

Hip Hop Kairos

Discourse is part of the network of knowledge and power.

-Foucault

My words are like a dagger / with a jagged edge.

-Eminem

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Abstract

The discursive output of Hip Hop points to identity-representing and identity-forming messages of a highly popular and influential culture. While these messages may not come through a traditionally studied medium in rhetorical studies or contain Truth in the Platonic or Confucian sense, they serve as powerful and complex rhetorical avenues from which to study issues of identity and race and their connections to social and ideological philosophies and realities. This essay focuses on the kairotic messages and communal truths which Hip Hop brings to light and the intricate web of rhetoric, race, and identity it involves. The essay also considers the ramifications of social and historical inequity and racialization on the creation of discourse and, conversely, on the ramifications of discourse on social and historical inequity and racialization. The latter part of the essay focuses on specific historical “racial projects” including the 1992 L.A. Riots, Hurricane Katrina, and the presidencies of George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

Hip Hop Kairos

While rhetorical studies “have become more broadly engaged with the rhetorical practices of groups who have been excluded by the dominant intellectual tradition”¹, the landscape of rhetorical studies is still lacking in its discussion and analysis of the highly popular and influential rhetoric of Hip Hop culture. One reason for this lack is the stereotyped notion that Hip Hop rhetoric focuses primarily on materialism, misogyny, and violence. Beyond these simplistic stereotypes are the often superficial and uncomplicated discussions of Hip Hop’s connection to society and rap music’s link to negative behavior. National figures such as Bill O’Reilly, Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Tipper Gore, Lynne Cheney, Bob Dole, and former Education Secretary William Bennett, just to name a few, attack the, what they call, “crude” and “destructive” lyrics of rap music and rarely delve into complicated and researched discussions. The trickle-down effect of such national criticism and the mere fact that scholars in the field have, for whatever reason, ignored the rhetoric of Hip Hop, has created an important void in rhetorical studies. There certainly has been some work done by scholars of rhetoric and composition, led by the book-length works of Kermit Campbell and Elaine Richardson¹, and the collection *The Hip Hop Reader*, along with a handful of published articles, but much more can and should be done.

¹ Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks. New York: NY Press, 2004. “Octalog II: The (Continuing) Politics of Historiography.” *Rhetoric Review* 16 (Fall 1997): 22-44.

Importantly, and to heed intellectual rigor, it must be noted that some of the stereotyped characteristics of Hip Hop rhetoric actually do apply to some of it, especially to a significant percentage of the most popularized American Hip Hop music classification of the last fifteen years—“gangsta rap.” Ignoring the fact that Hip Hop certainly does contain a plethora of lyrics and images that seem to condone hyper-materialism, misogyny, and violence (among others) would lead one to believe that significant scrutiny was not applied to this discourse or that I was ignoring the very real implications of such imagery. But my aim is a rhetorical analysis that moves beyond the simplistic discussions of the negative stereotypes of Hip Hop and which highlights the fact that Hip Hop rhetoric is an important discourse that teaches much about the identity of Hip Hop culture and, more significantly, that the textual and visual rhetoric of Hip Hop displays kairotic truths and social-personal identity forming messages.

The situated realities and messages espoused by Hip Hop rhetoric are important in understanding the social and political vibe of the culture and of those whose worldview is highly influenced by the culture’s discourse. These messages are important in that they not only display the worldview of those persons, but they are central in creating that world-view. As bell hooks reminds us, “words impose themselves”², and they not only impose themselves on particular individuals but also on groups, cultures, and societies. This discourse displays formative truths held by many in Hip Hop culture. These truths, which in the kairotic sense are never universal, unchanging, or unproblematic, include a focus on a very racial and politicized message, on linking the U.S. government mainly to the White race, on linking much of the White race to historical and contemporarily situated injustice, on labeling White Republicans as elitist and at times racist, and on putting forward a liberal message and supporting mainly Democratic candidates.

Future scholarship may argue the validity of these truths and their complex effects but understanding some of these truths and realizing their epistemic nature is an important first step. Putting Hip Hop rhetoric on par with more traditionally studied types/genres/segments of discourse is not only viable but important. It is important in the study, and living out of, social, political, racial, economic, and ideological theories and realities.

Hip Hop is a strong voice in displaying and affecting the historical moment at hand. Whether fully understood by individual rappers/Hip Hoppers or not, the rhetoric of Hip Hop is kairotic in that it mixes social, racial, and economic theories with the very real “moments” of the day—and it does so in an unrelenting and rhetorically situated manner. With its focus on specific events, specific people, usage of “of-the-time” language and

² “Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words.” *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge, 1994. 167-75.

references, the rhetoric of Hip Hop is consistently aimed at providing a voice for “the people” in the here and now and in rhetorically creating/constituting a complex Hip Hop ethos. It is a rhetoric that will continue to affect and create, at least in part, minds, communities, and social relations.

Importantly, the identity-forming messages and truths discussed in this essay are not the end-all message of Hip Hop, or the only perspectives that are embraced by those highly influenced by Hip Hop: that thinking would be too simplistic and essentializing. However, the messages do represent important communal truths that stem from social circumstances which tend to be largely ignored by mainstream society and, at times, rhetorical studies. Hip Hop discourse displays a different, sometimes radical, lens from which many view the world. This is important to a growing discipline that, as Keith Walter’s argues in “Whose Culture? Whose Literacy?” “profit[s] from...many perspectives on the past, present, and future” (9).

Finally, this essay hopes to erase the notion that Hip Hop is, at best, merely an entertainment medium and, at worst, simply “noise.” Hip Hop rhetoric discursively displays and affects reality and contains truths in its depiction and usage of the kairotic moment². The rhetorical message of Hip Hop can also be seen as revolutionary in that it complicates what can be seen as important “text” or “rhetoric” and challenges many middle and upper class ideals and sensibilities; in many cases, it provides unfiltered commentary on race and society. Ultimately, some Hip Hop rhetoricians must be seen as “organic intellectuals”³ who have become, and continue to become, discursive leaders to the Hip Hop community by espousing situated truths about specific kairotic and historical moments. Hip Hop rhetoric is also a rich avenue from which to approach central aspects of Critical Race Theory, namely issues of racial hegemony, racial formation, and racial identity.

Organization and Theory

As an organizing framework this essay positions Hip Hop rhetoric within the important discussion of rhetoric as (1) containing empty glibness, (2) containing eternal Truths, and/or (3) providing kairotic/situated/Sophistic truths. Situating Hip Hop discourse within this discussion addresses the popular notion that the discourse of the Hip Hop community, particularly rap music, is glib, uncomplicated, and not worthy of scholarly study.

Beyond that general framework, and most central in this discussion, is the focus on specific kairotic messages put forth and embraced by many in the Hip Hop community with Critical Race Theory as the theoretical backdrop of the analysis. I begin with the

³ Villanueva, Victor. “‘Rhetoric is Politics,’ Said the Ancient. ‘How Much So,’ I Wonder.” Writing Theory and Critical Theory. Eds. John Clifford and John Schilb. New York: MLA, 1994. 327-334.

understanding that the rhetoric of Hip Hop “is used to constitute rather than [only] report historical reality and its causes”⁴ and that, importantly, in its discourse, as James Berlin believes about all discourse of daily practice, “ideology is minutely inscribed”⁵ (“Social Epistemic” 78). I also hold that “a given historical moment displays a wide variety of competing ideologies” (“Social Epistemic” 78) and use Race Critical Theory to inform, and further complicate, my discussion of these competing ideologies. This approach helps me posit the larger social implications and ramifications of Hip Hop rhetoric. Important work has been done to rhetorically analyze this rhetoric but at times stops at making deeper connections with historical oppression, racism, and classism. This previous work seeks to understanding the discourse mainly within the culture of Hip Hop. For example, Charis E. Kubrin’s work in “Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music,” while focusing on the fact that rappers use language to construct identities, discusses victimization, snitching, and retaliation in connection to rappers/Hip Hoppers within their environments. Kubrin takes as his focus the “local social order” of Hip Hop and black inner-city communities (363). My analysis seeks to connect the rhetorical construction of “street” or “Hip Hop” identity with larger issues of cultural, social, and economic hegemony.

