

Joakim Karna Frydeblad

## Concerning Black Lives

Examining Contemporary Hip-Hop Song Lyrics as Oral Poetry, and What Insight These Lyrics Can Give in to the Present Experiences of African-Americans in the United States.

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to look at contemporary hip-hop songs as a form of oral poetry, and what insight close reading these song lyrics can give in to the present experiences of African-Americans in the United States. Firstly, this thesis focuses on features and characteristics of hip-hop, and oral poetry, in order to examine what these two oral forms have in common, and why hip-hop should be regarded as oral poetry. Secondly, this thesis attempts to close read or analyze hip-hop song lyrics from contemporary artists: Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino and Cardi B., in order to learn what insight these can give into the present experiences of African-Americans in the United States today.

## **Sammendrag**

Denne avhandlingen forsøker å forklare hip-hop som en form for muntlig poesi, og hvordan hip-hop sangtekster kan gi innblikk i samtidskulturen til afro-amerikanere i dagens USA. Først så tar avhandlingen for seg særtrekk og kjennetegn ved hip-hop, og muntlig poesi, for å utforske hva disse to muntlige sjangerne har til felles, og hvorfor hip-hop bør regnes som en form for muntlig poesi. Avhandlingen forsøker også, og analysere sangtekster av amerikanske samtidsartister, Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino og Cardi B., for å utforske hvilke innblikk disse kan gi en til å forstå samtidskulturen og opplevelsene hos afro-amerikanere i dagens USA.

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## **Contents**

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>SAMMENDRAG.....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF KENDRICK LAMAR'S “HiiPOWER” .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>WHAT IS HIP-HOP: HIP-HOP ORIGINS AND CHARACTERISTICS.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>ORAL CULTURE AND POETRY: ORAL CULTURE ORIGINS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO HIP-HOP.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>CLOSE READING OF WORKS .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>“REDBONE” (2016) BY DONALD GLOVER (CHILDISH GAMBINO).....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>“BRONX SEASON” (2017) BY BELCALIS ALMÁNZAR (CARDI B.) .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>RELEVANCE FOR TEACHING PROFESSION .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>DISCOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>APPENDIX A – HiiPOWER BY KENDRICK LAMAR .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>APPENDIX B – REDBONE BY CHILDISH GAMBINO .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>APPENDIX C – BRONX SEASON BY CARDI B. ....</b>	<b>6</b>



## **Introduction**

Black Lives Matter. The phrase was first coined as a post on Facebook in 2013 by Alicia Garza, and gained momentum after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who killed 17-year old Trayvon Martin (Cobb, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The phrase was intended as an affirmation of the lives of African-Americans and a community distraught by the Zimmerman verdict (Cobb, 2016). Since 2013, the phrase and hashtag have been featured heavily in media discourse, most often concerning news about: police brutality, shootings of unarmed African-American men, and the Black Lives Matter movement (hereafter referred to as BLM). BLM is unlike previous civil rights movements of the past, in that it favors decentralized leadership and non-hierarchical structures (Cobb, 2016). Former communication strategist for BLM, Shanelle Matthews, states in an interview from 2016 that: “We focus on those marginalized within black liberation movements, imposing a call to action and response to state-sanctioned violence against black people, as well as the virulent anti-black racism that permeates our society” (Bhambhani, 2016).

Former United States President Barack Obama said in 2016, that the movement was effective in highlighting the issues that African-Americans face, but that it should be more pragmatic and work with political leaders and organizers to craft solutions, instead of criticizing outside the political process (Shear & Stack, 2016). President Obama seems to express a frustration that many in the political establishment class share in regard to this new wave of activism, as it appears unfamiliar to those in the older generations. One explanation is that this new generation of civil rights activists want to forge their own path. They see previous methods as outdated, or that these yield marginal results. In contemporary society, the presence of social media, smartphones, and the 24-hour news cycle are also significant because they highlight and add visibility to the issues which BLM is facing, such as fighting against structural oppression and working for the affirmation of black lives. In addition, the brutality and militarization of law enforcement in the US are also important to note in this context.

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<sup>1</sup> Trayvon Martin was a black teenager who was shot by George Zimmerman, and fatally wounded on February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida (Hamacher & Emmanuel, 2012)

At the same time, many great African-American artists are achieving success in popular culture through music such as hip-hop. One of the ways that we gain insight into African-American history and culture is through popular and contemporary culture. Hip-hop is one of these instances where popular culture and history merge into each other. The lyrics of hip-hop are often quite crude, profane, and deal with many different themes, such as black history, police brutality, achieving fame, and love. However, from a superficial perspective, hip-hop song lyrics in themselves can appear to lack substance and to be problematic in terms of gender, sexuality, and violence. The genre itself has broad appeal, especially among young people. Since one of the primary goals of the humanities is to study culture, both contemporary and past, I believe that these lyrics are worth studying, and that one can gain cultural competence and a broader understanding of history, socio-economics, language, and poems through listening to, and exploring what they have to say.

### **A brief analysis of Kendrick Lamar's "HiiPower"**

However, before going into further detail, I want to provide an example of the kind of lyrics that will be analyzed in further detail later on. Kendrick Lamar Duckworth (1987-), or as he is more commonly known, Kendrick Lamar, is one of the most famous and successful American hip-hop artists today, having gained many accolades for his work. Lamar is from Compton, Los Angeles, and his work is often inspired by his upbringing and life in this area (Baker, 2016, p.216). In 2018, Lamar became the first hip-hop artist to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his album *DAMN.* (Flanagan, 2018). The Pulitzer Prize Board called the album “a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life.” (DAMN., by Kendrick Lamar, 2018). Since Lamar is such an influential and popular figure in contemporary hip-hop music, his lyrics can serve as a model for what a close reading of hip-hop song lyrics can teach us about history, politics, and society. “HiiPower” is the final song from his 2011 debut album *Section.80*, which serves as a imagined origin story to the artist Kendrick Lamar (Hodge, 2019, p.40). Therefore, the speaker in the song is Lamar, but a past version of himself, as the album follows Lamar before his rise to fame.

One of the most central themes in this song is the idea of black history and pride. There are references to geographical and historical locations in Africa, like the pyramids in Egypt and the Serengeti. Also, one can find allusions to other elements of African and African-American history, such as slavery and the civil rights movement in the United States. Lamar does this by invoking the names of African-American leader figures: Martin Luther, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Fred Hampton, and Marcus Garvey.

Martin Luther King jr. (1929-1968) was a famous non-violent civil rights leader and worked for the advancement of people of color through the specific aims of negotiation, self-purification, and direct action (King, 1964, p.79). Malcolm X (1925-1965) was also a civil rights leader, who was considered a champion of black nationalism and was in opposition to Martin Luther King jr.'s ideas of organizing, most notably, they disagreed on non-violent resistance (DeCaro, 1998, p.180). Huey Newton (1942-1989) and Bobby Seale (1936-) were founders of the *Black Panther Party*, a revolutionary socialist political organization that also emphasized black nationalism (Seale, 1970, p.92). Fred Hampton (1948-1969) was the leader of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, and was notably murdered by the Chicago police (Haas, 2019, pp.i-iv). Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was also a noted figure in African-American history and called for African-Americans to return to Africa and promoted a pan-Africanist ideology (King, 1964, p.22).

In the first verse, Lamar hints to a conflict of allegiance between two figures.

Visions of Martin Luther staring at me /  
Malcolm X put a hex on my future, someone catch me /  
I'm falling victim to a revolutionary song /  
(Lamar, 2011)

By contrasting Martin Luther King Jr.'s policy of passive resistance and non-violence, with the more controversial and revolutionary ideology of Malcolm X, the song dramatizes two very powerful and different stances against inequality and oppression: that of peaceful or violent response. The speaker notes that Martin Luther King Jr. is staring at him, and this might suggest some feeling of guilt because he does not agree with all of his views.

Visions of Martin Luther staring at me /  
If I see it how he seen it, that would make my parents happy /  
(Lamar, 2011)

This conflict also becomes more evident at the beginning of the second verse. If the speaker had followed the example of Martin Luther King Jr., then he would have done something his parents would have been proud of — implying that he has not made his parents happy or proud. In some way, he wants to and feels guilty for not being able to do so. Had Lamar followed Martin Luther King Jr., he could have made them happy knowing that he was a law-abiding and peaceful citizen. However, Martin Luther King Jr. was also considered polarizing in his time, and later gained more widespread acceptance in the United States. Signs of this acceptance and the celebration of his legacy can be found in streets named after him, or Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday which is observed on January 20. Secondly, there is a generational aspect in terms of Martin Luther King jr. and his legacy, as many older African-Americans see him as an example of an American success story. He was able to influence politicians and authorities to enact change through meaningful legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>2</sup> However, since Martin Luther King jr. was murdered, his death illustrates the history of violence towards African-Americans. Consequently, this is something that Lamar must also relate to.

Violence is thus another central theme in this song lyric, and there are several references to killing, death, explosions, and other violent acts.

I'm standing on the field full of land mines /  
Doing the moonwalk, hoping I blow up in time /  
(Lamar, 2011)

One such example of violence is in the second verse, and this pertains to the speaker's inner state. "The field full of land mines" is an image that dramatically represents how, as an African-American male, the speaker feels that there are potential dangers outdoors. In the public sphere, he is surrounded by danger, including harassment. Literally, one could interpret

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<sup>2</sup> Landmark pieces of civil rights legislation which aimed to bring an end to discrimination in terms of segregation and employment. They also aimed to end literacy tests for voter registration and establish poll watchers in order to avoid abuse (Davis, 2001, p.xxii).

it as unprovoked harassment from law enforcement, or physical assault. There is also an existential aspect to these because Lamar is seen first and foremost as black and male, not as a human being.

There is an interesting double meaning in the last line. The phrase “to blow up” is slang for achieving success or acquiring fame. In addition, there is also the literal meaning to explode physically, which makes sense if the speaker is standing on a field full of land mines. Furthermore, in a figurative sense, the phrase also means that a situation has gotten out of control. Therefore, Lamar wants “to blow up” (achieve success) in order to avoid being “blown up” (maimed or killed). Secondly, the moonwalk is also important, as it is the iconic dance move that Michael Jackson would perform. The moonwalk, as Jackson performed it, involves “walking” backward and became an iconic part of his persona (Pugh, 2015, pp.241-244). It could be seen as not being able to know what dangers one might face, while at the same time moving forward or having momentum. Furthermore, Jackson was one of the most successful African-American artists of all time. Lamar, in other words, hopes to escape the dangers of being African-American and male, by becoming accepted as a rapper and performer.

In addition to its interesting portrayal of the realities of being a black male in the US, the lyric is notable for several formal features that are not dissimilar to poetry. Firstly, the use of repetition that occurs throughout the song, is an *incremental repetition*. An example of this can be seen in how the last two lines in each verse are similar — adding both a sense of continuity and development.

