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## RAP MUSIC: THE SONGS OF JAY-Z AND N.W.A GANGSTA CREW

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### Abstract

Shawn Corey Carter is professionally known as Jay-Z. He is an American rapper, record producer, and entrepreneur. He has written many songs and started his musical career in the late 1980s. The N.W.A. is one of the earliest American hip-hop groups formed in Compton, California. They are one of the most significant popularisers and controversial figures of the gangsta rap subgenre. This group is widely considered the most influential and greatest in the history of hip-hop music. The voices of the African-Americans have been suppressed and their stories are subdued and concealed despite the continuous discrimination and injustices done to them. Many young blacks are incarcerated in prison, they are accused of selling drugs. The lives of the African Americans in the ghettos are uncertain. The police under the administration of the Reagan government have the full authority to put them under custody at any time without any fault of theirs. The black youths suffer injustices due to their identity. The police are cruel, aggressive, and brutal to the black youths. The living conditions of the poor African Americans are bleak. Young African-Americans are compelled to sell drugs due to poverty.

In light of this background, this research article intends to critically examine some of the songs of the African-American rappers Jay-Z and N.W.A hip-hop group. This research study has selected several songs from their albums and examined how African-American hip-hop artists deploy their songs to shed light on the truth of the African-American experiences in the world. The songs intend to question the injustices and discrimination executed by the Ronald Reagan and George Bush governments against the African-Americans, especially the poor African-Americans living in the ghettos. The songs of Jay-Z and N.W.A group symbolizes the suppressed voices of African Americans. The songs as an art form narrate the unseen and untold stories of African Americans.

Key Words: rap song, identity, black narrative, dissent, American prison system

### Introduction

The research study shall begin with a brief background information about rap music and it will be followed by a critical analysis of the songs of Jay.

Z and N.W.A gangsta group. The research study used a qualitative approach as a methodology to delve into the songs of the two aforementioned artists. Some of the qualitative methods employed in this

research study include looking at several music videos of the artists in question, listening to interviews taken by certain news agencies with the artists from YouTube, watching documentaries of the songs and the lives of the artists, and varied other secondary materials.

According to Tatum "Rap is an oral language set against a musical background that dates back to early African-American societies that use tradition to entertain and educate audiences in tribal history and current events." (p.340) The concept of hip-hop has undergone multiple changes with time. In the initial stage, old-school hip hop constitutes simple rapping techniques, and it has been used as a form of entertaining people at parties or grand events. It has no political color. Contemporary rap music has more sophistication and complexity in its lyrics and form. Modern rap music emerged in the lower-class neighborhoods of New York City in the 1970s as a form of cultural resistance and social protest of the African-American youth to their deteriorating economic and social conditions.

Blanchard maintains that "Hip-hop music is generally considered to have been pioneered in New York's South Bronx in 1973 by Jamaican-born Kool DJ Herc." (2016) The deindustrialization has affected and eviscerated the economic base for employment in some segments of the city and there is no harder hit than the South Bronx which contained the poorest section of the poorest borough in the city. Additionally, the inner-city dwellers are victims and not a receiver of the affirmative action introduced and implemented by the state government under the administration of President Ronald Reagan. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar believes that "Hip-Hop understands the elusive cultural politics of contemporary black urban America, the language, dress, style rising out of the Ghettos.... It is a production of the Black Power era and is conscious of the cultural politics that have marginalized black artists who have had their art co-opted by white performers." (p.81) There has been a long controversy within and without the Negro race as to how the Negro should be treated in art—how he should be pictured by writers and portrayed by artists. Since the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans have publicly questioned and confronted

the representations of black people in popular culture, therefore, the hip-hop generation is another form of challenging the representations of black people in popular culture. The ruling period of Ronald Reagan and the Bush Era has achieved its greatest prominence in rap music.

With time, rap music has developed as one of the most demanding music genres in the contemporary American music industry. Consequently, it has begun to encounter multiple challenges and difficulties. Many rappers have succumbed to the pressure of corporate interests. So, the question arises what is authentic hip-hop music in the African-American community? Within the hip-hop industry, there is a huge controversy regarding the authenticity of hip-hop music. Hip-hop fashion trend is publicly condemned by middle-class African-Americans, like Bill Cosby, unaware of its historical roots and the political messages it carries.