Thus, the work of Critical Race Theorists such as Etienne Balibar, Stuart Hall, Cornel West, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant, among others, becomes central. Balibar holds that “all identity is individual, but there is no individual identity that is not historical or, in other words, constructed within a field of social values, norms of behavior, and collective symbols” (221). In this instance, it is the discourse of Hip Hop rhetoricians, namely rappers, that helps form the social values, behaviors, and symbols of Hip Hop culture; in most cases these elements of culture are racially charged. Hall reminds us that the value-forming events/discourse, the “racially structured social formations,” are formed and lived out within a complex economic, social, and ideological web—a web referred to as “articulation” (“Race”). This “articulation” is central to Hip Hop discourse and ethos.

Cornel West helps to locate contemporary racial identity and racism within a broad historical context in “A Genealogy of Modern Racism” and helps us understand the racial and racist underpinnings from which rap and Hip Hop culture and discourse emerged. Hip Hop rhetoric forces us to discuss race, racial categorization, and the effects of historical racism in the very real and kairotic moments of contemporary society. Along with the racial-historical backdrop of Hip Hop rhetoric is the crucial question of

⁴ Kubrin, Charis E. “Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music.” *Social Problems*. 52.3 (2005). 360-78.

⁵ (“Social Epistemic” 78)

identity—specifically the formation of racial identities (which consequently is connected to “articulation”). The formation of racial identities, for Michael Omi and Howard Winant, occurs through “a process of historically situated projects” (124). These kairoitic and racial “projects” simultaneously interpret, represent, and/or explain racial dynamics (125). Hip Hop not only responds to racial projects—situated racial moments—but is itself a racial project and thus complexly connected to racial formation.

The discursive messages of Hip Hop not only add to the variety of messages on and within society and serve to expand the landscape of rhetorical studies,³ but also, and crucially, create/constitute social realities/truths within a very racialized worldview for those strongly connected to the Hip Hop ethos and, consequently, affect racial formation.

To develop these connections, formed through Hip Hop rhetoric, between kairoitic moments and racial identity I first develop the importance of kairoitic messages and their place within the realm of truth-telling then proceed to analyze secondary examples of kairoitic messages put forth by influential Hip Hop artists Public Enemy and Dead Prez. The analysis then moves to two primary “moments” in American history and Hip Hop music: the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and Katrina, the devastating hurricane which hit the U.S. Gulf coast in 2005. Finally, along with these events, political commentary coming from Hip Hop concerning presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama presents important communal truths and identity-shaping messages that display the reigning political ethos of Hip Hop while displaying deep connections to racial identity and racial formation.

Glibness vs. Eternal Truths vs. Kairoitic truths

In contemporary times the popular understanding of rhetoric is that of empty or misleading discourse and is often connected with the world of politics. The term rhetoric is cast upon the speech of persons, many times those seeking political approval, who are viewed as espousing empty, at times flowery, commentary that is simply meant to entertain or gain favor and is assumed not to promise serious action in the future. This popular understanding of rhetoric is a manifestation of the thinking of ancient rhetors Plato and Confucius who felt empty and glib speech was counter to the Truth-telling and Truth-seeking nature of True rhetoric/discourse/dialectic.

The formal study of rhetoric has fortunately moved beyond the study of only political, legal, and religious persuasive theory and discourse, as can be viewed in the vast amount of scholarship produced by rhetorical scholars over the last half-century and specifically in the diversification of the influential anthology *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Rhetorically analyzing Hip Hop discourse may be a continuation of “look[ing] for rhetoric where it

has not been found—in many cultural locations⁶ (Octalog II 33), but adding Hip Hop rhetoric to the discussion of the truth-nature of rhetoric is new and important. Within the current atmosphere of rhetorical studies, which includes (1) scholarship interested in reclaiming the Sophistic view of situated/kairoic truths (2) the traditional view of rhetoric being empty speech and (3) the continuously developing understanding of rhetoric as a socially constructed, social constructing, and social epistemic reality, the injection of Hip Hop rhetoric adds a new lens from which to view the nature of truth in rhetoric—a lens constructed by a non-traditional, often minority, often marginalized community. It is a rhetoric that is part of “our search for alterity, for rhetorics other than the familiar, [which] can reveal to us alternative possibilities in conceiving discursive practices and their power formations⁷ .

Glibness and Truth/truth

In ancient rhetoric, two prominent figures, Plato (Greece) and Confucius (China), shared similar views on glibness in discourse—both criticized the use of flowery and empty rhetoric. For Plato, focused dialectic was central to coming to understand philosophical Truths in the world, not glib discourse which could be manipulated to prove any case (sometimes characteristic of epideictic speech). Plato’s hostility towards rhetoric can be seen in his *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*.

As for Confucius, he stressed one’s silent actions in opposition to entertaining speech. In *The Analects* he states:

It is a rare thing for glib speech and insinuating appearance to accompany authoritative conduct (1.3).

Exemplary persons would feel shame if their words were better than their deeds (14.27).

Both Platonic and Confucian views on rhetoric were not only against “sophistic” and glib speech, but viewed these qualities, and a totalizing Truth, at opposite ends of a spectrum. Not only was glib speech seen as unnecessary, but also counterproductive in one’s search for Truths and respectful living. These True rhetorics were not interested in developing “empty” speech that would serve merely for entertainment or for boasting the rhetorical talents of the speaker. Furthermore, ancient Chinese rhetoric stressed silence and harmony while maintaining the status quo and avoiding confrontation. Urging and

⁶ “Octalog II: The (Continuing) Politics of Historiography.” *Rhetoric Review* 16 (Fall 1997): 22-44.

⁷ “Revisionary Histories of Rhetoric: Politics, Power, and Plurality.” *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*. Ed. Victor Vitanza. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1994. 112-27.

remonstrating were favored above aggressive discourse and argumentation⁸, and being unrelenting in one's speech was looked down upon because it "results in the breakdown of relationship" (138). These points are illustrated in the following visual:

Truth-----	Glibness
Discourse towards Truth	Unrelenting Speech
Correct/Respectful Action/Speech	Empty Speech
Controlled Dialogue	Some Epideictic Speech

Hip Hop rhetoric has been characterized as ultra-glib and unrelenting in its rhetorical approach. It also, as will be highlighted throughout the essay, seems to foreground difference and confrontation over mutual identity, which can offer rhetoricians new interpretations of the present⁹. Looking specifically at Hip Hop/rap artists, there is undoubtedly a focus on the rhetor's ability to entertain with words and a battle for linguistic supremacy, traits that can be associated with glibness. However, even when there is no philosophical point or argument at the center of the lyrical discourse, rappers illustrate the power of words and are unrelenting as they hurl them at the audience and at other rappers. Rather than meaningless, though, their words serve as "signs of struggle"¹⁰ and point to the underdog mentality strongly connected to the Hip Hop ethos⁴. Some short examples:

In "My Words are Weapons," rapper Eminem states:

My words are weapons/I use them to crush opponents/My words are weapons/
I use them to kill whoever's steppin' to me/My words are like weaponry

And in "Criminal":

My words are like a dagger/with a jagged edge/That'll stab you in the head

Eminem's sentiments are highly indicative of Hip Hop rhetoric and show a clear link

⁸ Lyon, Arabella. "Confucian Silence and Remonstrating: A Basis for Deliberation?" *Rhetoric Before and Beyond the Greeks*. New York: NY Press, 2004.

⁹ Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg. Malden: Blackwell, 2002. Berlin, James A. *Rhetoric, Poetic, and Culture*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996. 77-94.

¹⁰ West, Thomas. *Signs of Struggle: The Rhetorical Politics of Cultural Difference*. New York: SUNY Press, 2002.

with power and discourse. They are echoed by one of Eminem's biggest influences, Tupac Shakur, in "Let Them Thangs [guns/bullets] Go":

Hitting [you] with new rhymes/I can make you love me

Like Eminem, Shakur understands that lyrical rhetoric has the power to sway opinion and, in this case, get people to "love" the rapper. Yet, in Hip Hop rhetoric it is not only about understanding the power of words, but also about using them to show superiority over one's opponents—and in Hip Hop, the opponent is anyone who thinks his/her rhetorical skills are better than one's own.