While you mothafuckas waiting, I be off the slave ship /  
Building pyramids, writing my own hieroglyphs //

So get up off that slave ship /  
Build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs //

Cause we been off them slave ships /  
Got our own pyramids, write our own hieroglyphs //  
(Lamar, 2011)

In the first verse, Lamar links his achievements to cultural events of the past. Here he appears to dismiss his listeners as “mothafuckas,” a negative and pejorative term.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to keep in mind that, among young people who frequently use it as slang, it has a different set of connotations, and indeed is often used as a filler for “you all”. Stating that his listeners are “waiting” could suggest that they are still in captivity since they are waiting to be free, while he already is.

Later in the second verse, Lamar is addressing his listeners, telling them to “get up off that slave ship.” It is meant to be imperative. Historically, one would be restrained by chains on a slave ship, and thus getting up would be impossible. But as in the poem “London” by William Blake, one could argue that the restraints are mind-forged manacles (Blake & Lincoln, 1991). Therefore, Lamar is saying that these chains are no longer real, but purely the restraints of ideological, social and cultural structures more than physical ones. The chains represent the cultural oppression which African-Americans historically have faced and continue to face to this day. Figuratively it also means one should not accept the position that has been assigned to oneself by others.

However, it could be argued that Lamar does not fully acknowledge the structural racism that still oppresses people of color, and which makes it difficult to rise up. While some can, others cannot escape the economic circumstances, and institutional racism that surrounds them. Yet, one can argue that this is a reflection of the American mentality of success: it is achievable for anyone willing to try and work hard enough. Lastly, in the third verse, Lamar uses “we” and “our” for the first time, indicating a sense of community and belonging — adding contrast to the individualism he represented in the beginning. The use of past tense is noteworthy, indicating that the history of slavery is now in the past, and that one should move forward together in unity.

Furthermore, another example of this dynamic between continuity and development can be found in the way in which Lamar invokes the pyramids and hieroglyphs. Pyramids are the tombs of great leaders, monuments to a great civilization, and also a reminder of mortality. Hieroglyphs were an ancient system of writing used by the Egyptians. Consequently,

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<sup>3</sup> This term is thought to have its origin in African-American folk history, as being a reference to white slave owners who would savagely abuse the bodies and minds of black women (Alim & Smitherman, 2012, p.122).



pyramids and hieroglyphs are examples of works that outlast the maker. By invoking and linking himself to these works, Lamar seems to indicate confidence that his works might outlast him. Moreover, this could be interpreted as Lamar setting himself up as a kind of leader, stating that he is going to build his own pyramid. However, since Lamar also states that “we got our own pyramids,” he invokes a shared sense of community. Thus, one could argue that he wants to be a community leader, someone who can bring people together. In terms of leadership, there is additionally a notion in the paradigm of leadership, which Lamar sets up by contrasting Martin Luther King jr. and Malcolm X. Thus, it could be argued that he is envisioning himself as a leader like these two central figures in modern African-American history, but representing a different path than Martin Luther King jr. and Malcolm X — inspiring change through his music and lyrics.

Since hip-hop is first and foremost an oral genre, the performance does not correspond exactly to the written transcription. Therefore, one should always listen to the recorded song as well as reading the lyrics. In terms of oral language, it becomes apparent that Lamar is using African-American Vernacular English.<sup>4</sup> Although several linguistic and grammatical features are clear, one of the most easily recognizable is the use of the invariant form of *be*. Rickford (1999) explains that one of the morphological features of AAVE is that the verb “be” will have an invariant form for the habitual aspect (p.6). One instance of this can be found in the penultimate line of the first verse. “I be off the slave ship”. Secondly, there is also the case of stressed “been”, which can be found in the bridge part of the song. A stressed “been” is used to mark a remote phrase, an action that happened or the state came into being a long time ago, as in “she been” instead of “she has been” (Rickford, 1999, p.6). An example is found in the second line of the bridge: “We been down for too long but that's alright”.

It is also important to note that some of the words would not rhyme if a non-AAVE speaker had performed them. For instance, in the first verse, third and fourth line, there is an end rhyme with the words “song” and “clone”. Another instance is the third verse, fourth and fifth line, where there is end rhyme with the words “Audi” and “autopsy”. Although there is no fixed rhyming pattern in the song lyric, there are instances with both internal rhyme and end

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<sup>4</sup> African-American Vernacular English or African-American English is a non-standard variant of English spoken most often by African-Americans in the United States. Linguist define it as an ethnic variant, even though it is not spoken by all African-Americans, and note that it is particularly popular with young people. There is some disagreement on whether it should be seen as a language on its own, and even on what the correct terminology for it should be (Davies, 2014, pp.66-71).

rhyme. From line ten in the first verse and towards the end of the verse, there are several instances of internal rhyme (miss you / issue / televised / tell the wise / instrumental / mental / imagination / nation). In in the first six lines of the second verse one can find end rhyme (me / happy / cheek / week / peak / weak / week).

In terms of vocabulary, the language is not complex but includes features such as profanity and figurative language. Interestingly, the amount of profanity is relatively small in comparison to other works of Kendrick Lamar.<sup>5</sup> Profanity is not uncommon in hip-hop lyrics, but one reason why this song uses less profane language than other song lyrics is that it tries to fit the subgenre of *conscious hip-hop*. Forman & Kohl (2010) explains that conscious hip-hop is a subgenre of hip-hop music that emphasizes criticism of authority, power figures and society in general: it is often regarded as realism rap (n.p). Words like “revolutionary” and references to “fight the system” can be seen as indications of this focus on conscious hip-hop. This is not to say that all conscious hip-hop eschews profane language. However, it should be noted that some scholars suggest that Lamar belongs to the subgenre of *gangsta’ rap*, because his lyrics often are first-person narratives about feeling disenfranchised in urban inner-city environments (Baker, 2016). I will discuss the difference between these in more detail later, but it is important to note that they share some similarities. Nevertheless, I believe that in this song Lamar could be classified as conscious rapper.

Rhythm is an essential part of both hip-hop and poetry, and thus poetic *meter* also becomes an interesting aspect of hip-hop lyrics. Rhythm is felt in language when one speaks or listens to someone who is speaking. Abrams (1985) explains that meter can be defined as the rhythm of stresses structured into a recurrence of regular and approximately equal units (p.101). These equal units are called foot or feet. In English poetry, there is ballad meter, which consists of a quatrain with alternating four and three-foot lines in *abcb*, or sometimes, although less frequently, *abab* rhyming scheme (Dugaw, 2012a, p.119). This thesis will go into some further detail about ballad form later on.

Common meter, which is found in hymns, is almost identical to ballad meter, yet while the number of syllables might be different, the amount of beats per line is the same. Since hymns are sung, the syllabic differences are often coped with by altering the duration of the syllable.

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<sup>5</sup> See “Backseat Freestyle” from his album *good kid m.A.A.d city* (2012) as an example of a song lyric that is arguably more explicit.

Moreover, one of the primary reasons that this feels natural is because composers will try to achieve a regular rhythm through a combination of syllabic and musical stress. Music allows for greater flexibility in the verbal patterns of ballads and hymns, and sung performances enliven and manage apparent prosodic irregularities in the text (Dugaw, 2012b, p.120). The connection between hymns and ballads have their origin in the emergence of the English Protestant tradition, and the development of choral songs (Dugaw, 2012b, p.120). In the African-American musical and cultural tradition, Christianity is also important, as the sermon also represents an oral form in its own right. Yet, one should also acknowledge the influence of other oral forms like folk songs and spirituals.<sup>6</sup> Although spirituals are not hymns, and therefore will often have irregular meters, they align themselves with Christian imagery, stories, and themes.

One example of a spiritual is “Go Down Moses”, as this spiritual represents a link between Lamar's vision of himself as a leader or Pharaoh, and the Biblical story itself. In addition, there are parallels between the Israelites who were slaves under the Pharaoh in Ancient Egypt, and African-Americans who were slaves in the United States.

When Israel was in Egypt's land /  
Let my people go /  
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand /  
Let my people go /  
(Work, 2013, p.165)

Since the meter is irregular, a scansion of the text will inevitably be metrically complex, nevertheless, it is apparent that there is a rhythm. Consequently, this same argument can be made about hip-hop, as it is complex in terms of meter and uses music to cope with irregularities. This thesis will not focus on meter, but instead, features such as imagery, figurative language, rhyme and sound features will be examined.

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<sup>6</sup> Spirituals evolved in the United States between the 17th and 19th centuries, during slavery, and expressed a collective African-American folk aesthetic based on oral stories of injustice and oppression. They are often characterized by (1) a leader/soloist calls out, and the congregation responds, (2) musical lines consisting of short syncopated rhythmic patterns and (3) long phrases with a slow tempo and also irregular meter (Kirk-Duggan, 2006, p.998).

In this brief analysis of Kendrick Lamar's song "HiiPower" I have attempted to clarify several elements that highlight contemporary aspects of US society, history, as well as language and poetics. One can argue that these lyrics give insight or add commentary on what it is like to be an African-American male in the US today. This can be found in the allusions to police brutality, and the images of violence that are featured in the song. Secondly, there are historical references in the song lyric, which can be seen as important in order to understand the history and culture of African-Americans. Lastly, the poetics and literary elements that can be found in this song lyric are not dissimilar to those which constitutes oral poetry. While this brief analysis has only discussed a few of them, such as repetition, figurative language, internal rhyme, end rhyme, and meter, there are other devices such as alliteration and intellectual rhyme, which has not been discussed. Further on, this thesis will look at different characteristics and elements of oral poetry in comparison with hip-hop to support the claim that hip-hop can be regarded as a form of oral poetry. In addition, the educational aspect of using hip-hop songs in the classroom should not be ignored. The new English subject curriculum states several competence aims where one could argue for the inclusion of song lyrics in teaching. This thesis will discuss both advantages and challenges in using hip-hop song lyrics in the classroom later on. In summary, this thesis will aim to look at contemporary hip-hop songs as a form of oral poetry, and how close reading these song lyrics can provide insight in to the present experiences of African-Americans in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In order to examine a contemporary subject such as hip-hop, many of the sources will often be online sources, and print sources are fewer due to the digitalization of information, but the privileging of print sources is one that I acknowledge and respect, but in order to discuss and examine contemporary culture, online sources must be included and used.

## What is hip-hop: hip-hop origins and characteristics

In a traditional sense, hip-hop can be defined as a musical genre that originated in the United States and uses musical techniques such as sampling, DJ'ing<sup>8</sup> and MC'ing<sup>9</sup>, with a strong emphasis on elements from jazz, funk, soul, and rhythm & blues music (Bradley, 2009, p.xv). However, hip-hop should also be considered a subculture, which encompasses clothing, visual art, dancing and language. Secondly, it is important to note that hip-hop is often presumed synonymous with *rap*. Although this is technically correct I will offer a useful distinction between the two: rap can be defined as a *technique*, a method used by the MC or more commonly known as the *rapper*, to speak in rhyme, whereas hip-hop can be seen as referring to the *genre* itself (Chesly, 2011, p.132). Furthermore, I would argue that this means that although rap may be used in hip-hop, it is not an absolute necessity. Lastly, hip-hop is a feature of contemporary culture, and thus it continues to change and evolve, which is why modern hip-hop can be interpreted as a broad genre and culture with several characteristics. Before I discuss these characteristics, I believe that one should be aware of the historical origin of the hip-hop genre, as it is interconnected with several other elements of African, and African-American history and culture.