Clearance Page writes that "... a 2004 study on low-income black youth finds troubling evidence that hip-hop negatively influences young people by promoting a narrow and problematic notion of black authenticity: The standards of 'black authenticity' promulgated in hip-hop culture are not only too narrow but downright dangerous...." (p.125) Clearance Page hints rap music as a manifestation of underclass culture, perpetrators of crime, profoundly self-destructive culture, promoting narrow and problematic notion of black authenticity. Thus, Hip-hop has gradually come to assimilate and define only the people who do not sell out to become a bourgeoisie middle-class standard, the same values that enable social mobility in society. The cultural war continues as to which one is the authentic identity within the African-American community.

#### **N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitude)**

The N.W.A. (*Niggaz Wit Attitude*) was formed on the west coast, California in the year 1987 by a group of artists namely Dr Dre, Ice Cube, Eazy A, MC Ren, DJ Yella, The D.O.C., and Arabian Prince. Erin C Parker constructs that "The gangsta rap music came from a place of anger, revolution directed against the authoritative power of the police and

government forces and the unjust condition.” (n.pag) The N.W.A.’s album is anti-police and it directs its anger against the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) increasing aggressive attitude and approaches toward the law enforcement within the streets of Compton. The N.W. A. gangsta rap emerged out of resistance in a period of sustained moral panic surrounding race and criminality in the United States. Their official debut album *Straight Outta Compton*, symbolized the aggressive nihilistic black militant rage, the same rage that was seen back in the 60s via the Black Panther Party. Now, the same rage is being articulated in the streets through rap music.

The N.W.A. album has become an influential force in the black culture with enormous power to create and shape ideologies. Initially, the album *Straight Outta Compton* was rejected by national radio and MTV on the grounds of excessive violence and that the video erupted from the true party on the street. McCann writes that “...While gangsta rap has many significant limitations associated with violence, misogyny, and commercialism, it nonetheless represents a salient expression of resistance that can inform broader interventions against the American prisons system.” (p.7) The N.W.A.’s lyrics have enabled us to trace the broad history of the American prison system and its nature of operation in the inner cities. Investigation of crimes and arrests has been frequently practiced by the LAPD which results in the nabbing of massive numbers of black youth or black young adults. It is also important to note that black young adults are imprisoned for being charged as involved in crime and drugs regardless of their innocence. The N.W. A. gangster rappers narrate about the oppressive life and structural injustice that determines the lives of the Ghetto dwellers—the poor African Americans.

The title of the album itself conveys a message that the song—*direct out of Compton* reports varied issues from the perspective of the Niggas. The policemen and the white society have tried to hide and keep under wraps the form of discrimination and injustices executed against African Americans. In the song *Direct Out of Compton*, one of the crew members reveals the reality of the negros, living in constant terror

because anybody can get shot, anything can happen to anybody at any time. In an interview initiated by Kendrick Lamar, Ice Cube says that “N.W.A change in pop culture and music history because we made it alright for the artist to be himself.” In other words, they are underground reporter, reporting their experience by themselves, without the aid of a radio or news broadcaster. They deploy their songs to narrate and report their side of the story that has been suppressed by social media. Their songs as an art form give voices to them.

On August 9, 1988, the N.W.A. released their song *Fuck the Police* from the album *Straight Outta Compton*. The song, *Fuck the Police* is a protest song that has instigated the FBI to write a letter to the N.W.A. group. In August 1989, the band received a letter from the FBI, announcing the song and accusing it in a way of inciting violence against law enforcement. Tracy “The D. O. C” Curry said that “they want to shut down rap music and shut down the experience of the black American in the Ghetto and you can’t shut down with a letter.” Nancy Reagan rode shotgun... was conducting what was in essence urban warfare asserts Professor Todd Boyd (USC). The drug war imposed by the Reagan government had a profuse impact on the lives of the inner-city dwellers especially the black youth who were in their early twenties. The state government allowed the free flow of the drug business and the corrupt police themselves were also involved and entangled in this business, so the war on drugs came to symbolize the New Jim Crow for African Americans.

The N.W.A lyric from the song *Fuck the Police* asserts

Right about now, the N.W.A is in full effect. For a punk motherfucker, with a badge and a gun. To, be beaten on and thrown in jail...Fucking with me cause I’m a teenager...Searching for my car, looking for the product. Thinking every nigga is selling narcotics.... search a nigger down, and grab his nuts. And on the other hand, without a gun, they can’t get one...Black police showing out for the white cop ICE CUBE will swarm. On ant mother fucker, in a blue uniform. Just

cause I'm from the CPT. Punk Police are afraid of me, huh. A young nigga on the warpath. Chorus: Fuck the Police (repeated four times).

