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# A Beautiful Mind: Black Male Intellectual Identity and Hip-Hop Culture

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Toby S. Jenkins<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In a field like hip-hop, where written and verbal communication are the two primary forms of work production, the mind or intellect of the artist should be viewed as the very thing responsible for success. However, unlike other writing-intensive fields, the mind of hip-hop artists is often the least valued and least lauded trait. Hip-hop artists, whether they realize it or not, have more to offer. They are more than the things that they possess. They are writers. They are thinkers. This article examines intellectualism in hip-hop music—its presence, shortcomings, and ultimate value.

## Keywords

hip-hop and academics, knowledge production, intellectuals

## Adjusting to the Neighborhood: Hip-Hop's Place in American Popular Culture

Seven years ago, John McWhorter (2003) wrote an article in the *City Journal* titled “How Hip-Hop Holds Blacks Back.” After recently reading his piece, I immediately wondered how the author feels today, at a time when even hip-hop

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<sup>1</sup>George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Toby S. Jenkins, George Mason University, 4400 University Dr., MS 1B3, Fairfax, VA 22030

Email: [tjenkin8@gmu.edu](mailto:tjenkin8@gmu.edu)

artists are saying that mainstream music is less than impressive (Carter, 2009; Jones, 2006). Hip-hop has never been perfect. But it is not all worthless. In his article, McWhorter outlines the various ways in which the lyrics of hip-hop music are poor influences on Black youth. He identifies Grandmaster Flash's classic "The Message" as the critical changing point where hip-hop evolved from fun party music to destructive and nihilistic street anthems. His analysis is a result of a literal rather than critical read of the song:

Grandmaster Flash's ominous 1982 hit, "The Message," with its chorus, "Its like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under," marked the change in sensibility. It depicted ghetto life as profoundly desolate. . . . Music critics fell over themselves to praise "The Message," treating it as the poetry of the streets—as the elite media has characterized hip-hop ever since. The song's grim fatalism struck a chord; twice, I've heard blacks in audiences for talks on race cite the chorus to underscore a point about black victimhood. So did the warning it carried: "Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge," menacingly raps Melle Mel. The ultimate message of "The Message"—that ghetto life is so hopeless that an explosion of violence is both justified and imminent—would become a hip-hop mantra in the years ahead. (McWhorter, 2003)

There is a strong difference between the "message" and insight that this song provided into the lived realities of urban poverty and the post-1990s "script" that followed the initial emergence of gangsta rap, where all artists (regardless of how truthful) had to be gangstas, pimps, thugs, or millionaires (Kitwana, 2002; Watkins, 2005). When street-level politics of struggle and survival first began to surface in rap music, there was authenticity in the lyrics—even in the very first gangsta rap that came out of Southern California. In many ways, the writing of hip-hop artists like Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel demonstrated the ethic that drives critical race theory: the importance of allowing the marginalized to speak and for their voice to be raw, real, and authentic (Barnes, 1990). Barnes (1990) explains the importance of this theory:

Minority perspectives make explicit the need for fundamental change in the ways we think and construct knowledge. Exposing how minority cultural viewpoints differ from white cultural viewpoints requires a delineation of the complex set of social interactions through which minority consciousness has developed. Distinguishing the consciousness of racial minorities requires acknowledgement of the feelings and

intangible modes of perception unique to those who have historically been socially, structurally, and intellectually marginalized in the United States. (p. 1864).

A critical component of acknowledging such modes of perception includes hearing real stories of the cultural experience. Almost a decade later, the worth of hip-hop warrants revisiting. Undeniably, there are basic aspects of hip-hop music that have improved since both its inception and the publication of McWhorter's (2003) article. The musical production of today is more complex than some of the mixed beats that provided the backdrop to rhymes in the late 1970s. In the early days of hip-hop, the music was simply a backdrop, and the DJ's artistic ability was demonstrated by mixing existing songs with new dance beats while creating a "break" so the dancers could take action. Dancers and emcees were the central players in early hip-hop. Music producers have now come into play in a much more active and recognized way. Contemporary producers have indeed elevated the music. Additionally, the business acumen of hip-hop artists has also changed. Artists are now leveraging their roles in the entertainment industry, and some are individually enjoying a payday that no other music entertainers of color have ever seen in any genre of music. And lyrically, the style of rap has also been enhanced. After decades as an art form, competition has made emcees strive to perfect their rhythm, cadence, and style. However, there are two components of lyrical analysis: lyrical content (what they are saying) and lyrical style (how they say it). Although it may be difficult to argue that lyrical content is getting better with age, to say that "hip-hop creates nothing" is wrong (McWhorter, 2003). At its best, hip-hop creates writers and thinkers in young people of color—something many schools have failed to do (Gause, 2008; Harper, 2009; Jenkins, 2006b; Noguera, 2002).