The earliest roots of rap can be traced back to the West-African bardic tradition, where the bard or griot tells a story of either historical nature or based upon a heroic individual (Keys, 2008, p.6). The bardic tradition is defined by using instruments and song, to sing tales which were transferred orally. The notion of orality should not be underestimated in regard to African-American communities, as oral forms have long been integral to shape and maintain their culture (Price-Styles, 2015, p.11). During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, millions of Africans were forcibly removed and transported across the Atlantic, in an event which became known as *The Middle Passage* (Klein, 2017, p.1). Yet, even with events such as this, African oral traditions were able to survive and became the basis for new developments within music and culture in the United States. Keys (2008) explains that because of slavery and the way Africans were forcibly removed from both their culture and language, they transformed the new language and culture which they faced through an African prism (p.7). Moreover, this can be seen in the development of spirituals, work songs, and other oral traditions such as folktales.

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<sup>8</sup> A *disc jockey* (DJ) is the person who plays recorded tracks for a live audience often for the purpose of dancing. In hip-hop, the DJ is the background band and creates the mix of music which allows the rapper (Hansen, 2015, p.42).

<sup>9</sup> *Master of ceremonies* (MC) is a person responsible for creating rhyme and rap to the beats which the DJ plays (Bradley 2009, p.1).

Subsequently, the notion of an African prism can be helpful in order to understand the historical origins of many significant African-American cultural and musical traditions such as blues, jazz, funk, soul and later hip-hop.<sup>10</sup>

In his book, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop*, Adam Bradley (2009) explains that hip-hop has its modern origin in the 1970s in The South Bronx, New York City (p.xv). Firstly, one of the main factors that should be accounted for is the demographics of the borough. During the 1970s, the demographics were rapidly changing, as more immigrants and people of color were moving into the borough, while white people were moving out to the suburbs (Roberts, 2016). The reports at the time were focused on the area as deprived, impoverished and at fault for its current situation. “This is the South Bronx today — violent, drugged, burned out, graffiti-splattered and abandoned. Forty per cent of the 400,000 residents are on welfare, and 30 per cent of the employable are unemployed” (Tolchin, 1973). However, in more recent years there has been an effort to retell the story of the Bronx in the 1970s, with particular focus on the experiences of those who lived there (Vázquez & Hildebran, 2019). In an interview with *Jacobin Magazine*, documentary filmmaker and Bronx resident Vivian Vázquez, explains that institutional policies such as redlining, zero enforcement of housing codes and investigations in arson were to blame for the urban decay, not the inhabitants of the Bronx (Kurti, 2019).<sup>11</sup> Although the area was struggling in terms of economic opportunity and poverty, it seems that the media was focused on shifting the blame from the structural elements, downward to an individual level, thus blaming the community of those who lived there.

Furthermore, the trend of declining economic opportunity was not isolated exclusively to the Bronx in this time period. After nearly two decades of high economic growth caused by the end of the Second World War, the US economy experienced stagnation in its growth and inflation in terms of prices (Dietrich, 2014, pp.61-66.). Lastly, it is worth mentioning that hip-hop evolved as a part of youth culture. As the predominantly white youth culture helped spur a cultural shift in the 1950s and 1960s, with rock and roll music, hip-hop evolved from black

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<sup>10</sup> Although this thesis will not go into further detail in discussing the development of the musical aspects and genres that helped influence hip-hop, I find that Portia Maultsby’s model is particularly helpful to look at to briefly explain the historical and musical development of African-American music (Maultsby, 1995, p.185).

<sup>11</sup> Redlining can be defined as a practice of *de facto* segregation in the United States where the federal government systematically denies mortgage insurance in and near African-American communities (Rothstein, 2012, pp.vii-viii).

youth culture. Price (2006) explains that the diverse youth culture of the 1970s was a part of a next-generation civil rights movement, since inner-city youths were often ostracized, marginalized and oppressed (p.1). Moreover, this is why hip-hop evolved and emerged in several other cities and areas across the United States in approximately the same period of time. Chang (2011) mentions that young people of color saw their opportunities being foreclosed due neoliberal policies that starved local governments, and they were also marginalized by black leaders who appealed more to electoral politics rather than youth activism (p.242). Therefore, it is in many ways a situation that is affected by multiple various causes, and on different levels.

By the middle of the 1980s, the genre had gained momentum and was heading into popular culture. Groups such as Public Enemy and N.W.A became popular in mainstream culture, but were still highly controversial due to their image.<sup>12</sup> The two groups also represent different genres, and moreover, two distinct trends which were shaping 1980s hip-hop: conscious hip-hop and *gangsta' rap*.<sup>13</sup> Baker (2016) argues that gangsta' rap was a first-person street narrative from disenfranchised, young African-American men about the conditions and environments in which they resided in (p.1). While both conscious hip-hop and gangsta' rap emphasized realism in their lyrics, the latter was considered less politically motivated and therefore more commercially viable for record labels, yet it still aimed criticism at authority figures such as law enforcement (Forman & Kohl, 2010). Moreover, the gangsta' archetype can be seen as a truth-teller who disrespects authority, focuses on authenticity and highlights agency and overexaggerates the abilities of the rapper in their environment (Nyawalo, 2013, p.466). Furthermore, this archetype of the gangsta' is thought to be rooted in other parts of African-American culture. Most notably, through the trickster archetype found in African-American folktales, in characters such as Brer' Rabbit and Stagolee (Nyawalo, 2013, p.462). The gangsta' archetype and the traditional trickster archetype found in both folk literature and mythology share some similarities. As Lewis (1998) argues that the trickster is an intelligent boundary-crosser, who challenges authority and embodies ambiguity (p.7).

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<sup>12</sup> Public Enemy was an American hip-hop group which consisted of: Chuck D (Carlton Douglas Ridenhour), Terminator X (Norman Lee Rogers), Professor Griff (Richard Griff) and Flavor Flav (William Drayton). The group was formed at Adelphi University in Long Island, New York in 1985 (Price, 2006, p.177).

<sup>13</sup> Most notably through such songs as "Fuck the Police" (1988), "Straight Outta Compton" (1988) from N.W.A, and "Fight the Power" (1990), "Bring the Noise" (1988) from Public Enemy.

Lastly, hip-hop culture today is not the same as it was when it first started in the Bronx in the 1970s. Berry (2018) argues that as hip-hop grew increasingly more popular and inevitably became commercialized, it influenced other popular music genres — and borrowed elements from other genres (p.105). Evidence of this can be found in examining the current Billboard Hot 100 chart for music, and most often some elements from hip-hop will be involved.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, this opens the discussion on whether hip-hop has adapted to the mainstream of popular music or if it is opposite. However, while this is an interesting topic in regard to music history and musicology, I will not discuss it further. Furthermore, the language of hip-hop has also evolved, as terminology is also changing: words like MC is less frequently used today, and the DJ no longer spins physical records but digital ones. The distribution of music has also undergone massive changes, with the advent of streaming technology, digitalization and less physical sales of records (Baker, 2016, p.214). Consequently, all of these changes reflect an important fact, and that is that hip-hop has experienced great changes since its conception — as it will continue to do because it is a very contemporary genre. I believe that this is something to remember when discussing not only hip-hop, but this thesis in general.

This thesis will now present some central characteristics of hip-hop. Although hip-hop culture is vast and contains many different elements, I will focus on those that are central to both poetics and music. One of these characteristics is a musical technique known as sampling.<sup>15</sup> In many artistic expressions, creating a link to the past has long been essential to establish oneself within the tradition. In hip-hop, this has been a regular occurrence since its conception, partly because the genre has its origin in musical elements such as soul, funk, and rhythm & blues (Williams, 2015, p.206). An example of sampling would be in the song “Express Yourself – Remix” (1988) by N.W.A<sup>16</sup>, which samples the song “Express Yourself” (1970) by Charles Wright & the Watts 103<sup>rd</sup> Street Rhythm Band. The original from 1970 is ideal for sampling because it features a melody, chord progression and drum groove that is repeated several times without lyrical interruption<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> As of the last week of April 2020, six out of the top ten songs from Billboard’s Hot 100 chart are from artists that use some form of rap in their songs: Drake, Roddy Rich, Doja Cat, Post Malone, Future and Justin Bieber (Billboard, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Borrowing a musical phrase or elements from one recording and incorporating these into another (Williams, 2015, p.206).

<sup>16</sup> Niggaz With Attitude was an American hip-hop group from Compton, Los Angeles which started in 1986. Original consisted of the members: Easy-E (Eric Wright), Dr. Dre (Andre Young), DJ Yella (Antoine Carraby), Ice Cube (O’Shea Jackson) and Arabian Prince (Mik Lezan) (Price, 2006, p.175).

<sup>17</sup> A drum groove is a rhythmic pattern with the same tempo and rhythm (Middletown, 1999 p.143).



Another key characteristic of hip-hop is the fact that it does not have a defined rhyming structure or pattern. Therefore, this means that there can be variation in terms of rhyming, and this works to create tension. Bradley (2009) explains that rap rhyme is essentially about balancing the listener's expectation, thus on one end of the spectrum, you could have constant rhyming regularity and on the other end you could have no rhyme at all (p.41). As such, this becomes a balancing act, where only using a fixed rhyme pattern or only using no rhyme at all could lead to a loss of tension. Nevertheless, it is important to note that hip-hop features many of the same types of rhyme that can be found in written and oral poetry. Among the most common forms of rhyme are end rhymes and rhyming couplets, but internal rhyme and approximate rhyme are also prevalent (Bradley, 2009, p.41).

Importantly, *self-fashioning* is another essential characteristic of hip-hop. The term is accredited to Stephen Greenblatt (1980) in his work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, and it refers to how the English aristocracy in the Renaissance would construct their own identity and persona following socially acceptable standards (Greenblatt, 1980, pp.1-5). In some regard, the same can be said with many hip-hop artists, who often construct their own identities through the lyrics of their songs. Richardson (2006) explains the concept of *braggadocio* as when a rapper asserts their superb and exaggerated skills, wealth, or other features and abilities (p.11). This can be seen as a kind of self-fashioning, and is an important tool in the construction of one's image. Likewise, the emphasis on realness and an individual's background could also be seen as self-fashioning. Realness and authenticity in hip-hop is dualistic because it involves *telling* narratives and also *being* narratives (Perry, 2004, p.91). This often involves that the rapper will boast about their success, while also promising to remember where they came from.