Hip Hop artists are continually battling for rhetorical supremacy, lyrically and in delivery, and do not shy away from pointing out their skills and, in many cases, claiming supremacy. Southern rap artist Lil' Wayne, on his album *Tha Carter II*, has a track titled "Best Rapper Alive" in which he claims:

Bring the crowd and I'm loud In Living Color/It is Lil' Wayne, got these rappers in my stomach/Yummy, I'm takin' it, I ain't asking them for nothing/If you sell a million records we can battle for ya' money

This rap is characteristic of rappers who boast about their skill and lyrical dominance over other rappers. The in-your-face nature of the rhetoric (I'm loud In Living Color) is in sharp contrast to the silence and "respect" encouraged by Confucius. The rapper also shows his dominance over other rappers by stating he has defeated, even metaphorically eaten, his competition (...got these rappers in my stomach/Yummy). He is also aggressively taking, not respectfully asking for, the label of rhetorical superiority. And, only when other rappers have similar success to his (If you sell a million records), can they think of battling him on his level. He later adds, in the same song:

The young heart attack, I spit dat cardiac/You can't see me baby boy, you got dat cataract

This continues Lil' Wayne's argument that not only do his words have power, but that he is on a higher level of rhetorical talent. He claims to be young and powerful (The young heart attack) and claims to be "spitting" words that have the power to cause serious damage (cardiac). And in stating "you can't see me" the rapper uses a well-know phrase in Hip Hop rhetoric that signifies the inferiority of someone's ability or perspective. He addresses his presumed audience of competitors as "baby boy," combining two images that represent immaturity and lack of complexity. Lil' Wayne then ends the song by suggesting his talents come easily and naturally to him, and that his song, "Best Rapper Alive," was an easy task for him to produce and deliver:

It's just a victory lap baby/ I'm just joggin' /And I ain't even out of breathe/ the motherfuckin' best yet

These lyrics may only belong to a single song, but they illustrate a common theme in Hip Hop rhetoric—the boasting of lyrical skill and power and the pervasive attitude of struggle and competition. It is a seemingly constant cry of “this is who I am; I have struggled; I am not only a survivor, but I’m better than you and everyone else.” This boasting can be seen in nearly every major Hip Hop artist of the past twenty years including Rakim, Slick Rick, Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Notorious B.I.G., Nas, Mase, Eminem, Jay-Z, 50 Cent, Ludacris, and Lil Wayne (just to name a very few highly successful and influential artists).

There are even those that attempt to rank the best Hip Hop rappers/rhetoricians which also highlights the competitive nature of Hip Hop culture. From popular Hip Hop magazines (e.g. XXL, The Source), to general websites (e.g. epinions.com; mtv.com), to blogs, to full-length books, many in Hip Hop are interested in compiling their own list or debating lists that have been created⁶. As one Hip Hop fan states about his favorite artist, “Jay-Z is the best rapper in the game. Period. Point Blank. His voice, his lyrics, his stage presence, and his ability to move the crowd, cements his position at the top of the Hip Hop food chain” (G-Rice). This praise is similar to Phaedrus’ praise of Lysias in Plato’s Phaedrus:

Do you think that a mere dilettante like me could recite from memory in a manner worthy of him a speech that Lysias, the best of our writers, took such time and trouble to compose? Far from it—thought actually I would rather be able to do that than come into a large fortune! (2).

In the scene, Phaedrus is about to attempt to recite a speech previously presented by Lysias, an orator known for his brilliant and erudite speeches. Having loyal fans is apparently nothing new to great rhetoricians.

But glibness and aggressiveness in Hip Hop rhetoric goes to another level when one considers a central phenomena in Hip Hop rhetoric—the rap battle. Rap battles are when two rappers go head to head in a battle of lyrical talent and wits. Each rapper gets a turn (usually lasting anywhere from 30 seconds to 2 minutes, if timed at all) to show off their lyrical talent and, importantly, to attack his/her opponent. The winner is sometimes determined by an individual who has been chosen to pick the winner, but it is usually determined by audience applause and feedback. These Hip Hop battles can take place on a large scale (Rap Olympics, Scribble Jam) or on a much smaller scale (schoolyards, street corners), but always involve the lyrical battling between two competitors who are trying to verbally beat, even destroy, the other participant.

In the ultimate illustration of glibness and rhetorical showmanship in Hip Hop rhetoric, the rap battle, competitors are not interested in any Platonic, philosophic Truth or in refraining from unrelenting attacks. And they are certainly not interested in silence.

Silence in the rap battle constitutes defeat and humiliation. Some could compare these rap battles to a more traditional war-of-words such as a presidential/political debate, but that is a weak comparison. In political debates there tend to be specific issues addressed, and each participant attempts to get his view and agenda across to the audience/voters. While the audience determines the “winner” in polls and on election day, there is always a focus on topics during the debate itself.

All that matters in the rap battle is rhetorical talent, in some sense similar to epideictic speeches/dialogues of ancient Greece and in a sense, very different. Looking again at one of Plato’s seminal works, *Phaedrus*, we have the title character and Socrates examining a speech by Lysias and Socrates’ first speech in the text. The speeches are meant to be strong and complex rhetorical works, but not meant to point to any real Truths, in the Platonic sense. They consist of word-play and the manipulation of thought to show rhetorical talent—much like the rappers in a rap battle. But, ancient Greek rhetors, like Plato and Socrates, as illustrated in the second half of *Phaedrus*, were ultimately interested in using language to figure out and convey Truths about the world. Philosophical thought was meant to prevail, not the language used (glib or otherwise).

Thus, much of Hip Hop rhetoric, particularly in the realm of the Hip Hop battle, is at odds with the view of rhetoric by ancient rhetors like Socrates, Plato, and Confucius. The aggressiveness of the rap battle is perfectly illustrated in the final rap battle scene of the highly successful Hip Hop film *8 Mile*. The movie is based on the life of rapper Eminem, who grew up in Detroit, in the area known as 8 mile, a lower-class area where he honed his skills as a rapper and was involved in number of these rap battles. Eminem’s character in the film, Rabbit, makes his way to the finals of a rap battle competition at a local club and, in the final battle scene, goes up against “Papa Doc,” known as the best freestyle rapper in the area. The two go head-to-head, with each getting two minutes to lyrically attack the other. Rabbit skillfully and verbally attacks Papa Doc, using counter-argumentation and diminishing Papa Docs Hip Hop ethos⁷, to the cheers of the audience who determine Rabbit as the winner. Papa Doc is so verbally defeated that he is silent when it is his turn at the microphone.

This scene is reminiscent of the ultra-glibness and showmanship previously discussed, and in clear contrast to the philosophic rhetoric proposed by Plato and the respectful, relenting speech favored in ancient Chinese rhetoric. The rap battler is highly confrontational, many times getting right in the face of the competitor as he/she rhymes/attacks, and is only concerned with defeating his/her opponent, nearly always making personal attacks. So, in nearly every important way, the rap battle and rhetoric produced from the battle is, at its core, extremely different from the use/limited use of rhetoric proposed by ancient Platonic and Confucian rhetoric (though Plato employed rhetoric to attack it). This raises two interesting and important questions: Is there no

truth or value in Hip Hop discourse? Are rhetorics rich in glibness and unrelenting speech perpetually at odds with truth?

Glibness vs(?) Truth

While Rabbit's rhetorical delivery/attack in 8 Mile not only displays complex rhetorical devices, it is also a highly aggressive, entertaining, and artistic attack—qualities looked down upon by ancient rhetors such as Plato and Confucius. The lyrics rhyme, follow a specific beat, and are filled with poetic imagery. In rap battles the object is not only to attack the competitor, but to do so while showing linguistic creativity and talent. It is the sharp mind and the sharp tongue that join to make the Hip Hop rhetorician successful. If aggressive lyrics and showmanship are staples of Hip Hop rhetoric, is there then any Truth being conveyed in Hip Hop rhetoric? In a Platonic sense probably not much, if any—at all.