### *The Invisible Man*

Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape. (Mos Def, [Smith], 2002a)

In a field like hip-hop, where written and verbal communication are the two primary forms of work production, the mind or intellect of the artist should be viewed as the very thing responsible for success. However, unlike other writing-intensive fields, the intellect of the hip-hop artist is often the least valued and least lauded trait. Whether it is in the lyrics of songs or in the media depictions of the artist, for male hip-hop artists, the possession of

power (business ownership), prowess (beautiful women), and paper (money) are consistently viewed as the character traits that earn bragging rights. Shows like *MTV Cribs* (2000), *The Flavor of Love* (2006), and *I Want to Work for Diddy* (2008) have illustrated that the trend to confine the life worth of the male rapper to cribs, relationships, and business ventures has become the industry standard. But hip-hop artists, whether they realize it or not, have more to offer. They are more than the things that they possess. They are writers. They are thinkers.

At its core, hip-hop culture has always acknowledged intelligence. Five basic elements have been identified as the core contextual framework of hip-hop culture: the B-boy/B-girl (dance or break dance), the emcee (voice), the DJ (music), graffiti (art), and knowledge (the consciousness) (Watkins, 2005). Many elements have found their own independent acceptance and growth. Such has been the case with break dance. With nationally syndicated television shows and competitions, a new life and energy has been breathed into the art of break dance. In many ways, hip-hop as a broad culture has moved from the separate corners and blocks of the urban street community and taken up new residences within the larger popular culture. It now belongs to everyone. But not all elements have fared so well in the move. It seems that when it comes to being fully valued and welcomed into the new, wider community of popular culture, some elements were broken in the move. This is what happened to knowledge. Knowledge and intelligence within hip-hop does not seem to have a place within American pop culture.

When we talk hip-hop in the larger society, there is often no mention of an artist being smart, intelligent, or brilliant. This lack of appreciation for the intellect of the writer often is not present in other fields. How many male book authors are praised for the look of the woman on his arm rather than the intellectual or creative value of the books that he has produced? The ways in which the mind of the hip-hop artist is all but ignored within popular culture is, largely, a part of a broader trend within American society to disregard the experiences, perspectives, and ways of being, knowing, and expressing that are offered forth by African American men. So, in the same way that African American male minds have been underserved in classrooms, channeled into prisons, and in some cases, all but ignored within American society, the mind of the hip-hop artist is also devalued within the subordinate popular culture (Jenkins, 2006b).

Written over 50 years ago, Ralph Ellison's (1995) classic text *Invisible Man* symbolically shines a light on the lack of inclusion of Black men in broader society. Ellison's America was a place in which a man becomes invisible because society refuses to see him as anything more than a stereotype.

Now a century later, in contemporary society, there is only an illusion of inclusion. The real identity of many Black people (as strong, culturally grounded, and intelligent) still remains invisible. This is a society in which even our president is criticized for being too smart (professorial) and walks a thin line of being seen as too ethnic (Poor, 2009; Rappaport, 2009). If the man holding one of the most critical positions in our society must succumb to a manufactured and socially palpable identity, what role could artists possibly occupy as strong and vocal intellectuals?