James Baldwin, wrote an opinion piece for *The New York Times* in 1979, where he discusses what he called Black English, as a language on its own. "People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate" (Baldwin, 1979). In similar fashion, the argument which Baldwin presents here can be transposed to the language of hip-hop, as it too is a product of the conditions that the genre was formed in. On one hand, this means that it can be seen as a creative expression or response, to articulate events and circumstances that for the majority of Americans, might seem unfamiliar or even alien. However, the language of hip-hop as a response, is often criticized for being explicit, coarse and profane. The use of slang is also a

feature of hip-hop language, as slang is often associated with informality, and used to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group (Eble, 1996, p.11). Another central element to hip-hop language that is associated with informality is profanity. The use of profanity has also led to some assumptions about hip-hop language, namely that it lacks vocabulary, and uses profane language to compensate. However, research suggests that this is a common misconception, and that a high frequency of swear words can be an indication of a healthy vocabulary (Jay & Jay, 2015, p.257). Another central feature of the language of hip-hop is the usage of repetitions. A common misunderstanding is that the use of repetitious language indicates a lack of vocabulary, but this is not the case. Mazur (2012) explains that repetition is central to African-American oral tradition and that it shapes the African-American musical tradition as well including blues, spirituals and hip-hop (p.1169). In brief summary, what becomes apparent is that there are several misconceptions about the language of hip-hop, and that it represents a certain lack of vocabulary, most notably through the use of profanity and repetitious language. To a larger extent, this reflects the reality that hip-hop has for a long time been perceived and mischaracterized by certain assumptions that have made a lasting impact in the public consciousness.

## **Oral culture and poetry: oral culture origins and its significance to hip-hop**

Oral culture predates written culture, and oral poetry belongs in the broader realm of oral culture. Bessinger (2012) writes in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* that oral poetry can be divided into two different types: oral traditional poetry and oral textual poetry (p.545). The main difference between the two is that oral textual poetry is often composed or written down, yet performed orally (p.545). Contemporary popular music and songs can be said to fit into this category. Finnegan (1977) maintains that most definitions of oral poetry should include ballads, folksong, and what she calls, “American negro verse” and popular music (p.4). Whereas oral traditional poetry is poetry that is both composed and transmitted orally, distinguished by two different categories: the epic and the ballad (Bessinger, 2012). Abrams (1985) explains that epic poetry is a long narrative poem, told in a grand style and focuses on a heroic or semi-divine figure, whose actions depends the fate of either a tribe, nation or all of humanity (p.51). The ballad form is a poetic narrative, written in verse, and often orally transferred through generations and from geographical locations,

therefore authorship is often also presumed anonymous. The most common form is the ballad stanza, which is a quatrain in alternate four- and three-stress iambic lines, where usually only the second and fourth line rhyme (Abrams, 1985, p.12). An example of the ballad form is “Sir Patrick Spens” by Walter Scott from his work *Child Ballads* which has a Scottish origin.

To Noroway! to Noroway! / *A*  
to Noroway oer the faem! / *B*  
The king's daughter to Noroway / *A*  
'Tis thou maun bring her hame. // *B*  
(Scott, 2005, p.103)

In this stanza one can also find another central feature of oral poetry, namely repetition. Oral poetry is known for its nature of repetition, and this can be anything from repeating certain sounds, phrases or entire verses (Bessinger, 2012, p.545). There are several reasons as to why this is, but one of the most common explanations is that it is a tool to help performers remember the poetry which they are performing. Mazur (2012) explains that repetitions in the language can be found in several literary devices and is essential in structuring poetic elements on different levels (p.1169). This thesis will now discuss some more central aspects of oral poetry, and in order to limit the potential scope, I will primarily focus on three main aspects; performance, transmission and composition. Later on, I will examine and compare these in order to look at how hip-hop can be constituted as a form of oral poetry.

One of most central aspects of oral poetry is the fact that it is performed, and that emphasis on performance is important in order to understand the work itself. Subsequently, performance is one of the primary elements that distinguishes oral poetry from written poetry. While it is true that one can read oral poetry if it has been transcribed, complete realization is dependent on performance: an oral poetic work should be listened to, not merely read. Finnegan (1977) explains that the text in itself does not constitute the oral poem and therefore a consideration of its performance is required (p.28). Also, what constitutes a performance is important to note. Traditional performances of oral poetry have focused on reciting, singing or speaking (Finnegan, 1977, p.118). In terms of the ballad, one might argue that the performance leans more towards singing, whereas rapping in hip-hop might fall somewhere in-between speaking and singing. One of the great features of performance is that it allows for variation, and is

dependent on the context in which it is being performed. Therefore, the social context and the audience also play a role in the performance aspect of oral poetry.

Another important aspect of oral poetry is transmission. The transmission of oral poetry refers to how it has moved from different geographical locations, from performer to performer, and how it has been distributed. In terms of written works of literature, these are transferred and stored using writing and spread with the help of printing technology. However, oral poetry has, for the most of history, not been able to be stored or transferred on a massive scale. Using the ballads as an example, one can find what is often called a romantic view or approach to oral transmission. Finnegan (1977) explains that this approach is characterized by the assumption that near word-for-word transmissions over longer periods of time, are possible, and that this is what is a part of the purely oral tradition (p.139). However, this can be seen as a somewhat unrealistic approach to transmission. What is perhaps more realistic is that oral transmission depends on memorization, and this will lead to variations since human memory is imperfect. Therefore, oral transmission can be regarded as a process in which the elements that are transferred deteriorate, changing with each transmission (Finnegan, 1977, p.141).

Lastly, composition is an overlooked and yet somewhat complex aspect in terms of oral poetry. One of the reasons why composition is difficult is because it is inherently problematic to discuss composition in irrefutable terms. Finnegan (1977) argues that it becomes difficult to find concrete evidence in terms of composition, mainly because there have been instances where oral and written culture have influenced each other, and that claims of word-for-word oral transmissions often tend to be undependable or overexaggerated (p.20). As such, it becomes rather difficult to note if an oral poetic work is composed by one author, or several authors, and how much it has changed from its original form. Therefore, composition in oral poetry is often dependent on several other factors such as memorization, improvisation and the influence of subsequent culture of writing.

To discuss hip-hop lyrics as oral poetry, one must also be able to argue that they are in fact *oral poetry*. Finnegan (1977) uses three different ways of qualifying poems that are oral: composition, mode of transmission and lastly its performance (p.17). Most hip-hop lyrics are what one can define as oral textual poetry since they are written compositions, but performed orally. Since the performance is the key part, composition is often somewhat overlooked. Yet

it remains one of the main reasons why hip-hop song lyrics can be considered oral poetry, because it is difficult to find a single authoritative source text. If one is to look up hip-hop song lyrics online, the results will inevitably be varied. One of the reasons for this is because fans will often transcribe the lyrics of their favorite hip-hop artists. Secondly, there is an element of variation which relates to performance, and that artists will naturally have some variation in their performances of songs at certain times and places. One example of this is non-explicit versions without profanity and coarse language. In fact, because the Federal Communications Commission, which regulates broadcasting in the US, subjects network television and radio to censor profanity and offensive language, artists that perform on live or recorded television will have to clean up their lyrics (Green, 2005, p.358).<sup>18</sup>

The mode of transmission of hip-hop lyrics may not seem the same as that of the ballad and other oral forms of poetry. However, they are transmitted in the modern sense by the artist's influence and reputation. Finnegan (1977) also argues that transmission via radio, records and other such media should be regarded as a type of transmission because the result is the same (p.169). Moreover, because of the internet, artists are less reliant on record labels and can produce and publish their music independently, through online services such as SoundCloud.<sup>19</sup> Transmission of songs in the digital age can thus be seen as a more independent process than in the early years of the genre. Furthermore, the artist is more than the author or the performer. In many ways they are essential in the transmission of their work by being able to promote and spread their brand, influence and music, via traditional live performances and social media.

Lastly, in terms of performance, there are many shared elements to that of oral poetry performances and hip-hop performances. Variation is an important element in terms of performance, because in both oral poetry and hip-hop, social context and performance are linked together. One of the ways that this is evident is the role of the audience at performances of hip-hop, this can be in the form of clapping, making cheers and noise, often called, *call and response*. Richardson (2006) explains that skilled MCs will set up a pattern of

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<sup>18</sup> In the court case from 1978, *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation* the United States Supreme Court ruled that the FCC has power to regulate indecent material and therefore subjects network television and radio broadcast to follow a set guidelines as to uphold this (Green, 2005, p.358).

<sup>19</sup> SoundCloud is a music streaming service in which anyone can upload their own music. This has spawned a subgenre of rap in contemporary hip-hop, called *SoundCloud rap*, and is characterized by being a disruptive and punk-like form of hip-hop music which has become recently popular in the 2010s (Caramancia, 2017).

having the audience respond to a lyrical verse line, a question and an answer (p.11). This is what is often referred to as a call-and-response pattern. Furthermore, the inclusion of these live audiences' responses on recorded hip-hop music contributes to the notion that the role of the audience is essential in the performance aspect. In addition, the use of repetitious language in hip-hop performances could be seen as a tool in order to help with memorization. Bradley (2009) argues that rhyme patterns, homonyms and puns are all part of a foundation of memorization (p.xviii).

In brief summary, it becomes apparent that there are similarities between oral poetry and hip-hop songs, as they share elements such as repetition, performance, transmission and composition. In order to illustrate these similarities I have chosen to focus on the ballad as an example of an oral poetic form that can be comparable to hip-hop. It is with these aspects of oral poetry in mind that I advance the claim that hip-hop can and should be regarded as oral poetry. Moreover, I believe that to further examine hip-hop song lyrics as oral poetry, one should endeavor to close read or analyze hip-hop song lyrics in order to gain insight into what these lyrics are able to reveal about the contemporary experience for African-Americans in the United States today.

## **Close reading of works**

Any close reading or analysis of contemporary hip-hop song lyrics faces the challenge of authorship. Negus (2011) argues that, historically, the concept of authorship in music has been centered around intellectual property and copyright (p.234). However, authorship in music is a more complex, composite or collective activity, because it involves: composers, arrangers, producers, backing musicians, managers, and record label executives. As a result, writing credits for songs can, in some instances, have no clear sources.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, I will focus on the person or persons identified as the author or authors of their works. One of the primary reasons for working with this assumption is because hip-hop is oral poetry, and thus the performance aspect will be most important. Moreover, there is often an assumption that the performer or singer corresponds with the writer, and that a song lyric describes the emotions of the person singing it. In other words, that there is no distinction made between author and persona or character, as there often is when discussing poetry. In this analysis of “Redbone”, I intend to prove otherwise, that dramatic characters and other personae can be featured as well.

### **“Redbone” (2016) by Donald Glover (Childish Gambino)**

Donald Glover (1983-) or as he is known by his stage name, Childish Gambino, is an American hip-hop artist, from the Stone Mountain, Georgia. Glover first began rapping and releasing his own music for free online, while in college studying dramatic writing at NYU Tisch School of Arts (Alfuso, 2012, p.35). Glover breaks with the stereotypical notion of a hypermasculine male hip-hop artist. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he explains that: “for a few years, if you weren’t a thugged-out gangsta’, you simply didn’t exist in hip-hop” (Fitzpatrick, 2011). His diversity of talent is prevalent in his writing, song lyrics and performances, this also allows him to be more experimental, and his 2017 album *Awaken, My Love!* was considered out of the ordinary: as it was unlike much of his previous work. I believe that Glover is an important figure in contemporary hip-hop, and also one of those who can be thought of as pushing the boundaries of the genre, and this is why his lyrics should be examined.

