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## **Rap in the United States and Cuba: A Genre Uniquely Emblematic of The Paradox of (De)Colonization**

Maya Rose Bliffeld

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Rap in the United States and Cuba: A Genre Uniquely Emblematic of The Paradox of  
(De)Colonization

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**I. Abstract:**

Music, as a profound and resonant cultural expression, captures the nuance of societal dynamics, political climates, and the collective emotions of communities throughout time. Colonialism, more specifically the Atlantic slave trade and the experience of suffering, has been reflected in the music as much as it has pioneered styles of new global music in the present. Music, specifically rap, contextualized in the hip-hop movements of the United States and Cuba, reveals primary sources of the effects of systemic racism and the marks of slavery in the contemporary context. The United States and Cuba each have a close relation to the history of slavery as well as the ways in which black people have been systematically discriminated against ever since. In these two countries where systemic racism is so ingrained, rap's positionality allows people to break from mindsets and economic/social policies that drag them down as a collective group.

Rap further serves a similar function in the dialogue of the African diaspora and what it means for blackness in both of these countries, even though its reception from the government has been completely opposite in some respects. Based on recurring themes in the music as they related to colonialism and decolonization, I created 3 subcategories to analyze, applicable to both countries: revolutionary rap, rap embracing self-love and blackness, and everyday rap. I then selected 6 songs, 3 from each country to represent each category, to analyze for their lyrical contents in relation to decolonization theorists, exemplifying the pinnacle of music as a social force more than other mediums of scholarly analysis. The creation of music as a consequence of colonialism demonstrates how history influences music, and rap's unique position further shows how a colonial creation can be the most effective in decolonizing countries, people, and mindsets.

## II. Acknowledgements:

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for anyone who has advised, edited, listened, brainstormed, or aided me in any way throughout this process. Music is my love and passion, and the intersectionality between songs and the historical cultural narratives they reveal is an idea that has long laid dormant in my mind, waiting to be further explored. Through this thesis, I seek to attach a piece of myself as a Guatemalan-American musician to today's global network of sounds and discourse through my analysis in relation to colonialism. I have always struggled to connect my personal identity to my traditional background and training as a classical musician, but this thesis was a way to treat different genres of music with the same degrees of legitimacy and authority awarded to classical music. I wrote this to give a scholarly platform to musicians and poets who have long been underrepresented and undervalued as people of color who seek to enact change in the world by unconventional means.

That being said, I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Angelina Tallaj for inspiring this idea through her teaching in a class called Latin American Popular Music and Race and Gender. With her love of music and true mentorship as my advisor for this project, I was able to imagine a way to meld my own musical passion and academic interest in colonialism into a cohesive idea. I would also like to thank my Seminar Instructor, Dr. Cal Johnson for keeping me accountable for each and every deadline, giving motivational pep talks, and for helping me extract the big ideas when I was struggling to articulate them myself. Thank you!

Last, I would like to thank my family for their love and support, particularly my father for always helping me edit and clarify my ideas.

*I have so much gratitude for all the help I have received; I sincerely thank you.*

### **III. Introduction:**

Music is the fossilized form of cultural interaction that reveals relics of the violent colonization all over the past and present sounds in music throughout the Americas. The Trans-Atlantic Slave trade set a precedent for the systematic commoditization and exploitation of black bodies and culture, and the legacy of colonization has profoundly disadvantaged and damaged the people across the African diaspora today. It is the reason that there is a general 'Caribbean' or 'Black' culture in former colonies of the Americas, stemming from the initial trauma of forced displacement and deprivation of specific cultural retentions like language and religion. Likewise, it is the reason that racism is enshrined in the laws of formerly colonial spaces. It is imperative to see the ways the legacy of slavery permeates into the present, and it is a relation applicable to almost every aspect of societal and cultural life, particularly in the ever-globalizing world of today. The racial hierarchy turned social order imposed by slavery has not only economically and politically inhibited black populations within nations, but it has also left profound psychological damage. It is impossible to alter this hegemonic narrative without a space providing a voice for those who have historically been silenced, no matter how monumental the task. There are several means of doing this, but the ones with wide-reaching cultural impacts are the most effective, created by and for the black community.

Music serves a historical purpose, and it is also equally capable of catalyzing societal and legislative change in the present. Hip-hop has a unique position in the historical narrative of black civil rights movements and protests, but the lyrical addition of rap articulated systemic problems in new ways and retains the present-day function of decolonizing the mind while teaching people to understand and process the trauma of being oppressed. What is fundamentally crucial about music and hip-hop is its accessibility and the fact that its inherent

roots come from black culture and black sounds. The same origins for black communities in the colonies of the Americas, beginning in the early 15th century, are the origins for the genre, but this movement was the contemporary iteration of this repeating cycle of injustice.

Hip-Hop is crucial because it is sonically based on African beats, specifically by way of the Caribbean, a place in closer proximity to the United States, where the genre began in the 1970s. Many famous rappers and musicians in the community are from the Caribbean or have cultural connections to that region, and thus, globalization of the sounds and ideas is fundamental to hip hop and could not have occurred without the sounds and creations of the Caribbean. These sounds would not be known as being distinctly Caribbean without the stain of Colonization, making it imperative to the narrative and context when it comes to exploring hip-hop as a medium for change.

