawness in rap seems to appeal to its marginalised audience, and a no-frills approach tends to allow for a greater appreciation of the genre and perhaps a sense of self-fulfilment for its participants, in that it is a satisfying and rewarding subculture to be part of.

There is a certain degree of sentimentality and nostalgia that is displayed in hip hop culture. With cypher, although the aim of the game a lot of the time is to be hard-hitting and witty, there is an element of endearment and nurture amongst cypher participants within a performance and this is probably due to the very personal nature of the content of the lyrics, as well as the experiences, that are being shared. However, so many kinds of music performance can seem clinical, and despite the unwritten rules of cypher and its often formulaic construction, there seems to be nothing in its make-up that could be described as being clinical, or unapproachable, in terms of the way it is practiced. I also argue that all forms of music, even 'high' class genres of music, are mistakenly termed 'clinical' in their performance. For example, looking at classical music – there are several 'conditions' applied to the performance. Audience members may not be as openly expressive as

---

[162] Reynolds, Simon, *Bring The Noise* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 20.
[163] Schloss, Joseph G., *Making Beats* (New England: University Press of New England, 2004), p. 92.

the audiences of other genres, the musicians have rehearsed their parts to perfection, the performance venue being 'right' and everything is in its proper place, are factors that can contribute to making the actual performance seem clinical. It could be argued that these conditions are merely cosmetic and the actual music and its performance can still invoke a great deal of emotion, despite its clinical setting, and this therefore allows for a very personal and, perhaps beautiful, experience for musicians and audience members alike.

Similarly, participation in cypher presents a myriad of performance conditions to consider, despite the fact that these conditions do not seem so clinical. The ability and opportunity to engage with an artform that means something is highly important to participants of cypher, and to participants of hip hop culture in a broader sense, and this is pointed out by Rose:

> Out of a broader discursive climate in which the perspective and experiences of younger Hispanics, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans had been provided littler social space, hip hop developed as part of a cross-cultural communication network. Trains carried graffiti tags through the five boroughs; flyers posted in black and Hispanic neighbourhoods brought teenagers from all over New York to parks and clubs in the Bronx, and eventually to events throughout the metropolitan area; and, characteristic of communication in the age of high-tech telecommunications, stories with cultural and narrative resonance continued to spread at a rapid pace. It was not long before similarly marginalized black and Hispanic communities in other cities picked up on the tenor and energy in New York hip hop.[164]

Marginalisation was something that all of hip hop's pioneers faced on a daily basis and it is clear, from what Rose states here, that marginalisation is part of an undercurrent in hip hop culture, which was able to spread, and grow, due to various means of communication amongst members of marginalised communities, and particularly through marginalised youth communities. This knits together well with the discussion of 'The Message' in the previous section of this chapter, as well as

---

[164] Rose, Tricia, (1996) "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style, and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop", In Gordon, Avery F. And Newfield, Christopher, (eds.) **Mapping Multiculturalism,** Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 440.

Chuck D's concepts of 'cultural compensation' and 'something out of nothing,'[165] which are the core themes to be investigated in Chapter 5.

To a certain extent, the very factors that make cypher a marginalised artform, also contribute to increasing the feeling of authenticity for participants and audience alike, and they also provide a sense of belonging for its participants. Also, in a broader sense, I would go as far as to argue that hip hop culture would not exist if it were not for the element of marginalisation that has contributed to its conception, birth and state of constant evolution. All of the ingredients of hip hop culture, particularly rap music and the practice of cypher are affected by marginalisation to some extent. Firstly, for example, looking at the social and cultural backgrounds and traditions of cypher's participants reflects that marginalisation has played a role in their individual and community identities. This includes factors such as upbringing, socio-economic standing in society, behaviour and even the style of clothes that are typically worn by participants. Secondly, the actual musical characteristics of cypher highlight that marginalisation in a musical context is absolutely salient to the core theme of this chapter. Musical practices from previously marginalised ancestry and influences can be considered here, from the fact that rap stems from African oral traditions, to the use of sampling in rap and musical devices such as call and response which have descended from the music of previously marginalised people such as those entrapped in slavery.

To a great extent, marginalisation is utilised in rap to reflect identity. For many, marginalisation is part of everyday culture, and as Taylor asserts, culture is

> [an] entire ensemble of attitudes, institutions and practices that define a
> coherent way of living. Working to build and maintain this coherence is what
> communities do, as their members co-operate to satisfy characteristically
> human aspirations to, for example, meaningfulness, order, and beauty.[166]

This statement tends to steer towards and support the argument here that cypher is a cultural practice that provides a cultural (and musical) coherency for those who

---

[165] As mentioned in section 5.2, hip hop as 'Cultural Compensation' was discussed by Chuck D of Public Enemy in the 2007 BBC Documentary 'A lifetime in New York'.

[166] Taylor, Paul C., (2005) "Does Hip Hop Belong to Me? The Philosophy of Race and Culture." In Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) **Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason,** Illinois: Open Court, p. 81.

engage with hip hop culture in the everyday and at a local level. Furthermore, the issue of identity and its intertwined relationship with cultural roots plays a role here, such as Taylor's comments on the 'alienation' that is faced by a character in the film *Brown Sugar*, in that 'he is no longer living out an *authentic* existence as a member of his community.'[167] Taylor goes on to make a very relevant point here:

> On this view, human existence gets its meaning, and human individuals get their identities, from social life. Someone who breaks away from his or her roots is... well, let's take the organic metaphor seriously: what happens to a tree when it gets separated from its roots?[168]

This is a particularly important point to note when considering cypher's place in a marginalised community due to the ways in which participants express their individual identities within cypher. Cypher brings the very essence of hip hop culture to the fore in its practice, which is, fundamentally, based on truth, knowledge and communication. As a secondary facet of hip hop's culture, the importance placed on cultural and musical roots is demonstrated within the practice of cypher and this can be seen as being a direct manifestation of experience of marginalisation to varying degrees. One would concur with Taylor that, 'our roots confer meaning on our world and help make life worth living.'[169]

It is also worth mentioning that the very little monetary expense required to take part in cypher makes it more accessible for people from marginalised communities to take part; essentially, this isn't what makes cypher a marginalised practice. What does make cypher a marginalised practice stems from the cultural and social situations of hip hop culture's many participants and the way in which marginalisation becomes an intrinsic part of their everyday lives. I also argue, therefore, that there is not so much of a need for the validation of the authenticity of cypher as it isn't an outwardly-facing practice of rap music. By this, I mean that although cypher has its own participants and audience, it isn't a subgenre of rap to make it in the mainstream, nor could it be even classed as a subgenre of rap; it is simply an *internal* artform within rap and hip hop culture and therefore has no need

---

[167] Taylor, Paul C., (2005) "Does Hip Hop Belong to Me? The Philosophy of Race and Culture." In Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) **Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason,** Illinois: Open Court, p. 81.p. 83
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.

to be validated as being genuine, because, simply, there is no reason for it not to be. I then further assume that the ingredient of marginalisation in cypher contributes to cypher's authenticity and therefore contributes to the individual and collective identities of its participants.

2.4i   *Conclusions from Chapter 2*

The core issues reflected in this chapter have focussed on marginalisation, which have, in turn, highlighted the topics of identity, authenticity and belonging in hip hop culture. To a great extent, marginalisation reflects a part of identity for many individuals and their respective communities, particularly for those affected by diasporic change. In a sense, marginalisation actually contributes to breaking down certain barriers here, in terms of participation in hip hop culture. This is due to the common bond that links marginalised communities from several cultural and diasporic backgrounds and further highlights that rap is a highly accessible genre for those who wish to participate. Rap is all-inclusive and the practice of cypher is one of rap's branches that further improves the accessibility to participation in a musical genre for marginalised communities. As time progresses and marginalised and diasporic communities start to feel more integrated in their current surroundings, cypher continues to be part of the everyday for many, and it can now be seen as a worldwide practice that came out of rap, evolving from the conditions of marginalisation to a certain extent.

Rap is a marginalised genre of music and originally appealed to, and continues to appeal to, marginalised communities in New York, but has since spread geographically and through many cultures to achieve a worldwide movement with many participants from a wide range of cultural and social backgrounds. The semiotics of hip hop culture imply a code of behaviour that is followed by its participants, and to a certain extent, demonstrate an element of choice in the participation of individuals in hip hop. This choice also symbolises empowerment for many participants who would otherwise struggle in feeling part of a culture or community, thus highlighting further

the issues of belonging and identity. For many, hip hop culture provides a sense of belonging, and ownership, and contributes significantly to people's individual identities. There are multiple dialogues taking place within hip hop culture, and in rap, this is demonstrated between a rapper and their audience, and vice versa. In terms of cypher, multiple dialogues take place between individuals and the cypher community. Both of these statements add to the argument that rap is a channel of communication for many people and provides empowerment as they begin to feel like someone is speaking on their behalf, representing them as individuals and as communities, but ultimately, when it feels like their message is being heard.

The aspect of message is fundamental to rap and this is reflected in the practice of cypher. Cypher is a more localised channel of communication and a platform on which issues can be raised and shared thus engaging peers in relevant dialogue. The message aspect further bonds individuals and communities who share similar feelings and opinions, thereby developing a synergy, as raised in the conclusions of Chapter 1. I also assert that the sharing and disseminating of a message in cypher takes rap's facet of communication to the next level. In cypher, consciousness of the individual is increased and this further encourages engagement in cypher. Participants find that cypher is an environment in which their message can be heard, and where they feel listened to and related to; feelings of belonging and even feelings of enlightenment can increase, thus adding to the encouragement felt by participants wanting to engage in cypher.

The concept of survival has appeared once more, this time in a different context to those outlined in Chapter 1's concluding points. The misunderstanding of hip hop culture, due largely to the negativity conveyed by mainstream rap, has often made conditions tough for underground and 'true' hip hop culture to be understood. This has added to the adversity which is faced by hip hop participants and advocates, as they face further barriers due to misconceptions and ignorance by those who are unaware of the positives in hip hop culture. Adversity from one's past, such as the

oppression and segregation of black people, which ultimately went on to shape hip hop culture, is now added to with adversity in the present, which stems from a lack of understanding about the many positives in hip hop. This has meant that hip hop has had an added struggle to survive but has done so largely to the many positives that it brings to those who engage with it. Cypher is an oral tradition of tomorrow and I hope that its participants continue to choose to engage with it, to share and communicate their own personal and community message, and thus enabling the survival of such a valuable and accessible practice within hip hop culture.

CHAPTER 3

LITERAL CONTENT OF CYPHER, WORDS & METAPHOR

"Why is this verse comin' six times rehearsed?
Don't freestyle much but I write 'em like such"

> Lyrics from 'He Got Game' by Public Enemy (1998) and possibly a reference from Chuck D which pays respect to rappers who have the talent and ability to freestyle. This also implies that freestyling is a form of rap which comes from the heart, or has soul, and Chuck D's message is the same. This is quite a testament to freestyle rapping by Chuck D, who is one of the most respected and experienced rappers of all time.

Cypher is structured so that every participant will get an equal chance, in terms of time or number of bars, to show off their freestyle skills. In order to 'win' in a MC battle situation, i.e. gain the most respect by delivering the wittiest rap, it is only fair that rappers have the same time frame or bars, in which to show off their skills. However, cypher in New York, and around the world, definitely has a collective feel to it, rather than reflecting a competitive vibe, and this is also witnessed in many online videos of cypher; an example of where cypher has been disseminated online is through the videos of Ozone Cypher, a collective based in Florida. Here, viewers can see cypher taking place on the streets, with participants supporting new MCs to have a go, and who laugh collectively when lyrics don't flow so well and content is of a relatively poor standard compared to the more experienced MCs in the group.[170] Studying recorded examples of cypher can be problematic, as it raises the question about the authenticity of the situation, as mentioned in the previous Chapter and around Auslander's concept of 'liveness.' However, for the purposes of this research, I have used recorded examples which appear to be the closest reflection of what cypher is like in the flesh, without participants playing up to the camera.

It is as though everyone taking part in the cypher is on the same team, working together, rather than demeaning each other and striving to win, as in a battle situation. As a collective, cypher participants may demean another group, such as people from a different borough, or in a situation such as an arranged competitive event like at EOW, but in general, cypher in its true and raw sense seems to be about team spirit, and this is reflected in the

---

[170] A particularly good example is this video from October 2009:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qt_dj2Z_iYE King Koopa, the first MC to start off the cypher is clearly a newcomer, although I would argue that having a go at improvised rapping would be preferred to the obviously pre-mediated rap of Brownstudy, the second MC to take part.

lyrics and metaphor that are offered by cypher's participants. The braggadocio often on display has more to do with the ego of the entire group, rather than individual self-praise, and while a great deal of rap lyrics have a deeper meaning, cypher uses wit and metaphor in a more 'straight-up' manner.

The language used in cypher is highly sophisticated and is articulated in an extremely clever style, as well as being entirely appropriate to the peer-group by using colloquialisms and references specifically related to the neighbourhood in which it is taking place in, and in some cases, the geographical area that the participant is from; this further adds to the inclusiveness of the practice and highlights that it is a very accessible artform, for those from otherwise marginalised backgrounds. The themes in the lyrical content of cypher can change at any instance; tangents are common and the person who starts off the cypher can rap about something completely different to the next person, although generally, there is a constant running theme which is referred to throughout, and the creative utilisation of call and response, as mentioned in Chapter 1, dictates that quite often, a central theme will recur throughout the cypher. The main object of cypher is for participants to make a contribution and maintain movement and energy flowing.

Looking at how the participants group and project their words shows quite a talent and often displays an astonishing amount of verbal and metaphorical vocabulary and wit. The constant play on words, syllabic grouping and wit in cypher reflects an extraordinary verbal dexterity which seems like an art in itself; the freestyler has to be a verbal contortionist with a vast array of vocabulary in order to successfully execute their contribution to the cypher and keep it flowing on any number of different subjects, at a constant pace, whilst being fully improvised. The tangents in participants' lyrics link up usually to provide segue ways back to the main theme or topic, and can be seen as going 'full circle'. It is common for most cyphers to go from person to person in a clockwise motion but occasionally this pattern can be interrupted if certain content particularly provokes someone positioned elsewhere in the cypher, or an audience member feels particularly inspired or provoked to 'jump in' and take part immediately. The motion is also disturbed when new participants join in with the cypher and with people coming and going, but generally, I have found that the group of cypher participants convene naturally, through conversation, and the members are usually constant throughout. In summary, there are no rules in the cypher but mutual respect and

courtesy are embedded in the practice, despite (sometimes) rather shocking content which aims to provoke one another into an equally witty and cleverly articulated response. It seems wholly acceptable to say degrading and vile things about others in an MC battle situation but I would say that this occurs less frequently in a cypher situation which is mainly focussed on giving its participants a fair and equal turn to have their say, around any topic, thus creating a channel of communication.

Aims of this chapter

This chapter will focus on the lyrics in MC battles, and in cypher, as well as looking at particularly charged examples from recorded rap music, and will consider the significance of lyrics in cypher. The use of braggadocio can add further dimension to lyrics by bragging about personal attributes, either fact or fictional, whilst also demeaning others, in both an individual and collective sense, given that cypher is practiced in a group situation, and the general feeling is that everyone is working as part of a team; this chapter will look at braggadocio in further detail in order to establish its role and relevance in freestyle situations. The way that cypher provides a 'voice for the voiceless' is particularly interesting to consider and further examination will tie in with the discussion from Chapter 2 and how, in essence, cypher has become an artform for the marginalised in society. This chapter also builds on Kelley's theory that

> what counts more than the story is the "storytelling" – an emcee's verbal facility on the mic, the creative and often hilarious use of puns, metaphors, similes, not to mention the ability to kick some serious slang (or what we might call linguistic inventiveness).[171]

This is certainly at the crux of the practice of cypher as well as being at the heart of rap music and one would agree with Kelley, that there is something *more* to rap than its lyrical content; flow is crucial here. A great deal of the aestheticism in the genre of rap stems from the slick delivery of the words, and how an MC utilises humour, in combination with highly sophisticated literary devices, such as metaphor. It is also important to recognise that all of the above is undertaken under a certain degree of pressure in situations such as MC battles and cypher, due to their improvisatory natures, and furthermore, the practice of cypher is a

---

[171] Kelley, Robin D. G., *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 37.

constant link to hip hop's rich and diverse cultural roots and history through its demonstration as a living Afrocentric oral tradition.

3.1   Words and Metaphor in Rap

Rap's success relies on a good partnership between lyrics and music. With cypher, and MC battles, words and metaphor are the building blocks that lead to participation and delivery; being able to demonstrate creatively structured and witty lyrics, is at the heart of both of these forms of rap. With a limited amount of time (or number of bars) for participants to show off their verbal skills, it is imperative that the improvised words and metaphors in battles and in cypher are put together in a creative and impressive style and delivered in a clear and clever manner; a sense of rhythm is vital to cypher and goes hand-in-hand with the lyrics themselves which, in turn, determine a participant's flow. Quite often, participants in cypher undertake highly sophisticated lyrics with equally impressive syllabic and word grouping to produce interesting and creative rhythms whilst keeping up the momentum of their delivery. In a sense, this further develops flow and keeps the process interesting for the cypher participants and the audience. Lyrics are intertwined with complex verbal processes and become the tools for engaging in practices and styles such as signifyin(g) and braggadocio. In an emotional sense, lyrics serve as the dialogue between a performer and their audience, thus providing a direct interface to channel a message, and therefore having the ability to influence people's perceptions and raise awareness of certain cultural and social issues.

There is a great deal of trust amongst battle MCs who strive to be better than their competitors. Although violence is not condoned under any circumstance within the battle situation, the trust that any violence will not occur outside the battle situation is there. Quite often, at the end of a battle, both participants will shake hands, and even hug, to acknowledge the talent of their challenger and to demonstrate a sportsmanly attitude. This kind of mutual respect is testament to the philosophy and ethos of hip hop culture, and highlights that words must be accompanied by the right kind of attitude to have any value in rap. A non-violent form of communication, such as MC battles and cypher, allows for the showcasing of knowledge, wit and intelligence, through words and attitude. There is no place for

physical violence. However, rap lyrics themselves can actually include violence-themed content but the important point to note is that such lyrics are not meant to be interpreted literally. As Kelley summarises,

> the assumption that rappers are merely street journalists does not allow for the playfulness and storytelling that is so central to Hip Hop specifically, and black vernacular culture generally. For example, violent lyrics in rap music are rarely meant to be literal. Rather, they are more often than not metaphors to challenge competitors on the microphone. The mic becomes a Tech-9 or AK-47, imagined drive-bys occur from the stage, flowing lyrics become hollow-point shells.[172]

Kelley's analogy helps to explain what rap lyrics represent. It also indirectly highlights that, through a lack of knowledge and understanding, hip hop has earned such a bad reputation. This also helps to understand more about the consequences of ignorance and you can see that if people interpret lyrics literally, then it is no surprise that hip hop continues to be surrounded by misconceptions around what hip hop culture is actually about. Furthermore, and intertwined with the theme of braggadocio,

> Exaggerated and invented boasts of criminal acts should sometimes be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices. Growing out of a much older set of cultural practices, these masculinist narratives are essentially verbal duels over who is the "baddest." They are not meant as literal descriptions of violence and aggression, but connote the playful use of language itself.[173]

Misconceptions about rap, due to offensive lyrics, are at the heart of the problem of hip hop's negative image. For example, certain artists in the mainstream tend to rap about the themes of women in a derogatory way, drugs and violence. Many of these artists' musical styles tend to verge on the pop music spectrum, more than hip hop, but with lyrics rapped over the top of the music, so as this music is widely played in clubs, its audience goes on to associate these musical styles with what they think constitutes hip hop. An example of this kind of artist is Nelly, who has had a great deal of commercial success, but whose lyrics always reflect the themes mentioned above, such as in *Ride Wit Me*,[174] which reflects misogynist content:

---

[172] Kelley, Robin D. G., *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 38
[173] Ibid.
[174] Nelly, Ride wit Me, *Country Grammar* (Fo' Reel/Universal Records, 2001). Video can be viewed here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtSDWq6HsJE

In the club on the late night, feelin' right
Lookin', tryin' to spot somethin' real nice
Lookin' for a little shorty, hot and horny so that I can take home
(I can take home)
She be 18 (18) wit an attitude
Or 19 kinda snotty actin' real rude
Boo, as long as you a thicky thicky thick girl you know that it's on
(Know that it's on)
I peep somethin' comin' towards me up the dance floor
Sexy and real slow (hey)
Sayin' she was peepin' and I dig the last video
So when Nelly, can we go? How could I tell her no?
Her measurements were 36-25-34

In terms of mainstream rap, when such lyrics are accompanied by music videos that promote criminal activity and misogyny, it is no surprise that hip hop and certain rappers then become unpopular by association. The difference between literal and metaphorical meaning, and subsequent interpretation, has therefore contributed to the marginalisation of rap as musical genre because of the social barriers that they create through people's lack of understanding. Perhaps another contributing factor to the misinterpretation of rap lyrics could be attributed to the way in which being 'straight-up' and sarcastic are finely balanced. For someone with little knowledge or understanding of rap, it might be difficult to know where to draw the line between what should be taken literally, and what should be taken metaphorically. It is worth expanding some thoughts on signifyin(g) here, in addition to the previous discussion in 1.5. Signifyin(g) adds a further element of the black vernacular to hip hop culture, and especially in rap lyrics, thus contributing to the authenticity of hip hop and adding credibility to rap's genuine 'blackness'. To a large extent, black vernacular styles such as signifyin(g) emphasise the use of what Mitchell-Kernan terms as 'black English,' and also makes the point that tone of voice and other 'markers' have a direct impact on words and their respective meanings.

Such features [such as using certain terms that can be considered offensive] serve to define the style being used, indicating its tone and describing the setting and participants as being appropriate to the use of such an artistic style. Further, such features indicate that it should be recognized that a verbal duel is occurring and that what is said is meant in a joking, perhaps also

threatening, manner. A slight switch in code may carry implications for other components in the speech act.[175]

A particularly important feature of rapping, and especially in an MC battle or cypher environment, is the way in which the 'fine line' between wit and offensiveness is consistently toyed with, within the lyrics. In an MC battle situation, participants regularly cross the line, which is fully acceptable and encouraged; pushing boundaries is an intrinsic part of a battle. In a cypher situation, because its participants are not in direct opposition with each other, the fine line can occasionally be crossed but the practice is more about playing with barriers, and using wit and subtlety, without actually crossing the line. Mitchell-Kernan further describes this when looking at signifyin(g), and states that

> Because verbal duelling treads a fine line between play and real aggression, it is a kind of linguistic activity which requires strict adherence to socio-linguistic rules. To correctly decode the message, a hearer must be finely tuned to values which he observes in relation to all other components of the speech act. To do so he must rely on his conscious or unconscious knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules attached to this usage. Meaning, often assumed by linguists to be signalled entirely through code features, is actually dependent upon a consideration of other components of a speech act.[176]

This statement is particularly important in cypher where all participants are 'in tune' with hip hop culture and are therefore best placed to interpret and correctly understand any message or meaning that fellow participants may endeavour to disseminate and share in the cypher situation. Cypher reflects a high level of intelligence in its participants through the sophistication of words and issues used in the lyrical content of cypher. Furthermore, intelligence in a different context is reflected in cypher in the sense that all participants have to be able to determine the relationships and levels of understanding between fellow participants. By this, I mean that participants need to be able to utilise language that is appropriate to the cypher peer group and be able to articulate issues appropriately in the group. While this entails using highly sophisticated words and metaphor, and using verbal processes such as signifyin(g) and braggadocio, slang and colloquialisms have their place too and further affirm the respective participants' understanding and location,

---

[175] Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia, (1972), "Signifying, loud-talking, and marking" in Kochman, Thomas (ed.), *Rappin' and stylin' out*, (University of Illinois Press), p. 328.
[176] Ibid., pp. 328 - 329.

in using them. A great deal of cultural and social awareness is required in order to execute a convincing and genuine rap, and similarly, cultural and social awareness is needed to be able to interpret and understand rap's content. As deduced in Chapter 1, rap is a social commentary and this would not be possible without the effective exchange between narrators, i.e. rappers and cypher participants, and their audience and fellow participants. The exchange in knowledge and communication works when both communicator and receiver have a similar level of understanding and interpret words in the same way as each other. Also, signifyin(g) becomes a working example of how the understanding and interpretation dichotomy works within black vernacular culture, and especially in rap. Meaning is open to misinterpretation; cypher participants must be fully receptive to communication indicators, such as body language and tone, in order to understand the intended meaning. As Mitchell-Kernan summarises,

> A remark taken in the spirit of verbal duelling may, for example, be interpreted as insult by virtue of what on the surface seems to be merely a minor change in personnel or a minor change in topic. Crucially, paralinguistic features must be made to appropriately conform to the rules. Change in posture, speech rate, tone of voice, facial expression, etc., may signal a change in meaning. The audience must also be sensitive to these cues. A change in meaning may signal that members of the audience must shift their responses and that metalinguistic comments may no longer be appropriate.[177]

It is interesting to note that there is a degree of science behind what constitutes a good rap lyric, and, as discussed previously, it takes a combination of elements in order for a rapper to have lyrical success. Aside from being able to come up with original, witty and potentially hard-hitting words, a rapper needs to be able to deliver these words in a way that is rhythmically and aesthetically pleasing. To do this, the words must be constructed in a way which needs to flow and help shape the rhythmic and musical features of the song. With cypher, there are some notable differences around musical accompaniment, but ultimately, rap lyrics need to flow convincingly and connect with the underlying beat. In terms of being convincing, rap lyrics need to be able to lend themselves to forms of verbal expression, and

---

[177] Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia, (1972), "Signifying, loud-talking, and marking" in Kochman, Thomas (ed.), *Rappin' and stylin' out*, (University of Illinois Press), p. 329.

particularly those forms connected to the black vernacular, such as signifyin(g). In terms of pre-written rap, Edwards asserts that

> The writing process in the way you come up with the content and the flow and join them together to create the finished lyrics. Some of the most memorable and classic hip-hop tracks are created not just by great flow or great content but by the skilful combination of the two.[178]

As with most forms of Western music, patterns naturally emerge in rap and it is highly rewarding for a rapper to find that their lyrics do actually fit with the implied 'shape' of the music. This concept relates to part of the discussion in Chapter 2, around the semiotics of rap and how there are implicit and unspoken rules in life around aestheticism and how they influence a person's judgement in what may or may not sound 'nice'.