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<sup>20</sup> On the vinyl record and compact disc of *Awaken, My Love!* by Childish Gambino, Donald Glover is listed as the writer on all tracks. However, *Gangsta’ Bitch Vol.2* by Cardi B, is only available in digital format, and there is no clear indication of a type of writing credit on the digital copy. However, online sources such mention three other writers: Klenord Raphael, J. White and “SwiftOnDemand” (Almánzar, 2016)

Childish Gambino's "Redbone" was initially released as a single from his third studio album, *Awaken, My Love!*, in December 2016, with musical arrangements by longtime collaborator Ludwig Göransson (Pareles, 2016). Although Glover usually raps in his songs, he decided to sing on his third album. Pareles (2016) suggests in an album review in *The New York Times* that Glover's sharp turn from rapping to singing is an indication of the album's homage to the roots of hip-hop — namely soul and funk music from the 1970s (Pareles, 2016). Online responses and fan analyses of the song often claim that it is about the importance of staying aware (woke) in terms of political and social issues in order to combat injustice (Lefevre, 2019). However, I believe that this is a song that ironizes the term "woke", and that it is about a complicated relationship between an African-American male, and a light-skinned African-American woman. The woman sees herself as politically aware, and uses the relationship with the male persona as evidence of her openness to relationships with people of color who are darker-skinned than her.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that, while the expression "stay woke" became increasingly popular during the time of the BLM movement, it was also subjected to mocking particularly online. In other words, while #BLM went on to thrive and became prominent in the modern-day civil rights movement, #staywoke did not — and suffered the fate of becoming a popular ironic phrase (Pulliam-Moore, 2016).

Before beginning this analysis, there is one important note to be made. In "Redbone," there are multiple voices, literally, in terms of singers, and figuratively, in terms of characters in different sections of the song. In the verse, there is the "I-person," a male character whose statements appear to suggest that he is a dark-skinned African-American male. In the pre-chorus a female voice, imagined by the male character, appears, and she is the eponymous "redbone," a young light-skinned African-American woman. She is either responding to what the male character has said, or is saying/thinking these things which he imagines her to be thinking. Lastly, in the chorus, there is a composite of several voices, including the I-person and others. In the verses, there are only two pronouns that are used, "I" and "you". Therefore, when using "I" it is the I-person speaking, and "you" is when he is addressing or referring to the woman character. Furthermore, in the pre-choruses, there are also only two pronouns used, "you" and "we,". This suggests that she is speaking directly to the male character, or to other male characters, about whom the main character is jealous.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines woke as an American slang term, and that it means being aware of and attentive to issues of racial and social justice. The phrase "stay woke" originated in AAVE, but has carried over into mainstream language and culture as well (Woke, 2020).



In terms of structure, the song contains two verses, two choruses, and two pre-choruses, where the second verse is shorter than the first, and the second chorus is longer than the first. It also follows a rhyme pattern in the verse, which can be called *monorhyme*, or *aaaa* (“light/right/right/pride”, with “pride” as a half or approximate rhyme) which is repeated in the first verse but not in the second verse, and in the chorus, this becomes *abcbabc*.

The title of the song refers to the slang term for light-skinned African-American women who have red undertones in their skin color due to mixed-race heritage (Maxwell, Abrams & Belgrave, 2016, p.1490). Due to colorism within the African-American community, light-skinned women are also seen as more desirable (Maxwell, Abrams & Belgrave, 2016). In the second verse, the male character describes the woman as “My peanut butter chocolate cake with Kool-Aid” (Glover, 2016). Peanut butter, chocolate, and Kool-Aid contain the colors light-brown, dark-brown and red which mixes into light-brown with some red undertones. Therefore, one can assume that the female character in the song is a light-skinned woman.

Daylight /  
I wake up feeling like you won't play right /  
I used to know, but now that shit don't feel right /  
It made me put away my pride /  
(Glover, 2016)

Daylight is not just a time of day, but an indication of enlightenment or illumination, of seeing clearly (as in the term “wake up”): the male character has reached a newfound realization. The “you” character does not “play right”, or “play fair”: she is behaving improperly, not keeping to the rules of the game, suggesting either that she is unfaithful or that she is not as invested in the relationship as the speaker would like. As the verse progresses, there is a slow development of resentment and anger in the speaker, and these feelings climax in the chorus: continuing to be with this woman has come at the cost of being humiliated, and having to put away his pride as a man. The connotations of pride are also significant because they represent sin and sinful behavior, as pride is often considered a type of original sin, where one is putting themselves above God and anyone else (Lewis, 2009, p.121).

So long /  
You made a nigga wait for some, so long /  
You make it hard for boy like that to go on /  
(Glover, 2016)

Firstly, words like “nigga” (derived from *nigger*) and “boy” have historically had negative connotations in the context of African-Americans: “nigga” is a racist slur, while “boy” is also a pejorative when referring to an adult African-American male, as it was used to signal a hierarchical difference between adult white males and black males (Rahman, 2012, p. 138). So it is unusual that the speaker uses these terms about himself, and thus something about this relationship makes him feel negatively about himself.<sup>22</sup> The “something” seems to be that the female character made the speaker “wait for some”, meaning she did not immediately consent to sex, which made him feel insulted or degraded. Subsequently, this made him feel racialized and emasculated.

The speaker in the pre-chorus is the female character, but it is unclear if she is addressing the speaker, or another man, or even several men. Therefore, it is possible that this is the woman as the speaker imagines her to be, sexually promiscuous with other men. Although the “it” is vague, the woman appears to be objectifying herself, inviting someone to “have it”: to have her body. Although Glover sustains a fairly high-pitched voice throughout most of the song, there seems to be an increase in pitch in the pre-chorus, which marks the shift from the first speaker to another. Moreover, when performed live, there is a call-and-response pattern, where most of the lyrics in the pre-chorus are sung by female chorus singers and Glover only briefly responds.<sup>23</sup>

If you want it, yeah /  
You can have it, oh, oh, oh /  
If you need it, ooh /  
We can make it, oh /

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<sup>22</sup> There is currently disagreement on whether the use of the word “nigga” within the African-American community should be viewed as acceptable as it attempts to reclaiming the word, or if it should be regarded as equally as offensive as “nigger” due to the historical connotations (Rahman, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> See Donald Glover’s performance on the American talk show *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, aired December 14, 2016 (Michaels et.al, 2016).

If you want it /  
You can have it //  
(Glover, 2016)

The use of the pronoun “we” would usually suggest the woman and the speaker, but in this case it is ambiguous. It is not clear if the woman is inviting someone else to have sex with her, or indeed if this is even her speaking at all. Furthermore, her language seems like an exaggerated male fantasy, and therefore, may well be the product of the male speaker’s jealous imagination. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Glover first sings in a very high voice, almost like a castrato, and then an even higher voice that is still his — he is performing as a woman.

In the chorus, there are several voices and speakers at once, including that of the I-person.

But stay woke/  
Niggas creepin’/  
They gon’ find you /  
Gon’ catch you sleepin’ (Ooh) /  
Now stay woke /  
Niggas creepin’/  
Now don’t you close your eyes //  
(Glover, 2016)

The word “niggas” is plural, and the pronoun “they” is ambiguous, but it is not clear if the I-person identifies himself as part of the “they” group. In other words, if this implies separation or affiliation with the group. “They” is most likely a group of other men that the female character has been in similar types of relationships with as the I-person. However, since he uses the term “nigga” about himself, there is the possibility that he will join this group. At the very least, “redbones” are being threatened: “creeping”, “find you”, “catch you” suggest a narrative of pursuit and capture.

Moreover, there is a double meaning in the term “woke”: the woman is “woke” in the political and social sense, but the I-person is “woke” in the literal sense that he has woken up

and realized that he is being used.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the first line becomes an ironic statement addressed to the female character from the I-person. In the chorus, it becomes apparent that Glover is using negative stereotypes about African-Americans to play on white fears.<sup>25</sup> The “niggas” are a group, rather than individuals, and are given animalistic traits: they crawl like snakes; they are active at night (when most people sleep) and are associated with (personal and cultural) nightmares; they are a sexual threat (they are a group of men drawing closer and closer to a single woman). The I-person is threatening the woman with revenge, because he suspects that she allows herself to be seen in public with him in order to gain cultural capital. Therefore, he warns her to “stay woke” (alert) because she is in danger, while implying that she cannot stay awake forever and thus not escape this danger. Glover transforms the speaker into a black stereotype in order to suggest that this is actually how the woman sees him: the irony is that he then promises to enact her deeply racist fears.

To briefly summarize, “Redbone” is song about a complex relationship between a dark-skinned African American man, and a light-skinned African-American woman. The female character is presumed to be in a non-exclusive relationship with the male character, and is promiscuous. The male character feels resentment and anger for being used by the female character as a means of publicizing her political and social awareness. Glover presents an ironic dramatization of the notion to “stay woke”: as the male character believes that the woman refuses to have a deeper relationship with him because she is essentially racist, and he then seems to speak in the person who corresponds to some of the more extreme stereotypes about African-American men. However, this is a clear example of a song that plays with ideas of political correctness, and both positive and negative racism, where the author adopts the mask of a disappointed lover who is unable to understand his rejection except in racial terms. This leads him to then becomes the toxic black male that he thinks the woman is afraid of. It is a clever but also deeply unsettling song.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The phrase “stay woke” is significant, because of the ambiguity in regards to verbal tense in AAVE. It does not have the simple past tense that is found in Standard English (Green, 2002, p.36-37). In SE “woke” is the simple past tense of “wake”, and therefore it does not translate directly into SE.

<sup>25</sup> White fears of black insurrection or violence is rooted in the history of slave rebellions, and has affected relations between white people and African-Americans throughout US history. One of the best known examples of slave rebellions is the Nat Turner rebellion, which occurred in Southampton County, Virginia on August 22, 1831, where Turner believed that he was God-chosen to lead his people and destroy slavery. Initially armed with mostly farming implements, Turner and a group of seven others, killed all the white residents of his masters farm (Joseph Travis), and in the following 24-hours went from farm to farm killing every white man, woman and child they encountered (Greenberg, 2003, p.xi).