Why is it so difficult for Black men to be their full and authentic selves in the United States? Persisting White supremacist and patriarchal thinking as well as a patriot “gang” culture definitely play a part. hooks (2004) provides an explanation of the influence of White supremacy:

Nowadays in the imperialist white-supremacist patriarch culture, most boys from poor and underprivileged classes are socialized via mass media and class-biased education to believe that all that is required of their survival is the ability to do physical labor. Black boys . . . have been socialized to believe that strength and stamina are all that really matter. Groomed to remain permanent members of an underclass, groomed to be without choice and therefore ready to kill for the state in wars whenever needed, back males without class privilege have always been targets for miseducation . . . the curiosity that may be deemed a sign of genius in a white male child is viewed as trouble making when expressed by black boys. (p. 36)

Within hip-hop, it is not so much that those thoughtful and socially aware artists who dare to resist the stereotype are not recognized as being positive. Most agree that these artists are positive. In fact, positivity has almost become a badge of dishonor—a marker that means you may have a lot of skill but you probably do not move a lot of product. So though it is nice to be positive, it is not necessarily lucrative. But agreeing on whether or not these artists are positive or liberating writers is not the issue. The problem is rather that critical thought and critical citizenship have never been traits that society has preferred to see demonstrated by Black men (hooks, 2004; Jenkins, 2010). Racism can only thrive in environments that believe the stereotype. So, the mass culture is literally not buying the persona of the intelligent, socially aware, and politically critical Black man. In music, we want our thugs, and in the White House, we do not want anyone that makes us feel dumb.

And beyond the turbulent relationship between Black men and America, the society broadly has limited tolerance for any divergent voice (regardless

of color). American patriotism is often approached through a very narrow and one-dimensional lens (Jenkins, 2010). Like any gang culture, to be a full member (citizen or patriot), you must uncritically accept and support the organization. Those who voice opposition often face a verbal beating and the label of outcast. Like any strong gang, you either get down with us or get beat down by us. Negative talk and thought about the country is not allowed. And so, the need to challenge the idea of who gets to define patriotism and whose voice is allowed to be both heard and valued is a real issue.

More public critiques are needed of the traditional conceptualization of “genius” as being Western, White, and male and of “patriotism” as being synonymous with conformity and blind allegiance. In contemporary public blogs, these outdated ideologies still persist. A 2008 blog post sharing the “Top 50 Geniuses of All Time” listed 50 White men from the Western world (<http://4mind4life.com/blog/2008/03/30/list-of-geniuses-top-50-influential-minds/>). New ways to define and appreciate genius and intellectual contributions must be developed. Clearly, people of color, women, radical activists, and many political prisoners have transformed our society for the better in deep and meaningful ways. They have pushed to expand our laws, our behavior, and our thinking.

### *The Breakdown*

I’ve got an appetite for destruction—but I scrape the plate. (Jay-Z, [Carter], 2001))

The impact of the largely stereotypical images of hip-hop artists that are advanced through popular culture and the media is both deep and important to discuss. Popular culture has always played an important role in shaping public opinion. The basic premise of McWhorter’s (2003) argument regarding the strong influence of entertainment does have merit. In the 1930s, movies, commercials, and newspaper articles were used to sway public opinion against the use of marijuana and eventually led to its outlaw in 1937 (Bonnie & Whitebread, 1974; Lupien, 1995; Parry, 2008). Many of the negative stereotypes about single Black mothers (that still hold sway) were generated in the 1980s during the media frenzy in which images were widely published of mostly Black crack mothers, crack babies, and welfare recipients (Cox, 2006). These depictions helped to push forward extremely unforgiving and what we now know to be racially unbalanced drug laws. And you can look at any decade to see that during times of war, nothing drums up broad public support for military engagement better than a swarm of war-based movies

(Carver, 2002). When it comes to seducing the public's opinion, pop culture has been around the block. But it is probably more powerful now than ever before. This is partly due to the increase in venues for mass media consumption (music TV, expanded and digital cable, satellite radio, iPods, cell phones with video and music downloads, hip-hop artists as fashion and restaurant moguls, etc.) (hooks, 2001). We can now access media 24-7 in our homes, in our cars, or while simply walking down the street. We no longer have to walk into the living room or run to the newsstand for the daily news. We simply carry it in our purse, and it is available at the click of the browser button. And so, popular culture continues to influence the public but now with a much wider reach. The one thing that holds constant is the fact that negative and false propaganda is still as much of an issue now as it was in the 1930s. And stereotypes are still broadly projected about many communities.