These lines are from the song 'Fuck the Police' (1st stanza and chorus). Apparently, the lyric constitutes the brutality, atrocities, and cruelty of the police against the black youth. In the video, Dr. Dre represents the figure of the judge presiding over the serious disputes of both the N.W.A., and police department inside the court. Ice Cube is made to stand and report the underground reality of Compton. It is also interesting to note that during this period, the LAPD was escalating its war on drugs in South Central, Los Angeles known as 'Operation Hammer' using the word of Daryl Gates (police Chief). The police used tanks to destroy and smash down suspected houses of crack dealers. The suspected drug dealers had mistaken identities which caused the police to victimize victims and no one trusted the victims.

McCann discerns that "The marks of criminality refer to a regime of signifiers inscribed upon African American bodies that imagines black subjects as fundamental threats to social order." (p.8) The black subject is perceived as a threat to social order and a mark of criminality. The blackness of the body decides the fate of the black youths from inner cities. John Singleton/ writer/ Director of *Boyz n the Hood* asserts that "if you were in front of a liquor store or corner, buying Doughnut, they just hit you up and put you out on the car." The LAPD caught many Latino youth and Black youths in the jails whom they suspected of engaging with drugs. "They beat them around the building," says DJ Yella.

Dairoid 'Wacko' Potts, a producer of *Street Outta Compton* states that "higher status just means a bigger target on your back." They are always in danger if they are in the streets of Compton. Every unknown has to be viewed with suspicion. If they are from Compton, young teenage blacks, the police catch them and put them in jail. The black youth are keenly observed everywhere by the Police department. Since the police have all the authority to kill the minority's inner-city dwellers, the police are very powerful. They have the right and agency to kill people anywhere and anytime. The law supports

them; the state government validates their inhumanity. The black police are out of choice, they are like puppets of the state government. Marcus Reeves asserts that "what the N.W.A plan was the shock and awe of hip-hop's faithful with a fresh band of reality rap. One that gives listeners an unfiltered humorous, almost cinematically exaggerated view of black urban life- all from the perspective of Niggas, the ultimate Ghetto dwellers." Therefore, *Fuck the Police* is another form of expressing their rage towards the mainstream society.

The N. W. A.'s new video *Express Yourself* seems to appear gentler than the previous album; in fact, it is no less potent expression of rebellion. To song conveys "Yo man, there's a lot of brothers out there. Flaking and perpetrating but scared to kick reality. So, what you want me to do." These lines express the inner-city dwellers' uneasiness and timidity in speaking out the truth about street life in Compton. Many young blacks and unknown men are killed in the streets by the police but no living soul is gallant and dauntless enough to speak out the truth for fear of being brutally charged by the police. For instance, the death of Tupac Shakur and notorious B.I. G proved the unwillingness of the community to share the truth or reality with the world. From the lyrics *Express Yourself*,

The police are not interested in investigating the killers; in fact, the case remains unresolved these days. I'm expressing my full capabilities and now I'm living in correctional facilities, cos some don't agree with how I do this (express yourself). Even though the Compton settlers bring the knowledge of the street into the spotlight, the state government and the police Department pay no heed to their words rather they are being corrected. The media is not willing to broadcast the street life in Compton; hence, this song is rebelling against authority, established institutions, and state administration. I still express, yo, I don't smoke weed or sess, coz it's known to give a brother brain damage, don't be another sequel, express yourself.

These lines can be interpreted as reflecting the determination to continue to express themselves despite the injustices and unlawful administration executed by the police to the Ghetto dwellers. The reference to *weed* symbolizes the drug-infested and poverty-stricken community on account of structural racism and discrimination within the black community. The line "don't be another sequel, express yourself" implies not to give up the good fight and be an example for the coming new generations of the black community. The line that says "they ban my group from the radio hear N. W. A. and say "hell no"! But you know it ain't all about wealth. As long as you make a note to express yourselves." Their first release of the album *Straight Outta Compton* met with rejection by the recording labels and the radio was unwilling to broadcast their song claiming that the lyrics were too obscene, violent, and misogynistic.

The second line carries a dual meaning. It can be interpreted as echoing the challenges encountered by rap songs that convey the truth of street life in the rap music market. Additionally, it also articulates that money or wealth is not the ultimate goal in determining the black identity. Rather, it is only when you express yourself, that you create and maintain your own identity. It is when you express yourself, there is a possibility of speaking the reality of the black subject despite hurdles and obstacles from the dominant community. Through their songs and musical genres, they resist and promote the African-American culture in mainstream society.