<sup>26</sup>Although “Redbone” is unique in its own sense, there are several other songs that deal with some similar themes and narrative characteristics. “Letter Home” and “Heartbeat”, from his debut album *Camp* (2011) deals

## **“Bronx Season” (2017) by Belcalis Almánzar (Cardi B.)**

Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar (1992-), more commonly known by her stage name, Cardi B., is an American hip-hop artist from the North Bronx, New York City, and has recently risen to prominence. She is bi-ethnic with her father being from Puerto Rico and her mother being African-American. She first gained popularity through the use of social media such as Instagram in 2015, and this social media influence was a starting point for her rap career (Weaver, 2018). Almánzar is a popular and emerging figure in contemporary hip-hop. She is from the birthplace of hip-hop, and is a working-class woman who has had to navigate and find success in a male-dominated field. Therefore, I believe that one should examine her lyrics in order to see what further insight Almánzar might give into what this experience is like and what she represents in terms of black womanhood.

Debuted as a single in September 2016, the song “Bronx Season” then made it onto Cardi B.’s second mixtape *Gangsta Bitch Music Vol. 2*, released in January 2017 (the purpose of a mixtape, shorter than full-length albums, is to promote and give a representation of the artist’s abilities, both musically and lyrically).<sup>27</sup> In “Bronx Season,” she raps about the struggle to achieve success, especially in a profession dominated by male artists and heterosexual male attitudes towards women. At the time, she had recently made a commercial breakthrough, and the song can be seen as a response to negative reactions to this newfound success and her own experiences with fame. What I find interesting is that it tells us a great deal about what it is to female professional singer from a Latina and African-American background, while also dealing with personal aspects of the singer’s life.

“Bronx Season” it is written in one long verse and features end rhyme, mostly couplets, but sometimes with as many as four lines ending in the same rhyme (“mic/flight/sight/right”). In the first part of the song, there are several examples of couplets, some of them approximate (“soft/cost/charts/right/overnight/hype”), some of them quite crass (shit/dick, sick/shit), but

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with the topic of infidelity. “III. Life: The Biggest Troll [Andrew Aurnerheimer]”, from *because the internet* (2013) and “Boogieman” from *Awaken, My Love!* (2016) feature the use of pitch-shifting in order to illustrate different characters as a part of the narrative.

<sup>27</sup>In hip-hop culture, the term mixtape most often refers to an independently produced album, which is often given out free of charge in order to promote the artist. The origin of the word comes from the literal cassette tapes, which would contain homemade compilations of music, and the mixtape has most often always been associated with subcultural capital (Williams, 2018, p.488).

there are also multiple examples of internal rhyme (“I kill the show, I get my dough, I catch my flight”/ “What you thought? Yeah you really lost, now you kinda sick”). It is the first song on the mixtape, and therefore it is also an introduction to the rest of the work and to Cardi B.’s repertoire in general. Although she is introduced by someone else (“Ay Cardi, you got somethin’ to say?”), thus giving the sense that the speaker, “I”, is in fact her, the credits for the song include three other writers, so that it is possible that some of the song at least is rhetorical. In other words, it includes statements that are to be expected from a rapper, and that establish her credibility and realness, (“I throw my hands, I hit ’em left, I hit ’em right”) or that attempt to curry favor from those who buy her product (“I love the fans, they fill me up with their ammunition”). Some statements could also be seen as a way to pay due diligence to African-American cultural traditions (“I thank the Lord for every blessing He has given”) however genuine, seems to jar in a song that describes many instances of non-Christian behavior, but it serves to establish links between Cardi B. and other African-American singers of the past, who often included spirituals in their repertoire. One of the most notable examples would be Aretha Franklin, as she is often regarded as the Queen of Soul, and this is most evident in her 1972 album *Amazing Grace* (Rodman, 2018, p.19).

The first four lines consist of a series of questions, and these can be seen as both rhetorical and confrontational: the speaker is demanding respect. There are echoes of Dylan’s “Blowin in the Wind” (1963) here, and these may be deliberate – where Dylan was trying to nudge people to find answers to social and political problems at the time he was writing, Cardi B. seems to be suggesting that the reasons for the obstacles in her way to acceptance and respect may be just as social and institutional, as they are personal.

Now, how much times do I gotta prove these niggas wrong? /  
And how much times I gotta show these bitches I ain’t soft? /  
How many shows I gotta sell out ’fore you get the cost? /  
Why they really tryna front like I ain’t hit the charts? /  
(Almánzar, 2017)

The first question relates to proving herself in a male-dominated profession, as she implies that she is has faced disparagement and opposition from “these niggas,” or in other words, other male rappers. Opposition and resistance to women in male-dominated professions is not something that is new, and although there will inevitably be some variation, this opposition

can take many different forms. Martin & Barnard (2013) argue that there is a negative work-identity perception in regards to women, which signals a prevailing lack of confidence in women's competence (p.7). Therefore, women can experience an increased pressure to prove their skills and abilities due to this negative perception in their competence. Moreover, this is why the speaker dismisses any notion of her not being competent enough, as she asserts herself and attempts to prove other male rappers wrong.

Patriarchy is not always enforced by men only – something Hawthorne touched on in *The Scarlet Letter* (2007) where he describes a group of women complaining that the magistrates have been too lenient with Hester Prynne, and suggesting that she should have been hanged or branded for her adultery (Hawthorne & Harding, 2007, pp.45-47). Cardi B.'s second question acknowledges that not all women are supportive of and in solidarity with the creative endeavors of other women. The use of the word "soft" is interesting in this respect, because it is an adjective that is often gendered as feminine in popular culture. Moreover, it is often framed in a negative manner: a "soft" person is not tough, resolute, or capable of standing up for themselves. In other words, Cardi B.'s denial of softness is not a rejection of femininity as a whole, but that of *hegemonic femininity* as it is negatively defined.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, when she uses the sexist and dehumanizing word "bitch", which is often done by male artists in hip-hop, it could be argued that she is embracing a form of masculinity (as other female performers are sometimes accused of doing).<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, she can be seen as proving or demonstrating that she "ain't soft" because of her harsh language. At the same time she is also distancing herself from the opposite of "soft", women who betray their own cause by being highly critical and negative towards other women in particular. Nevertheless, what is clear is that she feels she has to constantly prove her own worth and value, and that this is wearying. It should also be noted that due to the competitive nature of hip-hop, the speaker is trying to claim superiority above others, both men and women.<sup>30</sup> Lastly, it is important to mention that

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<sup>28</sup>Hegemonic femininity refers to the characteristics and traits that are perceived as womanly, it also assumes the superiority of white over African-American women, valuing those who adhere to white feminine norms by awarding privileges and benefits, while at the same time devaluing those who do not meet the hegemonic standard (Davis et.al, 2018, p.822).

<sup>29</sup> Recent and contemporary artist Young M.A identifies as a lesbian and is often seen as perpetuating the objectification and subjugation woman. Thus she is not challenging the hypermasculine nature of hip-hop and could be seen as emulating some features that are often gendered as masculine (Oware, 2018, p.154).

<sup>30</sup>Almánzar is also known for having an on-going feud with Nicki Minaj, who is one of the most popular female rappers of all time. This feud and constant need to prove oneself, illustrates the competitive nature of hip-hop, and how hegemonic masculinity reinforces this competitiveness on a more general level in society (Hunt, 2018).

Cardi B. appears to want to state her type of femininity, one that is rooted in her cultural, ethnic, and class background, which is why it might be unfamiliar to many.

Furthermore, there is a double meaning in the word “cost,” and this pertains to how success is measured. The speaker implies that she has been commercially successful and that she has sold out all the tickets to her performances. Therefore, one can assume that the word “cost” refers directly to the transactional cost or the price: highlighting the revenue she has gained from her success. Figuratively, it also refers to the personal cost, or the sacrifice, that she has made in order to be successful. Lastly, the speaker questions why certain people act disingenuously, or “front”, even though she is more successful than what they are.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, there are several references to sexuality and sexual acts in the song, and although this is not uncommon in hip-hop, such references usually objectify women. However, here the perspective is female and confident, and perhaps it is because of this that she has faced some online criticism of overt sexuality in both her song lyrics and stage performances. In a video response posted to Twitter on July 11, 2019, Almánzar addresses these criticisms. “I have seen that a lot of people write that female rappers only talk about their pussy and shit... It seems like that is what people want to hear!” (iamcardib, 2019). In this she is commenting on the mainstream success of artists such as herself, emphasizing that the general public or her fans do not seem to necessarily share these critics’ views on female rappers being overly sexual. As a consequence, I believe that it is worth examining the representation of sexuality and Almánzar’s femininity as a bi-ethnic and working-class woman from The Bronx.

Almánzar has been open about her past as an erotic dancer before becoming Cardi B. the rapper, and this is something that reoccurs in her songs as well.<sup>32</sup>

They sleepin’ on me just because I used to strip /  
But it’s all good ‘cause now they wanna get up in my VIP /  
Blowin’ up my phone, sayin’ everythin’ I touch is lit /  
(Almánzar, 2017)

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<sup>31</sup> According to Urban Dictionary, the word front is a slang expression, which means putting on a fake persona or tries to act like something one is not (Front, n.d).

<sup>32</sup>See “Drip” and “Best Life” from her album *Invasion of Privacy* (2018) as examples of songs where she also raps about her past as a stripper.



In the first line, she mentions that people used to “sleep on her” because she used to be a stripper.<sup>33</sup> The speaker is reporting that she has been slighted and ostracized: this represents an attempt to try and belittle or humiliate her. More importantly, it serves the goal of undermining her confidence as an artist. Subsequently, this highlights the social stigma that sex work, such as erotic dancing, continues to have in contemporary society. Almánzar has been outspoken about her past and mentions she began working as a stripper when she was 19 years old (Weaver, 2018). However, she has also admitted that stripping helped her escape from gang activities because it was a better financial option (Weaver, 2018). Moreover, this is emblematic of a more significant issue, which is the social shaming of women generally for any behavior that is seen as sexually improper, which there are notable examples of in both literature and history. Social shaming is prevalent in *The Scarlet Letter*, as Hester who is publicly humiliated in the marketplace for having a child outside wedlock. In addition there are historical examples in the European women whose heads were shaved after the end of World War II, as punishment for having relations with German soldiers. In comparison to men in hip-hop, social shaming of behavior that is perceived as sexually improper, has not been a concern because overly sexualized males can still be taken seriously by the industry and society — it is evidence of their prowess, their status, while for women it is the opposite.

Hunter & Cuenca (2017) argue that women who feature in hip-hop music videos are often objectified and serve as accessories rather than being independent figures (p.29). Cardi B. thus operates in an androcentric culture, and her frank expressions of female sexuality go against the norm of the male perspective. She speaks for herself rather than being spoken for, and this is seen as brazen. But as the song progresses, the “I” adds hypocrisy and falseness to the charges against those around her: now that she has money, signified by her access to VIP lounges and other exclusive areas, she is the object of excessive praise. The silent treatment has turned to flattery, represented by her phone “blowin’ up” – a figurative phrase meaning that the phone is vibrating excessively because people want to praise her out of self-interest, telling her that everything she does is “lit”, a slang term that implies something is cool or amazing (Blowin’ up, n.d; Lit, n.d).

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<sup>33</sup> Urban Dictionary defines “to sleep on” as an expression that means to be ignored, or that someone does not have confidence in you (Sleep on, n.d).