To a certain extent, rap lyrics follow a similar process to melody in music, which follows a certain direction, or travels, and is able to tease its audience by changing its musical journey and leaving them in anticipation of its resolution. The idea that music strives to 'resolve' is based on the science behind the Western harmonic system and one argues that to a certain extent, rappers subconsciously follow this desire to resolve in music and this is reflected in the way in which their lyrics are constructed and delivered. Verbal expressive forms such as signifyin(g) relate to the idea of resolving and the resolve is found when a message is decoded and the audience 'get' what is being said. Anticipation is built during the course of actually getting to this moment of resolve. Central to building anticipation and then getting to a sense of resolve in rap music, is the way in which words are used. Edwards dubs verbal techniques as 'content tools' and these assist with the manipulation of words which have an effect on flow and message.

> While a content form is the basic structure of a song, content *tools* are the specific techniques you use from line to line in your lyrics to help better convey your content. The overall structure of a song might be conceptual or abstract, but within that structure you might use a number of different content tools, such as imagery, metaphor, or wordplay. Most of these tools are the same ones found in poetry and other forms of literature.[179]

---

[178] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 133.
[179] Ibid., p. 41.

Furthermore, Edwards picks up on the point that these content tools are salient to the development of rap lyrics. I argue that as well as being intrinsic to other forms of literature, these tools are utilised even more in black vernacular expression and are, therefore, of extra importance in rap and hip hop culture. A rapper needs to continuously improve and build on these skills in order to achieve the successful delivery of rap lyrics. These skills are also a salient part of a rapper's ability to achieve the successful communication of their message. As Edwards summarises,

> Mastering the different tools is very important. It lets you express your message in a way that will move the listener, and it helps you to add substance and depth to your lyrics. It can also let you make old topics seem new and fresh again.[180]

3.2 Voice for the Voiceless

Hip hop's bad reputation tends to overshadow the great deal of good and positivity that rap provides for individuals and communities. Rap very much highlights the power of words and further opens up an alternative channel of communication, especially for marginalised people, by fulfilling the role of being a voice for the voiceless. Across many cultures and musical genres, music has often been utilised as a form of self-expression, as well as being used as a channel of communication, particularly as a representation of people from marginalised backgrounds, thus giving a voice to those experiencing a common struggle. Whilst this representation of oppressed or marginalised people also raises issues of belonging and identity, likely as a result of diaspora, it is fair to say that music, as a channel of communication, is something which has deep resonance with black contemporary music, and, in particular, the musical genres associated with contemporary African-American culture. Many forms of black vernacular expression are intertwined with music, such as the blues, soul and gospel, and rap music has followed in the footsteps of its musical ancestors, in that it provides a platform for its participants to convey and communicate issues and messages. Also, rap provides an alternative form of engagement with popular culture. As Neal states

> For African-American youth, hip-hop music also allowed them to counter the iconography of fear, menace, and spectacle that dominated mass-mediated

---

[180] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 41.

perceptions of contemporary black life by giving voice to the everyday human realities of black life in ways that could not be easily reduced to commodifiable stereotypes.[181]

As well as crossing cultural and geographical barriers associated with diaspora, rap has crossed many language barriers and it is the essence of hip hop culture and philosophy, in communicating truth, which unites participants of hip hop culture on a worldwide scale. Ultimately, it is rap's function of narrator and in providing a voice that results in such unity; these features themselves rely upon the partnership between words and music, plus effective communication to the hip hop audience in order to achieve a sense of understanding and a feeling of being heard. Neal maintains

> that the emergence of hip-hop, which appeared in a rudimentary state in the mid-1970s, was representative of a concerted effort by young urban blacks to use mass-culture to facilitate communal discourse across a fractured and dislocated national community.[182]

And, furthermore, states that hip hop was,

> driven by the need to give voice to issues that privilege the local and the private within the postindustrial city – thus the overdetermined constructions of masculinity, sexuality, criminality, and even an urban patriarchy – hip hop's best attempts at social commentary and critique represented traditions normalized and privileged historically in the Black Public Sphere of the urban north.[183]

In times when people are faced with violence, crime and gang culture in their daily lives, one would assert that the importance and necessity of a non-violent means of communicating struggle and oppression is magnified. As Flores points out, rap has been used as a channel of communication for other marginalised groups and states that

> Like other Latino groups, Puerto Ricans are using rap as a vehicle for affirming their history, language, and culture under conditions of rampant discrimination and exclusion. The explosion of Spanish-language and bilingual rap onto the pop music scene in recent years bears special significance in the face of the stubbornly monolingual tenor in today's public discourse, most evident in the crippling of bilingual programs and services and in the ominous gains of the "English Only" crusade. And of course, along with the Spanish and

---

[181] Neal, Mark A., *What the Music Said* (New York:Routledge, 1999), p. 138.
[182] Ibid., p. 136.
[183] Ibid.

Spanglish rhymes, Latino rap carries an ensemble of alternative perspectives and an often divergent cultural ethos into the mainstream of U.S. social life.[184]

To a large extent, the accessibility of rap as an artform plays a key role in widening rap's audience and ensuring efficient communication of the message. Flores takes this further in saying that

> For Puerto Ricans, though, rap is more than a newly opened window on their history; rap *is* their history, and Puerto Ricans are an integral part in the history of hip-hop. As the "Puerto rocks" themselves testify in conversation and rhyme, rapping is one of many domains within a larger field of social and creative practices expressive of their collective historical position in the prevailing relations of power and privilege.[185]

In a similar context, blues became the first musical genre to 'speak out' about oppression, and oppression has been an integral part of black history. Although there had been slave songs and work songs previously to blues, it was blues that actually channelled opinions and feelings which were often controversial in mainstream America, but during and post Civil War, attitudes were beginning to change and especially towards the previously segregated black communities. Artists such as Nina Simone, during the 1960s, used blues to channel her opinion and voice protest over segregation, such as in *Mississippi Goddam*, which will be analysed in 4.4. To think about controversial blues in another sense, music often referred to as 'dirty blues' and coming from the late 1920s and early 1930s America, could be considered as having parallels in content with misogynist hip hop lyrics today. By incorporating lyrics of a sexual nature, dirty blues utilized the taboo. An example of sexually explicit lyrics can be heard in *Shave 'em Dry* by Bessie Jackson, from 1935:[186]

> I got nipples on my titties, big as the end of my thumb
> I got somethin' between my legs that'll make a dead man come
> Oh daddy, baby won't you shave 'em dry?
> Won't you grind me baby? Grind me until I cry

Oppressed people felt that they were speaking out through music about much needed change and long-standing suffering as they were able to relate to the messages which were communicated through the blues by predominantly black

---

[184] Flores, Juan, *From Bomba to Hip Hop,* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2000), p. 137.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Bessie Jackson, Shave 'em Dry recording on Youtube here:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cr6xjWEYGSs

musicians. Here, the issue of accessibility arises again, and rap is a form of popular music that allows and encourages accessibility to its predominantly marginalised audience. I argue that marginalisation is an essential contributing factor to the way in which people engage with hip hop culture. It is hip hop's rawness that adds to its appeal and increases accessibility. Creativity and self-expression is also encouraged at all times in hip hop practices, such as cypher, which further adds to this appeal. It is important to recognise the 'whole package' of what hip hop culture provides when considering exactly how rap is utilised as a voice for the voiceless, and one agrees with Keyes that, in terms of communicating to an audience,

> Rap music is an amalgam of street language coding, style, and raw beats. The rap music performance event is one in which dance, drama, music, and visual arts are inseparable. On a paramusical-lingual level, particular posturing, street dress, jewelry, and hairstyles underscore the message of the music.[187]

Keyes' point about the combination of these ingredients in what it takes to make rap successful is important, and it is particularly important to focus on what 'paramusical-lingual features' might entail in terms of cypher. Although words and metaphor are of ultra importance in communicating a message, there is more to giving a voice than words alone, and I hope to have conveyed this point throughout.

It is worth noting here that consciousness is an essential part of conveying the meaning of a message and adds credibility to 'the voice' in hip hop culture. Words alone do not always project a clear message and therefore do not always provide a voice. The added 'vocabulary' that musical characteristics bring, such as rhythm, can help to enhance a message or issue. At the moment this enhancement takes place, musicians, and perhaps participants of cypher, are able to feel united and that their message is going somewhere. Music adds a further dimension to verbal communication and, in combination with the social elements of music, contributes to the way it can assist in providing a voice for the voiceless. A good example of another collective-based model in current hip hop can be witnessed in the UK. The 'People's Army' is a collective of hip hop artists who state that

---

[187] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 150.

From city to city… From country to county… For people who want to listen…
Make it more than words… TAKE ACTION!!!
Our aim: to educate through music… With the hope to free trapped and
unconscious minds… ELEVATE!
Our purpose: To energise the collective diversity of those of us, willing to take
determined responsible control of our own environment. To acknowledge our
dutiful responsibility to nurture our culture. To facilitate activities that
educate, politicise, and provide guidance to our youth.[188]

Hip hop artists from all over the world, but predominantly from the UK, subscribe to
the People's Army manifesto of creating conscious hip hop which educates others,
especially younger generations, and provides their audience with conscious rap
which is far from the output of the mainstream. This kind of collective further
supports the assertion that artists want their particular message to be heard.

Engagement in cypher demonstrates a choice to some extent and the choice
to take part in a form of cultural expression. In complete contrast to mainstream or
commercial hip hop, cypher is an alternative for those who want to be actively
involved in hip hop culture but who do not have any affinity with the mainstream,
either consciously, in terms of political and social views, or subconsciously, in taking
part in cypher as it is simply the thing to do in the communities of its respective
participants. This contrast between cypher and the mainstream further highlights
that a large amount of mainstream hip hop is a deliberate act of exploitation of an
entire culture. What cypher stands for reflects the very essence of hip hop culture
and philosophy and promotes truth, knowledge and communication. Cypher is far
from being institutionalised and could be considered as a form of a self-governed
organisation. This adds to the core theme of the following chapters which discuss
the idea that hip hop culture enables individuals and communities to feel a sense of
empowerment and that they have a stake in ownership of cypher as an artform and
contemporary cultural practice.

Due to the lack of a hierarchy amongst cypher participants (and unlike gang
culture), I assert that cypher is a musical practice which allows individuals to take
control and therefore promotes a sense of own agency. As Morgan asserts, in
relation to 'core' participants of hip hop culture,

---

[188] Taken from the People's Army website at http://www.peoplesarmyofficial.com/index.htm

The core regenerates in five-year spans and its members often believe that true hiphop began when they came of age. They only recognize earlier moments in hiphop when they become long-term members. The younger group members also practice freestyle and compete with each other over the best rap delivery, style and so forth.[189]

This also supports the theory of cypher being an inclusive practice, and lacking a hierarchy amongst its participants, but highlighting participation in hip hop as a journey, where after an induction, participants become 'long term' members of hip hop culture. Relating back to signifyin(g), Potter makes the point that within language, a degree of power exchange actually can be detected, in that

Signifyin(g) has from its earliest origins deployed its linguistic "games" in order to frame and mobilize larger questions of power relations, Signifyin(g) is based on the realization that what Euro-American critics (following Gadamer) call the "aesthetics of reception" are in fact relations of *power.* Taking and mis-taking, acts of verbal exchange which are built around the central trope of the Signifyin(g) monkey as trickster figure, are at each turn linked with their material consequences; unlike much of "Western" aesthetics, which presumes the possibility of a "correct" or "accurate" reception, Signifyin(g) accounts for and sets into play the *mis*taking of meaning.[190]

This is particularly relevant to rap music and how cypher provides a voice for the voiceless, and the use of verbal practices such as signifyin(g) are not only utilised to add a further dimension of wit and humour to rap lyrics, but used almost subconsciously to pre-empt any misinterpretation from audience, and to those who are intended as recipients of the message. Interpretation needs to take place far deeper than the surface of rap lyrics because, as Keyes states:

Indirect commentary is delivered in rap lyrics through ambiguity, allusion, imagery, metaphor, braggadocio, or insults. In many instances, an MC subtly uses a word or phrase in varied forms that go beyond what the title of a song suggests.[191]

Finally, it is important to add here that in providing a voice for the voiceless, rap music, and especially cypher, provides the platform on which freedom of speech can actually be put into practice. While many people believe that they have freedom of speech, in practice it can be the opposite, and many forms of self-expression and

---

[189] Morgan, Marcyliena, *The Real Hiphop: Battling for Knowledge. Power and Respect in the LA Underground* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 55 - 56
[190] Potter, Russell A., *Spectacular Vernaculars* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 82-3.
[191] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 132.

public opinion are suppressed by social conditioning and the implied social barriers that can stand in the way of total self-expression. The collective ethos of cypher participants, as well as the collective attitude reflected by hip hop culture in general, allows participants the opportunity to properly exercise their right to freedom of speech, whilst in an environment that provides a safety net and a sense of 'strength in numbers.' The theme of team ethos in cypher as well as connecting the theory that certain forms of rap can serve as a voice for the voiceless, through the combination of the careful construction of words and language and a sense of being part of a team warrants further discussion. For now, I suggest that both the linguistic and sociological elements of cypher require careful consideration when trying to determine the significance of cypher in hip hop culture.

3.3   Braggadocio

As Keyes summarises,

MCs advance signifyin with lyrical wit via braggadocio. As boasting and exaggerated language escalates, it evolves in to a form of signifyin known to the rap community as *dissin,* the act of *dis*respecting or downplaying someone else's attributes while praising one's own. During the formative years of rap music, it was not unusual for an MC to verbally challenge an opponent through freestylin, the extemporaneous recitation of rhyming couplets.[192]

Here, one can begin to understand braggadocio as an artform in itself, and, while closely related to signifyin(g) in the sense that both are forms of black vernacular verbal expression, is used to intensify lyrics and their meanings. I assert that a great deal of braggadocio is built on a combination of exaggeration and humour, and is delivered in a very tongue in cheek manner. When considering cypher, braggadocio is not necessarily utilised in exactly the same way as Keyes describes. Due to the team ethos in cypher, there is no need to *dis* others in the group as everyone shares the common goal of taking part in the cypher and coming up with fresh and impressive lyrics. However, there can still be a place for self-promotion and exaggeration within cypher, without the need to put down others. Although, as Perkins asserts,

---

[192] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 137.

> The dis element informs all rap styles, and MCs must be able to perform dis to gain a modicum of acceptance and respect. It has been argued that the dis element in rap reinforces the macho tendency in African American male culture.[193]

I would argue that it is more likely to see the kind of braggadocio that Keyes outlines in an MC battle situation, when rappers are there to 'big up' themselves as well *as* putting down their opponent. Contrary to Perkins' assertion, the need for dis within cypher is not a priority for most cypher participants. There have been many occasions in rap's history when braggadocio has spilled over from MC battles to actual recorded rap, and, as Keyes notes

> Many of these verbal battles (e.g. Busy Bee versus Kool Moe Dee) were live, unrehearsed performances, but as rap music grew into a commercial music industry, verbal battles ensued on record.[194]

I assert that when such verbal battles become part of the mainstream and a part of commercialised rap, the battle function changes. The duelling rappers no longer want to prove themselves to peers and audiences, such as in an MC battle environment. The recorded 'beef' is simply used to sell more records on the back of media hype and attention, and thus to make more money due to the commercially driven record industry. I suspect that recorded battles have appeared several times during the course of hip hop culture's history, as part of a marketing plan, rather than to satisfy or to respond to provocations by opposing rappers in the usual sense. Looking at the origins of the MC battle, it is easy to see how black vernacular forms such as the dozens and braggadocio can be intertwined. Braggadocio is closely related to the dozens, and while it is quite easy to get bogged down in the seriousness of signifyin(g) and braggadocio, in what they are and what they do, I admire Kelley's take on the dozens, in that

> The goal of the dozens and related verbal games is deceptively simple to get a laugh. The pleasure of the dozens is not the viciousness of the insult but the humor, the creative pun, the outrageous metaphor. Contrary to popular belief, mothers are not the sole target; the subjects include fathers,

---

[193] Perkins, William E., 'The Rap Attack: An Introduction,' in Perkins, William E. (ed), *Droppin' Science, Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 18.
[194] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 137.

grandparents, brothers, sisters, cousins, friends, food, skin color, smell and hairstyles.[195]

While seriousness has its place in the black vernacular, and especially in hip hop culture, it is important to note that humour has its place too. Humour is so often lost in rap lyrics and in verbal artforms such as braggadocio, through the intensity of the situation, such as in an MC battle environment. With cypher, part of its aestheticism is to do with the way in which the everyday and mundane topics are incorporated into lyrics that reflect bigger issues, and act as a social commentary and snapshot of contemporary urban life. As Kelley affirms, verbal practices such as the dozens can breathe some welcome light relief into black urban culture. Furthermore,

> The emphasis on "your mama" in most interpretations of the dozens has more to do with the peculiar preoccupation of social science with Negro family structure than anything else. Besides, in many cases the target is immaterial; your mama, your daddy, your greasy-headed granny are merely vehicles through which the speaker tries to elicit a laugh and display her skills. In retrospect, this seems obvious, but amid the complicated readings of masculine overcompensation and ritual performance, only a handful of writers of the period – most of whom were African Americans with no affiliation with the academy – recognized the centrality of humor.[196]

To a certain extent, braggadocio in rap provides an added element of drama and perhaps enhances the sense of acting in the 'show' that is entailed in rap performances, which allows for a further level of engagement between rappers, their fellow participants and audience members. When braggadocio is used under the right circumstances, rap is enhanced with added exaggeration and comedy. Ultimately, a rapper is endeavouring to steal the show, and can utilise braggadocio to get the better of an opponent, particularly in an MC battle environment. Also, braggadocio assists in getting the audience on side as everyone can relate to the concept of trying to go one better than someone, and especially from involvement with black vernacular expressive forms such as the dozens. Exaggeration and showing off is part of the process which involves the dramatisation of rap and is the main characteristic that sets cypher apart from such dramatic and competitive situations such as the MC battle. While the content of cypher can be playful and

---

[195] Kelley, Robin D. G., *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 34.
[196] Ibid., pp. 34-5.

exaggerated at times, it is a far more relaxed practice for its participants than an MC battle, despite the demands of improvisation combined with an element of peer pressure that cypher involves. There are traces of braggadocio in another form of black vernacular expression known as 'jive talk', which became widely popular with the development of radio technology, and closely links with the beginnings of hip hop culture. As Keyes states, 'jive and rhyme were emulated by early hip-hop DJs and MCs'[197] and furthermore, relating directly to braggadocio,

> Jive was even incorporated in the boasting poetry of certain African American sports heroes. For example, the former heavyweight champion boxer Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay) was known for his poetic prowess. Before each boxing match, Ali would taunt his opponent by boasting in rhymed couplets.[198]

I would argue that Muhammad Ali displayed the wit, humour and improvisatory verbal skills that many rappers would aspire to have and he should not be forgotten in his contribution in raising awareness of a style of black vernacular expression which in turn, had a direct role on the development of rap as a genre. Similarly, this links back to Chapter 2 which mentions the use of the black vernacular within humour, relating to the work of comedians Chris Rock and Richard Pryor. Keyes goes on to describe that jive talk also had its place in comedy and asserts that

> African American comedians too laced their monologues with street jive. Prior to Muhammad Ali's use of the boasting poetic style, black comedians, who used jive, flourished in 1940s Harlem, where they often hosted talent shows at theaters like the famous Apollo. Early populizers of jive humor included Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Redd Foxx, Godfrey Cambridge, Pigmeat Markham, and Rudy Ray Moore, the man known for popularizing toasts like "Dolemite" and "The Signifying Monkey" via audio recordings as well as in film.[199]

Braggadocio therefore becomes a common feature in most forms of black vernacular expression and within black artforms, such as in poetry, music and comedy. In a sense, braggadocio on varying levels, becomes an umbrella idiom of black popular culture and seems to be something that is inbuilt in black artforms and modes of expression. It is interesting to note that many rap artists, from around the world, subconsciously endeavour to emulate a sense of the black vernacular in their lyrics,

---

[197] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 31.
[198] Ibid., p. 31.
[199] Ibid., p. 32.

music and performances, and it is only relatively recently that it has become socially acceptable, and even encouraged, to rap in one's own dialect.[200] This links in with issues of identity and belonging in hip hop; now that hip hop is established as a worldwide culture, it is no longer necessary to rap in an American accent. Individuality and having a sense of local pride are actively encouraged in hip hop culture. Anyone can be part of hip hop culture if they'd like to become involved and there is no need to hide one's regional or national identity by altering an accent.

Going back to the theory that braggadocio is a common feature to various black artforms, I concede that this is a generalisation. In terms of African American music, while braggadocio can be present in lyrical form, such as with rap, or in terms of a sense of dominance, such as the jazz solo, Small succinctly defines that it is definitely an interlinking of different elements that actually *make* rap. While braggadocio is a notable part of black vernacular expression,

> One of the major difficulties in discussing the great four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle that is Afro-American music, and in showing how the various elements articulate one with another, lies in the necessity of using the literary medium, which is obstinately sequential, to represent a process in which so many interlinked things have been going on at the same time.[201]

The main point to draw out of this statement is around the concept of articulation. Ultimately, rap is the outcome of several interwoven levels of cultural articulation and closely links to identity and self-expression. For example, braggadocio itself is a complex artform within the black vernacular and is tightly bound to its cultural and historical roots. As Small asserts,

> Styles do crystallize and become dominant, and musicians as they play, listeners as they listen and dancers as they dance, do group themselves together, bound by common values and identities; such groups frequently adopt names for the purpose of self-identification. The fact that the power to name is also the power to define is of great importance in musicking, concerned as it crucially is with identity, and we need to look very carefully always at how a name is given, who gives it, and whose power of definition it reflects.[202]

---

[200] As discussed by Ken Masters in 'Hip Hop is Dead' http://vimeo.com/15896666 presented by Northern Film & Media, 2010 – a documentary focussing on hip hop culture in the North East of England.
[201] Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 369.
[202] Ibid., p. 370.

In terms of black self-expression, braggadocio has played its role, but the point in hand is that it is the 'common values and identities' that Small mentions, that knit a community together. This concept relates to previous discussion around marginalisation and highlights the relationship between language, or vernacular expression, and artistic expression and culture.

3.4   Deeper Meaning in Rap Lyrics

I come back
Every year I get newer
I'm the dust on the moon
I'm the trash in the sewer
Let's go
I come back
Every year I get brighter
If you thinking Hip Hop is alive hold up your lighter
Let's go
I come back
Every year I'm expanding
Talking to developers
About this city we planning, c'mon!
I come back
Through any endeavor
This is Hip Hop
We gone last forever

Hip means to know
It's a form of intelligence
To be hip is to be up-date and relevant
Hop is a form of movement
You can't just observe a hop
You got to hop up and do it
Hip and Hop is more than music
Hip is the knowledge
Hop is the movement
Hip and Hop is intelligent movement
Or relevant movement
We selling the music
So write this down on your black books and journals
Hip Hop culture is eternal
Run and tell all your friends
An ancient civilization has been born again
It's a fact

I come back
Every year I'm the Strongest
KRS-One, Marley Marl
Yup we last the longest
Let's go

I come back
Cause I'm not in the physical
I create myself man I live in the spiritual
I come back through the cycles of life
If you been here once you gone be here twice
So I tell you
I come back
Cause you must learn too
Hip Hop culture is eternal

The lyrics above come from *Hip Hop Lives (I Get Back)* by KRS-One and Marley Marl,[203] former rap rivals, who collaborated in 2007 to create this album. I chose this example of rap because not only is the lyrical content rich in terms of sending out a message that shows hip hop is knowledge, but also because the symbolic message of KRS-One and Marley Marl creating something together after being rivals during the Golden Age, over the specific geographic region of New York in which hip hop was born. This track is also significant due to its title, stating clearly that hip hop is alive.

With a great deal of emphasis on words and their meanings in this chapter, I would like to look in closer detail at some lyrics from several genres of black contemporary culture, relating to rap music. Utilising a case-study approach here, the lyrics of specific songs will be discussed and conclusions will be drawn as to what they might mean, in both a political or social sense, and where they might place the performer.

Fight the Power by Public Enemy [204] is used here as an example of revolutionary rap. This is taken from their 1990 album, 'Fear of a Black Planet.' A few things to note in this piece of music is the use of an excerpt of speech from Thomas Todd, a Civil Rights activist and how it is completely dismissed by Chuck D.[205] It is important to consider these lyrics in conjunction with the powerful imagery in the music video for *Fight the Power,* and expanding a little more on the video, it is interesting to note that Public Enemy have staged it in order to look like a race rally, complete with placards to give 'shout-outs' to people and places deemed worthy of

---

[203] KRS-One & Marley Marl, Hip Hop Lives (I Get Back), *Hip Hop Lives* (Koch Records, 2007). Music video here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FadzGGJiLTg
[204] Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990, Def Jam/Colombia).
[205] This dismissal can be viewed in the music video of *Fight the Power,* at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_t13-0Joyc, also mentioned in section 2.3.

their respect and affiliation. Immediately, the audience gets a sense of Public Enemy's political viewpoints and *Fight the Power*, as a whole package of lyrics, music, message and image, highlight where Public Enemy stand socially and politically.