But if we are to understand the rap battle in the context of struggle—social, economic, and linguistic—then we see that even these battles have much to show us. They highlight the fact that many who strongly identify with the Hip Hop ethos may do so because of the consistent rhetorical undercurrent of struggle—of having to battle social inequity and injustice. This translates into the highly competitive/combatative nature of Hip Hop rhetoric of which the Hip Hop battle is a significant piece. The Hip Hop battle also points to the “ethnocentric and erratic will to power from which texts can spring”¹¹—in this instance with the discourse of the rap battle representing a dynamic “text.” This text is born out of a culture of struggle and creates and perpetuates an underdog mentality that permeates the discourse of the Hip Hop community and protests the plight of minority groups at this moment in history.

Furthermore, if we are to use Sophistry—not in the traditional sense of glibness or superficial rhetoric—in our analysis, then we find an important angle from which to look at truth in Hip Hop rhetoric. In Platonic vs. Sophistic thought, there is a clear distinction between an ultimate philosophical Truth (capital T) and kairotic truths (lower case and plural), with the Sophists representing the latter. Much of Plato's work was in direct opposition to the Sophists who believed absolute Truth was/is not available to man. The Sophists stressed probable knowledge, or “truths,” and worked at contextualizing both knowledge and rhetoric (kairos). In this Sophistic sense, much of Hip Hop rhetoric is concerned with expressing truths about life and struggle, and does so from very contextualized positions. A Sophistic view of rhetoric understands, as Susan Jarratt pointed out about ancient Athenians in *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Reconfigured*, that rhetors, in this case Hip Hop rhetors, are given the opportunity and

¹¹ Said, Edward. “The text, the World, the Critic.” *Textual Strategies*. Ed. J.V. Harari. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979.

“ability to create accounts of communal possibilities through persuasive speech” (98).

While rap battles lean heavily on the side of pure rhetorical showmanship (an old view of Sophistry), there is much Hip Hop rhetoric that attempts to directly address important issues in the world and express particular views on reality to an audience. This rhetoric does not simply display the realities of many who connect deeply with the Hip Hop community, but “forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing that [are] crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview”¹². Hip Hop discourse also seems continually to work out what Victor Villanueva has stated about rhetoric in general, that it is politics and a precedent for action (334).

Though there are numerous examples to choose from, I will focus first in this section on two rap groups and how their message represents kairotic truths: Public Enemy, and Dead Prez. I will also make a statement about non-U.S. Hip Hop rhetoric before moving on to discuss Hip Hop rhetoric in connection to specific “moments” in U.S. history.

The first example comes from Public Enemy, a very prominent rap group of the late 1980s and early 1990s, who continue to produce albums into the new millennium. Addressing a vote against the creation of a Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday by Arizonians, in the early 1990s, the groups front man Chuck D posits, “the whole state’s racist” and directly addressing Whites: “he trying to keep it yesteryear/the good ol’ days/the same ol’ ways/that kept us dyin’.” In “What Kind of Power We Got” the group addresses the government by rapping, “stop trying to take our money...because we’re...sick and tired of being mistreated.” These “street truths” are a reflection of Hip Hop culture and reminiscent of popular sentiments expressed in Hip Hop rhetoric over the past twenty years. It may seem that this lyrical discourse is simply an angry reaction to opposition to the holiday, but the opposition and the reaction to the opposition can not be seen in a social vacuum. The existence of historical racism, the presence of social and rhetorical disadvantage, and the presence of competing ideologies—many directly connected to race—are part of the web of opposition and reaction. The events surrounding the vote on the MLK holiday played out “ideological social relations”...which shape social actions, function through concrete institutions and apparatuses, and are materialized through practices”¹³. The MLK situation in Arizona did not constitute a simple vote for a new holiday but “articulated” conditions in a historical moment—it displayed and created a network of complex interactions between

¹² (hooks, “Language” 171).

¹³ Hall, Stuart. “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance.” *Race Critical Theories*. Eds. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg. Malden: Blackwell, 2002.

social, political, and ideological realities ¹⁴.

Next is the political rap group Dead Prez, who became influential Hip Hop artists with their 2000 release of *Let's Get Free*. In "They Schools," the group unleashes a lyrical attack on the American social system.

The same people who control the school system/control the prison system/
and the whole social system/ever since slavery...[in history class] they seem to
only glorify Europeans/...to advance in life they try to make you pull your pants up8/
...so school don't even relate to us...

While these "truths" may shock and anger many, they are truths for many in American society. They are Sophistic, contextualized truths born out of specific moments and social realities. Much of Hip Hop rhetoric is focused on grasping the kairotic moment of the struggling, disillusioned minority, of asserting difference, and of rhetorically analyzing and attacking social norms. In the process, whether they realize it or not, Hip Hop rhetoricians enable resistance and subvert and disrupt cultural imperialism.¹⁵

One final note on Hip Hop rhetoric and truth is that Hip Hop has spread throughout the world and in many instances works as counter-discourse to dominant rhetorics and realities. In Britain, France, Japan, Palestine, Israel, Mexico, Africa, and many other places, Hip Hop rhetoric continues its legacy of opposition and counter-hegemonic discourse and continues to provide truths from new and fresh perspectives. While continually being concerned with artistry and linguistic showmanship, Hip Hop rhetoric, the world over, is also concerned with providing social truths, and helping listeners understand, like the Sophists, that not one person, or group, has, or should have, a monopoly on truth.

The glib speech of Hip Hop does not disqualify it from containing truth—but truth in a kairotic/situated sense and not in the Platonic and Confucian sense. In many ways, Hip Hop serves as that radical creative space written about by bell hooks—that rhetorical space which can serve as a "central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse" and a location of marginality that one, including many rappers, does not wish to lose, "give up or surrender as part of moving into the center... A site one stays in,

¹⁴ Hall, Stuart. "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance." *Race Critical Theories*. Eds. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg. Malden: Blackwell, 2002.

¹⁵ (hooks "Language" 171)

clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist¹⁶. It is a rhetoric born of the margins that continually adds to, and problematizes, the developing landscape of rhetorical studies.

Glibness, Truth, and Kairos

Glibness does not exclude kairotic truths in the case of Hip Hop rhetoric. The skillful, unrelenting discourse of this musical and cultural genre rhetorically brings to life the thoughts, emotions, and actions of a culture which continues to spread throughout the world. "Brings to life" is a general term for the more specific phenomena of creating and perpetuating a Hip Hop mentality in many individuals. The rhetoric of Hip Hop both represents and creates a real and perceived world. This world, vis a vis the culture of Hip Hop, is directly influenced by, and influential to, the discourse espoused.

Much Hip Hop, from its beginning, has been anything but relenting and respectful of the status quo. While I aim to be careful not to essentialize all Hip Hop music and culture, there is no doubt that most Hip Hop rhetoric is aimed at delivering a strong message—more skillfully than other writers/rappers (one's rhetorical competition). But, my central point is that along with the competitive nature of Hip Hop rhetoric comes the telling and production of cultural/communal truths. These kairotic truths are always situated in real life situations and among real and perceived social conditions.

Hip Hop rhetoric illustrates the lives and struggles of often poor, minority, and socially-rhetorically silenced individuals in their real and perceived struggles with social issues. It is also involved in the perpetuation of these real and perceived struggles while displaying the epistemic nature of the rhetoric of Hip Hop. It is a situated rhetoric espousing situated truths and, importantly, it speaks to, and of, millions of people worldwide.

These kairotic truths may focus on general concerns like the schooling system (Dead Prez) and issues of struggle, or on more specific occurrences like the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday situation in Arizona (Public Enemy). The following section will focus on the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Hurricane Katrina of 2005, and on the political ethos of Hip Hop culture, with a look at commentary about presidents Clinton, W. Bush, and Obama. In all cases, the rhetoric of Hip Hop culture will be central and will be aimed at displaying the kairotic truths of this influential discourse. As James Berlin points out in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, "language practices engender a set of ideological prescriptions regarding the nature of 'reality': economic 'realities' and the distribution of wealth; social and political 'realities' regarding class, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender

¹⁶ Hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. Ed. Sandra Harding. New York: Routledge, 2004.

and their relations to power...” (93). Such is certainly true in the case of Hip Hop rhetoric.