Arguments have been had for decades about who should take the weight for the negative impact of hip-hop music. Some argue that artists bear responsibility for the work that they produce. Artists have blamed parents by saying that parents should monitor their child's consumption of music. But many young people simply do not have good parents. What about the children of drug-addicted parents? Other kids have parents who are struggling to parent in the midst of hard life circumstances. This is often the case for kids who have single parents working multiple jobs just to afford food and shelter. In either case, parents may barely see their children, much less be able to adequately monitor what they watch or hear. Whatever the reason, the question is, do we allow these children to fall prey to bad influence simply because of circumstances of birth? And beyond children, as mentioned previously, media has psychological influence on adults as well. This is why advertising is such a major industry.

So when it comes to hip-hop, what do our teachers, classmates, neighbors, and citizens both within and outside of the United States often see when consuming the popularized hip-hop product? The five core elements of hip-hop can be replaced by the five core stereotypes of the Black male hip-hop artist: the nihilistic, self-centered, caked-out mogul with a god complex; the uneducated, lazy, absentee father; the imprisoned and angry criminal; the cool pimp; and the ignorant thug. According to bell hooks (1994), internalized self-hatred is more pronounced now than in the era of segregation. hooks goes on to discuss the critical differences between a time period when African Americans were demeaned, stereotyped, and caricatured by a larger society that openly admitted to hate versus a current era, where White-supremacist, patriarchal thinking is cleverly hidden behind curtains of verbal democracy and inclusion.

When we watched shows like *Tarzan* or *Amos 'n' Andy* that we enjoyed, we were ever aware that the images of blackness we saw on these programs were created by folks who, as Mama would say, “did not like us.” Consequently, these images had to be viewed with a critical eye. In my own family this critical vigilance began to change as the fruits of the civil rights struggle became more apparent. Mama’s last child would watch television alone with no adult voices teaching her a resisting gaze. . . . Once laws desegregated the country, new strategies had to be developed to keep black folks from equality, to keep black folks in their place. While emerging as less racist than it had once been, television became the new vehicle for racist propaganda. Black people could be represented in negative ways, but those who had wanted there to be jobs for Black actors could be appeased. Nothing pushed a white supremacist aesthetic more than television, a medium where even dark-haired white women had to become blondes in order to succeed. (hooks, 1994, p. 76)

Though written primarily about television, hooks’ comments can be broadly applied to mass media, as the industry is now more blended and less segmented as in the past. Music is no longer relegated to radio—it is a television-, radio-, and Internet-based form of entertainment. And it is not simply an issue of its broad reach. The cultural implications of the negative stereotyping in popular culture are even more disheartening. Today, some of these images are being put out by Black folks whom consumers want to love and trust. Today, it is less a matter of “they hate us” and more a capitalistic issue of “they don’t care about anything but money.” And today, given the massive availability of media, it is much harder to disregard and resist. This is what hooks meant. In a capitalistic society, a culture where mass media largely sets the agenda, it is difficult to argue that there is no media influence on consumers’ concept of both themselves and others. Especially when it comes to hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop culture extends beyond music and dance. It breaks down the separation of pop culture and daily life so that pop culture is not merely a form of entertainment but a lifestyle (Bynoe, 2004; Kitwana, 2002). The generations that identify with hip-hop embody the culture (sometimes good and bad) in all of who they are, bringing the culture into the way they interact, dress, think, and establish life priorities and goals (Bynoe, 2004; Kitwana, 2002). One problematic example was the case of the “thug.” In the early 2000s, it was the embraced stereotype of the day. Conversations were had about it, articles were written about it, bloggers blogged about it, and of course, popular songs spoke on it (“Why Black American Chicks,” 2008). And in

2004, almost serving as an affirmation of society's embrace of the thug image, Destiny's Child wrote a song glorifying it called "Soldier." In the song, the group made statements like "If your status ain't hood, I ain't checkin' for him. Better be street if he lookin' at me." They went on to state, "We like dem boys up top from the BK [Brooklyn]. Know how to flip that money three ways. So quick to snatch up your Beyonce" (Knowles, Rowland, Williams, & Harrison, 2004). In my 2006 *Gloss Magazine* article, I offer the following explanation of the thug phenomenon:

Undoubtedly, most women, at that time, were not actually seeking a thug or gangsta. If we take time to dissect and define these two simple personas in their most literal sense we are talking about a man that is disrespectful (thug) or a man that is criminal (gangster), and with both a man that lacks the ability to build familial, friend or kinship connections (hood). It is important that we understand a "hood" is a place where people do not enact the role of neighbor—where creating a sense of kinship and being a neighbor is absent from the experience. So, a hood can be created within an urban ghetto as well as in an affluent suburb where people don't speak to or look out for one another. If you were raised in a government housing project but had neighbors that looked out for you—then you were a part of a neighborhood, however poor it might have been. And if you are loving a man that is loving you back, and also loving his mother, father, nieces, nephews, friends, and also looking out for the young brothers on the block, however poor he might be, his status is not "hood."