1989 a number another summer (get down)
Sound of the funky drummer
Music hittin' your heart 'cause I know you got soul
(Brothers and sisters, hey)
Listen if you're missin' y'all
Swingin' while I'm singin'
Givin' whatcha gettin'
Knowin' what I know
While the Black bands sweatin'
And the rhythm rhymes rollin'
Got to give us what we want
Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power
(Chorus)

As the rhythm designed to bounce
What counts is that the rhymes
Designed to fill your mind
Now that you've realized the pride's arrived
We got to pump the stuff to make us tough
from the heart
It's a start, a work of art
To revolutionize make a change nothin's strange
People, people we are the same
No we're not the same
Cause we don't know the game
What we need is awareness, we can't get careless
You say what is this?
My beloved let's get down to business
Mental self defensive fitness
(Yo) bumrush the show
You gotta go for what you know
Make everybody see, in order to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say...
Fight the Power

Chorus

Elvis was a hero to most
But he never meant shit to me you see
Straight up racist that sucker was

Simple and plain
Mother fuck him and John Wayne
Cause I'm Black and I'm proud
I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped
Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps
Sample a look back you look and find
Nothing but rednecks for 400 years if you check
Don't worry be happy
Was a number one jam
Damn if I say it you can slap me right here
(Get it) let's get this party started right
Right on, c'mon
What we got to say
Power to the people no delay
To make everybody see
In order to fight the powers that be
(Fight the Power)

Through these lyrics, and supported by the Bomb Squad's samples, within the first few lines of the piece, we can see homage being paid to James Brown, with reference to *The Funky Drummer* and *I Know You Got Soul*.[206] There is also a clear message of Public Enemy believing in freedom of speech and wanting to highlight the injustices of black oppression. Message can be manipulated by rappers, and in the case of Public Enemy, although some of their message comes across in a rather blunt style, there are also underlying messages amidst the lyrics which are expected to be interpreted by the audience. As Edmondes points out, message and meaning don't just rely on words alone, and

> What really matters, surely, is the timing and intonation of phrases and cadences. What really does the destroying is the melody and percussion embodied in the words. The words still do the damage, ultimately, like shrapnel – but the explosive power is in the music of the rap.[207]

It is most relevant to look at some lyrics from a battle rap here, and here is an excerpt from a rap battle with EOW New York MC Iron Solomon competing against a West coast rapper called Thesaurus.[208] Some of the most notable lyrics in the battle come from Iron Solomon, who does not fail to impress the audience (as well as his opponent) by using raps that are clearly improvised, such as in Round 2, with,

---

[206] The former being performed by James Brown and the latter being produced by James Brown, and performed by Bobby Bird.
[207] Will Edmondes at http://www.copydex.blogspot.com/ 11th November 2007, 'Hip Hop Is... Signifyin(g)'
[208] Iron Solomon Vs. Thesaurus, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZIRzaKNC90&feature=related 25th April 2006, as part of the World Rap Championships.

> Now I'm the reason that you scream and yell at night
> Named himself Thesaurus but needed a dictionary to spell it right
> And when my record drops, I'll collect the wad, respect and props
> The time is now, you better set your clock
> Matter of fact, this is what I'd look like if my freckles popped
> I could select the spots on your face and play connect the dots

The difference in lyrics between those from a rap battle situation such as these, and the politically-charged lyrics from Public Enemy above, is quite marked. Although Iron Solomon delivers quite an up-front vicious verbal attack on Thesaurus, the whole rap still delivers wit and humour, and, ultimately, the aim is to win the MC battle with a prize of $100 and progression into the next round of the World Rap Championships. What is highlighted here is that music can be utilised for different purposes and can be manipulated appropriately by the rapper, to convey message and meaning to varying degrees. Iron Solomon's lyrics also reflect an element of braggadocio through several put-downs to Thesaurus, opening with the lyrics:

> Maybe you shoulda come here rockin' a better flannel
> Or at least some long pants, maybe you shoulda checked the weather channel
> 'Cos you don't have to look through the holes in this mesh trucker hat
> Just to see that this fuckin' guy is fuckin' whack
> I keep kosher but he fucks with pork and swine
> I'd smack him but he'd probably call the pigs to report the crime
> Yo, you're the ugliest baby that the stork could find
> I guess that's what happens when you face-fuck a porcupine
> See you might have a buzz out West but New York is mine
> But here, you're behind, he's still stuck on California time

Iron Solomon signifies here on several themes such as Thesaurus' attire, basically implying that Thesaurus has no fashion sense and is wearing a hat worn by truckers. Iron Solomon brags that 'New York is mine' which fuels the battle further. Even during these insults, Thesaurus laughs along and I suggest that he is impressed by Iron Solomon's clearly improvised rap. Thesaurus hits back at Iron Solomon in his retort with,

> Now I gotta ignore this guy talkin' about me and a porcupine
> I know you went home to record those lines and to say whether or not
> you had written those lines, I guess it's borderline
> So you can suck, don't swallow
> Bitch, your glasses are so thick you should be the spokesmodel for coke bottles

Which also demonstrates clearly improvised lyrics on Thesaurus' part who implies that Iron Solomon's lyrics are 'written' rather than improvised, as they should be in a battle situation. In a similar fashion to Iron Solomon, Thesaurus picks up on personal appearance in insulting Iron Solomon for wearing glasses. This particular rap battle also demonstrates a call and response kind of style, with one rapper presenting an insult, and the opponent quashing it with a counter-insult.

Here, I would like to discuss the freestyle rap undertaken between Big Zoo, of EOW, and guest rapper, KRS-One[209] - a more detailed analysis of the context of this freestyle is discussed in section 4.4, around the social settings and circumstances in which it took place, but here, I would like to focus on the wittiness and intelligence reflected in the words of Big Zoo and KRS-One. Big Zoo delivers a beautifully improvised and personal rap, which reflects much respect for KRS-One, paying homage to KRS-One's achievements, and shows a great deal of knowledge and understanding of the music of Boogie Down Productions, which was KRS-One's rap group. In complete contrast to the insulting and offending lyrics heard in a battle rap situation, this freestyle highlights the positive situation for those present at EOW, with Big Zoo starting off the freestyle with:

> Yo, I got to tell, Kris, respect dog cos I'm a teacher as well
> Matter of fact, that's where you can follow me
> I've got a Bachelor's in social work, my Masters in sociology
> Matter of fact for the chance of situation
> I dedicated 11 of my years to education
> That's why I had to gain shit, my favourite KRS album, *Edutainment*
> That's how I find it
> I remember when I first heard *Criminal Minded*
> That shit was fly as hell
> I'd sit in my room for 10 hours and burn the 'L'
> That shit is scary, I like the second album, *By All Means Necessary*
> And I have to reach ya, hip hop make some noise for the teacha!

In response to Big Zoo, KRS-One, noticeably and genuinely impressed at Big Zoo's talent and sincerity, responds with,

---

[209] KRS-One at EOW New York, October 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAQSzC0rquQ

Who the hell is this, pointing at me?
This is so neat man, thanks for that
Let me tell you right now I'm about to give it right back
That's respect, that's respect on the track
But now I got to return it, man you gotta learn it
This is what we do, when rap miss we burn it
Or burn them 'cause they don't know the principles
My man started with the metaphysical
And then he jumped on over into the spiritual
He taught the nation big up in education
You are on the frontline, I'm in my right mind
We're spitting the right rhyme at the right time
Listen to this, this is Biggie shit but he don't exist
So who's the number 1 MC now?
(Big Zoo responds with 'KRS-ONE!')

Again, the function of this freestyle is very specific. KRS-One sets out to show thanks and mutual respect to Big Zoo, while still providing entertainment to the crowd. The fact that he mentions 'the principles' i.e. the foundation on which hip hop culture is built, is very poignant, as he is all too aware that there are many rappers involved with hip hop for the wrong reasons. KRS-One clearly identifies with the culture at EOW and can see parallels with his own music which has always kept it real and remained true to the philosophy of hip hop culture around truth, knowledge and communication. This is reflected in his choice of words. It is also important to identify what is not being said in lyrics. Words contribute to style and style depicts many opinions of rappers, as well as communicating their opinions. Many rap artists have used their lyrics to promote a cause. It is important to note that KRS-One started the Stop the Violence Movement in 1989 because of an increase in violence within African American communities. This followed the murder of his DJ partner, Scott La Rock, from Boogie Down Productions (1987) and the killing of a fan at a Boogie Down Productions concert in 1988. Keyes asserts that

> Boogie Down Productions, spearheaded by KRS-One, along with other rap music artists wanted to set the record straight about rappers and violence. Their collaborative efforts led to the creation of the Stop the Violence Movement and its theme song, which appeared on BDP's second album, *My Philosophy* (1988). Besides addressing crime at rap concerts, the movement sought to raise public awareness of black-on-black crime, to point out its real causes and social costs, to raise funds for a charitable organization already dealing with the problems of illiteracy and crime in the inner city, and to show

that rap music is a viable tool for stimulating reading and writing skills among inner-city kids.[210]

KRS-One re-launched this movement in 2009 and commented that,

> [Hip-Hop] can make a difference. We influence every inner-city in the world…it's like all of us paying attention to a wind that seems to be blowing, a certain attitude about life that we are all kind of feeling. I think everybody wants to see Hip-Hop just balance itself out and grow a little more. It's good for everybody.[211]

In relation to rap's ancestry, and in considering musicians supporting a cause they believe in, it is important to analyse some lyrics from black protest music which convey disgust over the American Civil War. I will discuss the lyrics of *Mississippi Goddam* by a supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, and black feminist, Nina Simone.[212]

> The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam
> And I mean every word of it
>
> Alabama's gotten me so upset
> Tennessee made me lose my rest
> And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam
>
> Can't you see it
> Can't you feel it
> It's all in the air
> I can't stand the pressure much longer
> Somebody say a prayer
>
> Alabama's gotten me so upset
> Tennessee made me lose my rest
> And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam
>
> This is a show tune
> But the show hasn't been written for it, yet
>
> Hound dogs on my trail
> School children sitting in jail
> Black cat cross my path
> I think every day's gonna be my last

---

[210] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 164-5.

[211] Taken from an interview on AllHIpHop at http://allhiphop.com/2007/10/18/krs-one-relaunching-stop-the-violence-movement-enlists-superstar-rappers/

[212] Mississippi Goddam, written and performed by Nina Simone, live at Carnegie Hall, New York. First released on the album *Nina Simone in Concert* (Philips Records, 1964).

Lord have mercy on this land of mine
We all gonna get it in due time
I don't belong here
I don't belong there
I've even stopped believing in prayer

Don't tell me
I tell you
Me and my people just about due
I've been there so I know
They keep on saying "Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble
"To slow"
Washing the windows
"To Slow"
Picking the cotton
"To Slow"
You're just plain rotten
"To Slow"
You're too damn lazy
"To Slow"
The thinking's crazy
"To Slow"
Where am I going
What am I doing
I don't know
I don't know

Just try to do your very best
Stand up be counted with all the rest
For everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

I made you thought I was kiddin'

Picket lines
School boycotts
They try to say it's a communist plot
All I want is equality
for my sister my brother my people and me

Yes you lied to me all these years
You told me to wash and clean my ears
And talk real fine just like a lady
And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie

Oh but this whole country is full of lies
You're all gonna die and die like flies
I don't trust you any more
You keep on saying "Go slow!"
"Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble
"To slow"
Desegregation
"To slow'
Mass participation
"To slow"
Reunification
"To slow"
Do things gradually
"To slow"
But bring more tragedy
"To slow"
Why don't you see it
Why don't you feel it
I don't know
I don't know

You don't have to live next to me
Just give me my equality
Everybody knows about Mississippi
Everybody knows about Alabama
Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

That's it!

The lyrics of this song provide a working example of music that expresses oppression, struggle and political opinion, as discussed in section 2.4. As demonstrated by the lyrics, Simone does not utilise any kind of subtlety in her choice of words and *Mississippi Goddam* makes a direct political statement. The Civil Rights movement clearly had a great impact on musicians such as Nina Simone, and the extent of her commitment to the cause is demonstrated by the way she refused to repress her beliefs on the subject. Simone expressed her opinion in front of an audience, both in her music, with lyrical and emotive expression, and within the actual context of a concert, in front of an audience, talking on stage about Civil Rights. Simone was willing to be part of the movement, despite any impact it had on her musical career and her loyalty was unconditional. *Mississippi Goddam* was written in response to her disgust and anger over the abuse of black people, including the Alabama church bombings. Just as many rappers have a 'social stake' in their music, Simone did too and stated that

my music was dedicated to a purpose more important than classical music's pursuit of excellence; it was dedicated to the fight for freedom and the historical destiny of my people.[213]

This leads to the proceeding chapters which focus on similar issues around the development of social awareness and how rap can actually compensate communities.

3.4i   ***Conclusions from Chapter 3***

Although Chapter 4 focuses on literary devices, words and music, many sociological aspects of the practice of rap have emerged in the discussion and, ultimately, I can conclude that it is the mixture of words and language with different social circumstances which determine rap's message, or meaning. Lyrics can be interpreted differently, in accordance with their purpose, function and the social circumstances in which they are communicated by a rapper. The extent of humour and wit, and conversely, the extent of seriousness, can be established by the audience by interpreting carefully manipulated words and metaphor by a rapper. Words are central to communication and therefore impact on message and meaning and consequently have an effect on the dissemination of message and meaning. Just as the technique and style of a rapper must be versatile in order to undertake practices such as cypher, or MC battles, words too must be versatile in order to be manipulated by the rapper to reflect the mundane, or bigger issues, as appropriate.

Language can be used to build tension and anticipation for an audience through clever rap lyrics, and in combination with music, can be an effective channel of communication. Just as tension always seeks resolve in Western music, so too can this concept apply to lyrics; the audience (and rapper) gain satisfaction, having felt anticipation through the build up from certain lyrics. This is perhaps more relevant to rap which includes the very distinct forms of black vernacular expression such as braggadocio and signifyin(g). The amount of humour, vulgarity, dis and exaggeration are all

---

[213] Simone, N. & Cleary, S., *I Put A Spell On You* (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1993), p. 91.

controlled by words and are used to add an element of drama and exaggeration to lyrics. In artforms such as the dozens, the use of wit and humour is already expected by the audience and if the rapper can cleverly respond to this anticipation in a way which is perhaps not the obvious way, then the audience are more likely to be impressed and feel entertained.

Relating to the audience is something that all successful rappers have the ability to do. It is a highly respected skill and relies on a great deal of perception and self-awareness by the rapper in order to respond appropriately to an audience in a freestyle environment, such as in cypher or in an MC battle. Part of the relationship between performer and audience depends on the mutual identification of mood, social situation and personal circumstances and opinions. A rap is going to be a bigger success if it deals with themes and issues that are close to its audience. Lyrics are not just about the articulation of words, they mean much more than this. Lyrics provide a form of cultural articulation and enable rappers and audiences to establish common identities, thus contributing to the sociological aspect of hip hop culture.

Looking at words alone, words are the necessary tools required in order to communicate feelings of oppression, struggle and the opinions of their authors. However, rap is more about the whole package, and by this, I assert that words are far more effective when supported by images, such as via music videos, body language and the general style and conduct of the rapper. Rap provides a voice for the voiceless and a language for those who are from marginalised communities. The way in which rap provides a narration, or social commentary is unique to forms of black vernacular expression in contemporary culture. As demonstrated by the examples provided in section 3.4, lyrics serve a different purpose for different situations. In terms of the very blues-oriented Nina Simone example given, words were used to convey personal opinion over racial injustices and general disenchantment with political and social conditions of the time. Similarly, Public Enemy has consistently used politically charged lyrics to

convey their opinions and to communicate their disillusionment over issues around injustices relating to politics and society. Again, rap provides a voice for the voiceless, and Public Enemy lyrics serve as a representation, or perhaps Chuck D becomes a spokesperson, for those who feel unable to personally voice similar opinions or feel powerless in being able to openly discuss similar issues, for fear of retribution.

Chapter 3 links in with Chapter 4, mainly around the issue of self-expression, and how words can convey thought and opinion. Language is key to rap, and is inextricably linked to the social commentary aspect of hip hop culture. Braggadocio is highly relevant to all forms of black vernacular expression and has a significant role in situations such as cypher and MC battles. Lyrics are extremely significant in cypher, as well as in rap in general, but must be supported by other factors, such as body language, and the establishment of the relationship between performer and audience, in order to convey a message and have meaning. There is more to rap than its lyrical content, although lyrics are crucial to any form of rap. Chapters 4 and 5 will draw on the 'other' elements, particularly social and cultural factors, that make rap what it is, and how the success of rap is determined by many social factors, in partnership with the sciences behind rhythm and language.

CHAPTER 4

CYPHER AS A CREATIVE PRACTICE

"Yo, I hit these emcees with the grip of death like I was a Vulcan,
Ain't a lot of "ifs" an' "ands", it's just straight talkin'"

> Talib Kweli, 'Guerilla Monsoon Rap'. Kweli is implying that his rap is so slick and is to-the-point that the talents of other rappers don't come close to his. The analogy used is reminiscent of the dirty dozens, while cleverly incorporating a reference to popular culture by using the word 'Vulcan'. Track 17 on the accompanying CD.

There are so many parallels between cypher and free improvisation; the free improvisation music scene mirrors the collective ethos displayed in New York among freestylers taking part in cypher. In terms of audience response and the way in which cypher and free improvisation are 'judged', they are very similar indeed.[214] The location of cypher can be anywhere – just like free improvisation gigs, the organised cypher and MC battle nights in New York take a similar direction. It is important not to lose sight that cypher is an artform that takes place out on the street, i.e. a 'street art' but with movements such as End of The Weak (EOW), it means that there is more control over when, where and how cypher is instigated by its participants. Cypher has warranted the need for organisation and control over its practice due to its growing popularity and the kudos of participation. Perhaps these factors contribute to achieving some recognition of cypher as an artform, as it deserves. Either way, cypher can attract a large audience which will usually stand around the edge of the circle that is formed by participants; they contribute by way of cheering, applause and as 'back up'. Indoors, at organised events and under 'controlled' circumstances, there is a host who introduces the acts according to who turns up and who might work best together or in succession. The extent of this kind of control is problematic since cypher is known for the improvisatory and spur-of-the-moment attitude it exudes.

Cypher on the street is similar to free improvisation musicians getting together for an impromptu showcase, to share their work and ideas. To a certain degree, a performance can reflect the ritualistic elements of a rehearsal under these circumstances – ultimately, the performer is looking to sharpen their delivery and gain inspiration for future performances. In a comparison between rap and free improvisation as musical genres, both are specialised

---

[214] An example of free improvisation can be seen in this video of a violin and beatbox duo in New York. Although the audience wait to the end of this piece to respond, in contrast to cypher, we can see that the musicians respond to each other's music and allow each other an equal chance to lead sections. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbfuXJ2qW9E

subgenres of music which appeal to a certain kind of audience – those with open minds who have an appreciation for an art that is influenced by many things that takes place there and then, as well as both being influenced by 'everyday' occurrences.

Cypher could be described as a verbal martial art. Although the content of the cypher lyrics can be verbally offensive, there is no physical violence amongst the cypher participatnts. It could be compared to the African-Brazilian Capoeira which is a form of dance-fight, in which no physical contact takes place.[215] Cypher can also be one-on-one, with the cycle occurring between two MCs, although any element of competition between the two participants would reflect the dynamics of a freestyle battle, or MC battle. With cypher and freestyle battles, primarily the winning team (or individual winner) is decided by the audience, not by a judge. If the battle has a host, e.g. at an EOW event, the host will announce the winner after the audience's response; the winning cypher team is determined almost implicitly; everyone knows who has won instinctively, and it's always the team with the freshest, catchiest and hard-hitting lyrics and slickest delivery. Still, the win is for the group as a whole; and even if a cypher group contains a weaker cypher MC, there are no losers. The cypher taking place physically outside (and inside) EOW events reflects a collective rather than a competitive vibe so post-cypher dynamics often appear to make the situation more about a networking opportunity and having the chance of showing respect for everyone else in the cypher. It is a showcase of the talent around and provides participants with an idea of the standard of talent in a particular area, and shows them what the current trend is in neighbouring boroughs or areas with visiting participants.

This chapter investigates the role of hip hop within a peer group, and further establishes the position of cypher in relation to different situations; the aesthetics of performance and practice of an MC Battle are salient in building a picture of cypher's role within a peer group, and beyond, taking into account the global scale of the impact of hip hop and the culture that has evolved from what is primarily a street art. The intertwined relationships between the self and the alter-ego, self and the group, group and the underground, group and the world, to mention only a few of the complex relationship dynamics within cypher, further highlight the diversity and high levels of complexity that contribute to hip hop's uniqueness in terms of it being a musical genre. The element of free

---

[215] This idea was discussed informally with Professor A. Fernandez at Newcastle University, 2008.

improvisation adds a further dimension to cypher's practice. The juxtapositions between the community setting and a world-wide global scale, an between reality and the exaggerated, will also be discussed in this chapter, as ultimately, they reflect the characteristics inextricably linked to the creative practice element of cypher and are bound deep within the cultural code, or rules, of hip hop and the performance aesthetics of rap. Lipsitz's theory on hip hop is fundamental when considering the relationship between its performance and its immediate (and widespread) community:

> Hip hop expresses a form of politics perfectly suited to the post-colonial era. It brings a community into being through performance, and it maps out real and imagined relations between people that speak to the realities of displacement, disillusion, and despair created by the austerity economy of post-industrial capitalism.[216]

This theory also ties in with the principles outlined in Chapter 1, taking into account the diasporic nature of hip hop culture and its varying degrees of response to the African and African-Caribbean diasporas central to New York. Section 4.3 focuses on the 'team spirit' ethos and how cypher can empower an individual, a group, or a whole community; there is much emphasis on working together, despite the connotations of words such as 'battle,' which is demonstrated by the family ethic that hip hop has laid its foundations upon and how the sharing of experiences is actively encouraged, in order for performance skills to be honed and for the nurturing of 'professional' relationships and friendships to develop between the participants of cypher crews. As EOW (Germany) MC, Amewu, comments,

> cypher keeps hiphop alive. Because there are times you get frustrated with hiphop and then you walk by a cypher and hear someone step in with a very dope freestyle. You get inspired and drop some freestyles too and remember why you love hiphop… Street cyphers also get the attention of people who don't have anything to do with hiphop. Some of those people might get interested in Hiphop through this experience. So it's a great way of spreading the culture.[217]

4.1 Cypher as a Creative Practice: The concept of 'rehearsal' vs. the importance of improvisation in cypher

In looking at cypher as a creative practice, it is important to consider the concept of rehearsal and for any sort of musical performance, the differences between rehearsal and the concept of improvisation. As so much pressure, both from the artist and from their audience, or anticipated audience, is put on a

---

[216] Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verso, 1994), p. 36.
[217] Response selected from my blog at www.eodub.com/kitty

performing artist to achieve a 'good' performance or show, rehearsal is the tool that provides a safety net. A safety net in the sense that the performer has repeated their performance, or has at least prepared to a certain extent by practicing, which gives them the knowledge that what happens at the performance is really down to chance - as their performance has been trialled; the extent of that chance is defined by many factors - among them, self-confidence and self-assurance, as well as the input often from an observer of the rehearsal with regards to any improvements that could be made in order to make a future performance better, also having the feeling that they 'know what they are doing' assists with any performance anxieties through under-preparation; the whole concept of rehearsal is to minimise anxiety and to increase the standard or quality of a performance. In a biological sense, any form of practicing or rehearsing leaves a memory in a mechanical way – just like a pianist's fingers seem to remember what comes next during a performance, a rapper's reciting of lyrics leave a similar mechanical imprint that their brain remembers. It is also quite common for musicians to perform on autopilot when the added pressure of an audience is present; when emotions, such as anxiety, run high, a performer can often rely on adrenaline to carry them through a performance, or at least hope that the auto-pilot memory response will work.

As well as the physical and mental outcomes of rehearsing that tend to have a positive impact on a performance, the performer has an aural perception and memory of what comes next; this reaffirms the notion that the purpose of rehearsal is to give the performer an indication of their capabilities but more importantly, a chance to improve and prepare their work in order to reach an adequate standard for their audience. In a broader sense, when looking at rehearsal in terms of a 'professional' performance, it allows a feedback mechanism between audience and performer and gives an opportunity for a preview of what has been achieved and this can prove to be a useful, if not essential learning opportunity for a performer. Although cypher is an improvised art, I argue that every moment that an MC participates in a cypher is the rehearsal for a future cypher; it is an artform in which its practitioners are constantly evolving, which in itself is comparable to hip hop culture as a whole, as it is a forward-thinking movement which is always developing. Self-improvement and betterment are the key goals for a participant in cypher. Even

if a performance is not to the standard that the performer aspired to, the performance is not in vain, as it will contribute to the improvement of future performances, or participation, and will also increase self-awareness and maintain the strive for improvement and development, in terms of both performance and self.

Improvisation in any form of music still implies rules, or at least a code of conduct, is to be followed, or sometimes an air of expectation is present; as a Western musician, you already know if something sounds 'good' as this has been imprinted on your memory from the moment you heard music - whether this can be attributed to gut instinct or taken down to the core mathematical principles of harmony that we hear without realising but are the very tools musicians use instinctively to judge how we like (or dislike) Western music. However, defining good music, or even what makes certain music 'good' is highly problematic and when considering cypher (or rap), as questions over its aestheticism are raised, often with conflicting answers. Even jazz, the genre celebrated for its culturally diverse musical family tree and melodic and harmonic freedom, still has its own rules which are to be adhered to. There is some worth in the expression 'ignorance is bliss' for a non-Western musician; as a Western musician or audience member, we know that at the start of a classical concert there is a tune-up session before the actual music begins, but to someone who has never experienced Western music at all, this tune-up session that we all dismiss as the orchestra's performance preparation, could actually sound beautiful to someone without the same cultural or musical imprints; what a person perceives as aural beauty can be the total opposite in someone else's perception.

The word 'noise' is attached to only negative definitions and connotations. So often, by its critics, rap is referred to as 'noise,' which is demeaning to a rapper, or fans of the genre, especially given the amount of talent that is required and the amount of experience required in order to involve yourself in an artform such as cypher, without a performance being completely worthless. The aesthetics of music become an issue here and this subsequently highlights the fact that the way we judge music is certainly down to the cultural influences that are embedded within us. A key concept relevant to rap, as well as with all music, is that familiarity gives us comfort; this also provides a means to stick to these socially and culturally

constructed rules for no other reason, other than it is simply something that has always been done or thought of in this way. Rehearsal and performance contribute particularly to this desired familiarity which seems to come down to human nature. On one hand, cypher has to be completely improvisatory and free, and yet on the other hand, the implicit rules and codes of practice surround and engulf this supposed freestyle, and then this is compounded by the natural aspirations and the sense of belonging or the aspiration of fitting in felt by participants of cypher.