Not all music is inherently a force for change, and likewise, not all rap explicitly talks about systemic oppression or ideas of blackness, but three sub-genres featured in this thesis are means of change and examine systemic problems. Rap as a revolutionary genre, an expression of self, and as everyday rap reveals explicit and quotidian truths indicative of more profound systemic inequity, causing listeners to reflect. Furthermore, artists from the United States and Cuba are particularly attuned to reflect these themes more than most. Hip-hop's inception came from the need to voice opposition, but protest and revolt are not the only methods of analysis for the genre, even if they have received the bulk of scholarly attention. Hip-hop artists occupy a liminal space in their struggle between co-optation and agency in the 21st-century music industry, and all of the art reflects this struggle.

Before narrowing down to specifically rap, the hip-hop movement's impact is equally important and must be briefly explicated. The main pillars of hip-hop are well known and



considered to be: DJing, Breakdancing, MCing or rapping, and graffiti. Each element's artistic and political contributions are significant, but it is the lyrical extension of rap that most crucially gave a literal voice to the movement and must be analyzed alongside the consistently discriminatory political climate of the U.S. Technological advancements in music production pioneered by the DJing element brought sonic accompaniments to rap and relied on sounds from the past, influenced by African-American musical contributions. With clear ties to the past established, this genre simultaneously pioneers new forms of music production that continue to lead trends in the industry today, and that ultimately turned hip-hop into a dominant part of the music industry, a billion-dollar capitalist enterprise. That is why to this day, rap remains the most pervasive cultural element of the hip-hop movement (Quinn, 10)

This genre has a unique positionality in engaging both in acts of political change and serving as a means of self-expression artistically, something that brings an essential human quality that often gets lost in exploring the pain caused by systematic issues. Music that generally gains scholarly attention tends to be Euro-centric, which is the history most commonly found in the textbooks of music history classes, instead of contemporary music based on 'blackness' that served an essential role in history. At the same time, it is the genre's reliance on a white audience to obtain such a large platform in the first place to succeed in the long term. This dilemma caused many to critique rap as not truly black music, arguing the convolution of rap from a means of expression into a capitalist industry caused a legacy of inauthenticity that rendered the genre just another avenue of exploitation for black people (Burgess 2020). The monetary incentives created by capitalism play an essential role in the music industry today, and studies have even shown that the dominant audience for hip-hop is white, specifically 70% in the U.S. (Morgan, J., 2002; Yousman, 2003; Kitwana, 2005). This shows there is no doubt that rap is currently a marketable

product built on exploiting blackness and black people for white audiences and profit; however, the contributions of hip-hop artists who actively celebrate blackness and represent the voiceless are the focus of this thesis.

These contributions by black people for black people can not be underestimated, and it can not be emphasized enough that when music is utilized as a social force, there is an audience hungry and eager to listen and receive the message. Furthermore, as will be seen with certain artists, they are quite aware of *who* encompasses their audience, and there are messages directed towards their dominant audience that critique them regardless. The consumer market may be dominated by a white demographic, but this in no way disqualifies nor diminishes the present work that rap music does for people. In Cuba, there are less statistics on the dominant audience for the hip-hop genre, but given the underground nature and subject matter, it retains a sense of authenticity and remains representative of the true thoughts of the collective consciousness in Cuba.

Given this context, The United States and Cuba are ideal settings to explore the intersectionality of post-colonial oppression and movements of hip-hop as a response to putting down an entire race of people. They are two former colonies that once depended on the plantation system to succeed economically, and that continued to systematically oppress their black populations in the subsequent years after emancipation. Furthermore, they are two places that have notions of race that contrast each other as well as vastly different political regimes; one of ‘democracy’ and the other of ‘communism’, creating a unique juxtaposition of situations that, regardless, reveal the systemic pains felt by both communities that brought them to rap. Although the U.S. is the original geographical setting of hip-hop, it is the cultural exchange of people of color and migrants from the Caribbean that caused the genre’s emergence. Thus, when

the Caribbean contributed so strongly to the conditions that made rap music possible, it is imperative to look at how the hip-hop movement in Cuba was influenced by the social scene of blackness in the United States, and its reception consistently hostile from the government.

Despite a large market for rap in other Caribbean countries, not all rap was made with connections to social change. Some musicians get caught up in the capitalist music industry and are commoditized in the cycle of greed. The U.S. and Cuba, however, utilize rap as a medium to convey a black consciousness and mobilize the masses. In Cuba, the medium of rap is equated to *revolución* because of its history, and due to the fragmented and unequal political relationship between the two nations, hip-hop represented something particularly unique to the people of Cuba. The juxtaposition of these two countries reveals that no matter the setting, rap was a means of uniting a diaspora that had felt a massive loss of cultural retention into a new, global community.