Kairotic and Epistemic Truths

The textual and visual rhetoric of Hip Hop culture points to and directly affects the real and perceived realities of a countless number of individuals who strongly connect to the Hip Hop ethos. The rhetoric of Hip Hop culture (as with all discourse) does not only display/relay worldly phenomena, but also is involved in the creation of worldly phenomena. It is discourse that affects our thoughts and actions and thus affects social structures and social events. Hip Hop songs, lyrics, and videos create a culture/ethos of Hip Hop that becomes the foundation from which a large group of people think/function/act. While, as with any culture, the culture of Hip Hop is not simplistic or monolithic, the rhetoric of Hip Hop allows us to begin to understand some of the foundational aspects of a Hip Hop ethos and how that ethos displays, affects, and perpetuates itself.

Looking at two very specific and situated moments and at political commentary through the rhetoric of Hip Hop can begin to unfold some of the complexities and kairotic truths of Hip Hop culture. We begin to see that Hip Hop’s political discourse presents a very liberal and, in most cases, a very anti-Republican message. In all three cases there is a focus on race and racial factors.

Kairotic Events, Hip Hop, and Racial Projects

Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that “racial formation [is] the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (124). Hip Hop rhetoric is part of racial formation in that it illustrates, creates, and perpetuates ideas of race which thus affect the racial identities and beliefs of those who strongly connect with Hip Hop culture and music. Central to racial formation are “historically situated projects” (Racial Projects) which interpret, represent, and/or explain racial dynamics and which attempt to “reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (124-125). The 1992 L.A. Riots, the events surrounding hurricane Katrina, the political landscape surrounding presidents Clinton, W. Bush, and Obama, and, centrally, the discourse coming from Hip Hop culture about these kairotic moments, constitute racial projects that help form racial identity.

While the discourse coming from the Hip Hop community about these “moments” is often straightforward and unrelenting, it is at the same time an important identity-showing and identity-shaping message. It is a message full of both anger and hope but always one that displays communal and situated truths.

These truths, in many ways, highlight the existence of what Etienne Balibar refers to as the “fictive nation-state” and “fictive ethnicity” which are primarily constructed rhetorically. He writes in “The Nation Form: History and Ideology”:

The term [fictive]...should not be taken in the sense of a pure and simply illusion without historical effects, but...be understood as a “fabrication.” No nation possesses an ethnic base naturally, but as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them, divided up among them or dominated by them are ethnicized...” (223-224)

Balibar also stresses that “fictive ethnicity” is produced primarily through language and race, what he refers to as linguistic and racial ethnicity, and that this has “obvious political consequences” (225).

Hip Hop rhetoric challenges the unifying ideal of the fictive state by complicating and radicalizing its racial identity and, in its discursive output, disrupts the linguistic ethnicity of the nation. Hip Hop rhetoric at once depicts communal truths, solidifying or acting out fictive ethnicity and challenges the call to unity of the fictive nation-state. This challenge to unity is complexly packaged in, among others, Hip Hop’s growing mistrust or apathy toward institutions such as law enforcement, schooling⁹, and the traditional family and in its confrontational racial discourse.

Hip Hop’s usage and response to the kairotic moments below are part of the discursive fabric of Hip Hop culture and a narrative which is a part of, but challenges and complicates, the collective narrative of the United States.

1992 L.A. Riots

In a 2009 interview with Katie Couric, rapper Lil Wayne stated, “music is another form of journalism to me.” This sense of kairotic news-telling is nothing new among hip hop rhetoricians. Rapper Ice Cube has referred to himself, and Hip Hop rhetoric in general, as the Black CNN (all-news cable network). He, like most Hip Hop artists, believes that he is a historian and purveyor of truth, a truth that is not available in traditional media and, I would add, in traditional rhetorical circles. Hip Hop rhetoricians, as James Berlin points out about historians, are “never simply writing an account of the past...[but] an account of the present...and a vision of the future” (“Revisionary Histories” 127). But Hip Hop artists are also not simply writing accounts, they are rhetorically constructing the present and future (and even the past) for the masses who deeply connect with Hip Hop.

Ice Cube artistically and rhetorically displays the realities, and sometimes perceived realities, of living as a poor minority in the United States and dealing with society and the police.

More specifically, in vivid social commentary, Ice Cube, in his album *The Predator*,

discusses the Los Angeles riots of 1992, which were sparked when White members of the Los Angeles Police Department were found not-guilty on charges stemming from their beating of an African American, Rodney King, a beating that was captured on video and widely broadcast.

While a vast amount of literature including news stories, op-ed pieces, and academic articles, among others, were created in reaction to the beating, acquittal, and subsequent rioting, little attention has been placed on the reactionary rhetoric of Hip Hop artists, including in rhetorical studies. Much of the discourse from Hip Hop culture that deals with the events surrounding the 1992 L.A. Riots came specifically from those Hip Hop artists who lived in Los Angeles during, or prior to, the riots. This situated discourse is not only important due to its propinquity with the riots, but also because police brutality was something that much “gangsta” rap music had focused on leading up to the riots. As Robin Kelley writes in *Race Rebels*, “...though the media believes that the riots began with the shock of the beating of Rodney King, neither the hip hop community nor residents of South Central Los Angeles were really surprised by the videotape. Countless numbers of black Angelenos had experienced or witnessed this sort of terror before” (184). Furthermore, much Hip Hop discourse about the riots not only verbalized the thoughts and feelings of many, especially Black and poor, citizens of the United States, but helped create and perpetuate a distrust, and even hatred, toward law enforcement, the justice system, and the social system of the United States—three entities that were seen as White-dominated and that were implicated in the social terrorization of poor minorities. A recursive response involving action-reaction-rhetoric, police brutality (as with Rodney King) and discourse about police brutality, cause many disadvantaged and often minority communities to “be wary of the police” and “cause residents...to avoid [police]...not cooperate with investigations, to assume dishonesty on the part of officers, and to teach others that such reactions are prudent lessons of survival on the streets”¹⁷. It is no coincidence that such themes are prevalent in Hip Hop rhetoric, which serves as a rhetorical voice/hammer to those members of disadvantaged and racial minority groups.

In “We Had to Tear This Motherfucker Up,” Ice Cube violently addresses some of the defendants in the Rodney King case (Powell, Coon, Wynd, Vaugsinio). The vulgar language is indicative of the frustration, angst, and hatred felt by many and of the unrelenting and unapologetic nature of much Hip Hop rhetoric. But the nature of the discourse is not in contrast to kairotic/communal truths; it is deeply part of those truths:

Vaughn, wicked, Lawrence Powell, foul / Cut his fuckin throat and I smile

Pretty soon we'll catch Sergeant Coon / Shoot him in the face, run up in him witta

¹⁷ Kubrin, Charis E. “Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music.” *Social Problems*. 52.3 (2005). 360-78.

broom

I gotta Mac10 for Officer Wynd / Damn, his devil ass need to be shipped back to Kansas

/ in a casket... / Now he ain't nothin but food for the maggots

The song also addresses a deep anger toward the jury in the case (which was moved to the predominantly White Simi Valley) which, in this kairotic commentary, directly represents the entire U.S. justice system for many poor minorities:

Go to Simi Valley and surely / somebody knows the address of the jury / Pay a little visit, "Who is it?" (Who is Ice Cube?) / "Can I talk to the grand wizard?" then boom / Make him eat the barrel, modern day feral

For many, especially fans of gangsta rap, equating the King jury to members of the Ku Klux Klan (the "grand wizard") seemed legitimate and obvious. While many citizens of the United States were stunned by the decision, it was the rhetoric of Hip Hop that presented a less-than-stunned reaction. Hip Hop rhetoric also did not shy away from highlighting racial labels and escalating the attacks on the King jury and on the entire social system of the United States.

Even more telling than the violence and naming of specific individuals is the song's refrain, "we had to tear this motherfucker up," referring to the rioting done in Los Angeles. The most telling part of the phrase, "had to," points to the Hip Hop community's belief that the rioting was less of a choice and more of a necessity in light of the events surrounding the beating of Rodney King and many others¹⁰ and the acquittal of the police officers even though the beating was clearly caught on video. This thinking can, to this day, be connected to the anti-police, anti-justice system, and anti-White sentiments and actions of many poor minorities in the United States. These sentiments are compounded by specific occurrences of police brutality against minorities and continue to be perpetuated by much gangsta rap music. Otherwise said, even if police officers today use correct protocol and legitimate force with a minority citizen, many, especially those who most fully embrace gangsta rap, will see the officers' use of force as stemming from racist ideology. This is no surprise coming from a community that embraces struggle as a theme and violence as a necessary option.