Of course, these terms are not meant literally, they are meant to represent something else. But it may be more socially beneficial to stop using them and to begin using the language that reflects what we love about black men. Our love of the "bad boy" is not new. It is as old as our love for men that dared to stand up and to challenge the status quo, to go against the grain as did our beloved Malcom X or Nat Turner. We actually don't love badness. We love strength that is sometimes interpreted as being bad. Women were saying they wanted a thug—but what they wanted was a strong man. What women were seeking was not a gangsta, but rather, a man that was confident and that commanded respect from those around him. (Jenkins, 2006a)

With all of the various ways that we can describe, label, and identify Black men, why are there only a few, limited, and stereotypical identities present in popular culture?

## *Beyond the Stereotype: Hip-Hop Artists as Knowledge Producers*

I used to speak the King's English, but caught a rash on my lips. (Mos Def, [Smith], 2002a)

Although many hip-hop artists may share former identities as thugs and gangsters, these are not their only identities. The failure to acknowledge truly talented hip-hop artists as intelligent demeans both the art production and the artist. Hip-hop artists are indeed talented, but they are not *just* talented. And though hip-hop artists may exhibit strength (as evidenced by their ability to navigate their way through poverty, crime, and oppression in America), they are not *just* strong. When artists write their own lyrics and those lyrics are brilliant examples of critical thought, social critique, or creative writing, they are exhibiting more than talent and strength. They are showcasing intelligence.

In their recent book, *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's Illmatic*, Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai (2009) acknowledge the depth and critical meaning often found in the lyrics written by rappers. Because the African American community has a history of valuing community-based knowledge—of understanding that knowledge is produced in our homes, on our streets, and through our cultural production—it is important that the Black community continue to challenge the notion of who is allowed to be considered knowledge producers and what venues (beyond educational institutions) are allowed to be viewed as points of knowledge production (Hill Collins, 1986).

When it is at its best, the lyrics penned by hip-hop artists are a valuable form of nontraditional knowledge and social critique of the American experience. I often use lyrical analysis of various forms of music, hip-hop in particular, in my classrooms in order to encourage students to wrestle with the counter experience of people of color. The work of many hip-hop artists equals Ellison's (1995) classical work in social value and meaning. In Table 1, I share brief lyrics (with notes) of four Black male hip-hop artists in order to demonstrate this value.

Jay-Z is a perfect example of an artist who has not been recognized enough for his intelligence. Within the culture he is seen as successful, powerful, rich, and smart. But the smart piece has not always been widely translated outside of the culture. On a recent appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the video introduction of Jay-Z still focused on the traditional ways in which manhood and success have been defined in America: money, power, ownership, and beautiful women (Hurt, 2006). However, the larger article written about Jay-Z in *O Magazine* took a different perspective, with Oprah interviewing him and

**Table 1.**

Lyrics	Notes
<p>“I Want to Talk to You,” Nas (Jones, 1999)</p> <p>I wanna talk to the mayor, the governor, the . . . president I wanna talk to the FBI, and the CIA, and the . . . congressman . . . I’m just a black man why y’all made it so hard, Damn . . . gotta go create his own job Mr. Mayor imagine if this was your backyard, Mr. Governor imagine if it was your kids that starved Imagine your kids gotta sling crack to survive, Swing a mack to be live, cart ack to get high . . . Mr. President, I assume it was negligence, Your streets are upside down and I’m here to represent</p>	<p>The need for poor communities to have voice and to be heard by the American power structure Black male unemployment Lack of political empathy and understanding of the life of the oppressed Drug-related crime Street violence The role of the hip-hop artist to loudly speak the truth and serve as a “street” representative for those being ignored by society</p>
<p>“Changes,” Tupac Shakur (1998)</p> <p>I see no changes wake up in the morning and I ask myself is life worth living should I blast myself? I’m tired of bein’ poor and even worse I’m black My stomach hurts so I’m lookin’ for a purse to snatch Cops give a damn about a negro pull the trigger kill a n* he’s a hero Give crack to the kids who the hell cares one less mouth on the welfare First ship ’em dope and let ’em deal to brothers Give ’em guns step back watch ’em kill each other It’s time to fight back that’s what Huey said 2 shots in the dark now Huey’s dead</p>	<p>Nihilism in the Black community Poverty and racism Socioeconomics that lead to crime Racial police brutality Lack of social concern for poor communities Government corruption Black-on-Black crime Silencing of Black activists Need for unity Need for community love Need for concrete and holistic strategies and efforts toward change</p>