Cardi B.'s female sexuality disrupts the notion of *hypermasculinity*, which hip-hop is rooted in.<sup>34</sup> One of the best examples of this is the way she invokes not only the language of male artists but the explicit references to sexual acts as well.

No tolerance for a hatin' bitch talkin' shit /  
Only time I hold my tongue is when I'm suckin' dick //  
(Almánzar, 2017)

That last line is somewhat reminiscent of what Lamar said in his song "HiiPower".

Grown men should never bite they tongue /  
Unless you eating pussy that smell like it's a stale plum /  
(Lamar, 2011)

However, whereas Lamar's line can be read as a not uncommon expression of male bravado, (with a not untypical sexist complaint about odors from female genitalia), Cardi B.'s frank, depiction of a sexual act (with amusing half-rhyme) has received a good deal of negative response. This double-standard relates to the hypermasculine nature of hip-hop, but it does show that female artists are not only forging their own path but changing the perceived notions of what is acceptable within hip-hop's conventions. In his book, *Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop Music*, Li (2019) argues that hip-hop's hypermasculine nature evolved during the early stages of the genre's emergence in the late 1980s and early 1990s (p.46). As hip-hop became commercialized, the image of the gangsta', and several other negative depictions of black men, received the most media attention and therefore helped move records from shelves: hypermasculinity then became a feature of hip-hop because it was commercially successful (Li, 2019, pp.45-50). The two examples above from Almánzar and Lamar illustrate a crucial difference in how male and female artists depict sexual acts. Lamar is fairly typical in invoking a negative cultural stereotype that women's genitalia smell bad, but he is also promoting an image of himself as a man with an abundance of choices, and who takes only the finest. Meanwhile, for her it is more matter-of-fact, and she is promoting herself mostly as someone who is not afraid to speak her mind, to confront prejudice against women, while at the same time suggesting that she is not without offers, sexually. However, she does not feel

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<sup>34</sup> "Hypermasculinity is an exaggerated expression of traits, beliefs, actions, and embodiments considered to be masculine. It relies on the understanding that there is ideal normative masculinity. Consequently, it is also an attempt to actively demonstrate masculinity in opposition to femininity" (Levy, 2007, p.325).

the need to degrade the other when talking about her choices, and the fact that she talks of women as agents rather than objects is positive. The double standards with which men and women are judged for sexual activity is, according to Kimmel (2005) and others, a product of gender inequality, and reflects the unequal distribution of power based on gender in contemporary society (p.5). Consequently, I would argue that, as Cardi B. uses the language of male rappers, to create a new expression of confident female sexuality in hip-hop. She thus decreases the male ownership of sexuality in hip-hop, and helps to fight against this unequal distribution of power. In addition, she also features many of the characteristics of the gangsta' archetype: focusing on her realness and frankness, highlighting her agency in a first-person narrative. However, while this archetype is often attributed to male artists, I would argue that she is portraying a female version of this archetype (as the mixtape title also suggests). Therefore, this could be seen as combating an unequal distribution of power, as she is using a common archetype mainly attributed to male rappers, to assert herself and her place within the tradition of hip-hop.

Towards the end of the last century, a character in a Henry James short story said that: "Literature is simply undergoing a transformation – it's becoming feminine" (by which he meant that more women were not only consuming but producing it), and it's to be hoped that this will also become the case in hip-hop (James, 1889, p.371). But in the same story, Darcy defends American English against charges of decay, arguing instead that it developed in response to another climate and topography, and another history: it became different to express different things. "A language is a very sensitive organism. It must be convenient – it must be handy. It serves, it obeys, it accommodates itself" (James, 1889, p.383). This is especially true of African-American Vernacular English as it appears in hip-hop song lyrics such as these: it has its own vital and energetic, vocabulary — and that is part of its originality and attractiveness. Words and phrases such as "front", "hype", "lit", "on sight", "corny" and "throwing shade" may not appear complex, but their meanings are not always obvious, and they are interesting as they sometimes are appropriated into daily and mainstream language, especially by young people. These popular slang expression can be compared to the words and expressions found on the east side of Oslo in what is most often referred to as *kebabnorsk* in Norwegian. This use of slang is not only reflective of Almánzar's age, as most younger people would likely be familiar with these expressions, but also her upbringing in The Bronx. Furthermore, there are elements of her native Bronx accent in the song. One of the distinct features of New York City English is what is known as the raised ə-vowel, or BOUGHT-

vowel – a feature of the NYCE accent that has nevertheless been steadily disappearing since the mid-1950s, especially among affluent white people (Becker, 2014). But, it is still found in Black and Latin communities, which often are regarded as more working-class (Becker, 2014, p.8) One can hear this vowel feature in Almánzar’s pronunciation of words like: soft, cost, charts and office. Interestingly, this feature of her pronunciation is less often found in her later work. Almánzar has even admitted that she had insecurities about her accent (Weaver, GQ Magazine, 2018). Consequently, her pronunciation and accent could also be important in regards to affirming realness and being connected to her Bronx origins.

In summary, “Bronx Season” serves as an introduction to Cardi B’s second mixtape and Almánzar herself as an artist and performer. Although it may at times seem superficial and egocentric, it highlights contemporary issues that women and women of color struggle with, namely achieving success, being able freely to express sexuality and deals with using the language of a dominant force in order to affirm one’s status.

## Relevance for teaching profession

In the new English language curriculum, there are two central competence aims that I would argue open for the use of hip-hop songs in the English Second Language classroom.<sup>35</sup> One of the main benefits is that hip-hop music is a feature of modern-day culture that is very popular with young people, and students in secondary education will have some degree of familiarity and interaction with a selection of contemporary artists and songs: that makes them relatable and interesting. Engaging and motivating the students is an important aspect of a successful pedagogical process. Secondly, the new core curriculum emphasizes that students should be able to gain an in-depth learning perspective, and these lyrics and music, can be useful in terms of in-depth learning about American society today, as they deal especially with the realities of present-day life for men and women from ethnic minorities. It speaks about their ambitions and anxieties, the difficulties they face and their definitions of meaningful, contented, lives, but also the language they use and their (personal and community) history (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2020). As a result, these lyrics touch on important aspects of American culture, language and society, while also being deeply personal. They reveal police brutality, discrimination against minorities, class, gender and culture conflicts both between and within American populations, but also creative enterprise and imaginative skill. Nevertheless, there are challenges to introducing hip-hop lyrics into the classroom, and perhaps the main ones would be the level of profanity, instances of (often misogynist) sexual *braggadocio*, the promotion of substance abuse, as well as the use of discriminatory language. Still, there are works of literature where all of these can be found. In fact, a lot of YA fiction that is popular with teenagers will inevitably feature them as well. Exposing teenagers to texts that use some discriminatory language or deal with issues related to sexuality or alcohol can be an opportunity for the teacher to discuss these things in class and explore — at a safe distance — students' attitudes to and questions about these problematic topics. Therefore, one must be able to find suitable lyrics for the intended group of students, both in terms of age and competence level, and hip-hop is an ideal stage on which to do so.

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<sup>35</sup> The student should be able to:

- Discuss and reflect around form, content and devices in different English language cultural expressions from different types of media, including music, film and video games
- Read, discuss and reflect on content and devices in different types of texts, including texts which the student has chosen themselves (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). (Translation from Norwegian to English provided by me).

## **Conclusion**

The aims of this thesis have focused on proving that hip-hop songs can be regarded as a form of oral poetry, and examine what these contemporary lyrics reveal about the present experiences of African-Americans in the United States today. The thesis has in addition to this, reflected on the educational aspect of hip-hop songs, and how this genre and its practitioners provide rich resources for the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Firstly, in order to study and research hip-hop songs within the field of literary studies, this thesis has shown that hip-hop songs are, in fact, a form of oral poetry. My analysis of Kendrick Lamar's "HiiPower" attempts to highlight what his song and oral poetry have in common, including features such as incremental repetition, rhyme, figurative language and allusion. I have also advanced the claim that aspects of a song's composition, transmission and performance also link hip-hop to oral poetry. Moreover, these song lyrics are educationally useful because they enable us to explore connections between present-day popular culture and literary history. However, I hope that I have shown that they also repay close reading, as students can learn about imagery and symbolism, and about different ways of communicating subjective experience. It should also be mentioned that there is an educational value in exploring the language of these songs, because they illustrate that there are more variants of English.

But I have also attempted to examine what insights contemporary hip-hop songs might give into the lives of African-Americans in the United States, which is why I pay attention to wider contexts relating to ethnic history, gender and class. The lyrics of Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) and Cardi B. (Belcalis Almánzar) reveal essential elements of the cultural moment that is currently unfolding. They give interesting portrayals of the impacts of racism, misogyny, stereotypes, and the politics of our time. Lamar focuses on the connections and long historical struggle for the affirmation of black pride and gives valuable insight into the experiences of being an African-American male in the present-day US. Glover gives insight into the era of woke culture or political correctness, and attempts to expose those who seek to use their awareness and commitment to social justice as a type of cultural capital, without being willing to fight for real change: he also adopts the voice of racial stereotypes to satirize these people, in ways that are unsettling. Almánzar informs of a new expression of femininity, one that is assertive and confident — not afraid to speak the truth, and also

providing insight into the female perspective on the genre of hip-hop and social stigmas that woman are burdened with today. This thesis has also referenced other songs by these artists, in order to illustrate that the issues and themes that are brought up in these lyrics should not be viewed in isolation — but rather in a broader context in regards to the artist's other work.

Furthermore, there are similar characteristics that connect these artists, such as language and tropes, that can be found in their lyrics. In terms of language, while they are from different geographical parts of the US and are also diverse in terms of background, it is apparent that all of them use some features of AAVE in their language and use slang expression frequently. The use of tropes, stereotypes, and archetypes can also be found in these song lyrics. In particular, I would argue that there are characteristics of the gangsta' archetype that can be found in all of the lyrics under discussion, and that this is in part because it fits with the expectations of the genre. The most prevalent trait in Lamar's lyric is his disrespect of authority, but Glover also invokes this quality by playing with negative stereotypes of African-American men, and Cardi B. exemplifies several of these tropes, by belittling her critics, focusing on "realness" and her own talents and success, and showing that she is not afraid to speak the truth. However, this does not imply that these three artists are gangsta' rappers, but rather that they in some shape or form invoke the archetype in their work.

In addition, these texts reveal a great deal about other topics as well, such as history, socio-economics, culture, and language. In the case of hip-hop's history, I make the point that, while it is a modern phenomenon, it has deep roots in many other parts of African-American culture. Furthermore, the lyrics I look at illustrate and emphasize the value of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding them. This approach helps to uncover deeply rooted and diverse cultural elements such as Christianity, music, language elements (e.g. AAVE, slang expression, and sound features), and the complex history of slavery, racism, and struggle for civil rights. In doing so, I hope to show that in order to understand many features of contemporary culture and society, one has to look back at the past and be able to reflect on why it is still relevant today.