There is much debate in the field of performance aesthetics involving the differences between recorded music and a live musical event or performance. In musical scholarship, recordings are generally regarded as being aesthetically poorer in comparison to a performance; this is an ongoing debate in the field of musicology. In investigating what it is that constitutes the 'missing something' from each format, highlights that the main difference between the two that is highlighted, is that a recording is missing an audience, and despite someone listening at home, there is a definite lack of the visual experience, but especially, a lack of a social event and all the complexities that entails. With cypher, the element of the social event is crucial for its practice and is also a salient feature of all aspects of hip hop culture – the collective ethos is constantly celebrated and encouraged amongst all of its participants, performers and audience members alike. Although one could argue that with live recordings and videos of performances, you do get to experience the social event to some extent, the main difference is that you are unable to participate in the moment. In hip hop culture, participation is a key factor. As a counter-argument, recordings still have a great importance in music and quite often, they are the means of 'switching on' an audience's initial interest in the music and allow an audience to become better acquainted with the music before or after a musical event.

Making music in the home has certainly declined over the last two centuries and this perhaps could be attributed to the development of music technology. As stereos and sound technology have developed, has there been less demand for live performances? However, for genres such as rap, the development of music technology has given people the opportunity to become bedroom DJs and record and disseminate their own music easily and efficiently. For cypher, developments in

technology have fuelled the increase in awareness of its practice, and have encouraged more people to participate. While you need very little other than a group of participants who are willing to freestyle to create a cypher, music technology allows for people to record and swap freestyles or battle recordings; kudos for the practice continues to grow. The internet has provided a platform for cypher participants to have their cyphers recorded on video and disseminated across the world, which often leads to the development of an 'international' reputation for cypher's best participants. Quite often, cypher champions and battle MC champions go on to get recognition worldwide and can then work towards building a fan-base which is often used to support a budding rap career.

The on-the-spot decision-making process in cypher is apparent and allows for an audience (or peer) feedback mechanism, as with all live performances. This means that every performance is tailor-made to suit its audience and the vibe of the audience can provoke a response by the performer; live performance leaves room for improvisation and to a large extent, especially with cypher, relies upon it. Recordings can't offer this feedback mechanism – once something is recorded and produced, it can't be changed. Looking into the detail at the social dimension of performance, you can see that audience members experience a community spirit and not an experience as separate individuals (which will be looked at in depth in section 4.3). The value that is placed on a performance comes from the 'power of exchange' between the audience and the performer and the performance serves as the 'cultural goods' that are to be traded.

Despite rap being thought of as very much a means of verbal communication, it is important to sift out the non-verbal communication that takes place during a cypher. Cooke's study on non-verbal communication among African-Americans highlights the significance of gestures and bodily movements in communicating, as well as the way in which they are adapted according to different social situations. Body language enables communication and, as Cooke describes, 'basically explores how man *sees* rather than how he *hears.*'[218] Rap is often highly expressive in terms of body language and when thinking about cypher it is clear to see that although it is

---

[218] Cooke, Benjamin G. (1972) "Nonverbal communication among Afro-Americans: an initial classification." In Kochman, Thomas (ed.) **Rappin' and Stylin' Out.** (University of Illinois Press, 1972). pp 32 – 64.

very much a non-violent practice, many gestures indicate masculinity, aggression and mimicry; all gestures contribute some way in cypher's delivery and although cliché, actions can speak louder than words, or certainly add to the overall experience of cypher, either as an aid to a participant trying to convey a particular message, or as an audience member trying to understand this message. As cypher is primarily a street art, using the tools that you already have, i.e. body language, is the equivalent of utilising musical instruments or stage scenery in a formal performance setting.

> Although rapping is most frequently associated with verbal adroitness, there exists a 'silent rap' in which a cat may indicate what his desires are with his facial expression and intensity of eyes, etc.[219]

As mentioned previously, the musicological debate surrounding the value of recorded music tends to favour the opinion that a recording is aesthetically poorer than experiencing a live musical performance. However, for cypher, which is raw and, strictly-speaking, takes place in-the-moment, it can be difficult for artists to create publicity, or more correctly, spread the word, when there is no recording to promote or to use as a means of attracting attention towards upcoming performances. Mixtapes have always been a key tool in generating awareness and building a fan base for any rap artist; this has proved to be a particularly inexpensive and effective means to gain publicity and the practice still occurs today. However, in contrast to the mixtape, many artists choose to use social media to disseminate their work and again, this is due to advancement in sound technology. There is an abundance of websites dedicated to mixtapes, where the 'tape' can be downloaded in MP3 format and many rap artists use this to give a flavour of their interests and an indication as to the overall vibe of a performance or album. Websites such as YouTube enable performances to be captured relatively cheaply then viewed around the world; the EOW website also has its own video section for this purpose. Cypher crews and individuals can see what their competition is like from around the world and therefore this puts in place a mechanism similar to peer review.

With so many online resources offering free (although mainly illegal) mixtapes, the actual physical mixtape seems almost redundant. Mixtapes are usually

---

[219] Ibid., p. 48.

illegal as no permission from the music's owner/composer has been sought. This also means that artists featured on mixtapes usually miss out on any royalties, meaning that the person who compiled the mixtape does not pay featured artists. Even when mixtapes are given free, as a gift, moral and ethical issues are raised, since the artists still loses out in financial terms. However, I argue that the mixtape still has its place as a valuable gift from the artist to the audience. Still, so often they are given away or at least sold very cheaply at hip hop performances and events. They're still collectable and there is something special about being given a physical object. As Marcel Mauss's theory about gift-giving and gift-reciprocation emphasises the human instinct of obligation, which in turn, strengthens relationships,[220] surely this can only be beneficial for the hip hop community both in terms of the development of rap music and by having a positive impact on morale and perceptions about hip hop as a genre – what can the audience give back? In the case of hip hop, rap, and even live cypher mixtapes, this theory rings true. Certainly at EOW, the mixtape culture continues to thrive, both in CD and MP3 formats. So it could be argued that while improvements in sound technology are made, there is still a clear hark back to the old-school with the demand for mixtapes still apparent, although perhaps now they are produced for the purpose of being a gift or reward, or even as a novelty, rather than necessity, as they once were, before the world was online and long before the tools for dissemination became easily accessible for all.

4.2   MC Battles vs. Cypher Collectives

Although battle raps and cypher are closely related in a musical and social sense, there are a few subtle differences, in terms of their respective formats and performance aesthetics, which set them apart. Expanding on format, function and context of both battle and cypher highlights the similarities and differences between the two.

An MC Battle takes place between two rappers, usually as a staged event or performance, with a host. Each performer has the opportunity to rap for a set number of bars, or seconds, alongside their accompaniment which is usually

---

[220] *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss was written in 1923 and then translated into English in 1954. It was a pioneering philosophical argument about gift exchange between people and is still regarded as being the most prominent in its field today.

provided by a DJ. A battle can also take place on the street, like cypher, but a staged version is more common. As Edwards defines,

> Battle raps appear on a lot of records, but they are also often recited or freestyled off the top of the artists' heads in live battles, where MCs will perform on the same stage to see who has the better verses.[221]

As with cypher, verbal wit and improvisation used to demean the opponent rapper and 'big up' oneself, by means of expression such as braggadocio, is the aim of the game. However, many of the raps in a battle rap are pre-written and to some extent, this is accepted, and in turn highlights when a freestyle rhyme is completely and genuinely freestyled, composed in-the-moment, and would therefore earn a greater respect for its rapper. As Royce Da 5'9" comments, differing battle styles exists and participants are able to respond to one another and make a judgement call on which style to rap in. Furthermore, that

> It's only difficult to write battle rhymes when it's somebody dissing you that you don't really know nothing about, because when you're wondering, what do I say about them? So if it was like a diss track, I probably wouldn't do it if I didn't know enough about the person. As far as just regular spitting rhymes that's not about anybody in [particular], but that can apply to people, I kind of started off doing those, so that's always gonna be there. What makes it a different process is the mind frame that I'm in coming to the table, like knowing that I gotta come up with just regular spitting battle-sounding rhymes, I'll come in that mind frame.[222]

Although this observation around differing battling styles seems to be focussed on recorded rap music, I argue that battles on the street and in organised battle events display the same dynamic in the sense that a lot of the features of the battle style stem from the response felt by each participant. Furthermore, the to-and-fro motion between participants in MC battles directly mirrors the call and response device, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Ultimately, although the MCs are opponents in a battle, they are always working together, feeding off each other for lyrical inspiration and creating a 'product' for their audience. Therefore, I would also assert that there is as much teamwork, or partnership work, involved in a battle situation, as there is within cypher.

---

[221] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 27.
[222] Ibid., p. 29.

A slick delivery is essential in a battle and this must be combined with improvisation, ingenuity and wit in order to fully satisfy the audience. Similar to cypher, it is generally the audience that determines a 'winner' by their response to the rap, as discussed in greater detail in section 4.4. However, the function of a battle rap varies to the function of cypher; many rappers use battling as a mechanism to achieve respect in the local hip hop community before going on to 'make it' and, at first, to build up their reputation on the battle scene, before going on to trying to sell their records to the participants of a far more underground scene. Several artists subsequently go on to have success in the mainstream, but this is not always an outset goal from the beginning by a participant. In fact, a participant is more likely to want to earn a good reputation as a battle MC rather than hoping to make it in the mainstream. In contrast, cypher has more of a community-interest function than a platform-for-making-it function in terms of its practice and participants. Self-confidence is of paramount importance in delivering a successful rap and as Edwards summarises,

> A lot of MCs gain experience and confidence by writing battle rhymes and learning how to battle other MCs. Papoose notes, "Basically I feel like hip-hop is all about confidence, and I gained that confidence when I was younger because I used to battle a lot as a kid."[223]

Conscious rap continues to thrive; it is the characteristic of consciousness that gives MC Battles and cypher an aspect of distinction, in terms of social issues, from other forms of rap. I assert that there is more 'safety' for participants in cypher, in comparison to MC battles. Although there are many parallels in terms of performance aesthetics between the two forms, cypher has a safety net due to the option of being able to blend in a bit more than in a battle, and there are other participants who will be ready to step in should the execution of a participant's delivery go wrong. A battle environment seems far more cut-throat and without any safety net. Pittman concludes,

> The battle is a dramatic showdown between two rappers who challenge one another with lyrics... and vie to outdo one another in the construction and performance of their raps. Two rappers square off, each claiming to be the

---

[223] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 29.

best. They can only establish which of their competing claims is valid through a struggle: each is duelling with the other for the status of acknowledged superiority. The winner takes away the glory and the rewards, while the loser loses credibility, since his claim to be the "baddest muthafucka on the mic" has been defeated.[224]

Cypher is very much a social, or perhaps sociable, form of rapping. A comment on my blog from DJ Snuff, EOW London, affirms this by saying:

> Hip-Hop is a social economy [in] itself. Show love to Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop will show love to you. Opportunities come from being involved as an artist that include travel, friendship, purpose, fulfilment and a cultural identity that holds no segregation other than the levels you reach as an artist and the strength of your character. I have respect for everybody in Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop itself, I know that Hip-Hop respects me and gives me the ability to contribute to the growth of what we are.[225]

The physical form of cypher, moving in a cyclical or continuous direction, gives more opportunity for social participation and engagement. Participants can join or leave a cypher freely, as the motion is not disturbed if the group should be augmented or diminished. Going back to the consciousness aspect of cypher, its practice allows for social issues to be covered and many participants use it as a tool to narrate everyday struggles, from one extreme to another. Although a large amount of focus is on wit and verbal agility, as with battles, greater emphasis is placed on taking part and highlighting common moral responsibility and experiences. One thing that can be witnessed with cypher, is that it is not about a winner and a loser; it very much reflects a team ethic and this will be considered in further detail later in this chapter.

Looking at the extent to which participants rehearse for their role in a battle and in cypher respectively, shows that there are always elements of rehearsal present in both, but, it is most certainly cypher which is the fully improvised form of rap out of the two, and it is fair to state that cypher generally takes place in a far less pressurised environment, under more relaxed circumstances, and is far less cut-throat in its social dynamics. A battle highlights when something is totally improvised, in circumstances such as when a participant picks on their opponent's physical appearance or personal features. Those features may have been completely

---

[224] Pittman, John P., *"Y'all Niggaz Better Recognize": Hip Hop's Dialectical Struggle for Recognition*, in Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) *Hip Hop & Philosophy,* (Open Court: Illinois, 2005), p. 42.
[225] Selected from responses on my blog page at www.eodub.com/kitty

unknown to the challenger up until the point of the battle or event. However, many of the lyrics in battles are clearly rehearsed or at least mentally 'banked' by the rapper for future use.[226] Certain battles could be described as being partially or wholly lyrically pre-meditated. As previously discussed, no physical violence is ever condoned in either battles or cypher although body language and physical gesturing is an extremely important device in each, and this is used to convey and exaggerate actions and the extremity of a situation. While I accept that there are exceptions to every rule, I assert that it is highly unlikely that any resentment would be saved for a situation outside the MC battle environment. Such resentment would be saved for a future battle, thus promoting the continuation of MC battles. It is important to note that respect is something that is trying to be achieved on all sides of an MC battle and hip hop philosophy encourages the giving and receiving of respect. Physical movement adds a further dimension to the narrative element in cypher; this added dimension also links back to the concept of storytelling in rap, and the connection to griotism through African oral traditions, as discussed in Chapter 1. It is important here to outline the specific cultural codes and body language that accompanies cypher. While points tend to be exaggerated and 'acted' out by cypher participants, it is far more subtle than the over-exaggerated body language and close proximity between MCs in an MC battle situation. I assert that movement in rap is gender determined and that males move in a very beat-centric fashion in comparison to the smooth gyrating, also known as 'grinding' by females. It's also worth noting Schloss' point about the dynamics of b-boy participation, and in breakdancing, the term cypher is used in a similar context to taking part in a rap cypher.

> The cypher as a social space teaches many valuable lesson to b-boys and b-girls; a connection to Five Percenter spirituality and politics, a connection to other circle-based elements of hip-hop, the ability to overcome shyness or reserve, developing one's general ability to perform under pressure, the ability to project confidence, and the ability to seamlessly correct mistakes.[227]

---

[226] In an MC battle between Iron Solomon and Flamez, it is clear that Flamez has used mainly pre-meditated rap in contrast to Iron Solomon's rap which incorporates insults about Flamez's physical appearance, clothes and style, which are clearly improvised in the moment: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGEdz5sQ1jE

[227] Schloss, Joseph G., *Foundation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 101.

Though talking about b-boy and breakdancing culture, Schloss summarises perfectly the dynamics of cypher in hip hop culture.

There are many examples in a battle situation when an opponent is so overwhelmed and impressed by the rap of their challenger that they can't hide their laughter, astonishment or respect and often shake hands or hug their opponent – which is something that isn't written in the implicit rules or code of behaviour of freestyle, but is very much encouraged and further demonstrates the positivity in the atmosphere that such open admiration can help to promote.[228] In showing respect in this way, the audience can learn much about the personalities of the rappers or participants that they are watching; it shows that rappers can be good sports and gives a more human quality to the intensity that can be felt in battle rap situations.[229] Furthermore, this kind of attitude allows for a healthy exchange of critique and promotes an environment in which creativity and expression will have a better chance to flourish. Such behaviour also emphasises that the element of truth in hip hop and the common good of rap is ever-present, and this rings true even under extreme conditions, such as in a battle situation. Not only do performers have the pressure to perform or put on a good show for the audience but they need to be able to win the respect from their opponent. Good sportsmanship is crucial in being able to take part in a battle as sorry losers have everything to lose in terms of reputation, respect and the possibility to reflect a weak sense of sportsmanship and, basically, not having the ability to be the better man in congratulating or even just acknowledging an opponent. The consequence of not displaying a sportsmanlike approach is that a very poor attitude, feeble conduct and a lack of a sense of humour has been displayed. In other words, if a rapper can show grace in losing and gain respect for fair play then there is more chance that the audience will judge fairly, and overall, there will be a greater respect for this artist in the hip hop community, and in their respective battle or cypher scene. On a personal level, these rappers will be encouraged and feel supported to take part again in the future. Such a theory reflects the dichotomy between the vulgar and offensive lyrics that can go back and

---

[228] Refer back to 2.1 for more detail on the 'Rules of Rap.'
[229] Good examples of this can be found on YouTube such as Iron Soloman vs. Shirt & Tie http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g03ObMtPVm8 and Asher D vs. Stig of the Dump http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRhs-SQOCVA

forth in a battle, yet gain respect, and further establishes that righteous social and behavioural etiquette also contributes some way in gaining respect. Having a good attitude and positive attitude in a battle or cypher situation will never be in vain. What Keyes asserts to rap in general, is of particular significance to cypher and MC battling, in that

> Rap artists measure the success of their performances by signals, cues, and expressions from the audience, such as verbal exclamations, handclapping, and dancing. An excellent performance is defined by lyrical fluidity, rhythm and timing, articulation, voice quality, musical mix, stage presence, and above, all, originality.[230]

In an artform where so much importance is placed on verbal communication, it is surprising how much the non-verbal form of communication of body language contributes to its practice. It is scientific fact that body language allows unconscious feelings to be communicated,[231] and perhaps with the lack of physical violence in rap, the presence of a physical gesture is used both to support and exaggerate the message or story, as with mime or acting, or going back to basics, to demonstrate territorialism. On one hand, mime is an artform that does not use speech, and uses only choreographed and articulated bodily gestures to convey something. In terms of physical movement, it is worth pointing out that cypher is a predominantly male practice, as with rap music in general. I noticed that there is a fundamental difference between male and female movements in hip hop culture, which can be seen on many rap videos. Males tend to move in time with the rhythm, in quite jerky movements, and head nods, whereas females tend to move more from the hips, in a smooth style, often gesturing in quite a sexual manner. An example of these contrasting styles can be seen in Wu Tang Clan's *Gravel Pit* music video.[232]

On the other hand, a display of territorialism is something that could be considered to be primeval and extremely masculine in showing everyone else the physical space or belongings that are not to be owned, or invaded, by any other. Both of these characteristics link back to the significance of African musical and

---

[230] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 125-6.
[231] Taken from Albert Mehrabian's idea that the majority of human communication comes from body language, rather than through language. http://www.kaaj.com/psych/bio.html
[232] Example of male vs. Female physical movement in the music video for *Gravel Pit* by Wu Tang Clan: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwQHBOII8ss

cultural practices, as discussed in section 1.2, and also when looking at the affects of rhythm and how it can provoke physical movement. Therefore, cypher and battle rap reflect juxtapositions between high art and the everyday, as well as between the deeply philosophical and basic human instinct. Further investigation will be undertaken in 5.1 with regards to survival of the fittest and how for some communities, cypher fills the role of being a form of cultural compensation[233] due to the way it is a sophisticated artform which is accessible to those from less developed areas or less privileged backgrounds. One aspect of hip hop culture that seems pertinent to raise here, is the fact that the taking-part and engagement with the culture offers a voice for many, and it is cypher and MC battles that provide this channel of communication. To feel that your voice is heard in hip hop, does not necessarily mean there is a need to become a mainstream recorded rapper. Cypher and battles provide a great deal of satisfaction to their participants, and, as Rose summarises succinctly:

> Hip hop remains one of the most accessible creative forms for those who feel that most if not all other avenues for telling their own life stories have been cut off by limits established in other genres. Beyond this, many fans need to hold onto the idea that hip hop is a place for such personal portraits, even when this idea might be untrue. Despite its disturbing turn in the commercial realm, hip hop truly is one of the few creative visible places where in-depth criticisms of society's failures (e.g., social injustice, corporate control of culture and media consolidation, racial inequality, class oppression, normalised sexism, and homophobia) can be expressed.[234]

I can conclude, therefore, that this aspect of rap connects back to the essence of hip hop which focuses on truth, knowledge and communication. Similarly, cypher plays a large role in hip hop culture and holds great significance due to the nature of its practice, as well as the lyrical content; both facets add to the social dynamic of hip hop culture and enhance communication, particularly, as Rose asserts, as a social commentary.

---

[233] The concept of 'Cultural Compensation' was discussed by Chuck D of Public Enemy in the 2007 BBC Documentary 'Once upon a Time in New York' which was about Punk, Disco and Hip Hop and the associated cultural characteristics of the respective genres (and subcultures). Chuck D believes that hip hop exists in response to cultural deprivation. This concept is a salient theme in Chapter 6.
[234] Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicCIvitas Books, 2008), pp. 135-6.

4.3   Team Spirit and Collective Moral Responsibility

The sense of team spirit in a cypher is absolutely apparent in every instance; while a small element of competition may be present among team members, though not as extreme as in a battle situation, fundamentally, the collective ethos of the group far outweighs this competition and, primarily, cypher exemplifies a primary focus on the concept of a group or team, working as individuals in partnership for a common cause. Essentially, cypher enables the true philosophy of hip hop to be demonstrated while striving for the common good of its members, the participants, by educating one another based on a philosophy in which inclusiveness, truth and openness about struggle are intrinsic elements. As EOW (Germany) MC, Amewu, comments,

> [cypher] can encourage some weak or inexperienced MCs to work on their skills. People will know they aren't that dope if no one goes crazy about their freestyles but if they still feel accepted within the circle although they aren't that dope they will try to improve to impress. It's good to build a team of talented MCs but it's also always about "each one teach one" even if there is really a lot to teach.[235]

Despite the term 'collective moral responsibility' being fairly recently coined, and it being a highly problematic term for philosophers, the practice of cypher with its team spirit ethos could be used to reflect a working example of the term; it seems to be better to be one of many winners than to be the only winner amongst losers. Collective moral responsibility ensures that not only does one take responsibility as an individual, but there is an added element of responsibility in making a positive contribution to the group as a whole; this could be viewed as a delicate dichotomy to handle – in one sense you have the safety net, or backup, of the others in the collective but in another sense you have the pressure, or burden, of contributing something to the group that has a positive outcome for all, not just for one's own benefit. 'Collective Consciousness,'[236] however, is a familiar term in philosophical and sociological contexts. Rather than a community becoming so close that they then come to share beliefs and their ideals, I argue that cypher also allows the feedback of individuals' ideals to filter into the collective; cypher is open, not only in

---

[235] Response selected from my blog at www.eodub.com/kitty
[236] Term used by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), French Sociologist, in his book *De La Division du Travail Social* and translated into English by Coser, Lewis. A., The Division of Labour in Society (Free Press, New York: 1997).

the context of participation, but also in the sense that it is open to the opinions of others and welcomes freedom of speech. To explain further, using hip hop philosophy as a primary trigger for the existence of cypher, situation and circumstance are very much considered and reflected in the narrative that is composed of improvised lyrics in cypher, not necessarily the other way around. As a counter-argument, it could be disputed that the negative and 'bad' language heard in cypher (and within hip hop culture in general), contradicts this 'moral responsibility.' This does not stand up when considering the collective good that comes out of cypher and when thinking about the lyrics that then ultimately earn respect and display a sense of pride through their slick delivery and sophisticated articulation. Individuals willingly sacrifice their individual achievement in order to donate to the success of the collective as a whole and this is of paramount importance when considering team spirit: success of the group will build confidence and morale, which in turn, can increase both group and individual morale, confidence and bring about a sense of empowerment and purpose for all involved.

A collective offers more opportunity for positive progression in terms of personal growth with an increase in knowledge, experience and awareness, and, as discussed in section 4.2, the actual physical structure of a cypher allows the collective to grow and participants can opt in or opt out of a cypher in a generally relaxed and pressure-limiting environment. Floyd highlights that the idea of the collective in black music is Afrocentric, and relates to traditional African 'dance, drum and song,' in that

> Based on collective responsibility, it was a society in which exceptional individual achievement [in music] was expected to serve the community. This was its moral imperative.... Clearly, traditional African communities, insofar as they conformed to the general description here, were more concerned with the community than the individual and had rules whose primary purpose was the protection of the society.[237]

This leads to a comparison between cypher and folk music; the physical structure of the group, the collective ethos and not forgetting that folk music also shares other features with rap, including a rich cultural past and both are regarded as an oral tradition. Similarly, in both folk and rap, in this kind of participative

---

[237] Floyd Jr., Samuel A., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 34.

environment, a mentor-tutee relationship can be established between more experienced members of the collective and the novice members.[238] If you take part in a cypher in your local area, it stands to reason that a collective will form between participants due to the basic concept of familiarity, thus allowing the development of trust between individuals. Keyes states that

> the conceptual base of rap music is rooted in a street style. An artist's use of speech, characters, attitude and crews asserts that the rapper is down with the street.[239]

In support of this theory, it could be argued further that the 'streetness' of cypher is crucial to its appeal and accessibility; an artform that is deemed to be 'street' will, by association, provide lower social boundaries that are so often associated with certain genres of music and their respective relationships with people from certain social classes.

Looking at group dynamics and complex pack-type behaviour which has been echoed in all civilisations, there tends to be an alpha male figure who becomes a representative of any group, having earned that right. With cypher, there doesn't appear to be an alpha male and this perhaps makes all other members closer due to very little rivalry, and certainly no rivalry outside the lyrics. It is useful to consider that this nurturing style of behaviour, allows those with experience to continue to develop their skills and allows the less experienced to have a go, should they wish to do so, safe in the knowledge that a more 'senior' member of the group is there to almost guide and fall back on. In relation to EOW, in the proceeding section of this Chapter, the 3 Kings[240] who host, facilitate and perform every week at EOW, work as part of a team, and although they all have very different personalities and rapping styles, they all work cohesively as a unit, whilst supporting and encouraging one another, and placing a great emphasis on motivating and engaging with all of the performing participants, and audience members, throughout EOW events.

---

[238] A video of a Traditional Irish Music session, highlights that although musicians play simultaneously, each musician takes a turn to lead and show-off their skills. Participants respond to one another's music: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_wkF6TO4h0

[239] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 125.

[240] The 3 Kings of EOW are: ViceVerses, ProPayne and Big Zoo – please refer to section 4.3 for the EOW case study as well as appendices I and II for comments from ProPayne.