The violence and aggression in the Rodney King incident, as portrayed in Ice Cube's song, are part of a very contextualized rhetorical situation that pointed to lives and perceived truths about the United States as perceived by many, mostly minority, citizens. It also displayed, once again, the "articulated" web of competing social, economic, and ideological realities and discourse spoken of by Stuart Hall. For some in the United

States, the acquittal was justified: for many others, it was unjust. What gangsta rap pointed to was the situated “truth” for many that the events surrounding the King situation were simply a continuation of racist social ideals, some of which are documented in Cornel West’s “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,” and thus a racist justice system.

On the same album, in “When Will They Shoot?” Ice Cube states:

Calling me an African American / like everything is fair again

and

They killed JFK in '63 / so what...do you think they'll do to me?

These lyrics, along with the aforementioned ones, represent contextualized, community-constructed truths about the nature of life in America for many African Americans and racial minorities. They are truths that are part of the worldview of those who feel that, at its core, the United States is an unjust country—one which gunned down a socially progressive president and which holds a metaphorically and literally similar fate for poor minorities. And while the validity of these statements can be debated, the fact that they constitute truths for a very large portion of the population is a reality. Those who produce much of gangsta rap, like Ice Cube, and many who embrace the ethos of gangsta rap, believe that the social and justice systems are stacked against them. As Erin I. Kelly states in “Criminal-Justice Minded: Retribution, Punishment, and Authority,” in rappers “lies a firm belief that the law does not, and doesn’t aim to, protect them.” He continues by stating, “If the law doesn’t protect you and won’t deliver justice, you may have to protect your own honor and reputation by seeking vengeance against your enemies” (183). In the streets of Los Angeles in 1992, and in the rhetoric of much gangsta rap, it was the delivery of justice that was central—a redistribution of judicial resources along particular racial lines. The method of delivery may appall and baffle many, but the situated justice of the riots, and of Ice Cube’s raps, make clear sense to many others.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina pummeled the Gulf region of the United States in 2005, devastating many areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, with varying levels of damage from central Florida to Texas. The hardest hit area was New Orleans. What makes the events surrounding Katrina pertinent to the discussion of this essay are the underlying social, racial, and rhetorical factors that come into play. While the hurricane and subsequent storm surge did not only affect one group or race, a spotlight can rightly be placed on the situation of poor African Americans in the aftermath of the storm and, importantly, on the

reaction to the inept response by various federal entities. More specifically, the rhetoric of some Hip Hop artists, as with the L.A. Riots, displays, perpetuates, and creates the sentiments of many within and outside of Hip Hop culture, especially poor minorities. This transforms the events surrounding hurricane Katrina from a mere discussion on storm relief to a racial project that is connected to the ongoing formation of racial ideals in the United States and beyond. This racial project, occasioned by strong winds from the Atlantic, has entered the American psyche and become a part of its racial discourse, part of which is the influential rhetoric of the Hip Hop world.

The rhetorically situated discourse of some Hip Hop artists in the aftermath of Katrina (and even before then), point to two interesting sentiments prevalent in Hip Hop culture: (1) blame and race are unapologetically linked and (2) all U.S. government entities and their response, or lack thereof, to the victims of hurricane Katrina are consistently and directly linked to the White race. While lyrics and statements by numerous Hip Hop artists could be pointed at to highlight these two sentiments, the discussion here will focus on three very popular and rhetorically influential artists: Lil Wayne (a native of New Orleans), Jay-Z, and Kanye West. There will also be mention of two compilation albums put together in response to the events surrounding Katrina, a statement by Latino rapper Chingo Bling, and an e-interview with DJ Raj Smoove, another native of New Orleans.

Lil Wayne, Jay-Z, and Kanye West

Much Hip Hop music has historically focused on situated events while pointing to specific moments—with rappers not shying away from “keeping it real” or pointing to hard truths. These truths of course are situated/kariotic truths that help shape the psyche, racial and otherwise, of those deeply connected to Hip Hop culture. Not surprisingly, this is no different in much of Hip Hop’s response to the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.

In the song “Georgia Bush,”¹¹ Louisiana rapper Lil Wayne attacks President Bush for the inadequate government response to the victims of Katrina and begins with:

This song is dedicated to / the one with the suit / thick white skin / and his eyes bright blue

He continues his link of blame to Bush and the White race in general with statements such as:

They telling you lies on the news / White people smiling like everything’s cool /

But I know people that died in that pool / I know people that died in them schools

When you see that confederate flag / you know what it is / a White cracker

motherfucker

That probably voted for him

There was certainly blame put on Bush by many groups and individuals not connected to Hip Hop but the rhetoric of Hip Hop was the boldest in condemning the president, linking blame to White people in general, and unapologetically suggesting that racism played a role in the government's response.

In "Minority Report," rapper Jay-Z echoes some of the sentiments of "Georgia Bush." In a scathing and vivid attack on Bush and the chaotic response to victims, he raps:

The commander in chief / just flew by / ..what if he ran out of jet fuel / and just dropped?

Poor kids left on the porches / same old story in New Orleans

And in referring to his own donation of money to help hurricane victims, Jay-Z seems to later realize:

Damn, I just put my monies in the hands / of the same people that left my people stranded

This linkage of blame to George Bush specifically, and the labeling of him as a representative of the White race, was heard by millions during a nationally televised telethon put together to raise money for the hurricane victims. During a live segment, rapper Kanye West ad-libbed the statement "George Bush doesn't care about black people." This was a very public display by a popular representative of the Hip Hop community of the sentiments felt by many that George Bush, and the government in general, was not merely incompetent but that their actions were dictated by racist ideology. Interestingly, in the song "Like This N Like That (They Can't Deport Us All)," popular Houston-based Latino rapper Chingo Bling echoes West's nationally televised statement by rapping, "They got us cleaning up Katrina / Yo, Kanye / Bush don't like Mexicans neither."

These sentiments by minority rappers are of no surprise to many, including Bill E. Lawson who writes in "Microphone Commandos: Rap Music and Political Philosophy," "rap music, if one listens closely, can be heard as challenging basic philosophical assumptions underlying the political order" (161). Lawson sees much Hip Hop rhetoric as a reaction to the broken "social contract" of the United States, particularly in its failure to live up to its "agreement" with Blacks (162). I would emphasize that much Hip Hop rhetoric, especially that which is presented in this essay, is not only a reaction to this broken social contract but is directly involved in the breaking-work of this

philosophically envisioned contract. The rhetoric of Hip Hop displays and creates mistrust and blame which, rightly or wrongly, affects the “social contract” of the United States.

This deep blame and mistrust of the president/government/Whites is also touched on in Lil Wayne’s and Jay-Z’s songs. Lil Wayne mentions the fact that the levee system, meant to prevent or diminish flooding in New Orleans, was flawed—a valid argument made by many. But, he goes beyond simply blaming inadequate engineering by bringing up the fact that many believe that the levees were intentionally sabotaged by the federal government: “I know some folk that lived by the levee / they keep on telling me they heard explosions / same [thing] happened in hurricane Betsy / 1965 / I aint too young to know this / that was president Johnson / but now it’s Georgia Bush¹².” He then adds, “New Orleans, baby / now the White house hatin’ / trying to wash us away like we not on the map.” These claims of sabotage may be brushed off as far-fetched conspiracy theories by some, but the claims are important in that they highlight, create, and perpetuate mistrust by many (especially poor minorities) towards the federal government. They point to the fact that many people would actually not be surprised if the federal government did intentionally sabotage the levees¹³. And if there is a direct connection being established, especially in the Hip Hop world, between the federal government and the White race, and in many cases, White racists, then this “racial project” (constituted by the aftermath of Katrina and Hip Hop’s response), goes a long way in establishing racial worldviews and actions.