Their last album called *Niggas for Life* came out in May 1991. It rose to number one on the Billboard Pop Jobs and it was the first hard-core album to acclaimed such a prestigious status. It solidified gangster rap's place in Music but generated criticism from conservative critics due to the contents of the song. The album *Niggas for Life* is an attack on critics who have criticized the N.W.A. for their frequent usage of the word 'Niggas' in their lyrics. The song expresses

Why you brother insists on using the word nigga? Don't you know that's bringing you down? Nigga, nigga nigga that's all I hear you

motherfuckers talk about is nigga. Personally, I think the lyrics are a bit too harsh. I ain't no nigga, fuck that shit. Does everything comes out your mouth got to be a 4- --letter word?

These lines strongly hint at the N.W.A.'s concept of their identity. It appears that they narrate to the listeners of the songs they will remain black and blackness is an indication of their identity. According to Rev. Calvin Butt, Rappers "... just don't move looms and they just want to say whatever they want and get away with it." Their songs have no substance. The irony is that the conservative black middle class burns down a huge number of CDs on the streets. Moreover, the state government and the black conservatives together pressured the CDs to be removed from stores. Hence, the song *Niggaz 4 Life* criticizes the black conservatives for their pretentious nature towards mainstream society. Till today the N.W. A's voice is still relevant; it is still the voice of the Ghettos. Their music is unrivalled and they are a harder group which haven't been outdone till today. "They broaden the perspective of popular music and validated the experiences of a new generation of African Americans." (Documentary 'N. W. A, The World's Most Dangerous Group')

#### **Shawn Corey Carter**

Shawn Corey Carter also known as Jay-Z was born in a drug-infested Marcy Project, Brooklyn on December 4, 1969. At a very young age, Jay-Z engaged in selling drugs to support his family. The Marcy project, back in 1978 was a huge island built mostly in the middle of nowhere, designed to warehouse lives. It was filled with unemployed youth and broken families everywhere. In Brooklyn, most of the households were looked after by a single mother. Due to structural constraints, the lower-class black males were unable to fulfill the traditional role in the family. The black youth lacked supervision from elders and there was excessive supervision from law enforcement. Young black males were incarcerated, and killed before the age of 25 as victims and soldiers of the crack epidemic. Jay-Z's songs and lyrics are deeply rooted in the black hip-hop scene; it has a deep connection to the historical spirit of the African-American resistance in America unattended. Jay-Z believes that the Ronald Reagan

administration was behind the proliferation of crack in their communities.

In his song *Can I Live II*, from the album *Reasonable Doubt* Jay Z wrote about the degradation of his community and law enforcement

I got fed sending me some letters. Cause I'm schoolin 'the youth. But they can't lock me down. Cause my tool is the truth. Yeah, I sold drugs for a livin'. That's a given. Why is it? Why don't y'all try to visit the neighborhoods I lived in? My mind has been through hell. My neighbor is Crime Central. Where cope locks you up more than they try to defend you.

Jay Z directly and indirectly refers to the violence and cruelty of the police experienced by his community. Jay Z also appears to speak about poverty and the degradation of his community. The black underclass sells drugs so as to attain economic stability. The song carries political messages, it attacks the Government of the United States for neglecting inhabited areas of the poor black underclass. He challenges the affirmative action introduced under the Ronald Reagan administration which benefitted only the middle-class blacks in terms of employment. The marginalized group in the Ghettos continues to be marginalized. Jay Z sheds light on the severity of law enforcement in the Ghettos. The disenfranchised black youths are taken as prisoners and charged as crime practitioners by the state government. The apparent intentions of the state government in trying to erase the black subject are emphasized in this song.

Jay Z also refers to his past life when he was into selling drugs to earn and support his family. He also exposed the economic injustice policy executed by the state government. It is interesting to mention that drug dealing was the main source of income for poor inner-city dwellers due to the complex social arrangements of society. Dibinga interviews Jay Z's high school teacher Ms. Lowden (1960-1980) she said that

Students from the Marcy projects in her classroom spoke about hearing gunshots on a daily basis and nightly basis and drug-infested streets of Brooklyn to such an extent that her

student ability to sleep was disturbed... She recalled some students in her 6th grade classes having pagers to alert them of purchasing pending drugs purchase...selling drugs was a badge of honor for many students as well as a lucrative, although illegal form of working...her school and many others like hers were abandoned by the New York City Board of Education. She said that the BOE had a policy of benign neglect similar to the policies taking place at the presidential level under Ronald Reagan.

In the song *The Gift and the Curse* from the album *The Black Album 2*, he recounts what he and the poor black youth have had with the police along with the severity of Rivera's (who leaked Jay Z's album) stabbing incident.

In my lifetime, I caught smaller cases, but I had a capital hypocrite system that let me right back at you. You better hope a rich rapper never attacks you, not even that scratches you, especially if you black dude. They don't give a shit unless the accused just happens to rap. And they can look good by painting him as bad news cause in my past...exposed to the curb and nobody said a word so, imagine how disturbed I was.