Gang culture

Unfortunately, and perhaps unfairly, rap is commonly associated with gang culture, due in part, from the subgenre of gangsta rap, as well as from the generalisation that those associated with gangs and violence would be more likely to come from marginalised backgrounds. 'Streetness' partly entails survival of the fittest amongst urban communities, and therefore this can lead to involvement with criminal activity and especially violence. One of the benefits (if any) of being part of a gang is the sense of belonging and identity that many gang members lack; the feeling of familiarity that gang membership provides could be seen as an emotional exploitation of the marginalised, with many gang members joining due to the yearning for belonging, and then getting in too deep. However, this is purely speculation and one must remain focussed on the sheer desperation that must have been felt by all communities in New York, particularly by people in the Bronx, during the 1960s when living conditions grew worse while the rental fees for sub-standard properties massively increased. As Keyes points out:

> As conditions worsened, crime escalated. Some youths formed neighbourhood groups or gangs to police their apartments, projects, streets, and neighbourhoods from outside invaders. As soon as one gang formed, others formed in response, eventually leading to fierce territorial rivalry. By the 1960s the South Bronx was regarded as a leading headquarters of street gang violence.[241]

While no excuses can be made for the criminal actions of gangs and their members, one can begin to see why gang culture provided a social if not physical lifeline to those engaged in gang activity. It could be argued that gang culture is a manifestation of the collective. It is therefore only natural, when considering the demographic of hip hop's first participants, that gang culture and hip hop culture can appear to go hand in hand. Participation in hip hop culture could then be perceived as underhand, and even criminal, and it is important to remember what the essence of true hip hop actually reflects.

---

[241] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 125. p. 46.

In response to the prevalence of gang culture, Afrika Bambaataa saw the opportunity within hip hop culture to channel peace and unity within a community, and in a sense, formed a non-violent gang, or group, in the Universal Zulu Nation. Although the Zulu Nation draws much of its philosophy from Islam, its fundamental guiding principles are based on truth, knowledge and peace, and is an all-inclusive movement, not just for those from an Islamic background.

Wu Tang Clan

Perhaps the most pertinent example of team spirit in recorded rap is the Wu Tang Clan. Wu Tang came together as a collective and over the years, have had a changing line-up, to accommodate for new members of the group, and also due to the fact that every member of the group is not always present on each piece of work by the Wu Tang Clan. The system of having members 'drop in and out' has proved to be a winning recipe for the Wu Tang Clan and I would argue that it is this formula that strengthens the relationships between members and contributes to keeping their sound fresh. Members of the group are free to pursue solo albums, with the support of their fellow Wu members, and this is highly unusual for recording artists or groups who are usually tied to the various conditions outlined in their record deal. Due to this flexibility, members of the group are able to undertake collaborative work with fellow members of the group, or work in partnership with rappers from outside the group, in order to create new music, which must play a great part in personal development, as well as the opportunity to experience new musical avenues. Also, this flexibility demonstrates a great deal of trust and cohesion amongst the members of the Wu Tang Clan and furthermore, shows that there are alternatives to the typical approach for recording artists.

As a collective, Wu Tang Clan show a great deal of team spirit and mutual support for each other, and each member is encouraged as an individual to pursue their own musical ambitions. In a sense, Wu Tang, as a whole, provides a 're-group' situation to its members, and perhaps contributes to the stability, or familiarity, that has been mentioned above. Whilst there is much fluidity in the dynamic of the Wu Tang Clan, there is something within the group that is a constant to all of its

members. The formula of Wu Tang Clan draws a couple of parallels with cypher and I can conclude that Wu Tang has become a recorded example of cypher, in terms of its ethos. Firstly, the line-up of Wu Tang is fluid and although there are core members who return, all of whom have something in common and have come together under a certain set of circumstances. Secondly, the team spirit ethic is certainly omnipresent in all of Wu Tang's work, and information on their website affirms this, and explains that

> Turning the standard concept of a hip-hop crew inside out, the Wu-Tang Clan were assembled as a loose congregation of nine MCs, almost as a support group. Instead of releasing one album after another, the Clan was designed to overtake the record industry in as profitable a fashion as possible - the idea was to establish the Wu-Tang as a force with their debut album and then spin off into as many side projects as possible. In the process, the members would all become individual stars as well as receive individual royalty checks.[242]

So although money did play a major part in the formation of Wu Tang Clan, it was formed on the principles of team spirit and this highlights the success that can come out of these group dynamics, and, the almost pack-like behaviour. As Rose rightly states,

> Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and in one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family. These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds, which, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may, in fact, contribute to the community-building networks that serve as the basis for new social movements.[243]

An example of manifestation of the collective, in Wu Tang Clan's music, can be seen in the song *C.R.E.A.M.,[244]* where three members of the group come together to present a view of the struggles of being young black males in New York. Raekwon, Method Man and Inspectah Deck work together on this track, produced by the RZA, with the following lyrics:

> (Method Man)
> Cash Rules Everything Around Me

---

[242] http://www.wutang-corp.com/artists/wu-tang-clan.php July 2011

[243] Rose, Tricia, (1994) "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style, and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop." In Gordon, Avery F. And Newfield, Christopher, (eds.) **Mapping Multiculturalism,** Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 433.

[244] Wu Tang Clan, C.R.E.A.M., *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (Loud Records, 1993). Can be heard here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjZRAvsZf1g

C.R.E.A.M.
Get the money
Dollar, dollar bill y'all

(Raekwon)
I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times side
Staying alive was no jive
Had second hands, moms bounced on old man
So then we moved to Shaolin land
A young youth, yo rockin the gold tooth, 'Lo goose
Only way, I begin to G' off was drug loot
And let's start it like this son, rollin with this one
And that one, pullin out gats for fun
But it was just a dream for the teen, who was a fiend
Started smokin woolies at sixteen
And running up in gates, and doing hits for high stakes
Making my way on fire escapes
No question I would speed, for cracks and weed
The combination made my eyes bleed
No question I would flow off, and try to get the dough off
Sticking up white boys in ball courts
My life got no better, same damn 'Lo sweater
Times is rough and tough like leather
Figured out I went the wrong route
So I got with a sick tight clique and went all out
Catchin keys from across seas
Rollin in MPV's, every week we made forty G's
Yo brothas respect mine, or anger the tech nine
Ch-POW! Move from the gate now

(Method Man)
Cash Rules Everything Around Me
C.R.E.A.M.
Get the money
Dollar, dollar bill y'all

(Inspectah Deck)
It's been 22 long hard years and still strugglin'
Survival got me buggin', but I'm alive on arrival
I peep at the shape of the streets
And stay awake to the ways of the world cause shit is deep
A man with a dream with plans to make C.R.E.A.M.
Which failed; I went to jail at the age of 15
A young buck sellin' drugs and such who never had much
Trying to get a clutch at what I could not touch
The court played me short, now I face incarceration
Pacin', going up state's my destination
Handcuffed in back of a bus, 40 of us
Life as a shorty shouldn't be so rough
But as the world turns I learned life is Hell
Living in the world, no different from a cell

Everyday I escape from Jakes givin' chase, sellin' base
Smokin' bones in the staircase
Though I don't know why I chose to smoke sess
I guess that's the time when I'm not depressed
But I'm still depressed, and I ask what's it worth?
Ready to give up so I seek the Old Earth
Who explained working hard may help you maintain
to learn to overcome the heartaches and pain
We got stickup kids, corrupt cops, and crack rocks
and stray shots, all on the block that stays hot
Leave it up to me while I be living proof
To kick the truth to the young black youth
But shorty's running wild, smokin' sess, drinkin' beer
And ain't trying to hear what I'm kickin' in his ear
Neglected for now, but yo, it gots to be accepted
That what? That life is hectic

(Method Man)
Cash Rules Everything Around Me
C.R.E.A.M.
get the money
Dolla dolla bill y'aaaallll YEAH

5%ers

It is also appropriate to mention the Five Percent Nation in this chapter. The Five Percenters stem from an organisation who live their lives by the Five Percent philosophy, which is something that is heavily influenced by Islam and supreme mathematics. The name is derived from the belief of the organisation 'The Nation of Gods and Earths' (also known as the 5% Nation of Islam) that only five percent of the population is 'enlightened and good.' The Five Percent Nation is significant in hip hop because it teaches that the first people on Earth came from Africa, a scientifically proven fact, and one which links back to section 1.2 with a discussion around the concept of 'The Motherland.' Miyakawa explains that

> Five Percenters believe that the Science of Supreme Mathematics is the key to understanding man's relationship to the universe…. Every stage of Five Percenter training emphasises the relationship between numbers and cosmology.[245]

The numeral '0' is particularly relevant to this study as it directly relates to this research, as it equals 'cipher' in terms of supreme mathematics, along with 1 =

---

[245] Miyakawa, Felicia M., *Five Percenter Rap* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 25 – 26.

knowledge, 2 = wisdom, 3 = understanding and so on.[246] Many rap artists engaged with Five Percent culture and this has been demonstrated in their lyrics and music videos from the late 1980s. In contrast to the violence and crime orientated gangs of that era, the Five Percenters became a collective who were reputed to be a gang, but one that spread the message of peace and communicated the Five Percent philosophy. As Keyes asserts, the Five Percenters have seemingly formed a network, which also parallels with the dynamics of cypher, in that,

> Another network system for MCs is the "cipha" or cipher. A term popularised by the Five Percenters (or the Five Percent Nation) and adopted by hip-hop speakers, rhymin MCs refer to a cipher as a circle of three or more people. MCs "feed off of one another" in keeping a rhyme going in a cyclical fashion.[247]

It is fair to say that there is a deeply rooted connection between the team spirit witnessed in cypher, as well as in hip hop culture in general, and the philosophical beliefs and teachings of organisations, or movements, such as the Universal Zulu Nation and the Five Percent Nation of Islam. There is an element in these philosophies that advocates a sense of togetherness and the communication of peace and knowledge, which is certainly displayed in the practice of cypher. An important aspect of cypher and these philosophies is that there is always the desire to seek truth and to maintain a sense of personal development, as well as development for the collective as a whole.

4.4 End of The Weak? : Cypher Keeping Hip Hop Strong in NYC... and Beyond Fieldwork Case Study, March/April 2009

Cypher is a key element of hip hop and,

> in a stark contrast to the world of U2 or Coldplay, Hip Hop, like Jazz before it, forms part of an artist's engagement with everyday existence – if not making one's own records, then collaborating with someone else – the time is always now, not mapped by a meticulous business plan, or honed through endless rehearsals and re-takes.[248]

---

[246] Miyakawa, Felicia M., *Five Percenter Rap* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 25 – 26. 4 = Culture or Freedom, 5 = Powere or Refinement, 6 = Equality, 7 = God, 8 = Build-Destroy, 9 = Born.
[247] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 124.
[248] Will Edmondes, *Signifying Autonomy: Hip Hop In Wales*, a paper exploring hip hop's contribution to Welsh culture, presented at St. Fagan's: National History Museum in Wales, 24th January 2009.

So to summarise, the essence of cypher is that it exists in the everyday; unlike music that can be classed as ubiquitous or 'background noise,' it is creative, in-the-moment and an extremely sociable form of music, taking into account everything from what was for breakfast, to world politics, i.e. encompassing everything from the mundane to the extreme. The raw quality of cypher is an important characteristic, and one which makes it almost endearing to a musicologist. For something that is wholly unrehearsed, cypher still reflects a form which is synonymous with other forms of highly rehearsed Western genres of music. Although its place is on the street, EOW allows cypher and freestyle to be showcased and promoted as an art in itself, as it should be, achieving recognition, albeit unintended, for this practice. To some extent, cypher is just an intrinsic element of rap and hip hop, which is mostly taken for granted, or expected, by native New York youths who are 'into' hip hop. Following cypher fieldwork, I can conclude that for New Yorkers, cypher is just something that's always been there, and has played a part through childhood and growing up without even realising the musicological phenomenon of cypher and its impact on popular music and youth culture (when considering African-American youth in particular).

To put EOW into context, it is important to highlight that it has very local roots as well as international acclaim. EOW started out as a stage for MCs to perform their music but has since grown into a weekly night in New York and world-wide, with EOW taking place in the UK, France, Germany, Brazil, Argentina and Spain. It offers what can only be classed as a supportive environment for newcomers to the scene to have-a-go and also delivers world-class artists, under the same EOW banner, which is a concept that in itself is rather unique in terms of musical performance. EOW's competition strand, 'The MC Challenge' has also gone global – with representation from several regions having the opportunity to cypher with each other, proving that cypher can cross several cultural boundaries as well as language

barriers.[249] An example of global cypher is voiced by EOW Berlin MC, Amewu, who states that:

> Cypher is a cultural and musicological phenomenon very similar to a spontaneous jam session. But you don't need any instruments. Even if there are different languages involved you communicate through the use of rhythmic patterns so although for me as a German MC it's sometimes kind of frustrating that many people don't understand what I am saying [but] I still have a chance to show through the flow what I am capable of and I think sometimes people can even feel what you are saying without understanding one word.[250]

When the EOW champions from each country get together for the EOW World Finals, they take part in a competition called 'Power Cypher' which is a cypher round that encompasses several different languages through the various participants, such as in the EOW World Final 2010,[251] with all of the international challengers including Stig of the Dump (EOW UK), Amzilla (EOW USA), Furious (EOW Germany), Alpha Wann (EOW France), Folizz (EOW Brazil), Metal J (EOW Czech Republic) and Cyno MC (EOW Uganda), rapping in their respective native language within a cypher.

Something that Murray Forman points out is that 'hip hop displays a clever transformative creativity that is endlessly capable of altering the uses of technologies and space.'[252] I agree this is definitely reflected in hip hop, and specifically with cypher. Cypher requires no technology and adapts to its space; it requires only creative and reflective participants to make it a success, which can be seen in the ever-growing online collection of cypher recordings from various cypher collectives across the world. Of course, cypher has developed already from its street roots and many cypher events have developed, using DJ accompaniment and then projected as an actual performance.[253] I will elaborate on this point in this section,

---

[249] Although this cypher isn't taking place 'on the streets', it is cypher none-the-less, being broadcast from a radio station. 'How to Rap in 3 Languages: EOW International Cypher' parts 1&2. Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0CoBCGAOmA
Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puMyFYwnKzY

[250] A video of Amewu versus Chefket at the MC Championship at EOW Berlin in 2010 can be seen here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJW9IAkHXBk and comment taken from a response on my blog at www.eodub.com/kitty

[251] A video of the EOW World Final 2010, hosted by EOW Berlin is available to view here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHxLxYFeDo4

[252] Forman, Murray, *'Represent': Race, Space and Place in Rap Music*, *Popular Music*, Vol. 19, No. 1, (Jan., 2000), pp. 65-90.

[253] Such as Ozone Cypher who are based in Florida: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fehr89pfYk

particularly in relation to the social elements, environment and the family atmosphere that is commonly displayed in cypher, as well as expanding on issues such as 'social unit binding' and identity which is a prominent theme in the work of Tricia Rose in relation to hip hop and its sociological affect. Further exploration of the quality of rap is required here in order to build on the previous sections of this chapter; by this, I will make references to musical characteristics and how they weave into hip hop's family tree, and how they relate to issues highlighted previously in this thesis.

Quite often, in scholarship that investigates hip hop, the lyrics and words in rap are analysed. While metaphor is salient in hip hop's language, sometimes lyrics are just meant to be taken literally – cypher is the informant in rap, whether it is to do with current affairs or the weather and this can be demonstrated by drawing on examples from the cypher witnessed at EOW (and also from online sources provided throughout). It is already fair to say that cypher keeps it real and it is true in its approach and practice; as Edmondes succinctly points out, 'the hip hop artist expresses through material praxis (free from ideologies) both as individual and as representative of a social group, to show and prove by example from within the locus of contradiction,'[254] and a lot of the success of cypher boils down to 'spitting the right rhyme at the right time.'[255] Keyes describes cypher as a 'network system for MCs' and is regarded as

> a circle of three or more people... [to] "feed off of one another" in keeping a rhyme going in a cyclical fashion... The prerequisite for participating in a cipher session is the ability to create rhymes instantaneously. Hence, ciphers are likened to freestyling sessions.[256]

To put NY hip hop into context, it is on everyone's doorstep in New York and can be seen and heard everywhere; it is common to be approached by budding hip hop artists on the New York subway trying to sell their CD singles and albums. You can walk down a street and see artists offering signed copies of their single, posing

---

[254] Will Edmondes, *Signifying Autonomy: Hip Hop In Wales*, a paper exploring hip hop's contribution to Welsh culture, presented at St. Fagan's: National History Museum in Wales, 24th January 2009.
[255] Big Zoo on EOW TV, 28th November 2008 http://www.eodub.com/eodubtv.html
[256] Keyes, Cheryl L., *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004) pp. 124-5.

for photographs and trying to entice you to their concerts. This form of promotion is extremely direct and, for a hip hop enthusiast, it can be hit or miss in terms of the music on sale and the performances on offer – there are a few diamonds in the rough and then, on the other hand, some concerts seem to be nothing more than bad karaoke to a few midi beats, in stark contrast to EOW events. This is the reason why EOW can be considered the epitome of true hip hop; EOW takes place in a small, dark club, but there is a lot of organisation and passion behind the hosts and participants who are there to support the music they love and by doing so, keep hip hop alive. The censorship laws in the US must be very different to the law regarding censorship in the UK – NY daytime TV has a vast array of music channels which broadcast local hip hop at all times, such as BET, VH1, MTV and Fuse.[257] On BET, I noticed that there are no bleeped out expletives that one would usually expect for daytime TV, and at times, the hip hop that is broadcast contains strong language and what most people would consider to be extremely offensive vulgarities; the only thing that is censored is the actual written song title on screen, if it happens to contain bad language. Perhaps it is indiscretions such as these that give hip hop its bad reputation and quite rightly so, for certain kinds of hip hop, but what is admirable about cypher is that it gives an aesthetic quality to profanity; if you want to swear and be crude, then it can be done intelligently, wittily and beautifully.

During several visits to Club Pyramid in the Lower East Side of New York on Sunday evenings, between 2007 & 2009, I saw firsthand the way EOW looks after its clientele and demonstrates a nurturing quality that could be considered rare in any other musical situation; the evening begins with a welcome from the hosts, encouraging and supporting the evening's participants and audience. Everyone is then asked to shake hands with someone else in the audience whom they've never met before. Handshake is perhaps not the right way to describe the half high-five, half hug gesture that takes place between strangers. It's a peaceful, respectful, display of affection. Immediately, this token introduction dispels any tension or anxiety that one could be feeling either as a performer or as a single white female in a downtown New York club, in the city that has gained notoriety for gang culture and

---

[257] BET – Black Entertainment Television.

gun violence. On top of that, on a night where hip hop is the genre and when so much blame has been put upon rap and hip hop for crime and violence,[258] a visitor to EOW is made to feel welcome and part of the family. I felt especially welcome and safe during my four visits in 2009 when I attended Club Pyramid alone, and on one occasion, I was even asked by a very friendly rapper if I wanted to put my name down for a slot on the open mic. Outside the club was equally as welcoming, and where most of my informal interviews with participants took place; this is also where I was able to witness cypher outside of an event situation, and *a capella*.

Looking at the social consciousness of hip hop, it could be said that EOW tries to compensate for hip hop's negative image. On entering the club, there is usually a stock of gifts for all who attend, such as free CD singles, stickers and as well as this friendly gesture, there was a stock of free condoms so it appears that EOW supports New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene health strategy for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy.[259] The merchandise stall at EOW does not pile on the pressure to buy EOW t-shirts and CDs which is so often the case at any gig or concert. On each visit, I heard a brief shout-out from the hosts which informs the audience what is for sale and the only other similar shout-out comes as a reminder to tip the bar staff which is a customary gesture in New York City. As well as EOW promotional material on offer, there are a wealth of flyers for other hip hop nights, not endorsed by EOW but which certainly reflect a kind of freedom for artists and other venues to promote hip hop nights to the EOW audience, without the worry of them being removed by the establishment. By the end of an evening at EOW, you have collected a lot of flyers, and, gaining more popularity, small business cards of many of the performing artists, leading you to their Myspace site, blog, podcast and other information. Everything is shared and in no way did I witness any rude behaviour from audience members and fellow artists towards those giving out their promotional literature. All of these small touches and little details give depth to a theory of cypher demonstrating an

---

[258] Such as 'Are rap artists responsible for the explosion of gang culture?'
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_20070810/ai_n19478902/
[259] http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/condoms/condoms.shtml

Underground vs. Inclusivity mismatch. Exploring this issue further can establish how something so far from the mainstream can nurture an all-welcomed community.

Audience participation is encouraged at all times; in a wider sense, any live hip hop will promote audience interaction in the form of call and response which sets hip hop apart from any other musical genre. Another observation of EOW, which builds further on the inclusivity aspect is that the hosts commonly referred to the audience as 'hip hop' such as 'is hip hop in the house?' or 'how are you feeling, hip hop?' As well as this, shout-outs such as 'Where New York at?' and 'New Jersey in the house?' define sub-groups and gave geographical representation to the umbrella hip hop audience. Again, the collective ethos at EOW is demonstrated by the language used by hosts, The 3 Kings, telling the audience that

> We are End of the Weak
> Why?
> We are bringing an end to the weak... minds
> An end to the weak spirits
> And an end to the weak LYRICS[260]

This kind of crowd motivation builds anticipation for the rest of the evening. By audience participation, through physical actions such as hands in the air, and hand gestures, as well as oral responses to the hosts and hip hop acts, the crowd and performers unite further. As Big Zoo, states in a documentary:

> We started to host it, really, to be honest, for the opportunity to showcase our own skills, we just wanted to spit, every week. And slowly but surely we saw an influx of the greatest talent that existed in New York. Ever.... but really, it became an area for MCs to showcase their talent and it just snowballed into this real collective of MCs, likeminded MCs, working to bring about the evolution of hip hop.[261]

When a performer is not so slick with their rap delivery, the atmosphere always remains supportive and if anything, the comical side to the performance is played up by the hosts (and audience) and the situation becomes more jokey than cringe-worthy, which would usually be the most likely feeling by both the performer and the audience in a less-than-standard performance in any other genre of music.

---

[260] As seen on videos such as LFNY, online hip hop documentary from 2004. At 12 minutes: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXumbZuKtKk
[261] Ibid.

In hip hop it is better for a performer to laugh with their audience and have no fear about getting up on stage to start with, as well as feeling less stressed and less pressure should they decide to perform again in the future to the same audience. It seems that a laugh amongst a friendly audience and smiles on everyone's faces is the very worst outcome and the maximum possible damage to the feelings of all involved. EOW's 'show love, get love' policy is respected and promoted at all times. The 'energy you give is the energy you get back.'[262]

Looking at the words and musical language used in cypher, and further looking at the roles and ideologies that are embedded into the practice, it is relevant to give examples of cypher that demonstrate how its social elements are communicated through language and music. Cypher connects individuals in a similar way to how members of any subculture choose to interact and communicate with each other. When R. Lincoln Keiser looked at roles (and rules) within gangs, he noted that the 'social etiquette' of the group was generally followed and,

> there are certain modes of behaviour that are considered proper between individuals in social relationships.[263]

When cypher participants of similar 'rank' perform, it is clear that that 'the idea of mutual help'[264] is something that is always observed. A trace of an element of competition between participants is there but more value is placed on the teamwork required to deliver an overall successful cypher. This is similar to a quote given by Keiser:

> We may get to arguing and then humbug [fight], but soon as it's over we buy a drink, and we [sic] back together. See, the way we see this thing, we all out to help each other... really.[265]

Most cypher is structured so that every participant will get an equal chance in terms of time/bars to show off their freestyle skills; everything is conducted fairly and the EOW MC Challenge reflects a team spirit between members of the same team, rather than individuals trying to receive individual acclaim.

---

262 Big Zoo on EOW TV, 28th November 2008 http://www.eodub.com/eodubtv.html
263 Keiser, R. Lincoln, (1972), Expressive Role Behaviour, in Kochman, Thomas, *Rappin' and stylin' out* (University of Illinois Press), p. 350.
264 Ibid.
265 Ibid.

Taking into account the several rounds in EOW's MC Challenge, and 'evolution of the battle,'[266] different musical skills are tested. Looking at the 'Beat Juggling' round, this is basically when each competitor raps while the DJ varies the accompanying beat so that the sampled beats and effects pace the freestyler and then make the rap more challenging by altering the tempo of the beats sporadically, so the freestyler has to respond to that by changing their tempo; the DJ is in control and the MC has to adapt. This round also adds to the variation for the audience and provides much entertainment, especially when the beat is so fast the MC can barely keep up. The 'Writtens' round offers the MCs to perform something that has been prepared in advance so this gives competing MCs the opportunity to practice and polish their own words, giving the competition an element that contrasts to the other rounds which mainly use freestyle rhymes. The 'A Capella' round is comparable to spoken word; there are so many parallels between rap and poetry – especially beat poetry with comparisons easily made in terms of subject matter, and the 'message', as well as the attitude of the performer, and the free improvisation process that is key to each.[267] The 'Freestyle Bag' requires improvised ingenuity and is highly entertaining and often awe-inspiring to the audience; MCs are presented with a box containing 5 mystery objects. The objects can be absolutely anything – a toy Shrek, a fly swat, a hat, a parcel and a number of random objects which are drawn out of the bag individually and then the MC has to freestyle around them. The final round is 'Cypha Skills' which has evolved directly from the street practice of cypher that is the salient component of this research. The number of bars is decided upon and then the cypher begins, giving each competitor a couple of chances to freestyle some verses.