Lil Wayne’s and Jay-Z’s songs also state the rappers’ opinions that the police force and the media were too aggressive in labeling victims as “looters” in the hours after the hurricane hit. Lil Wayne writes, “They make it look like a lot of stealing going on / boy those cops are killers in my home / nigga shot dead in the middle of the street / I aint no thief / I’m just trying to eat” and Jay-Z states, “wouldn’t you loot / if you didn’t have the loot / baby needed food / and you stuck on the roof?” This highlights a strong division (real and/or perceived) between the worldviews of White, especially middle-class and rich, Americans and poor minorities. It also emphasizes the need to examine non-traditional rhetorics like those coming from the Hip Hop community.

The rhetorical response by Hip Hop to the aftermath of hurricane Katrina cannot be simply discarded as radical and marginal, but must be looked at seriously for what it says and for ways in which it works epistemically in our world today. It is a rhetoric of the “resistance culture” that in many instances operates “outside of the norms and conventions of White mainstream society”¹⁸.

¹⁸ Smitherman, Geneva. “Meditations on Language, Pedagogy, and a Life of Struggle.” *Rhetoric And Ethnicity*. Eds. Keith Gilyard and Norris Nunley. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004.

Hip Hop rhetoric draws a clear line between the racial “us” and “them.” Many in Hip Hop stated that it was “my people” that were devastated and forgotten in New Orleans, and rappers like Lil Wayne, Jay-Z, and Kanye West, among others, gave of their time and money to help the victims of Katrina in ways they had not helped in other crises. Some Hip Hop DJs and producers also supplied monetary help and rhetorical donations by putting out albums to highlight the events and aftermath of Katrina—not a common occurrence in situations that do not have a direct effect on the African American community. As New Orleans DJ Raj Smoove put it, “We have a voice and it wasn’t drowned.” Compilation albums like Smoove’s *The Day After Tomorrow*, with an image of New Orleans drowning on the front cover, and Master P’s *Hurricane Katrina: We Gon’ Bounce Back*, along with the lyrics of Lil Wayne, Jay-Z, Kanye West, and numerous other voices of Hip Hop, may not be the fodder of traditional rhetorical studies (or traditional media reporting) but they provide insight into the experiences and worldviews of a large segment of the United States. Because of this, Hip Hop rhetoric may today truly be the “Black CNN” and certainly an important piece of the modern Black Rhetorical Tradition¹⁴.

Clinton, Bush, Obama: Hip Hop’s Political Ethos

The highly kairotic rhetoric of Hip Hop, as can be seen in its response to the 1992 L.A. Riots and Katrina, does not shy away from critical political and social messages. Its situated truths continue to be a part of the formation of racial ideologies and race relations. The statements made by rapper Lil Wayne in “Georgia Bush” provide just a small glimpse into the political ethos of Hip Hop culture. The political rhetoric of much Hip Hop, some of which will be analyzed here, highlights, perpetuates, and creates an anti-government, often anti-White ethos among those who use the rhetoric of Hip Hop to help shape their political ideology and agenda.

Commentary by rappers like Lil Wayne, Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Chingo Bling show a strong mistrust of the political machine in the United States, and within that general mistrust is much greater animosity towards the Republican party and Republican presidents. Hip Hop is a relatively young form of expression, reaching prominence in the 1980s, thus fitting into a 30-year or so time period from which to express a political message. This section will focus on Hip Hop rhetoric that expresses views on the two prominent political parties and, more specifically, on presidents Bill Clinton (Dem.), George W. Bush (Rep.), and Barack Obama (Dem.). The fact that Obama is the first black (bi-racial) president of the United States adds important layers of analysis, thus there is a lengthier discussion about him.

This entire discussion once again highlights the kairotic elements of Hip Hop rhetoric and its connections to communal truths, race, and racial identity.

Clinton, Bush, and Obama

President Clinton enjoyed rather positive feedback from the Hip Hop community, partially because his Democratic administration followed the Republican administration of the elder George Bush, but in large part due to his seeming connectedness to, and concern for, the African American community. A debate on whether Clinton or W. Bush actually did more to help minority communities is better saved for a separate discussion, but the perceived and perpetuated reality was/is that Clinton, and Democrats in general, are more concerned for minorities in general and specifically African Americans, who are the dominant force behind Hip Hop culture. This connection of Clinton to the African American and Hip Hop community was visually highlighted in the then-presidential-candidate's appearance on the Arsenio Hall Show in which he played the saxophone¹⁵. This connection continued after Clinton's two-term presidency was over when he chose Harlem, New York, as the location for his office and claimed, "Now I feel like I'm home" (Hinojosa and Palmer). His life and presidency even led some to refer to Clinton as "the first black president,"¹⁶ a historically foolish statement considering the 2008 election of Obama. While most of the Hip Hop community supported Obama in the 2008 presidential election, a statement made by popular rapper 50 Cent shows the continued support for Bill Clinton even eight years removed from his presidency: "Electing Hillary 'is a way for us to have Bill Clinton be president again'..."¹⁹.

This support for Clinton, very much connected to his link to the Democratic party, is in sharp contrast to Hip Hop's negative sentiments towards George W. Bush and the Republican Party. This contrast becomes even more evident when commentary on Bush is compared to Hip Hop's commentary on Obama. In Hip Hop rhetoric, the Republican party is often labeled as the party of rich, White, and racist individuals—individuals who have little concern for the plight of poor racial minorities, including African Americans. While other entities, and some politicians themselves, have labeled the Republican Party as out of touch and elitist, Hip Hop rhetoric offers a more vivid, direct, and un-politically correct attack on Republicans, much of which attacks President Bush directly. As with Hip Hop's discourse about the 1992 L.A. Riots and Hurricane Katrina, some might label it as unfair, hate-filled, and even racist, but the aim of this section, and of this essay, is not to argue the merits of the arguments but to point to the epistemic and kairotic nature of the discourse. It is a rhetoric ripe with commentary about specific and situated realities and one which holds communal truths about the racial state of the country and, importantly, which affects identity and action.

Among these espoused truths is that White, conservative (usually Republican)

¹⁹ Greenburg, Zach. "Endorsement Rap." Forbes Online. 21 Dec. 2007. 7 Jan 2009.
<http://www.forbes.com/opinions/2007/12/21/rap-vote-endorsement-cz_zog 1221rapvote.html>.

politicians and national leaders are consistently hurting the poor African American community, from which Hip Hop grew. As Michael Eric Dyson writes in “Gangsta Rap and American Culture”:

Cruel Cuts in social programs for the neediest, an upward redistribution of wealth to the rich, and an unprincipled conservative political campaign to demonize poor black mothers and their children have left...[them] in the dust. Many of gangsta rap’s most vocal black critics...fail to see how the alliances they forge with conservative white politicians such as Bennett and Dole¹⁷ are plagued with problems. Bennett and Dole have put up roadblocks to many legislative and political measures that would enhance the fortunes of the black poor.

He adds:

Moreover, many of the same conservative politicians who support the attack on gangsta

rap also attack black women..., affirmative action, and the redrawing of voting districts to achieve parity for black voters. Ironically, such critics appear oblivious to how their rhetoric of absolute opposition to gangsta rap has been used to justify political attacks on poor black teens. (178-179)

In the climate of much Republican mistrust by the African American community, attacks on George W. Bush are not surprising. In a blatant attempt to affect the reelection possibilities of Bush in 2004, rapper Eminem put out the song and video “Mosh.” The video urges citizens, especially the youth, to march on Washington and vote against Bush. Some of the lyrics include:

Stomp, push, shove, mush / F**k Bush / until they bring our troops home

Imagine it pouring / just raining down on us / mosh pits outside the oval office

Someone’s tryin’ tell us something / maybe this is God just sayin’ we’re responsible

For this monster / this coward / that we have empowered

...disarm this weapon of mass destruction / that we call our president

Such rhetorical attacks are echoed in the lyrics and comments made by many in Hip Hop,

including politically-minded rapper Mos Def who stated, “[Bush] got a policy for handling [black people] and trash” (Greenburg). The attacks on Bush from Hip Hop rhetors grew to a fever pitch in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Even though part of the responsibility should have seemingly fallen on the mayor of the city, it was Bush and the federal government that took the most heat from the Hip Hop community. This may well have occurred because New Orleans’ mayor was Black and, therefore, not a comfortable target for rappers. As New Orleans DJ Raj Smoove explains it, “As president he should have stepped in and over whatever state boundaries he was wary of to save American citizens. You know he is fast to travel halfway across the world and impose his measures...but somehow he was concerned about what the governor wanted to do and they play[ed] volley with the responsibility.” Interestingly, the African American and Democratic mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, gained reelection while national criticism grew (rightly or wrongly) for President Bush and the Republican Party.