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

Lyrics	Notes
<p>I got love for my brother but we can never go nowhere unless we share with each other</p> <p>We gotta start makin' changes</p> <p>Learn to see me as a brother instead of 2 distant strangers</p> <p>And that's how it's supposed to be</p> <p>How can the Devil take a brother if he's close to me?</p> <p>I'd love to go back to when we played as kids</p> <p>But things changed, and that's the way it is</p> <p>We gotta make a change . . .</p> <p>It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes.</p> <p>Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live and let's change the way we treat each other.</p> <p>You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do what we gotta do, to survive.</p>	
<p>"Mathematics," Mos Def (Smith, 1999)</p>	<p>The song's title is a play on words. It articulates the charge of the emcee to sum up life. Additionally, he creatively uses numbers throughout the song to further complicate the lyrics</p>
<p>Working class poor better keep your alarm set</p> <p>Streets too loud to ever hear freedom ring</p> <p>Say it backwards in your sleep, "It's dangerous to dream"</p> <p>It's a number game, but shit don't add up somehow</p> <p>Like I got, sixteen to thirty-two bars to rock it</p> <p>But only 15% of profits, ever see my pockets like</p> <p>Sixty-nine billion in the last twenty years</p>	<p>The daily realities of poverty-line living that causes you to always be on call, always be on guard, always be attached to a 9-to-5 reality rather than a life of hopes, dreams, and optimism</p> <p>The ways in which artists are not equal partners in the entertainment industry</p> <p>Misdirected government priorities</p> <p>Drug-trafficking laws and the criminal justice system</p> <p>Drugs and health</p>

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

Lyrics	Notes
Spent on national defense but folks still live in fear ... like	Lack of education and misdirected priorities
Sixteen ounces to a pound, twenty more to a ki	Tracking and tapping capabilities now present with mass mobile phone usage
A five minute sentence hearing and you no longer free ...	An emcee's job is to sum up life
Like nearly half of America's largest cities is one-quarter black	Strict sentencing laws and the criminal justice system
That's why they gave Ricky Ross all the crack	Poverty
Crack mothers, crack babies and AIDS patients	Unemployment and violence
Young bloods can't spell but they could	Poverty and prison
rock you in PlayStation ... like	Multiple ways that millions of peoples' lives are not their own
40% of Americans own a cell phone	The various ways that society treats its citizens as numbers; a lack of a humane experience
So they can hear, everything that you say when you ain't home	In the end, those on top need
I guess, Michael Jackson was right, "You Are Not Alone"	to be concerned about all of
You wanna know how to rhyme you better learn how to add	those below because when the
It's mathematics ...	oppressed reach their breaking
Yo, it's one universal law but two sides to every story	point, everyone will feel it; there
Three strikes and you be in for life, mandatory	is power in numbers
When the average minimum wage is \$5.15	
You best believe you gotta find a new grind to get cream	
The white unemployment rate, is nearly more than triple for black	
So frontliners got they gun in your back Bubblin crack, jewel theft and robbery to combat poverty	
And end up in the global jail economy Stiffer stipulations attached to each sentence	
Budget cutbacks but increased police presence	