What is refreshing about the judging at EOW is that the judges are always people who are highly respected and experienced in the world of hip hop; they're not always the same people and the judging is done fairly, giving marks on lyrics, creativity, stage presence, delivery/flow and crowd response. On the street, cypher is judged really by its audience, although the atmosphere is not as competitive than

---

[266] Vice Verses on EOW TV, 28th November 2008: http://www.eodub.com/eodubtv.html
[267] Spoken word from Gil Scott Heron and the Last Poets in the 1970s, clearly resonates with rap. Please refer to tracks 3 & 4 on the accompanying CD.

in an MC battle situation, but the winner is determined almost implicitly, everyone knows who it is instinctively. The person with the freshest, catchiest and hard-hitting lyrics and slickest delivery wins. Outdoors, a cypher can attract a large audience out on the street and they stand around the edge of the circle. Applause and comments can be heard and go towards deciding the winner. This echoes the sentiments in Keiser's 'Brotherhood ideology' with the symbolic sharing of wine in gangs, with the pouring action of wine to show a sacrifice, due to the material value of the wine, with every group member receiving the same amount regardless of their contribution to buying the wine.[268] In cypher, what you put in is your contribution and in a team context, whatever the outcome, is shared equally. It 'expresses and reinforces the values of mutual help – the values of brotherhood.'[269]

Hip hop is a universal genre of music but it is worth noting that 'commercial' hip hop is marketed to young African-American males; bearing in mind that a lot of the audience at EOW are relatively young (certainly below the legal age to drink alcohol in the US of 21), many of these youths will have parents the 'right' age to have been around when hip hop first emerged. This means that they have grown up with rap and hip hop and heard the lyrics that are still as relevant as they were 20-30 years ago. This has undoubtedly been a big influence on the EOW hosts, drawing on an example of host, Big Zoo, freestyling with rap legend KRS-One.[270] The very fact that KRS-One visited EOW is testament in itself to the quality of hip hop that takes place there. Big Zoo's freestyle on stage in which he refers to Boogie Down Productions' albums *Criminal Minded*[271] from 1987, *By All Means Necessary* from 1988 and *Edutainment* from 1990, was particularly impressive (by cleverly using references to two of KRS-One's major achievements with Boogie Down Productions). Big Zoo goes on to narrate through his rap how he agrees with KRS-One's self-styled label as 'the teacha' and how he himself has spent 11 years in education, gaining a BA in Social Work and a Masters in Sociology. Big Zoo paints a familiar picture in

---

[268] Keiser, R. Lincoln, (1972), Expressive Role Behaviour, in Kochman, Thomas, *Rappin' and stylin' out*, (University of Illinois Press), p. 367.

[269] Ibid. p. 368.

[270] EOW TV, 28th November 2008 http://www.eodub.com/eodubtv.html

[271] Boogie Down Productions, *Criminal Minded* (B-Boy Records, 1987), *By All Means Necessary* (Jive/RCA Records, 1988) and *Edutainment* (Jive/RCA Records, 1990).

telling the story of sitting in his bedroom and listening to Criminal Minded for 10 hours straight – something that is likely to be a pastime the whole audience could relate to. The rap is executed with a perfect balance of respect for KRS-One and a bit of self-promotion, finishing up with a shout-out applicable to both rappers, literally and metaphorically, of 'make some noise for the teacher!' This highlights the importance of education and how hip hop can be inspirational and set a good example for youth, contrary to the bad reputation that commercialised hip hop has earned. Boogie Down Productions is regarded as one of the key hip hop groups who contributed to the 'Golden Age' of hip hop and is noted for its use of lyrics which take on issues of identity, race, politics and African-American culture. The Golden Age of hip hop spanned from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, and it was during this time that hip hop's popularity really escalated. Many rap artists and groups of a high calibre achieved success in both financial and social terms – by bringing their message to a wider audience. Artists such as Public Enemy and Wu Tang Clan came to the fore during the Golden Age and it is interesting to note that the defining artists of the era were from New York, further highlighting hip hop's New York-centricity. Equally, artists on the Westside, such as NWA, created music which fitted in with, and further added to, the extensive and high quality rap to be born in the Golden Age.

4.4i   *Conclusions from Chapter 4*

From the case study of EOW and the other sections in Chapter 5, one is much better placed to be able to draw some conclusions as to the role and significance of cypher in hip hop culture. It is clear that for many people who engage with hip hop culture, such as the participants and audience members at EOW events, hip hop plays a fundamental role in the peer group and a great deal of encouragement is given to those who wish to participate in areas of hip hop culture, such as cypher. I argue that a community is created through participation in street-based artforms, and particularly in the case of cypher. Organised events like the events arranged by EOW contribute to the encouragement of participation in and engagement in hip hop culture. With such events, a space is provided where people can socialise in a comparably

safe environment with like-minded individuals. Ultimately, this kind of situation enables individuals to learn and grow in a personal development sense, in a very sociable and peaceful place. Therefore, I would further assert that movements such as EOW play a vital role in the community and such an assertion certainly warrants more research, which will be outlined in the final chapter.

Whilst the bottom-line conclusion in this chapter highlights the key theme of participation, it is important to note that hip hop's 'streetness' is crucial in increasing its appeal and accessibility. The discussions in Chapter 4 further support the earlier conclusions drawn in previous chapters, in that cypher itself increases accessibility to hip hop culture, especially for marginalised communities, and due to rap's diasporic nature, it is open to progression, including self-development, respectively. Hip hop's unfair association with gang culture is understandable, given the way that a lot of mainstream rap projects negative social imagery; whilst hip hop has had association with gang culture and violence in the past, I argue that hip hop actually provides an alternative to gang life. Cypher, especially, allows its participants to feel part of a team and enables them to speak out about injustices, which I suspect, is probably the primary reason why misguided youths end up being involved in gang culture in the first place, seeking peers, feelings of belonging and the rewards of a team spirit.

Chapter 4 has also been supported by previous chapters' conclusions, especially to do with the social commentary that rap can provide. It is clear that hip hop culture's philosophy is deeply rooted in the principles of truth, knowledge and communication, and rap is used as a mechanism in order to channel these principles. Furthermore, rap as a channel of communication goes hand in hand with the assertion above around participation and I conclude that the way in which participants of cypher can relate to their peers, and feel that their message is being disseminated and heard, must add to the encouragement in participation of cypher. The examples of Wu Tang Clan and the 5% Nation, given as representatives of team spirit within hip

hop culture, mirror the all-inclusive and welcoming ethos witnessed at the weekly EOW event in New York. I assert that the concept of team spirit is intrinsic to hip hop culture and with artists such as in Wu Tang Clan, I am able to affirm that team spirit goes beyond cypher in hip hop culture, and can be seen in recorded rap, as well as in other hip hop collectives, such as breakdancing crews. Team spirit promotes good sportsmanship and this is an essential personal quality for participation in MC battles and cypher. Whilst MC battles and cypher reflect several differences in terms of their respective formats, functions and context, the criteria of sportsmanship in the behaviour and outlook of their respective participants is certainly reflects a parallel.

Finally, I conclude that although cypher is an improvised form of rap music, rehearsal, in a sense, still plays a role in the performance of cypher. Although lyrics are improvised in-the-moment in cypher, each and every performance can be considered as a rehearsal to the next instance. Participants are able to refine their cypher technique and hone their skills in preparation for future engagement. A great deal of emphasis is placed on improvement in cypher and this includes self-development, as mentioned above. There appears to be a constant drive in trying to achieve something and to be the very best you can be, which again, is all part of sportsmanship and team spirit. Cypher participants are able to respond to each other, as well as their audience, instantly, which creates a very fluid and ever-changing feedback mechanism that relates to free improvisation and folk music. Exactly how cypher gives back to an individual and a community, will be looked at in further detail in the next chapter, along with the notion that cypher can actually *create* a community, and engage with people who could be considered as coming from a hard-to-reach background.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT CYPHER 'GIVES' IN TERMS OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, EDUCATION AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

"No question, it's like the elders told me,
No one person can do anything, but everyone can do something"

> Lyrics from 'One' by Immortal Technique. I have chosen these lyrics as they reflect the 'oneness' of hip hop and highlight the common struggle and everything that affects all people of the human race; it's also about the common struggle for truth and the lyrics end with "Thank you for listening, and thank you for supporting independent Hip Hop: The heart and soul of our culture, keeping the truth alive." Immortal Technique is a prime example of a rapper who has been influenced by diaspora (having been born in Peru and grew up in Harlem) and has focussed heavily on political and socio-economical struggles in his lyrics and music. Featured on accompanying CD, track 18.

> Hip Hop has given me an outlet to express myself, my ideas, frustrations etc. to people who may never know me or even like me but they hear my words. I have learned so much from Hip hop not just the music and the lyrics but the culture itself, the rebellious nature, the make something out of nothing culture, I grew up with Hip Hop and it has helped shape me to be the person I am today for better or worse.[272]

The comment above comes from MC and participant at EOW (New York), Lesliayn, from cypher collective LMNOP, and her thoughts on what hip hop culture has given back to her. I argue that cypher, specifically, gives back to its participants, and a salient point worth demonstrating in this chapter is *how* cypher is used in communities. Cypher allows for communities to be culturally compensated in areas where unemployment, gang culture and deprivation are rife. This is also true when thinking about hip hop in general, or looking at it from a broader perspective; it is very much a culture which enables one to 'get out what you put in' – in other words, the culture thrives from the consistent input, enthusiasm and creativity which is contributed by its practitioners; equally, practitioners get something in return for their efforts. Therefore, cypher participation is rather like a mutually beneficial relationship. It is rather fascinating to consider how cypher manages to balance several dichotomies that run in parallel – ultimately, cypher is an artform that comes out of years of oral tradition, musical and cultural diasporas and hybrids of different genres and then on the other hand could be thought of as having come from nothing; cypher is basically art from rubbish, something out of nothing. This could be true of all contemporary artforms but

---

[272] Response selected from my blog at www.eodub.com/kitty

what makes cypher unique is that it is culturally rich and diverse in terms of its conception, audience and impact on African American popular culture. Cypher gives many people with talent an opportunity to develop and learn, and to continue an oral tradition – for many participants, a bleak outlook and lack of prospects, in terms of opportunities of any kind, is what they face. Cypher is not about enabling those with talent to get out of the ghetto but it provides a platform for community engagement and assists in developing social awareness. From what I saw of the demographic of participants at EOW, and of those I spoke to informally during my research trips to New York, nobody seemed to come from a deprived background - at least everyone present could afford a small entry fee to EOW, some drinks and subway fare home. However, I argue that organised events, such as EOW, while welcoming to all, do not highlight the socio-economic class of participants, unlike the example of cypher provided in the introduction, which signified participants from a poor socio-ecomonic background, simply by the clothes they are wearing and the location of the cypher, which looks like an overgrown and run-down outdoors community space.[273] Cypher becomes a mechanism for negative energy to be utilised positively by means of channelling through music, giving indirect and direct positive outcomes for the development of music and social awareness, while endorsing a generation, and its future generations, to take ownership and increase empowerment for individuals and communities. As EOW (Germany) MC, Amewu, comments,

> the importance of cyphering for a community lies in the words of the MC. If you got something to say that's important for the community you doing something. If you only run around battling fools it can be fun but I wouldn't say it does something for the whole community. If you manage to say things with a deep meaning that many people can relate to whether they are interested in HipHop or not you will be able to transcend the boundaries of HipHop and really achieve things for the whole community.[274]

It is words and phrases like 'empowerment' and 'community cohesion' that are usually the driving force or aim of government initiatives which are heavily funded, and yet cypher already does this kind of work with no financial support or government backing at all. However, should hip hop ever gain such institutional approval, the possibility of it losing its street credibility would have to be considered, and therefore the very essence of hip hop

---

[273] Camden Cypher (New Jersey): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hrf21JWPHLQ
[274] Selected from responses on my blog at www.eodub.com/kitty

would be jeopardised, which goes back to seeking and speaking truth. Cypher is anarchical in the way its lyrical content demonstrates a reaction against a system, which in turn becomes a channel of communication for many, yet it is peaceful in its practice and philosophy.

Cypher is very much a street-based artform and due to the widespread international appeal of hip hop, and with regular events across New York (as well as elsewhere in the world) such as EOW, it has certainly developed into an international phenomenon that does remain true to its roots and continues to be a NY-Centric (as well as an Afrocentric) practice; this doesn't stop rappers from all parts of the world from taking part in cypher. It seems that cypher, or more generally, hip hop, is extremely versatile and adaptable in cross-cultural situations, and perhaps this could be attributed to hip hop's diasporic nature and the very melting pot from which the culture has emerged.

This chapter deals with how cypher is used to aid communities that are in need of some form of compensation, whether that is to do with education, employment, spirituality, cultural activities and many more social tributaries from an area of potential deficit, in the life of an individual or an experience of a whole community. However, to go one step further, this chapter also deals with the notion of cypher actually creating communities. There is no doubt that the research in this thesis so far supports the notion that cypher is culturally rich, and without it, many of its practitioners would be severely lacking in ways to articulately express themselves. The social interaction and the team spirit that makes a positive contribution to a community, regardless of its size, is fundamental in keeping that community together and alive. Mutual respect and open-mindedness are part of the practice of cypher, with all of its participants, as well as it being welcoming to newcomers, which was discussed and dealt with in Chapter 4. Unfortunately, it may be an impossible feat to measure the wealth of personal, social and educational development that can be directly attributed to cypher (or rap, or hip hop), in New York and beyond; empowerment, engagement and levels of education and social interaction are difficult, if not impossible, to measure. However, based on the evidence in all chapters, it is fair to say that were it not for cypher, many of the participants and rappers would be more likely to be engaged in a range of activities considered antisocial, unlawful, or even highly criminal. It is a proven fact that

boredom leads to increased crime within communities.[275] Aside from cypher being a distraction from boredom, and therefore crime, this chapter sets out to discuss in detail what cypher actually does for an individual and a community and *how* cypher can be regarded as a form of cultural compensation for some. It is also worth noting how hip hop can be used as a tool to deliver lessons from a broader range of subjects[276] to a broader demographic, including those from the marginalised or hard-to-reach communities which were examined in Chapter 2, and a wider age-range. KRS-One's concept of 'knowledge' as hip hop's fifth element will be discussed in 6.2.

5.1   Cypher as Cultural Compensation

The list that can be drawn up, when looking at the benefits to participants of cypher, is long and varied; there are numerous benefits to a participant in different contexts: as an individual, as part of a crew, and/or as part of a whole community. Primarily, dealing with the 'reimbursement' of the time, effort and advocacy that a participant invests in hip hop culture, either consciously or otherwise, shows that their participation brings a mutually beneficial relationship between them as individuals, and hip hop culture on the whole. The benefits that cypher brings to an individual highlights that there are a wealth of skills and experiences that contribute to personal development from participation in cypher. These skills are commonly referred to as 'soft skills' in the employability field, such as time-management, punctuality, organisational skills and the ability to work as part of a team, quite often taken for granted by prospective employers. These qualities in a person are not always naturally attained and they might have to be learned from somewhere. Cypher is a practice which can allow for this kind of personal development, as well as an increase in participants' confidence and social skills. It is also important to note that this, in turn, further promotes the development of hip hop as a culture and may help in some way towards rebuilding its reputation.

---

[275]Ferrell, Jeff, *Boredom, Crime, and Criminology*, Special edition of the international journal *Theoretical Criminology*, Volume 8 No. 3, 1998, pp. 287-302.

[276] Projects such as H.E.L.P (Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program) http://www.edlyrics.com/, e.g. the 'Mos Def' lesson plan, which uses Mos Def lyrics to teach young people about water pollution. TV shows such as Hip Hop Harry http://www.hiphopharry.com are aimed at 3-6 year olds and offer an 'alternative' way to teach children basic lessons such as washing hands by means of memorable and catchy raps, albeit highly cliché.

In areas where unemployment is rife and standards of education are generally low, it is fair to assume that an individual may be especially lacking in the outlined soft skills, and a formal education and qualifications, through, presumably, having a deprived upbringing or lack of moral and social guidance from a teacher or parent. I am not arguing here that the skills attained through participation in cypher will alone solve any problem of unemployment amongst marginalised communities, but merely that the development of social skills goes hand-in-hand with participation in cypher, as well as being submerged in the very sociable subculture, which can only be regarded as a positive aspect. In return, hip hop culture becomes affiliated with socially adept and skilful individuals who become, either directly or indirectly, the ambassadors for hip hop culture, which subsequently raises its profile and contributes to regaining a better, and justified, reputation for hip hop.

Hip hop itself may fill such social voids by the way cypher can engage the disaffected and with such a strong element of peer mentoring among cypher participants, individuals can learn something from their fellow rappers, with the most experienced playing their part as role models for the novices and, in a broader sense, for hip hop culture as a whole. Looking back to section 2.2 and thinking about how hip hop engages communities, it is the actual message that is conveyed by rap that strikes a great resonance with black youths in particular, and therefore this ability to communicate a message can be used as a hook, firstly to attract participants, which can then lead to making a positive change in participants' lives. As discussed in 4.2, cypher plays a large role as a mechanism for social commentary.

There is an abundance of other personal skills and experiences that, broadly speaking, hip hop can give to an individual, but more specifically, with cypher, the wealth of rewards to an individual in terms of social, communicative and confidence-boosting development, are paramount when considering the significance of cypher in hip hop culture. The ability to communicate effectively is the single most important facet of human existence; not only does hip hop push social boundaries but the very function of being able to communicate its message, and essence, is vital in keeping hip hop culture alive. As previously discussed in Chapter 4, rap is local, national and international. Language is not a barrier in hip hop and it can be utilised

as a tool to cross cultures and therefore spread the awareness of hip hop culture further afield and to a larger audience. The all-encompassing philosophy of hip hop is relevant to its followers across all continents and rap is significant to people from all backgrounds, using a range of native languages, including, perhaps most impressively, the deaf community whose first language happens to be sign language;[277] it would be fair to comment that actions can speak louder than words when considering the feat that Finnish deaf rapper, Signmark, has achieved amongst both deaf and hearing communities in Finland, as well as internationally. The support that Signmark has had from his home country is astounding and it is especially relevant to note that ultimately, this reflects something similar to institutional support for his music – and more poignantly, hip hop and rap being celebrated for what they are. Hip hop enables Signmark, and others, to achieve despite any barriers that may be faced. For once, the negative reaction to rap has been replaced with a positive reaction due to the fact that it is being used as an effective channel of communication, as well as the fact it is providing an opportunity to someone who wouldn't be able to engage with music easily, to become involved, and is encouraged to do so.

Signmark has added another dimension to music for the deaf community, by using hip hop culture and rap. In support of section 3.2 which demonstrated that rap gives a voice to the voiceless due to rap's characteristics of freedom of speech and a socio-political platform to air opinions. The theme of providing a voice to the marginalised, including the positive contribution that Signmark has made to the deaf community by means of rap, can further give support here to the notion that it is fair to consider rap to be a voice for the voiceless. This theory can also be taken in a very literal sense, due to the use of rap amongst the deaf community, but mainly for allowing marginalised communities to engage with music.

The appeal of rap's rawness enables individuals and communities to feel as though they belong somewhere, as well as feeling a sense of ownership, thus

---

[277] For example the international rap artist Signmark who is deaf and claims that 'rap goes beyond music, lyrics culture and languages and helped the signing community to find their own voice'.
http://www.thethinkingblog.com/2007/10/hip-hop-music-for-deaf-people.html (22nd October 2007)

highlighting issues of identity. Looking specifically at ownership, one can see that cypher allows individuals and communities to take possession of something that, although a highly sophisticated artform, can be used and enjoyed by all who wish to take part. The ghetto appeal of rap means that any misconceptions about music and class are diminished; the way in which a typically marginalised person might perceive a high art to be associated with supposed high class can be off-putting and marginalising for many individuals and groups of people. Therefore, with rap, the pompousness that is considered to be part-and-parcel of the arts, cultural and academic fields, is greatly reduced and there is a strong sense of accessibility with hip hop culture.

Cypher allows people to have a stake in a communal identity when the chance of owning material property or achieving academic success seem too far out of reach to even contemplate. Cypher may not have any monetary value but it could be argued that it could be legitimately considered a valuable asset by its participants solely based on its social wealth and the way in which it allows those who take part to earn and share respect and develop as individuals. In a sense, the autonomous nature of cypher allows individuals to subconsciously own and promote their art, at little, if any, monetary expense. This, in turn, develops the sense of pride that is apparent in the practice; participants have something to focus on, aside from crime or lack of opportunity, and, once emerged in the practice, are encouraged by peers to continue. Those with talent are almost addicted to the positive responses and feedback by their peers and for many, this might have been the only encouragement they have ever received. Again, this links to the way cypher reflects a nurturing ethos; cypher could be thought of as a provider of meaningful friendships and relationships, which, in some cases, could be the compensation, or at least some kind of substitute to participants who are otherwise lacking in terms of the family unit structure at home, or who have perhaps been marginalised or excluded in some way in their school life or from being part of a certain community.

Cypher can represent some form of cultural compensation[278] for many different people. As previously discussed in this section, cypher can provide the much needed voids in social skills, communication, personal development and teamwork that are vital life skills. However, on the other hand, one should not forget some of the 'smaller' benefits of participation, such as the presence of humour within performances and the basic social interaction that can contribute positively to people's health, wellbeing and quality of life. In these benefits, one can consider the amount of humour within rap, especially in battle raps and cypher, and look back to Chapter 3, to think about the laughter that can be provoked by participants and the fun that can be had when engaging in hip hop culture, whether this comes from participating in the dozens or being able to laugh at a participants' exaggeration and braggadocio in their delivery. In an otherwise serious document of research, it is appropriate to remember the lighter side of hip hop culture and the joy it can bring, whilst enriching people's lives that could be slightly mundane otherwise. Again, the display of humour in hip hop goes back to Chapter 1 in discussing the African griot, signifyin(g) and discussing their respective influences on hip hop culture; rap has always displayed a sense of humour, although perhaps subtly in some rap, but this is directly related to the witticism of the griot, and how humour and wit can be a sign of intelligence; intelligence is something that is a much-needed quality for all participants of cypher in order to be able to create fully-improvised raps, in the moment, that reflect thought, wit and careful construction. Seriousness has its place in rap as well, such as in 'conscious rap' and rap created in response to suffering of any kind, but primarily, participants in hip hop culture always need to be able to give and take a joke.

Cultural compensation has been a salient theme throughout this thesis highlighting that hip hop presents another choice in various contexts, which will be explored further here. Firstly, rap works on both a conscious and subconscious level and each level entails varying degrees of 'knowing' participation and engagement with hip hop culture. Participants of cypher take part merely for something to do, for

---

[278]As mentioned in section 5.2, hip hop as 'Cultural Compensation' was discussed by Chuck D of Public Enemy in the 2007 BBC Documentary 'Once upon a Time in New York'. Chuck D believes that hip hop exists in response to cultural deprivation.

the mundane, and for the fact that it fits into everyday life for them. For others, participation in hip hop culture, or specifically in cypher, means a lot more than this, and has been far more conscious. For many, participation in cypher has been a decision, whether for the right reasons or not, a choice has been made to actively engage, rather than to participate in something else. As discussed previously, an alternative activity for those from marginalised communities can often result in participation in gang culture, crime and violence, and to put it bluntly, this in turn can be fatal, to both an individual and the community. Similarly, in hip hop culture, participation can directly signify that an alternative choice has been made; it is not shameful to be part of something else with hip hop culture. Not only does Keyes' theory of rap as street consciousness come alive here, but there is also a sense of having street credibility in hip hop. For the Five Percenters, mentioned in Chapter 4, rap has gone hand in hand with the teachings and beliefs of the organisation and has many complementary parallels with hip hop culture that allow for the ideologies of each to correspond cohesively. There is a pulse or undercurrent in both streams of thought that tie them together, and I argue that fundamentally, this is to do with a common bond through afrocentricity being at their respective cores.

Hip hop culture is a living archive of the cultural past of its participants. Engagement with cypher requires such little monetary input for its participants that focussing on physical objects becomes unnecessary. There is no need to visit a museum to be immersed in rap's cultural past as it is all there, for free, in its most raw form which is on the streets of New York, through cypher. A lack of physical objects is compensated by a continuous narrative of history through rap, as well as through the other elements of hip hop, and therefore rap continues the African oral tradition - history in the present. The pioneers of hip hop were consciously doing something different which marked its birth. As DJ Kool Herc commented,

> I was the guy that never went downtown. I stayed in the neighbourhood and
> formed a culture called hip hop. I was the guy that didn't follow with the rest
> of the people. It wasn't called hip hop when I was doin' it. It was called a 'jam.'
> 'Coming to the jam.'[279]

---

[279] 'Once upon a Time in New York,' BBC documentary, 2007 – DJ Kool Herc

Although, here, Herc makes it sound like the conscious decision to be part of hip hop culture was actually just taking part in something that was part of everyday life. As Chuck D further explains,

> New York City in the middle of the '70s was a rough lookin place, you talked about there was a problem in corruption inside of government, there was a problem with fiscal spending and there was always a distrust of the mayorship around that time. So you had services in New York City that were limited and the first areas that felt that that the limited services were the areas where black and Hispanic people were living, thus, uptown, Brooklyn and the Bronx, were havin' a rough time at it and kinda like dipped into the realm of being slums.[280]

Furthermore, hip hop was a direct response to this ensuing hardship felt by many of communities within New York City, and hip hop culture came into existence, as

> It started off the emphasising of music education in the school systems, and, since so many things were taken away from the community, the community sorta like culturally compensated for that with the creation of making something out of things that just happened to be around. Old turntables, old record collections, hooking systems up into street poles for wiring, making art out of a wall and a spraycan [that] happened to be left at the side. Being able to dance on some cardboard.[281]

5.2 Rap as a form of education

As discussed in Chapter 4, the social benefit that rap provides to an individual and to a community is extremely difficult to measure, and similarly, the educational benefits that stem from hip hop culture are equally as important when considering the impact and significance of cypher in hip hop culture. The fundamental principle of hip hop is centred on knowledge, and in a broader sense, this plays a major role in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge via a channel of communication, as mentioned in previous chapters. In Western society, we are constantly reminded that 'knowledge is power' but for those who don't have the financial means or support to better themselves, there is little to no chance of being able to gain respect by achieving highly in education, and subsequently moving on to a good job. In critical pedagogy, much emphasis is placed on how learning can be made feasible for disengaged youths, or for those from marginalised communities, and considers each learner as an individual, looking at social context and why certain educational

---

[280] 'Once upon a Time in New York,' BBC documentary, 2007 – Chuck D
[281] Ibid.

and learning methods may not be suitable for all. For many, I argue that education is survival, and

> A major theme in rap lyrics is that the only way to survive is to use your head, be aware, and know what's going on around you. That simple idea packs a lot of background. The most obvious ideas about knowledge turn out, if you look at them close up, to be pretty questionable.[282]

Learning itself can be considered as a contributing factor towards marginalisation as there is an underlying negative assumption from people in power that marginalised people will not be interested in learning, nor have the capability, and that their place in society is a fate that is already set in stone, and having been born into marginalisation with little or no hope of a better quality of life. Of course this assumption couldn't be further from the truth, in terms of looking for opportunities and striving for better, but it is equally fair to say that each individual has a different set of learning needs. Therefore, each individual requires different levels of support, and responds to different styles of teaching. One size does not fit all. Cypher, therefore, can represent an alternative model of teaching and learning, or praxis, for the development of the acquisition of knowledge and we know that knowledge is certainly one of the cornerstones of hip hop culture, and is often regarded as being hip hop's fifth element. Knowledge is also significant in Five Percent culture, within supreme mathematics, as discussed in Chapter 1. The unique way in which knowledge is disseminated through cypher also highlights the epistemological qualities of the practice, and, furthermore, demonstrates that rap, and hip hop culture in general, also reflect this quality.