In sharp contrast, or in part because of the highly unpopular Bush/Republican administration at the time of the 2008 presidential election cycle, Barack Obama received much support from the Hip Hop community. There is no doubt that there was also a strong racial component to this support. But, just as the racial component was strong, so too was the fact that Obama was a Democrat. In somewhat simplistic terms, Obama was much praised in Hip Hop rhetoric because of his status as a non-Republican, non-conservative, and non-White candidate. But that seems to be only part, be it a large part, of the reason behind Hip Hop’s support. After all, Black presidential candidates of the Hip Hop era, like Jesse Jackson, did not achieve the level of popularity as Obama did in the Hip Hop community.

It seems that Obama was so popular in Hip Hop because he was a black, liberal, Democrat, three things that had become appreciated in the socio-historical creation and evolution of the American Hip Hop ethos, but also because he seemed to exude characteristics important to Hip Hop: he was fresh, cool, aware of racial struggle (and willing to talk about it), had a message of social change, and was rhetorically powerful. Obama was also a self-proclaimed Jay-Z fan who was seen “brushing off his shoulder” and “fist-bumping¹⁸” his wife on a number of occasions—visually rhetorical body language that connected him, in a small but important way, to the Hip Hop ethos. He fit the moment of the election very well (almost perfectly for those in Hip Hop). It was as though the *kairos* of the Obama campaign and the *kairotic* nature of Hip Hop rhetoric meshed nearly seamlessly at this particular political moment.

Some major Hip Hop artists that showed open support for Obama included Jay-Z, Ludacris, Common, Talib Kweli, Nas, Rakim, and Red Man. Also, numerous songs were produced with rhetoric that directly supported the Obama campaign. The vast amount of rhetorical support was/is unprecedented in the short history of Hip Hop. Some notable

songs include Nas' "Black President" where he raps, "America, surprise us / and let a black man guide us" and calls Obama the "new-improved JFK," and Common's song "The People" where he states, "standin' in front of the judge with no honor / ...unite the people like Obama." Also, in his song "Say Something," Talib Kweli raps, "speak to the people like Barack Obama." In this song he contrasts the struggles of "the people" to those focused on making profit, "a product of Reaganomics." Another nod of support can be seen in the rapper Jin's (a Chinese-American) "Open Letter to Obama" where he refers to one of Obama's popular phrases: "Red states / blue states / that's kinda late / In your eyes / it's only the United States. The song was so liked by the Obama campaign team that they added Jin as "friend" on Obama's official MySpace site¹⁹.

Finally, there was the song "Work to Do" by Kidz in the Hall which was meant to serve as a campaign song for Obama. The song is ripe with positive messages, including the repeated anthem of there's "work to do" in light of the struggles facing the county, along with the phrase "Obama for America." In the remix of the song, which included Talib Kweli and Bun B, there is a more political message:

One said he had a dream / Malcolm said "by any means" / Forty years later /
 Now I'm sort of seeing what he means / ..and the reality is we need a new plan /
 Critics say we can't / but Barack say we can / ...take our neck out the noose /
 Go and bring back the youth / Give our nation a boost
 In my lifetime / I've never seen the dream of Dr. King / fully realized in the flesh
 Lookin' in the face / of the current administration [Bush] / it's not reflecting me /
 And I'm starting to lose my patience

The message of the song, especially the remixed version, re-emphasizes the political and racial message behind much of Hip Hop's support for the Obama campaign, and its mistrust and hatred towards the Bush administration and Republican Party in general. It is a message that helps shape the political ethos of the Hip Hop community and, consequently, affects political and racial formation.

Support for Obama from the Hip Hop community can also be seen in Russell Simmons', a Hip Hop legend and media mogul, vast work in support of the Obama campaign. As Simmons put it, Obama "represents the best candidate to suit the ideas that matter most to me—eradicating poverty, conflict resolution, the environment, and foreign policy"²⁰. Further support is highlighted in the fact that an Urban Inaugural Ball, hosted

²⁰ Cheers, Imani and Crystal Holmes. "The Audacity of Hip-Hop." Newsweek Online. 25 Sep 2008. 9 Jan 2009.

by rappers Ludacris and Big Boi, was thrown in support of Obama's January 2009 Inauguration.

At other inauguration night events, rapper Jay-Z stated, "No more white lies, my president is black" and rapper Young Jeezy, who released the song "My President's Black," expressed thanks to the Iraqi journalist who threw his two shoes at President Bush's head in December of 2008. The footage of the two rappers aired on the O'Reilly Factor, a very popular news show hosted by Bill O'Reilly on the Republican-leaning (according to most in the Hip Hop community) Fox News Channel. Interestingly, O'Reilly, who is a vocal opponent of "gangsta rap," occasionally includes segments on Hip Hop artists because he seems to understand the power of their message. In contrast, a guest on O'Reilly's show, commentator Dennis Miller, seems to downplay the impact of Hip Hop rhetoric on shaping the worldview of many in society when he states that the commentary of Jay-Z and Young Jeezy are "a sidebar to a sidebar."²⁰

In an interesting, and telling/shaping, message, one of the hosts of the aforementioned Urban Inaugural Ball, Ludacris, put out a pre-election song ("Politics as Usual") in support of Obama in which he rapped, "Hillary [Clinton] hated on you / so that bitch is irrelevant / [John] McCain don't belong in a chair / unless he's paralyzed." This message was denounced by an Obama campaign spokesman (see Cheers and Holmes), but is yet another vivid example of the unrelenting message of much of Hip Hop. While the rhetoric of the song is offensive, it represents the feelings of some (many?) that are deeply connected to Hip Hop. It, along with much of the rhetorical support for Obama by the Hip Hop community, is not the respectful, philosophical, controlled dialogue desired by Plato and Confucius, but it is no less important to the study of truth and identity-forming discourse.

In a telling interview, Obama seems to grasp the power and importance of Hip Hop rhetoric and understand its complex relevance, another reason for his popularity in Hip Hop culture. He states:

A lot of these kids are not going to be reading the New York Times...Hip Hop is not just a mirror of what is, it should also be a reflection of what can be.

That "what is" and "can be" is at the center of the kairotic message of Hip Hop. The discourse of this community, which is in sharp contrast to the preferred rhetoric/discourse of Plato and Confucius, drives the political ideology of a large segment of the population. It is an ideology that is mostly liberal and Democratic, hyper-aware of race and race relations, and one which does not shy away from conflict, rhetorical or otherwise.

Conclusion: Hip Hop Kairos and Why it Matters

The discursive output of Hip Hop points to identity-representing and identity-forming messages of a highly popular and influential culture. While these messages may not come through a traditionally studied medium in rhetorical studies or contain Truth in the Platonic or Confucian sense, they serve as powerful and complex rhetorical avenues from which to study issues of identity and race and their connections to social and ideological philosophies and realities. The kairotic messages and communal truths of Hip Hop bring to light the intricate web of rhetoric, race, and identity and ask us, whether we agree with the messages or not, to consider the ramifications of social and historical inequity and racialization on the creation of discourse and, conversely, on the ramifications of discourse on social and historical inequity and racialization.

It asks us to consider this in the socio-historical moment of the situated now—the now of the first quarter of the new millennium, the now of our communities, the now of the Hip Hop rhetoric being created in basements, backyards, and street corners around the world, the now of lyrics pouring through music players and satellite radios at this very moment, and the now that is always connected to “articulated” moments of historical socialization and racialization.

Hip Hop kairos has much to say, show, and do and goes a long way in affecting the identity and actions of millions across the world, especially those most connected to the Hip Hop message and ethos. It is far from empty and glib speech—it is discourse strongly connected to the oppressed, to the marginalized, to an underdog and struggle mentality, and to the rhetorical and physical lives of many individuals, communities, cities, states, countries, and peoples the world over. Hip Hop rhetoric highlights, challenges, complicates, constitutes, and articulates complex social realities—it is rhetoric at its best.

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