*(continued)*

**Table 1. (continued)**

Lyrics	Notes
<p>And even if you get out of prison still livin Join the other five million under state supervision This is business, no faces just lines and statistics From your phone, your zip code, to your S-S-I digits The system break man child and women into figures Two columns for who is, and who ain't n* Numbers is hardly real and they never have feelings But you push too hard, even numbers got limits Why did one straw break the camel's back? Here's the secret: the million other straws underneath it—it's all mathematics</p>	
<p>“American Dreamin’,” Jay-Z (Carter, 2007)</p>	
<p>This is the shit you dream about with the homie steamin’ out Back-back-backing them Beamer’s out Seems as our plans to get a grant Then go off to college, didn’t pan or even out We need it now, we need a town We need a place to pitch a tent, we need a mound But For now, I’m just a lazy boy Big dreaming in my La-Z-Boy In the clouds of smoke, been playin’ this Marvin Mama forgive me, should be thinkin’ bout Harvard But that’s too far away, [my peoples] are starving Ain’t nothin’ wrong with aimin, just gotta change the target . . . You’re now in a game where only time can tell Survive the droughts, I wish you well . . . Survive the droughts? I wish you well? How sick am I! I wish you HEALTH I wish you wheels, I wish you wealth I wish you insight so you could see for yourself</p>	<p>Having a smoke and dreaming with your friends about one day making money Deferred dreams in the ghetto Poor people also feel the urgent need to stake a claim and find a place in the world Realities of poverty that redirect positive life goals toward here and now, concrete financial realities. Also speaks to the fact that ambition is still present in the heart of a street hustler—but lack of options, lack of critical thought, lack of principles, etc. have caused him to redirect his dream Time undoubtedly will run out for a street hustler A person living in poverty is thirsty, his life itself is a drought so I wish him a well (a water supply), but I also wish him well (to be okay and to do well in life), I wish him the things that will transport him out of poverty: wheels, wealth, insight</p>

finally mentioning his talent, his community experience, and his intelligence (Winfrey, 2009). Jay-Z's intelligence is beginning to peak through the curtains of the stereotypes. On a recent taping of *Real Time With Bill Maher*, Bill Maher presented Jay-Z with the printed body of his work, which composed an encyclopedia-length text (Sutton, 2009). On the show, the two men discussed the depth of writing involved in hip-hop. Maher shared his personal opinion that the lyrics of hip-hop music are much more important than those found in other forms of popular music because of their centrality to serious social issues and political problems. On the *American Gangster* album, Jay-Z demonstrates creativity first in the way in which the album is constructed: Each song is a progression that, when heard from beginning to end, tells the classic story of the rise and fall of a hustler. And within each song, the artist displays his mastery of lyrical style and content. As demonstrated in Table 1 in "American Dreamin'" (Carter, 2007), his literary skill with plays on words and metaphors, the rich meaning of his words, and his delivery make him exceptional. Jay-Z is an artist largely known and applauded for the fact that he does not write his rhymes on paper. Other, younger artists, like Lil Wayne, have also begun touting memorizing and freestyling as a show of their genius (Rodriguez, 2009). However, when one examines the complexity of the lyrics that artists like Jay-Z, Talib Kweli, Nas, Dead Prez, Ras, Mos Def, Black Thought, Andre 3000, Rakim, and Tupac have written, it is apparent that it is not how they record their music but rather the rich content and meaning of the lyrics that make their work a literal stroke of genius.

In the article "Mr. Nigger: The Challenges of Educating African American Males in American Society" (Jenkins, 2006b), I discuss hip-hop's merit as an alternative space of intellectual inclusion for Black men. In the article, I provide the following praise for the content in some hip-hop songs:

The lyrics of these artists summarize in less than five minutes and in a poetic form many of the key aspects that researchers have come to align with the black male experience in America—poor health, negative interactions with the criminal justice system, love for family, social oppression, violence, social rage and frustration, community leadership and activism, depression, prison industry complex, enslavement, unemployment, poverty, and the need for communal and self love. (p. 148)

And beyond the content knowledge being offered forth through their music, as previously mentioned, the writing talent is noteworthy. Throughout each song, the writers have used metaphors, similes, puns, and various forms of word play. Their work production also has merit in its mastery of the

schemes and tropes of stylistic writing and speaking. In many ways, hip-hop music is a contemporary continuation of the great intellectual tradition of the Harlem Renaissance. The strong social, economic, and political critiques of many rappers echo the artistic resistance of Langston Hughes's works, like "Let America Be America":

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
 I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
 I am the red man driven from the land,  
 I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
 And finding only the same old stupid plan  
 Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.  
 I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
 Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
 Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land! Of grab the gold!  
 Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
 Of work the men! Of take the pay! Of owning everything for one's own  
 greed! (Hughes, 1938)