I argue that hip hop culture provides a mechanism for learning, in an alternative style. The artist and audience feedback mechanism in cypher is comparable to a teacher and class relationship, with the salient difference that the participants take on the 'teacher' role, as provider of informations, perhaps can take more from the whole process of participation and therefore learn more, and achieve more, than perhaps the audience learns. In a typical musical performance environment, or teaching environment, it is the audience or class members who

---

[282] Green, Mitchell S., (2005) "'You Perceive With Your Mind': Knowledge and Perception", In Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) **Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason,** Illinois: Open Court, p. 27.

soak up the information that is on offer. The participation in cypher, therefore, provides a contrasting learning environment and structure to those considered typical Western teaching methods. As there is no hierarchy of participants within cypher, there is no need to rebel against authority when participating in cypher.

As highlighted in 2.4 and in the previous chapter, the outcomes of marginalisation, such as poverty and inequality, are faced on a daily basis by those who come from the ghetto and less privileged backgrounds. It is also known that the provision of education is not fair for all and marginalised communities are more likely to suffer in terms of teaching standards and quality of resources. Therefore, for those from marginalised backgrounds, I argue that rap provides an alternative way of learning, in various contexts, and cypher is the practical manifestation of this alternative form of education which is based on the deeply philosophical, cultural and historical movement that is hip hop culture.

Rap stems from and forms part of an oral tradition, and as with critical pedagogy, the role of this orality is significant when considering how it enables learning in general, as well as in the context of learning from the past and allowing for the opportunity to address and reflect on current issues. With an oral tradition, there is a subconscious reflection on the past, or at least a direct connection or reference to the past is made, and this is especially apparent in rap with the use of sampling and powerful lyrics. There is an inherent sense of politics within education and this is something that also rings true of cypher. However, what sets cypher apart from other practices stemming from oral traditions is that it is the technique of its practice that survives and continues, rather than the actual content of its message – something that is more physical than transcendental. The storytelling element is present, which links back to the discussion about Griotism in Chapter 1, but there is a large focus on refreshing the story – originality and creativity, not regurgitation, are encouraged. Therefore, I argue that cypher is an oral tradition of the future, and with its constantly refreshed participants and content, it is always reinvigorated and seems to be a practice that is set to continue. Cypher can also contribute to 'balancing' the educational and social inequalities faced by marginalised communities as cultural diversity is something that is celebrated and can be a

powerful tool in the circles of hip hop culture. Diversity means that a wider representation, in terms of demographics and backgrounds, and experiences of all kinds can be shared amongst participants from varying cultural backgrounds, but predominantly from those classed as marginalised.

The respect earned by developing cypher skills and establishing a good reputation can compensate an individual who may be lacking in formal education attainment by being able to take pride in their cypher achievements, and by demonstrating how they have been able to build on their talent. Cypher also gives its participants something to be proud of in the sense that they have taken part in something that is wholly non-violent which, although may not sound much, for those coming from a ghetto background, not participating in gang culture, crime and violence is an achievement in itself. On the streets there is an undercurrent of a survival of the fittest mentality, and cypher provides an alternative method of survival. In thinking about cypher as an artform, one can begin to unravel its merits as a form of education and as Shusterman summarises succinctly:

> Art intensifies experiences by engaging reality and by giving expression to the most powerful human drives. One of these basic drives that art seeks to satisfy is the quest for meaningful form. But another is the drive to achieve and express power. This second drive clearly relates to the phenomenon of violence, which is undeniably not only a feature of reality but also a particularly prominent and problematic feature in the specific reality and image of hip hop.[283]

By no means can cypher replace qualifications and experience on a curriculum vitae, although that is not the point of cypher any way, but there is no way that these qualifications can mean anything unless the qualified individual can take pride in their achievements and has spent a great deal of time and effort in getting there. After all, it's the effort and emotional investment that makes an achievement just that.

Cypher encourages and provokes thought on several different levels. There is no doubt that it takes great intelligence and innovation to deliver improvised raps in a slick and articulate manner and the thought processes involved in their creation

---

[283] Shusterman, Richard, (2005) "Rap Aesthetics: Violence and the Art of Keeping It Real" In Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) **Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason,** Illinois: Open Court, p. 56.

demonstrate ingenuity and an exchange of knowledge, and therefore thought, between participants, in a truly phenomenal practice. It is this exchange of knowledge that allows instant feedback and reflection amongst peers and this quality makes cypher unique in terms of other live music events. At a performance or event, there is a feedback mechanism from the audience to the performer, and whilst feelings of the audience can generally be detected by the performer, the review process usually occurs at the end of the entire performance. Conversely, with cypher, the evaluation process is instant and in-the-moment and the content of the rap and its review would be a fair contender to be incorporated into the rap of another participant's rap within the same cypher. Cypher becomes a revision and yet a reinvention of itself with every occurrence of participation. Bringing up certain topics in the content of cypher are bound to provoke thought amongst participants in a couple of contexts, firstly, in a literal sense – establishing the feasibility to incorporate any metaphors, thinking about any potential rhyming phrases, irony and flow would all be considered and looming in the back of the participants' minds. On a more transcendental level, lyrics in cypher reflect an opinion, and therefore, in a split second, the performer has to locate their self and mind within the topic and show where their opinions lie, whether these are true, or made up and implying that they're true, is not relevant. The ability to be perceived as speaking with wit, often humour, and even using extreme exaggeration is deemed to be satisfactory in terms of delivery, but the main feature is that the participants' lyrics are never lacking in conviction and originality, when it comes to their turn.

Ultimately, cypher enables its participants to gain experience in voicing their opinions while forming an inclusive and meaningful bond with other participants in their cypher circle. The pastoral care and peer mentoring that is subconsciously taking place in cypher highlights that rap is a form of education for many, and demonstrates at the least that hip hop culture is an education in itself and rap is its tool for learning. Considering cypher as the added nurturing element to rap that attracts and retains the interest of so many of its participants is an interesting concept. I can therefore assert that cypher can be considered an alternative means of learning, and engagement with knowledge and education, for those who may not

be willing, comfortable, or otherwise, with the standard or format of the state education that they have experienced thus far and continue to experience. As Keyes concludes,

> Rap music serves as a vehicle for self-expression. Many artists have given testimonies of their stormy past, from brushes with the law and incarceration to near fatal incidents. They have often expressed that during periods of reflection, MCing and DJing have been forums for them to articulate their personal experiences. Rap music serves as an agent for fostering self-esteem, self-knowledge, confidence and assertiveness among youth.[284]

I agree with Keyes here and, furthermore, can present the argument that the boundaries that are placed on areas of personal development within state education, such as self-esteem and confidence as mentioned above, further jeopardises an individual's learning ability and capacity. Cypher is the perfect mechanism for the qualities mentioned above by Keyes to develop and thrive amongst young people from marginalised backgrounds who may feel that their self-expression is trapped by the formal constraints of the format of the typical state education.

Education in itself can further marginalise communities and add to the disenfranchisement of youth. This is not to say that rap is an alternative, or suitable alternative, to a good and fair education; for some it may just be nothing more than a hobby, or something to do, but the significance of cypher in the lives of some of its participants, as a substitute or form of compensation for a 'proper' education, is great, and without it, I can only speculate as to what may have become of its participants without their engagement in cypher. It is fair to assume that participation in violence would be a likely alternative and as Shusterman asserts

> Violence cannot simply be viewed and eradicated as an absolute, unnecessary evil; it is deeply entrenched in our evolutionary make-up as a necessary tool for survival and still has its positive expressions and uses. The problem of overcoming violence is not, then, a question of exterminating it altogether but of channelling and managing it, of separating the good violence that improves

---

[284] Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 229.

realities from the violence that does more harm than good; of using good violence to overcome bad violence.[285]

In a sense, this is exactly what cypher does and I agree with this statement from Shusterman. The concept of using 'good' violence to overcome bad violence, echoes the philosophy of Chuck D although I would also argue that there can be no 'good' in any kind of violence. However, by this, I can see how something positive has come out of something negative, as discussed in Chapter 4, and perhaps this is how the assertions of both Shusterman and Chuck D should be interpreted.[286]

Just as it is impossible to measure the social benefits of cypher within a community, educational benefits prove equally as hard to measure and, unfortunately, the Western world is limited when it comes to placing value, other than on material goods, which have a monetary price. When it comes to emotional, social and educational wealth, we are indeed very poor at quantifying. A similar ideology can be seen with any form of art; what one person sees as treasure, could be rubbish to the next, and the same can be said for cypher, and in hip hop culture. It is also difficult to place value on something that is in a constant state of development and evolution. While many people from various situations in society are condescending towards hip hop culture (and probably due to the bad reputation that has been earned by commercial hip hop), to many, hip hop culture provides a high return in terms of social and emotional investment of its participants. A consequence of this participation is that a wealth of knowledge is exchanged by the participants of hip hop culture, and what can be seen as being cypher's contribution to the development of social awareness is certainly worthy of a more detailed discussion that will occur in the proceeding section of this chapter.

5.3   Cypher's contribution to the development of social awareness

From the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America.[287]

---

[285] Shusterman, Richard, (2005) "Rap Aesthetics: Violence and the Art of Keeping It Real" In Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (eds.) **Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason,** Illinois: Open Court, p. 60.
[286] 'Once upon a Time in New York,' BBC documentary, 2007 - Chuck D.
[287] Rose, T., *Black Noise* (New England: Wesleyan University Press, New England, 1994), p.2.

Cypher contributes to its participants' lives on many levels. As discussed in previous sections of this chapter, it is fair to say that cypher, as well as hip hop culture in general, provides a great deal of cultural compensation and has a significant role in its form as an 'alternative' education for some. The extent to which cypher can contribute in raising social awareness varies drastically in scale. On one hand, there are issues that could be classed as very small scale, like family life and relationships, and on the other hand, it raises the profile of global issues on a large scale, all of which are demonstrated by the juxtaposition of different topics within the lyrical content of cypher and the focus this then places on certain issues. Topics raised in cypher can cover everything from the very local - education, community, health and family, to global issues such as war, the environment, Government, poverty and globalisation, as well as bridging the gap with content that can resonate with all of its participants such as racial tension, teenage struggles and everyday life. Similarly, rap, or 'conscious rap' can be used to serve the same purpose. Ultimately, cypher's unique quality of being used as a device to relate to others' situations and to communicate one's own experiences shines through when cypher is witnessed by an audience. The hardships and difficulties that are faced in society are highlighted in the lyrical content of cypher and both personal and global problems, faced on a daily basis, are usually covered as a topic in the cypher.

Above all, rap allows for responses, both negative and positive, to be formed and communicated around injustices, however great or small. Cypher also allows such responses to social issues to be raised in a peer-group setting, making those responses more personal and reflective of one's own circumstances. Simultaneously, the general awareness of social issues is increased and for many, in turn, allows for self-awareness to increase. The encouragement of airing opinions and the sharing of experiences is seen to be a very powerful characteristic of cypher, and is also another positive aspect of hip hop culture in general. As Edwards rightly asserts,

> Hip-hop's popularity and global reach make it a very powerful medium with which to spread messages and influence people. As a result, a lot of artists feel that they carry a great responsibility for delivering conscious content in

their songs – they know they can have a major impact on the world, and they don't want to squander the platform they've been given.[288]

Whilst this is true of some rap artists who have had commercial success in the music industry, it is certainly true of those artists who have consciously made the decision to adhere to the essence of true hip hop by advocating some of the guiding principles of hip hop culture, such as truth, knowledge and communication. These issues link back to previous sections in this thesis, particularly around 'The Message' in 2.3 and many of the social issues highlighted in Chapter 4. I argue that Edwards' statement above has helped to highlight the fact that although not usually intended for an audience on a global scale, and in the context of this research, cypher allows for artists to be demonstrably conscious in their participation in the artform. Secondly, cypher also provides the artists with opportunities to make an impact, perhaps on a smaller scale, but an impact none-the-less on their peers and fellow participants in cypher. Finally, it is also important to note that Edwards' final few words in the statement are absolutely crucial in understanding the scale of the opportunity that cypher provides to its participants – a platform of their very own and the chance to engage with similar-minded peers. Again, as Edwards states,

> Conscious content doesn't always get as much exposure as other types of content in hip-hop. Several artists feel that more pressure should be put on the people in charge of pushing and breaking records to support conscious hip-hop, so that there is more balance in what is played.[289]

This is not to say that cypher should have more exposure, but in the absence of cypher having any kind of power in the sense of the above statement, one can appreciate and argue that cypher provides its participants with some sort of control over social issues and how they're dealt with; control is something which people from marginalised backgrounds feel devoid of, further adding to feelings of marginalisation. This issue also ties in with the themes of belonging, ownership and a team ethos, previously discussed in Chapter 4. In summary, cypher, therefore, can be seen as filling a void for many of its participants in another sense, as well as contributing significantly to the overall development of social awareness. Examples

---

[288] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 16.
[289] Ibid., p. 18.

of social activism in rap songs highlight further parallels with cypher. Chuck D is known to have described rap as the 'black CNN' and this can be demonstrated in lyrics in Public Enemy's music, such as *Don't Believe the Hype,*[290]

> Back
> Caught you lookin' for the same thing
> It's a new thing check out this I bring
> Uh Oh the roll below the level
> 'Cause I'm livin' low next to the bass C'mon
> Turn up the radio
> They claim that I'm a criminal
> By now I wonder how
> Some people never know
> The enemy could be their friend guardian
> I'm not a hooligan
> I rock the party and
> Clear all the madness, I'm not a racist
> Preach to teach to all
> 'Cause some they never had this
> Number one, not born to run
> About the gun...
> I wasn't licensed to have one
> The minute they see me, fear me
> I'm the epitome - a public enemy
> Used, abused without clues
> I refused to blow a fuse
> They even had it on the news
> Don't believe the hype...
>
> Yes
> Was the start of my last jam
> So here it is again, another def jam
> But since I gave you all a little something
> That we knew you lacked
> They still consider me a new jack
> All the critics you can hang'em
> I'll hold the rope
> But they hope to the pope
> And pray it ain't dope
> The follower of Farrakhan
> Don't tell me that you understand
> Until you hear the man
> The book of the new school rap game

---

[290] Public Enemy, Don't Believe the Hype, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam/Columbia/CBS Records, 1988). Music video here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vQaVIoEjOM

> Writers treat me like Coltrane, insane
> Yes to them, but to me I'm a different kind
> We're brothers of the same mind, unblind
> Caught in the middle and
> Not surrenderin'
> I don't rhyme for the sake of of riddlin'
> Some claim that I'm a smuggler
> Some say I never heard of 'ya
> A rap burgler, false media
> We don't need it do we?
> It's fake that's what it be to 'ya, dig me?
> Don't believe the hype...

The title of the song instantly provides the audience with a direct message and then the lyrics unfold a story of distrust of the media, and a belief that news corporations lie to the public. Here, Public Enemy also reflects association with the Five Percent Nation, with the reference to Farrakhan.

It is socially acceptable in hip hop culture to rap or freestyle around contentious issues and this method of 'discussion' somehow makes certain topics, perhaps those often regarded as taboo, more accessible than raising them in a conversation or other format. Therefore, it could be argued that, for many, cypher becomes even more important as a channel of communication and as a means to air issues that have relevance to an individual or a community. In this context, cypher demonstrates that it is far more significant than just something in the everyday, that is simply something to do. The key concept of communication in cypher relates back to the issues examined in Chapter 2 again, and how, at its most crude level, rap is used to communicate a message. However, in cypher, the emphasis is always placed on peaceful communication, and social awareness, in this sense, could be translated to what Keyes dubs 'street consciousness;'[291] nothing is censored but the way in which a rapper behaves enables them to use rap as a vehicle to positively convey their opinions and not feel inhibited whilst being self-expressive. Cypher becomes a vent with a safety net for many.

---

[291] Core theme throughout in Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

Looking at the flipside of the development of social awareness, from the point of view of the rapper, or cypher participant, it is interesting to consider the sense of social responsibility, if any, an artist feels towards their audience. In contrast to Rose's theory regarding the reception of rap, what has been seen to be demonstrated at EOW events clearly contradicts the following passage:

> Even though rappers are aware of the diversity of their audiences and the context for reception, their use of the ghetto and its symbolic significances is primarily directed at other black hip hop fans.[292]

It could be argued that this claim could be true, or representative, of certain forms of rap music, perhaps the kind that has been previously referred to as mainstream, but it does certainly not ring true when considering the context of EOW, which is a movement that is permeated by the essence and philosophy that represents true hip hop. The inclusiveness of cypher is apparent when witnessed first-hand, and, to imply that the 'ghetto' references are primarily for black audience members, like an in joke, is quite disappointing. The fieldwork findings in 4.4 contradict this theory. One can see why a similar assumption to Rose's can be drawn when considering the rappers who are out there to make money, and who participate in rap music for that reason alone; this is no doubt true of the commercial dark side of rap. Perhaps these implicit connections between a rapper and their audience, solely based on race, contribute to the subsequent problem in true hip hop culture and rap music, which, in order to quash, now has to work overtime. It seems that rappers feel a great sense of responsibility towards their audiences and the social and personal welfare of their audience members, as well as the whole hip hop community, and this is of paramount importance. EOW artists in particular go to great lengths to protect this important facet of the culture at EOW.[293]

> **A blog entry from ProPayne (EOW New York) -**
> **"Now We've beeen reduced to thuggery - Go Ahead Smile"**
>
> Mighty mighty...
>
> I have been the most loyal of dub followers for years (ha). Not only because I am a founder and host of this renowned movement, but also because I am a

[292] Rose, T., *Black Noise* (New England: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 12.
[293] 19th October 2009 at www.eodub.com

fan of seeing raw potential moulded and exposed to different styles to ultimately emerge as a dope artist. Through my ten year tenure at EOW I have seen so many artists build, grow, change and evolve, all minus the violence. To be able to say that in an industry/culture rooted in violence is a blessing.

Last night I was in and out of the dub, it was my night off and well, I rather be home with my wife when I'm off. I love you all, but quality time. Anyway, we had a scuffle at the spot. I was like what and who was involved. My team, what, I'm totally shocked. This is not acceptable. No amount of beer muscles and taunting *should* ever bring a dub soldier out of his element, we are the movement, it's our spot.

Needless to say that set the tone for a show outside and the boys cruising by spotted it. BANG, car accident. YES!! A car accident in front of the dub and the cops are involved. Now who are they going to be watching even closer, the Dub... This is how things thread together and one event brings on another and the cycle begins. I wish that was it, but the energy in the air must have been off.

Not even an hour later someone was thumped out inside of the club. We broke it up within a minute, but the damage was done. Our reputation as the best open mic in NY was being threatened by testosterone and thuggery. This is unacceptable. This is a callout to all EODUB family, fans, soldiers, leaders and admirers to show up to the dub and bring love. Remember who we are, what we're a part of, how this started and where we're going.

I may have been at fault for not being everywhere at once to diffuse things, but every man is responsible for himself and when you're in the company of gods and legends act like one.

This coming Sunday we're going in again, and the one after that and so on indefinitely. Be there, with a smile a good heart and leave your thuggery at home or do yourself the favour, upgrade your life and get rid of it. If you are 25 or older and still a street fighter, something is terribly wrong. Find a mild mannered woman to show you your softer side or go to a temple. The point is that at some age you have got to stop scrapping. Black eyes at work are not a good look, taking for granted that you have a job, if you don't, well that's another entry.

Lastly, I'd like to give you all permission to smile. It will not hurt your face, make you less of a man or make anyone think you're "soft", pause. Think of it like this, if you were a dog, it'd the equivalent of a growl, minus the noise. So go ahead, loosen ya face muscles and let one go, your family probably misses you being you, not the goon you saw in a video.

Look even KRS Smiles! Evaluate Yourself Today
P

Are underground rappers feeling the pressure or sense of responsibility to 'correct' what their mainstream counterparts have done to hip hop culture? Or perhaps they're trying to protect any further damage to the reputation that mainstream rap music has unfairly burdened on and earned for hip hop culture? The heartfelt blog response above by ProPayne (EOW New York), following a fight outside the club, indicates that the social and moral responsibility that rappers often consider their duty, to maintain. Deeply rooted in a philosophy concerning respect and focussing on being a better person is reflective of the essence of hip hop culture. To say that the 'ghettoness' of rap makes it easier for black artists to engage with other black youths, completely contradicts the actual benefits of rap music. A connection to the ghetto improves the accessibility of hip hop for all, regardless of race or cultural background, as it does not discriminate against certain people. A shared aspect of understanding where the rapper is coming from is common to the majority of rap, including cypher. Participants take it in turns to take on the role of a narrator of a story, and speak, or appear to be speaking, from their own experiences as individuals and as a collective. As Rose summarises, 'rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of observer or narrator.'[294] To a great extent, the 'role' that is taken on by rappers, could be seen as a function which gives more validity to their stories; in turn, this also means that an audience is more likely to be receptive, and therefore engaging, with hip hop culture, in knowing that what it is hearing is coming from a genuine, or reputable, source. Cypher is an artform that displays a high degree of authenticity and genuineness.

---

[294] Rose, Tricia, *Black Noise* (New England: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 2.

This aspect of social consciousness could be considered an element of hip hop culture, tying in with KRS-One's fifth element of knowledge, and complementing the ideology stemmed from Afrika Bambaataa, pursuing his beliefs through the Universal Nation of Hip Hop and

> basing his ideas in the principle of understanding the groundwork laid by the pioneers of the conceptual history of the previous elements, especially the social, political, and economic aspirations at their core, [he] attempted to revitalize the collective consciousness that created the culture to begin with.[295]

It is salient to the theories of Keyes, and sociologist Price, that 'street consciousness' is at the very core of hip hop culture and it is this knowledge and awareness that is instrumental in gaining respect from others in the rap community. As Price asserts,

> [i]n order to achieve street credibility, a sign of localized power and esteem, one has to be validated by the local urban leader, who, by his stature in the community and exemplary display of wisdom, offers insight and a connection to the past.[296]

This statement highlights the importance of authenticity and validity in rap music and further adds to the justification that all of these processes are subconsciously, or otherwise, taking place within hip hop culture and provide the driving forces that take hold in rap at deeply intrinsic levels. The striving for street credibility contributes to the dictation of hip hop culture's rules, and contributes to the way in which participants feel the desire and intention to gain respect from others. However, there is no single leader in cypher, as everyone has a fair turn, and an equal chance, thus making the physical and social practice of cypher highly democratic. To a certain extent though, Price is correct in his theory that validation plays an important role on the street, and with cypher, everyone is a leader. Primarily, respect is sought in close circles but then the goalposts are broadened by building on the local respect that has been achieved. Aside from channelling 'the message,' cypher serves as a model where recognition and respect in the hip hop world, and in the everyday, can be attained. The appeal of street music is, perhaps, enhanced somewhat by the street consciousness (and all that entails) to which it is linked. Rap isn't just music, nor is it 'just' anything. The dichotomies within hip hop,

---

[295] Price, Emmett G., *Hip Hop Culture* (California: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2006), p. 37.
[296] Ibid., p. 40.

and particularly in cypher, are large and this is so eloquently summarised by Reynolds, in that

> In a crucial paradox, the hardcore street scenes are populist but anti-pop. Their populism takes the form of tribal unity against what's perceived as a homogenous, blandly uninvolving pop culture. They're about the 'massive' as opposed to 'the masses'. But unlike the connoisseurial cliques or experimentalist ivory-tower cloisters, the hardcores are about innovative music with real 'social energy' mobilized behind it.[297]

A similar view is echoed by Allen on his sentiments about 'message rap'and states that

> The various themes of message rap are themselves defined by opposing tendencies, with message-bearing gangsta rappers tending to coalesce at one pole of the spectrum, and those holding more visionary spiritual or political outlooks commingling at the other.[298]

Considering the discussions in all sections in this chapter thus far, I argue that cypher demonstrates many parallels with rap deemed to be 'conscious rap' or 'message rap' and these parallels are seen, not just by the words and meaning in the lyrical content of cypher, but in cypher's physical practice. In raising social consciousness amongst its peers, cypher also contributes significantly to the development of social awareness. By looking deeper into the social dynamics of hip hop culture, I argue that cypher is an entirely pure manifestation of hip hop's cultural and philosophical roots. There is more to cypher than being a mechanism for communication and I would go as far as saying it is an essential musical and social practice for many, and raising social awareness is one of the many positive outcomes of participation in cypher. Cypher is an especially significant artform for individuals and those who identify with being part of a marginalised community or group. To a great extent, 'the message' and the development of social awareness are deeply intertwined in the practice of cypher, as well as throughout hip hop culture in general.

---

[297] Reynolds, S., *Bring the Noise* (Faber & Faber, London, 2007), p. 240.
[298] Allen Jr., Ernest, "Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap", in Perkins, William E. (Ed), *Droppin' Science, Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture,* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 1996), p. 168.

5.4   **Something out of nothing**

What cypher brings to an individual and community in terms of social wealth is outstanding, especially given the personal circumstances and issues that some of its participants have to face on a daily basis. However, the significance of cypher within hip hop culture is indisputably great, and now, in the musicological field, the opportunity to research cypher and present this research has been a rather exciting prospect.