These lines brought back the past incident where Jay-Z was arrested by the police on account of stabbing Rivera who had leaked his highly anticipated solo album *Amplified*. He deliberately refers to this incident to question the authority of the state government that enforces the law. Jay Z criticizes the imposed structural discrimination of black rappers by the police. He said that "the problem is bigger than the Rivera case as he chronicles another incident with the Police."

Jay Z's song also echoed the street police surveillance on narcotic agents, and the government tracking the movement of hip-hop artists while performing and touring. Police crackdowns Bill Clinton's 1994 omnibus crime bill, and the crack wars were turning black men in inner cities into an endangered species. The lines also depicted and recounted the 1960s and 1970's time when the government and law enforcement surveillance was

focused on civil rights leaders and black liberation leaders. However, now, the new perceived threat to America seems to arise from rappers, who are mere musicians. The black males were targeted by surveillance at the least and assassination at the most. Dibaba said "The Famous group involved in hip-hop surveillance is the New York Police Department (NYPD). The incarceration of a black man can possibly be an indication to make the black man literally disappear." (p.108)

In his song *A Ballad for the Fallen Soldier*, which comes under the album *The Blueprint 2*, Jay-Z employs metaphor and simile in retelling the story of life inside the Ghetto and politically critiques the United States Government and compares US acts of brutality on a black man to the act of terrorism committed by Osama Bin Laden. This song extrapolates the everyday lives of the Ghettos enmeshed in terror. "Crax was anthrax back then, back when. Police were Al Qaeda to black men while I was out there hustling and sinning with no religion. He was off to war killing for a living." Jay Z draws a comparison between the life of a combat soldier and the life of the Ghetto dweller to bring back the issue of racism, police atrocities, brutalities, poverty, and drug-infested lives of the Ghetto. Here, the drug dealer is seen as part of a larger system of oppression towards impoverished societies, nationally, and internationally which is part of the guilt he fears near the end of his days. Like how Al Qaeda has destroyed the World Trade Center and terrorized America, Jay Z refers to the misconducted nature of the police experienced by black communities in the 1980s and 1990s. When he says 'sinning' Jay-Z gives a lurid depiction of the street hustler who unintentionally commits sin by selling drugs to the poor people of his community due to the political arrangements of the society.

The recounting of an epidemic that spread like a disease in the Marcy Project sheds light on the miserable, heinous crime that remains unattended in the Ghetto and the dangers of the drug world. The parents were addicted to Cocaine. The children were without guidance and they became young gunners and drugs runners. So, through this lyric, Jay-Z surfaced the ground reality of the street and

converted it into art. In 2003, in his song titled, 'Beware of the boys'

'We rebellious, we back home, Screamin', 'Leave Iraq alone! 'But all my soldiers in the field, I will wish you a safe return. But only love kills war when will they learn? It's international Hov, been havin' a flow. Before Bin Laden got Manhattan to blow. Before Ronald Reagan got Manhattan the blow. Before I was cabbin' it there back and forth.

Jay Z explains these lines and spoke

Ronal Reagan got Manhattan to 'blow' slang for cocaine through the whole Iran- Contra scandal, who got the United States to involved into drug trade that brought crack to the hood so they could finance the contras in Central America. In the worst years of the Crack Epidemic...there were thousands of homicides annually in New York." So, juxtaposing Bin Laden and Reagan may not be as crazy as it may seem. This is a piece of our recent history that people like to forget or pretend that it never happened so they can maintain some fantasy of American purity which is why I thought it is important to include it in this rhyme. It is that same sort of historical amnesia and myth of America's innocence that led us to the war in Iraq. I'm trying to kill that myth by reminding people of the truth- coz that myth is a dangerous thing for the real world" (p.135).

This song is an attack and critique of the mainstream society and the black conservative middle class who opposed rap music. Members of his parents and grandparent's generations along with diverse sections of America condemned rap music. Civil rights movement veteran C. Delores Tucker and senators like Bob Dole's criticism of rap music made the rap music industry more popular says Jay Z. Tucker, the founder of the National Congress of black women protested rap music by saying "We have never had a phenomenon where kids were funding their own funerals at thirteen and twelve... I am going after the record industry because they are the ones that are out of control..." The black conservative members of United

Presidents are against rap music stating that black children are out of control due to listening to rap music and this engineered Jay Z to respond to them politically through his music to injustices he saw facing his community. Jay Z is now the CEO of Def Jam Recording and is listed as the second richest HIP-HOP king by Forbes Magazine in the year 2017.

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