The ethic behind songs like Tupac's (1998) "Changes" and Mos Def's (Smith, 2002b) "Mr. Nigger" conjures up memories of Claude McKay's (1922) "Outcast":

For the dim regions whence my fathers came  
 My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.  
 Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;  
 My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.  
 I would go back to darkness and to peace,  
 But the great western world holds me in fee,  
 And I may never hope for full release  
 While to its alien gods I bend my knee.  
 Something in me is lost, forever lost,  
 Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,  
 And I must walk the way of life a ghost  
 Among the sons of earth, a thing apart.  
 For I was born, far from my native clime,  
 Under the white man's menace, out of time.

Undoubtedly, Harlem Renaissance artists are the reason hip-hop artists have a platform to speak so freely today. The foundation of creative energy,

passion, and courage that this group of intellectuals created during the renaissance ushered in a new form of political license for writers, poets, and musicians. Everyone was included in the cause—everyone was considered to be a thinker. Using a new genre of music, hip-hop artists are still critiquing, reflecting, and artistically navigating the racial and class-based experience in America. They carry forward the torch. But it also must be said that in proving or arguing hip-hop's worth as an intellectual art form, it should not *have* to be similar to another art era that is more respected and more familiar. While recognizing and appreciating the family tree and the artistic genealogy, we must still allow the new generation to stand on its own two feet. Hip-hop is intellectually worthy simply because of its content. Its worth does not lie solely in the fact that it continues a tradition. Its worth does not rest solely in the fact that it mirrors the resistance of the past. It is worthy of intellectual appreciation simply because truth expressed through a politic of imagination and creativity is worthy of praise whenever it is exhibited.

### *A Call to Move Beyond Pathology: Expanding the Conversation*

There is so much potential for the intellectual identity of the artist and the broad consumer culture that identifies with hip-hop. Identity in hip-hop culture has been and in small pockets continues to be about absolute excellence, a strong sense of self-efficacy, and a pursuit to be the best. Hip-hop is a cultural space where individuals who have been kicked out of schools, locked out of opportunity, and imprisoned in oppression have created a space where they can shine, excel, and be great (Jenkins, 2006b). In their music, artists from KRS-One to the Roots to Jay-Z have always talked about their greatness, their skill, and their aim to be the best. It is questionable whether this ethic of excellence has been clearly seen through the smog of stereotypes obstructing our view.

As bell hooks (2004) points out, "Now more than ever before, the dark forces of addiction, of violence, of death seem to have a more powerful grip on the black male soul than does the will to live, to love, to be healthy, and whole" (p. 159). This is a situation our society has created. And it is up to us to fix it. We must love the Black male mind that we have so severely neglected, ignored, and demented. The strength of our families, the health of our communities, the diversity of our companies, and very clearly, the population of our prisons all depend on the strength of Black male self-efficacy.

It is time to expand the traditional conversations that we have been having about identity in hip-hop. Moving beyond pathology means artists moving beyond glorifying one-dimensional and often fake identities in their music and lyrics. First, artists need to see themselves fully. I am suggesting that artists need to love and appreciate their minds and see themselves as more than the kid that made it out, more than the guy that used hip-hop as a hustle, and more than the wind-up doll playing whatever role society demands for a dollar.

Additionally, the ways in which media and entertainment corporate structures market artists also requires criticism, protest, and renewal. Consumers need to show up mentally and physically in the marketplace. Not only should we evaluate how our beloved culture is being molded, but we must also communicate our criticism via retail and online stores. We literally buy into the identity of the ignorant, oversexed thug every time we buy a song. And to move beyond pathology, we as consumers and critics of hip-hop need to indeed become more critical in our thinking about the art form. At the same time that we hold some artists accountable for the harmful art that they produce, we also have to ensure that we hold up those artists that are shining examples of brilliance. We have had many necessary conversations in the past few years about what is wrong with hip-hop music. It seems both necessary and timely to now suggest that we also examine how hip-hop can heal the self-concept of our young people. We have talked misogyny and violence. And it is a conversation that needs to continue. But lets add to the agenda. To borrow the framework of hip-hop legends Salt-N-Pepa, let's talk about intelligence.

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**Bio**

**Toby S. Jenkins** is an assistant professor of integrative studies and higher education at George Mason University.