How art can be created from very little, or even nothing, is quite remarkable, although it could be argued that because cypher has such culturally rich roots, it is already brimming over with a great deal of cultural and artistic value, and therefore, it already has a predisposition to cultural wealth. Cypher's raw ingredients are simple, yet the finished product is a phenomenon which displays an enormous amount of talent, creativity, pride and empowerment amongst its participants. The skills, experience and communicative aspects that are developed by participants of cypher are undoubtedly 'gifts' to be treasured and are transferable to other aspects of life; those who choose to engage with cypher, as a participant or as an observer, can expect to be rewarded much more highly than with a reward from any other type of musical engagement. This is not to say that any other musician does not have a rewarding, fulfilling and worthwhile experience with music, performance and participation, but merely, for an artform or genre of music that requires very little input in terms of material wealth, then certainly cypher scores very highly indeed in what can be gained. So much of rap is about showing off, as discussed in section 3.3 around the concept of braggadocio, yet cypher allows and encourages the most modest of performers to take part, and a highly supportive whole-team dynamic comes into play when participants come together and share the 'stage.' This team approach is rather contrasting to the unbalanced and unfair situation of only one person dominating the limelight and experiencing their fifteen minutes of fame, which is often seen in the mainstream. Hip hop culture can offer its participants several benefits. Firstly, is the active engagement with an artform, without its participants feeling under pressure to stray too far from their respective comfort zones. This engagement from participants further contributes to the development of

cypher as a musical and social practice, which highlights the fact that cypher and its participants share a mutually beneficial bond. Participation with hip hop culture, and particularly with cypher, also allows for personal and musical growth on a level that cannot be surpassed by the standard form of education, especially in marginalised communities.

Perhaps the most valuable validation of cypher as an artform comes from Baraka's theory that the thought behind the art,[299] is what it is that is valuable, rather than the art itself. As the other sections in this chapter highlight, cypher is completely engulfed in thought and philosophy and yet these thoughts come into fruition in the spur-of-the-moment in an improvised situation, in a truly raw environment. With cypher, thought is so intrinsic to the practice but has to be undertaken and translated into a verbal delivery so quickly that it could be considered to be like a reflex to a provocation or stimulation from someone else's cypher in the group. In turn, this reflex also plays a part in the physical cyclical nature of cypher's performance. In this sense, cypher can be seen as both proactive and reactive; proactive due to the motivation and team spirit that must be in position in the first place to engage with cypher, but also as a reactive practice in the sense that cypher is a manifestation of a reaction to something that has not been premeditated. In contrast to the original idea of cypher being 'something from nothing', it is clear that cypher does come from something; it is an artform that, despite its rich cultural past, solely relies on thought in order to be 'something.' To quote Baraka, in support of this theory,

> thought is more important than art. Without thought, art could certainly not exist. Art is one of many products of thought. An impressive one, perhaps the most impressive one, but to revere art, and have no understanding of the process that forces it into existence, is finally not even to understand what art is.[300]

It is also useful to contemplate the amount of time involved in the thought process during cypher; just because cypher takes place in-the-moment, it is not to say that

---

[299] Core theme of research by Amiri Baraka in 'Hunting is not those heads on a wall', in *Home: Social Essays* (Akshaic, 1965).

[300] Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones), 'Hunting is not those heads on a wall', in *Home: Social Essays* (Akshaic, 1965), p. 174.

less thought has gone into cypher compared with any other work of art or performance, nor is it any less creative than any other music-making process or artform. Cypher is a direct expression, or the channelling, of concentrated thoughts. Again, in considering how Baraka applies his theory to live music, and therefore cypher

> The Supermaker, is what the Greeks identified as "Gods." But here the emphasis is still muddled, since it is what the God can do that is really important, not the fact that he is the God. I speak of the verb process, the doing, the coming into being, the at-the-time-of. Which is why we think there is particular value in live music, contemplating the artefact as it arrives, listening to it emerge. There it is. And There. But even this is after the fact. Music, the most valuable of artifacts, because it is the most abstract, is still not the activity that makes itself possible. Music is what is left after what? That is important.[301]

The way EOW encourages the practice of cypher and fully advocates living life according to hip hop philosophy and culture enables people from all backgrounds and of all abilities to take part and contribute in some way. These participants can then learn, as well as receiving the previously mentioned rewards from their engagement with hip hop culture. This quality makes cypher very unique and something that those who work hard to make the EOW movement a success should be proud of. There is no other artform that is as inclusive, to the point where hip hop culture might be considered as being inversely marginalised due to its embracing and encompassing of participants from a wide demographic, albeit under a general umbrella of 'marginalised.' Although closely related to battles, cypher is more worthwhile to its participants when considering the joining of forces that is demonstrated in the practice of cypher. Taking a united approach in an activity, and having a team strategy, rather than being in direct competition with one another, promotes a respectful culture and any element of competition is entirely non-violent. In cypher, triumphs are celebrated collectively, not just personally, and equally, the low-points are shared or simply laughed-off, with whichever outcome being far more enjoyable, or easy to take in a team setting rather than as an individual. Cypher is something out of thought, but ultimately, it is something that

---

[301] Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones), 'Hunting is not those heads on a wall', in *Home: Social Essays* (Akshaic, 1965), p. 174.

comes out of the effective and dynamic expression of thought, and it is the sharing of these thoughts that make cypher hold such significance in terms of hip hop culture.

The impact of cypher on the development of hip hop culture is largely immeasurable; hip hop culture can exist without cypher, but not the other way round, which nods in the direction that perhaps cypher isn't something that could be considered a separate or freestanding element in hip hop culture. What is important though, is how cypher contributes to social awareness, or street consciousness, and what Price states, in that

> what is important is that Hip Hop participants take pride in understanding the history of the movement and the lineage of the innovators and recognize the value that Hip Hop Culture has had both for its participants and society at large.[302]

In agreement with Price, the participants in hip hop culture reflect a genuine appreciation for an opportunity to take part and to be heard within a practice that is their very own, and this is especially relevant when considering cypher. One of the positive social aspects of rap and hip hop culture that can be observed through activities such as cypher, is that participation is so rich and rewarding to individuals and communities that it becomes priceless. I could argue that for some, cypher is a very powerful lifeline to its participants in both the literal sense and in the social sense, as detailed in previous sections of this chapter. So, in summary, something out of nothing, really, is an ill-fitting term for cypher when considering what actually goes into its creation, including participants' investment in taking part. In terms of the benefits and development in awareness for individuals and communities that stem from participation in cypher, or even just having cypher as a part of a community, is precious. There is a considerable amount of thought and effort from participants and their audiences that is necessary for the continuation of the development of cypher as a recognised artform; however, consideration must be given to the notion that perhaps cypher itself does not want to be classified as a recognised artform, nor is it meant to be recognised in this way, and that maybe its

---

[302] Price, Emmett G., *Hip Hop Culture* (California: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2006), p. 42.

place is already taken, as a raw and street-based activity which is just 'something you do.'

In terms of thinking about the practice in a general sense, there is no doubt that cypher plays its part in making hip hop culture even more accessible and widely-available to its participants; therefore it is clear to see that cypher contributes significantly in keeping hip hop culture alive, and in developing rap music as a genre, that is true to its rich cultural roots and historical past. For many people who engage with hip hop culture, their route in has been through participating in cypher; the appeal of taking part, sharing knowledge and developing technique with relatively no monetary cost, is something that cypher provides. In turn, this taking part opens up social circles and allows participants to build on existing skills as well as learning new ones. A relevant point made by Rose, on the subject of keepin' it real, and in support of a theory that asserts that accessibility plays a large role in hip hop culture, particularly for those from marginalised backgrounds:

> Perhaps many hold onto this role [as a creative visible place] for hip hop because they believe that if hip hop continues to be identified as a place where one can "keep it real," it might encourage more visible social commentary.[303]

This is further supported in the points made by Edwards in describing what works best, in terms of lyrical and topical content, for MCs when writing rap lyrics. Just as authors do their best work when they know about their subject, Edwards confirms that

> The majority of MCs like to write from real-life experience – either autobiographical lyrics about things they have actually gone through or lyrics at least generally inspired by situations they've encountered.[304]

As well as providing the possibility to channel negative social experiences into the content of a positive musical and social practice for marginalised communities, cypher presents a unique mechanism in which to connect with peers and audience members. Similarly, rap allows MCs to connect with audience members and listeners. In summary, cypher enables a large network of similar-minded, and

---

[303] Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicClvitas Books, 2008), p. 136.
[304] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 5.

potentially disenfranchised, young people and creates a forum in which they can feel heard. Edwards makes this point about 'connecting with listeners', in terms of rap music, but the same can be applied to the practice of cypher, in that

> Lyrics that deal with real life are a great way to connect with listeners, as people can easily relate to what you are saying if they have been through something similar. Any of the most admired artists use this technique.[305]

These artists are 'admired,' and respected, due to them being purveyors of truth, thus making them the advocates and ambassadors of real hip hop – by keepin' it real. This point ties in with the themes from previous chapters around issues such as the message and solidarity through teamwork. Cypher is highly significant in hip hop culture because it is a direct way in which to engage with the culture and also allows for voices to be heard. This is one of the unique and positive qualities of cypher as a musical and cultural practice and it is therefore little surprise to note the frustration felt by advocates of hip hop culture, when practices such as cypher are contributing something so positive to the lives of those who would otherwise have nothing. As Rose points out,

> Frustrated defenders of hip hop want more attention paid to the positives in hip hop. Positive hip hop can refer to many types of programs, institutions, or images. Some refer to the more progressive artists (sometimes called "conscious rappers"), who, while remaining focused on urban black life, do so with more liberal political consciousness and often avoid using curse word and sexual insults and limit the use of violent metaphors. These artists – the more visible ones are Common, Lupe Fiasco, Mos Def, KRS-One, Tribe Called Quest, OutKast, Dead Prez, and Talib Kweli – are often mentioned as notable examples of what is good about hip hop but also often overlooked in the frenzy to condemn all that is associated with hip hop.[306]

While Rose's point isn't entirely inaccurate, I think part of point is lost due to the tangent around limiting the use of bad language and so on. The artists listed above all have lyrics containing bad language and explicit material, but, as documented in Chapter 3, these are used as a valuable tool to convey experience and emotion, which is something that is very important to rappers. Similarly, the ability to eloquently, and even passionately, convey experience is absolutely critical to the practice of cypher. I agree whole-heartedly with Rose's final assertion that the

---

[305] Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009), p. 7.
[306] Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicCIvitas Books, 2008), p. 202.

positive aspects in hip hop are often overlooked. Hopefully, with more academic research in the future, and through more visible and promoted examples of the positive aspects of hip hop culture, the world will be able to see the absolute beauty and truth in hip hop culture, and begin to understand its role in the development of social awareness, community cohesion and the personal development of its participants. Cypher is a highly significant phenomenon in hip hop culture. To echo Rose's sentiments here,

> The genius of black creativity has often involved making something good out of the scraps – creating a delicacy out of undesirable, discarded parts. Sometimes, though, we get so excited about the resilience and transformative power of black people's creativity that we confuse the creative energy and talent with the creative output. In hip hop this has meant reveling over the ingenuity of hip hop's creative genius for using scraps from the urban landscape to make music – presenting exhilarating dances on cardboard in the street, reusing obsolete technical-trades equipment to rebuild stereos, telling stories on street corners in ways that made people in corporate offices listen – while at the same time ignoring the toxic conditions under which such creativity occurs.[307]

I argue that cypher builds on all that is good in hip hop culture – truth, knowledge and communication. While it was created in marginalised communities, out of seemingly very little, its cultural and musical foundations are very rich. Cypher has grown out of many things, as outlined in this thesis, and especially from raw talent. Cypher does not come from 'scraps.'

5.4i   *Conclusions from Chapter 5*

Hip hop culture provides a great deal of cultural compensation for marginalised communities and cypher especially, provides many benefits to individuals and their communities. The relationship between hip hop culture and its many participants is mutually beneficial in the sense that participants often give a lot of time and effort to hip hop, thus representing it in a positive light. At the same time, participants of hip hop culture have a great deal to gain in terms of personal development and cultural compensation from engagement with hip hop. The main stakeholders in hip hop culture are from marginalised communities and involvement in hip hop provides non-material

---

[307] Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicCIvitas Books, 2008), p. 265.

wealth, value and even social investment. To be able to engage in a such a rewarding artform under non-violent circumstances is something which is extremely important to those from deprived backgrounds who would otherwise think that gang involvement was one of their only few options in life.

Rap music and hip hop culture provide an alternative education for the disenfranchised. A great emphasis is placed on knowledge and communication in hip hop and therefore there is a lot to be learned from engagement or participation in hip hop. The wealth of personal skills, personal development and rewards that can be achieved through being an active member of the hip hop community is not to be overlooked. One of the main areas of personal development to increase as a result of participation in cypher is an increase in self-confidence. This resulting personal development ties in with the conclusions drawn in Chapter 2 which highlight that the empowerment of marginalised communities increases through participation with artforms such as cypher. Here, it is worthy to note that a sense of empowerment can be felt by an individual through their engagement in cypher. When individuals and communities feel a sense of empowerment and have feelings of belonging and ownership, community cohesion is naturally encouraged and this is certainly witnessed at events such as the weekly EOW event in New York. In fact, I feel that the EOW participants are overwhelmingly cohesive as a unit and there is no doubt that gaining and earning respect of peers is at the core of hip hop philosophy which EOW certainly puts into practice.

Quite often in hip hop culture, and in rap music, there seems to be a large amount of pushing social barriers which has not yet been discussed in hip hop scholarship. Cypher quite clearly goes beyond social barriers yet does so in a responsible and socially conscious manner. The amount of social awareness and responsibility that is displayed in the participation of cypher further adds to the wealth of positive outcomes from hip hop culture. Cypher is highly thought-provoking for its participants and audience members and

one can learn a lot from the sophisticated lyrics and message of cypher. The lack of opportunities for marginalised people, and especially young people within that group, can lead to feelings of despair, anger, frustration and disillusionment. Cypher allows a channel of communication to respond to these every day, yet major issues that are faced, and quite often, cypher lyrics are created in direct response to these feelings and experience of hardship. The social interaction between peers within instances of cypher, and particularly amongst the regular participants and audience at EOW events, can fill many social voids for people. The filling of such social voids is another direct positive outcome of engaging in hip hop culture and a further benefit to individuals. With the peer-mentoring ethos of hip hop culture, a sense of stability can be felt amongst those who regularly engage in team work practices, especially in cypher.

Ultimately, I conclude that hip hop culture is something out of nothing in a material sense, which has grown out of a very rich cultural and musical past, intertwined with originality, creativity and a forward-thinking attitude. Cypher is an important and highly significant branch of hip hop culture which supports and even creates community cohesion whilst promoting the core values of hip hop culture of truth, knowledge and understanding. I argue that cypher does not necessarily keep hip hop alive as there are many other elements of hip hop culture which do that, but cypher does contribute in keeping the spirit of hip hop fresh and rejuvenated. Cypher helps in attracting new audiences and increasing communication which certainly pertains to give cypher the status of an oral tradition of tomorrow.

Conclusion

This thesis started off as a response to the lack of scholarship on cypher and a genuine desire to fill this academic void. As my research and study progressed, I realised that part of my motivation stemmed from a need to dispel the common misunderstanding, that hip hop entails all that is wrong with society, such as crime, misogyny, gang culture and violence. While there is no denying that these activities have played their role in the successful marketing of commercialised rap, and have featured in the aspirations of many youths on the verge of heading down the wrong path in life, there can be no doubt that the positives in hip hop culture far outweigh such negatives. Ultimately, this general misunderstanding that surrounds hip hop culture can start to be mended by increasing awareness and understanding of the misinformed. Ignorance and prejudices will always be present in the world we live in but with continued research in the academic field, as well as through education and participation in hip hop culture, many more people will begin to realise that hip hop culture is an all-encompassing and culturally rich subculture, and rap is a highly aesthetic and intelligent genre of music.

I can conclude this research safe in the knowledge that it has highlighted a very important aspect of hip hop culture and know that cypher has been worthy of academic study. There is quite a lot to say about cypher, and it holds a great deal of musicological worth, which I will discuss below. I am keen to investigate if there are any more aspects of hip hop culture which are lacking in academic research; I am sure there are many. From a personal point of view, I would like to develop this research on cypher further, and hope that some of the issues raised will be valid topics for future papers. I hope my research will succeed in adding something to current hip hop scholarship and in providing food for thought for future musicological research. This research has achieved a thorough ethnological study on the practice of cypher and has highlighted the importance of rap's collective consciousness. Cypher is highly significant in hip hop culture and is a living example of black vernacular expression. I have deliberately provided a great deal of insight into the cultural past of rap, as it is crucial to understand this in order to then be able to fully appreciate the merits of cypher.

Rap's Afrocentricity in contemporary culture is testament to the musical and cultural practices to have survived, and continue to thrive, through rap's function as social commentator or narrator. The survival of African griotism and other practices such as signifyin(g), and their manifestation in rap music, further highlights the versatility and adaptability of African cultural forms and demonstrates 'survival' in several different contexts. Rap does not simply survive, but thrives, under seemingly harsh social conditions such as marginalisation. The way in which cypher is used as a form of communication again harks back to African oral traditions and further encourages individuals to take part and be proactive in their engagement with rap, thus ensuring the survival and constant reinvigoration of hip hop culture. Cypher is a mechanism for people to communicate their experiences and this is something which increases its appeal, particularly for marginalised, and perhaps diasporic, people and communities who feel a common bond and cultural resonance, to some extent. Cypher allows for a great deal of self-expression as well as collective expression, which makes for an undercurrent of understanding, and therefore produces a synergy amongst its participants. For me, this demonstrates a kind of rhythm and I conclude that rhythm can represent a shared consciousness amongst the participants of hip hop culture. Furthermore, this characteristic adds to rap's aestheticism.

Central to rap's ability to convey a message is words and metaphor. For cypher, although lyrics are absolutely crucial to the success of a rap and provide a verbal social commentary, I would conclude that it's the relationship between language and other non-verbal factors which give words their true meaning. In most forms of black vernacular expression, and especially in hip hop, it is the wordplay and teasing that go hand-in-hand with verbal forms such as braggadocio and signifyin(g), that really affirm an Afrocentric flavour.

In a social sense, cypher provides a great deal to its participants. Through participation in cypher and rap-related events, hip hop culture is provided with its lifeblood. The rawness and 'streetness' of cypher further add to its accessibility and increase the appeal to engage with it. Participation is critical for the survival of hip hop culture and the team ethos felt in engagement with cypher brings feelings of being supported and of being heard, for its participants. I admire the way in which cypher participants are able to improvise and create highly sophisticated and well-articulated witty raps on the spur of the

moment. Cypher's non-violent culture is something that its participants should be proud of. Similarly, there is nothing more heart-warming than witnessing an MC battle, full of tension and insults, only to see the competitors give each other a hug at the end. Just as lyrics are dealt with in the moment in improvisatory rap forms, so are emotions. You say it, you move on, and that's it. Any tension seems to evaporate. Cypher adds to the cultural compensation that hip hop has provided to many communities. Empowerment, belonging and achievement are some of the feelings that can be felt by an individual from engaging with cypher. Community cohesion increases through the practice of hip hop culture's philosophy around truth, knowledge and communication. Hip hop is socially conscious and socially aware and participants of cypher set to benefit a great deal in engaging with the practice. While I don't think I can honestly say that the life of hip hop culture is dependent on cypher for survival, I fully advocate cypher's positive qualities and feel that I have demonstrated in this research that cypher refreshes and reinvigorates many of those who engage with hip hop culture, thus keeping a *part* of hip hop culture alive. To a large extent, cypher is an oral tradition of tomorrow and contributes to the development of hip hop culture as a whole.

Cypher is an artform which relies on participants with an understanding of hip hop culture and raw talent. Movements such as EOW are crucial in promoting these facets. Finally, I can conclude with confidence that cypher is an important musicological phenomenon which has certainly proved to be worthy of academic research, and I look forward to seeing what the future will bring for cypher and how research in this area might develop.

Selected Bibliography

Books

Alim, H. Samy, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006)

Alim, H. Samy, *You Know My Steez: An Ethnographic and Sociolinguistic Study of Styleshifting in a Black American Speech Community* (New York: Duke University Press, 2004)

Auslander, Philip, *Liveness* (London: Routledge, 1999),

Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones), *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Akashic, 1961)

Bennett, Andy, *Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005)

Black Dot, The, *Hip Hop Decoded* (New York: MOME Publishing, 2006),

Bohlman, Philip V., *World Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Chang, Jeff, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (London: Ebury Press, 2005)

Cross, Brian, *It's Not About a Salary* (London: Verson, 1993)

Darby, D. And Shelby, T. (Eds.), *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* (Illinois: Open Court, 2005)

Dot, Black, *Hip Hop Decoded* (New York: Mome, 2006)

Edwards, Paul, *How To Rap, The Art and Science of the Hip-Hop MC* (Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2009)

Flores, Juan, *From Bomba to Hip Hop* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)

Floyd Jr., Samuel A., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995

Forman, M. & Neal, M. A., (Eds.), *That's the Joint* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

Fricke, J. & Ahearn, C. (Eds.), *Yes Yes Y'All* (Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1992)

Gates Jr. Henry Louis, and McKay, Nellie Y., (Eds.) *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997)

Gates, Henry L., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)

George, Nelson, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 1998)

Gordon, Avery F. And Newfield, Christopher, (Eds.), *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)

Harrison, Anthony Kwame, *Hip Hop Underground* (Philadephia: Temple University Press, 2009)

Hebdige, Dick, *Cut 'n' Mix* (New York & London: Routledge, 1987)

Katz, Mark, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (California: California University Press, 2010)

Keil, Charles & Feld, Steven (Eds.), *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

Kelley, Robin D. G., *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997)

Keyes, Cheryl, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004)

Kochman, Thomas (Ed.), *Rappin' and Stylin' Out* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972)

Krims, Adam, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

Lipsitz, George, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York & London: Verso, 1994)

Lull, James, (Ed.), *Popular Music And Communication* (California: Sage Publications, 1992)

Miyakawa, Felicia M., *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005)

Miyakawa, Felicia M., *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005)

Monson, Ingrid, (Ed.), *The African Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

Monson, Ingrid, *Saying Something* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

Morgan, Marcyliena, *The Real Hiphop: Battling for Knowledge. Power and Respect in the LA Underground* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009),

Neal, Mark A., *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999)

Osumare, Halifu, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Perkins, William E. (Ed.), *Droppin' Science, Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996)

Perry, Imani, *Prophets of the Hood* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004)

Potter, Russell, *Spectacular Vernaculars* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995)

Price, Emmett G., *Hip Hop Culture* (California: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2006)

Ramsey Jr., Guthrie P., *Race Music* (California: University of California Press, 2004)

Reynolds, Simon, *Bring The Noise* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007)

Rose, Tricia, *Black Noise* (New England: Wesleyan University Press, 1994)

Rose, Tricia, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008)

Schloss, Joseph G., *Foundation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009),

Schloss, Joseph G., *Making Beats* (New England: University Press of New England, 2004),

Scott, Derek B., (Ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009)

Simone, N. & Cleary, S., *I Put A Spell On You* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993)

Small, Christopher, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder, 1987)

Stuckey, Sterling, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987)

Stuckey, Sterling, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987)

Toop, David, *Rap Attack #3* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000)

Unterberger, Richie, *Music USA* (London: Rough Guides, 1999)

Wald, Elijah, *The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

Watkins, S. Craig, *Hip Hop Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005)

Weheliye, Alexander G., *Phonographies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005)

Additional resources

Dunleavy, Patrick, *Authoring a PhD* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

Articles & papers

Fink, Robert, 'Goal-Directed Soul? Analyzing Rhythmic Teleology in African American Popular Music', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (Vol. 64, No. 1, Spring 2011, pp. 179 – 238)

Bartlett, Andrew, 'Airshafts, Loudspeakers, and the Hip Hop Sample: Contexts and African American Musical Aesthetics', *African American Review* (Vol. 28, No. 4: Winter 1994, pp. 639-652)

Bennett, Andy, 'Rappin' on the Tyne: white hip hop culture in Northeast England – an ethnographic study,' *The Sociological Review* (Volume 47, Issue 1, pp. 1 – 24, February 1999)

Decker, Jeffrey L., 'The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism', *Social Text* (No. 34: 1993, pp. 53-84)

Edmondes, Will, 'Signifying Autonomy: Hip Hop In Wales' (presented January 2009)

Fabbri, Franco, 'A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications' in Horn, D. And Tagg, P. (Eds.), *Popular Music Perspectives* (Göteborg and Exeter, International Association for the Study of Popular Music: 1981)

Ferrell, Jeff, 'Boredom, Crime, and Criminology', Special edition of the international journal *Theoretical Criminology* (Volume 8, No. 3: 1998, pp. 287-302)

Forman, Murray, 'Represent: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music', *Popular Music* (Vol. 19, No. 1: January 2000, pp. 65-90)

Greenwald, Jeff, 'Hip-Hop Drumin: The Rhyme May Define, but the Groove Makes You Move', *Black Music Research Journal* (Vol. 22, No. 2: Autumn 2002, pp. 259-271)

Powell, Catherine T., 'Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street', *The Journal of Negro Education* (Vol. 60, No. 3, Socialization Forces Affecting the Education of African American Youth in the 1990s: Summer 1991, pp. 245-259)

Salaam, Mtume ya, 'The Aesthetics of Rap', *African American Review* (Vol. 29, No. 2, Special Issues on the Music: Summer 1995, pp. 303-315)

Shusterman, Richard, 'The Fine Art of Rap', *New Literary History* (Vol. 22, No. 3, Undermining Subjects: Summer 1991, pp. 613-632)

Smitherson, Geneva, ''The Chain Remain the Same': Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation', *Journal of Black Studies* (Vol. 28, No. 1: September 1997, pp. 3-25)

Sullivan, Rachel E., 'Rap and Race: It's Got a Nice Beat, but What about the Message?', *Journal of Black Studies* (Vol. 33, No. 5: May 2003, pp. 605-622)

Tagg, Philip, 'Introductory notes to the Semiotics of Music' (Version 3, Liverpool/Brisbane: 1999)