It is also important to note some of the limitations of this type of thesis and study. Firstly, the selection of artists will add some limitations to what one can analyze and research because one is dependent upon the discography and works of the artists. Secondly, there are limitations on what to include in terms of analysis and where the focus should be centered (for

instance, while I have mainly focused in this thesis on reading and analyzing texts in literary, cultural, linguistic and historical contexts, it might be argued that I could have focused more on a comparative analysis between hip-hop lyrics and other works of oral poetry). Lastly, it should also be mentioned that the relative lack of scholarly research on the topic of oral poetry and hip-hop can be a limitation. It seems that some of the knowledge central to hip-hop is still somewhat esoteric, and therefore some information will be difficult to source, especially because it is always changing and evolving, as one can see in the instance of slang terms. Nevertheless, I want to also emphasize that there are currently many relevant studies and research into hip-hop. Most of these are very interdisciplinary and can provide interesting perspective on how hip-hop pertains to different areas of the humanities.

In terms of recommendations for further study, there are several avenues that could be very relevant and provide needed insight into hip-hop through the disciplinary lens of literary studies. If one were to focus on a single artist in particular, then there is the possibility to study a selection of their works in a more comparative perspective. Since hip-hop has, in many ways, reached maturity, I would suggest that a reception study of specific artists and lyrics would prove insightful into culture. In addition, there is still much-needed work to be done on meter and rhythm in terms of hip-hop, as this is a complex but very interesting area of study.

I would argue that the contribution made by this thesis to the field of literary studies and scholarship is that it has helped broaden the scope of what can be thought of as literature (or perhaps brought attention to what modern lyrics and historical, oral poetry have in common). Although it is becoming more common to view song lyrics as literature, one should still remember that there is a debate within the field of literary studies as to what is literature, and more importantly, what should be worth studying. This debate came to the surface again when Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016: “For having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” (The Noble Prize In Literature 2016, 2020)

As hip-hop is a popular, oral genre that shares similarities with oral poetry, I advance the claim that it, too, should be regarded as contributing “new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” — and that song itself is a form of poetry (the word “sonnet”, after all, is widely agreed to derive from an Italian word meaning “little song.”) However,



contemporaneity is not itself an argument that hip-hop lyrics are worthy of study in the classroom. The hip-hop songs I have included have been selected because of their innate uniqueness in giving the reader or listener insight into features of culture, history, and language. As the world has become more globalized, it is crucial that one is able to understand the culture of others. Subsequently, humans are all on some level consumers of culture, either through literature, music or art, therefore there is also a need to understand what one is interacting with, when for instance listening to hip-hop. There is, in other words, a humanist purpose in the writing of this thesis within the faculty of the humanities. I hope it contributes to a deeper understanding of, and respect for, the creative productions of another culture. Lastly, I hope that it illustrates the need to stay aware and educated in order to promote openness, tolerance, and to combat systematic injustice.

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## Appendices

### **Appendix A – HiiPower by Kendrick Lamar**

[Intro: Kendrick Lamar]

Everybody put three fingers in the air  
The sky is falling, the wind is calling  
Stand for something, or die in the morning  
Section.80, HiiiPoWeR

[Verse 1: Kendrick Lamar]

Visions of Martin Luther staring at me  
Malcolm X put a hex on my future, someone catch me  
I'm falling victim to a revolutionary song, the Serengeti's clone  
Back to put you backstabbers back on your spinal bone  
You slipped your disc when I slid you my disc  
You wanted to diss but jumped on my dick  
Grown men never should bite their tongue  
Unless you eating pussy that smell like it's a stale plum  
I got my finger on the mothafuckin' pistol  
Aiming it at a pig, Charlotte's web is going to miss you  
My issue isn't televised, and you ain't gotta tell the wise  
How to stay on beat, because our life's an instrumental  
This is physical and mental, I won't sugar coat it  
You'd die from diabetes if these other niggas wrote it  
And everything on TV just a figment of imagination  
I don't want plastic nation, dread that like a Haitian  
While you mothafuckas waiting, I be off the slave ship  
Building pyramids, writing my own hieroglyphs

[Chorus: Kendrick Lamar]

Just call the shit HiiiPoWeR  
Nigga, nothing less than HiiiPoWeR  
Five-star dishes, food for thought, bitches  
I mean the shit is, Huey Newton going stupid

You can't resist his HiiiPoWeR  
Throw your hands up for HiiiPoWeR

[Verse 2: Kendrick Lamar]

Visions of Martin Luther staring at me  
If I see it how he seen it, that would make my parents happy  
Sorry mama, I can't turn the other cheek  
They wanna knock me off the edge like a fucking widow's peak, uh  
And she always told me pray for the weak, uh  
Them demons got me, I ain't prayed in some weeks, uh  
Dear Lord come save me, the devil's working hard  
He probly clocking double shifts on all of his jobs  
Frightening, so fucking frightening  
Enough to drive a man insane, I need a license to kill  
I'm standing on the field full of land mines  
Doing the moonwalk, hoping I blow up in time  
Cause 2012 might not be a fucking legend  
Tryna be a fucking legend, the man of mankind  
Who said a black man in the Illuminati?  
Last time I checked, that was the biggest racist party  
So get up off that slave ship  
Build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs

[Chorus: Kendrick Lamar]

Just call the shit HiiiPoWeR  
Nigga, nothing less than HiiiPoWeR  
Five-star dishes, food for thought, bitches  
I mean the shit is, Bobby Seale making meals  
You can't resist his HiiiPoWeR  
Throw your hands up for HiiiPoWeR

[Bridge: Alori Joh & (Kendrick Lamar)]

Every day we fight the system just to make our way  
We been down for too long, but that's alright  
We was built to be strong, cause it's our life, na-na-na

Every day we fight the system, we fight the system  
We fight the system (Never like the system)  
We been down for too long but that's alright, na-na-na

[Verse 3: Kendrick Lamar]

Who said a black man in the Illuminati?  
Last time I checked, that was the biggest racist party  
Last time I checked, we was racing with Marcus Garvey  
On the freeway to Africa 'til I wreck my Audi  
And I want everybody to view my autopsy  
So you can see exactly where the government had shot me  
No conspiracy, my fate is inevitable  
They play musical chairs once I'm on that pedestal  
Frightening, so fucking frightening  
Enough to drive a man insane, a woman insane  
The reason Lauryn Hill don't sing, or Kurt Cobain  
Loaded that clip and then said bang  
The drama it bring is crazy, product of the late 80's  
Tryna stay above water, that's why we shun the navy  
Pull your guns and play me, let's set it off  
Cause a riot, throw a Molotov  
Somebody told me them pirates had got lost  
Cause we been off them slave ships  
Got our own pyramids, write our own hieroglyphs

[Chorus: Kendrick Lamar]

Just call the shit HiiiPoWeR  
Yeah, nothing less than HiiiPoWeR  
Five-star dishes, food for thought, bitches  
I mean the shit is, Fred Hampton on your campus  
You can't resist his HiiiPoWeR  
Throw your hands up for HiiiPoWeR

[Outro: Kendrick Lamar]

Thug Life! Thug Life!

(Lamar, 2011)

## **Appendix B – Redbone by Childish Gambino**

[Verse 1]

Daylight

I wake up feeling like you won't play right

I used to know, but now that shit don't feel right

It made me put away my pride

So long

You made a nigga wait for some, so long

You make it hard for boy like that to go on

I'm wishing I could make this mine, oh

[Pre-Chorus]

If you want it, yeah

You can have it, oh, oh, oh

If you need it, ooh

We can make it, oh

If you want it

You can have it

[Chorus]

But stay woke

Niggas creepin'

They gon' find you

Gon' catch you sleepin' (Ooh)

Now stay woke

Niggas creepin'

Now don't you close your eyes

[Verse 2]

Too late

You wanna make it right, but now it's too late

My peanut butter chocolate cake with Kool-Aid

I'm trying not to waste my time

[Pre-Chorus]

If you want it, oh

You can have it, you can have it

If you need it

You better believe in something

We can make it

If you want it

You can have it, ah!

[Chorus]

But stay woke (Stay woke!)

Niggas creepin' (They be creepin')

They gon' find you (They gon' find you)

Gon' catch you sleepin' (Gon' catch you sleepin', put your hands up now, baby)

Ooh, now stay woke

Niggas creepin'

Now, don't you close your eyes

But stay woke, ooh

Niggas creepin' (They gon' find you!)

They gon' find you

Gon' catch you sleepin', ooh

Now stay woke

Niggas creepin'

Now, don't you close your eyes

[Outro]

How'd it get so scandalous?

How'd it get so scandalous?

(Oh, oh, baby you, how'd it get...)

How'd it get so scandalous?

How'd it get so scandalous?

But stay woke

But stay woke

(Glover, 2016)



## **Appendix C – Bronx Season by Cardi B.**

Oh, how you doin'?

I'm alright

Man turn this shit up, man

Ay Cardi, you got somethin' to say?

You got somethin' to say, talk to 'em

Now how much times do I gotta prove these niggas wrong?

And how much times I gotta show these bitches I ain't soft?

How many shows I gotta sell out 'fore y'all get the cost?

Why they really tryna front like I ain't hit the charts?

All these labels, throwin' deals from left to right

But I ain't givin' in until they get them numbers right

All these people think that this shit happen overnight

All that flexin' they be doin', shit is all a hype

No tolerance for a hatin' bitch talkin' shit

Only time I hold my tongue is when I'm suckin' dick

So when I see you in the streets, yeah, it's fuckin' lit

And don't be talkin' all that sorry shit, don't flip the script

I see the lights, I hear the hype, I hit the mic

I kill the show, I get my dough, I catch a flight

I see a hater, I'm runnin' down, it's on sight

I throw my hands, I hit em' left, I hit em' right

They sleepin' on me just because I used to strip

But it's all good 'cause now they wanna get up in my VIP

Blowin' up my phone, sayin' everythin' I touch is lit

Actin' cool and wanna fuck me like they wasn't talkin' shit, woah

I let 'em live, let the shady motherfuckers live

Get them the price then it's time to show them what it is

Don't got the bat? Well then what you really tryna pitch?

Don't waste my time, I ain't never been no average bitch

Not to mention, I did my tour and that shit was winnin'

Independent, the headline, award of feelin'

I thank the Lord for every blessing that He has given

I love the fans, they fill me up with their ammunition  
I don't really talk shit but now I gotta off this  
I don't know why bitches think we work in the same office  
Corny bitches tryna keep u, look exhausted  
Wave the white flag, girl, you might as well just forfeit  
My ex told me I was never gon' be shit  
Lookie, lookie now, lookie now, nigga I'm that bitch  
What you thought? Yeah, you really lost, now you kinda sick  
But I ain't never need a nigga, I was always on my shit, yeah  
I used to stare at magazines on the train  
Lookin' at these models like, "I gotta be this one day"  
Fuck around, got myself a name, now I'm gettin' paid  
Left the corny bitches in the grave, so they throwin' shade  
(Almánzar, 2017)