Furthermore, unlike other nations of the Caribbean and the United States, it is difficult to name *several* Cuban hip-hop artists who have obtained international success and recognition. This reveals the paradox of Cuban hip hop being a minority genre yet having a great deal of scholarly attention as it relates to ideas of the U.S. This however, is the beauty of the hip-hop genre. It was invented from a need to articulate struggles widely applicable to others domestically and across the African diaspora. In the late 19th century, the Pan-Africanism movement helped facilitate the emancipation process from slavery, and a clear global consciousness was capturing the attention of black people worldwide. The 20th-century Back-to-Africa movement, advocating for a proper 'homeland' for all black people globally, was more evidence that a collective identity was forming, giving a specific place for hip-hop movements to reverberate across the diaspora under the right conditions. Rap music was

invented in the U.S. with this philosophy in mind, and Cubans of the African diaspora were ready and willing to use this newfound medium to explore the same concepts as they applied locally.

All of the artists featured had to engage with modern-day iterations of colonialism to obtain their massive platforms like the music industry, as it was one of the only ways to achieve legitimacy and a large platform. Despite the consistent racial politicization of their music and personal identities, they were still able to advocate for change. Many artists compromise their own beliefs ultimately to better ‘brand’ themselves as palatable and non-confrontational, but when music is truly created with local specificity while also relaying messages emblematic of a global consciousness, it becomes an unstoppable social force (Lipsitz). Kendrick Lamar, Tupac, and Queen Latifah, in tandem with their Cuban counterparts: Los Aldeanos, Robe L. Ninho, and Silvito el Libre, utilized the channels of the music industry and engaged in the system out of necessity, but these Cuban and United States artists never compromised their message or forgot their roots in order to prioritize personal gain and success. These artists are at the forefront of their nation’s pulse and represent some of the best modern-day contributions of decolonization theory and spreading their message with a diverse audience.

#### **IV. Methodology:**

The testimonies and evidence provided in this thesis are in the form of 6 rap songs, analyzed for their lyrical message and sonic composition as they relate to the paradox between co-optation in the music industry and decolonizing. These songs are modern and real-life examples of the abstract theories discussed by decolonization theorists and those who sought to understand the lasting effects of the enslavement complex. I chose music as the medium of analysis for this connection because it immortalizes moments in history as well as the feelings

associated with those moments, even when the theories and events themselves are not overtly mentioned. Furthermore, I chose rap because of its unique position as a contentiously ‘authentic’ genre as well as its unique position as a colonial creation with an unprecedented ability of decolonizing, something essential to creating change.

The case studies are carefully organized into several subsections for both the U.S. and Cuba that give adequate and equal coverage towards the cultural specificities of both places and their histories. Though there are many commonalities in the experiences that influence the hip-hop genre, Cubans and people from the United States come from very different environments that uniquely influence the pain and music felt by the people, which is often reflected by the artists. First, a context on the origins of Hip Hop in each nation is given as it pertains to the social and political events of the 70s in the United States and the 90s in Cuba. Then, there is a breakdown of the nuanced definition of blackness for both Cubans and people from the United States and how racism within each respective nation has caused systemic and generational traumas. This context builds up to six songs that will be up for analysis in regard to the profound social impact that Hip-hop has today in truly decolonizing people's mindsets despite every obstacle.

Rap will first be examined as a revolutionary genre, the most common lens of analysis. The two songs examined will be DNA by Kendrick Lamar (2017) and El Rap es Guerra by Los Aldeanos (2009). The first exemplifies a direct critique that demands accountability for hegemonic problems that are literally in the DNA of white people. He also alludes to a lost sense of value and royalty deep in the genes of Black people. El Rap es Guerra is the Cuban example that alludes to the revolutionary aspect of the medium of rap itself and how rapping incited a call to war due to the amount of dissonance with the government expressed by the genre.

The types of rap music are vast and include many other ways of decolonizing the mind, which is addressed by the second category: Rap as an authentic medium of self-expression, featuring the songs U.N.I.T.Y by Queen Latifah (1993) and Cabello Bello by Robe L. Ninho (2023). Queen Latifah, as a female influential figure in the 90s rap scene at the height of the gangsta rap era, and especially in U.N.I.T.Y, boldly advocates against both external and internalized misogyny in society and holds men and women equally accountable for not feeding into the cycle. Cabello Bello is a highly contemporary example of this category of loving African features that many Cubans were taught to hate and advocating for “decolonización mental.”

The final category that deserves a place at the table is “reality rap” which speaks about the quotidian struggles of being a victim of systemic poverty without making an overt call to action (Krimms, 2000, Keyes 2000). This is a more subtle sub-genre than revolutionary rap but still, more than any other genre, it provides a raw, unfiltered, and honest testimony to the human consequences of the systemic racism that is too often reduced to abstract concepts and mere statistics that retract from centering the emotional level of damage. Changes by Tupac (1998) is one of the most significant contributions to the genre and was a pioneering example of its potential. For Cubans, an up-and-coming artist Silvito el Libre created a song called Pesadilla (2021), or Nightmares, that addresses the problem that the desperation in Cuba has continued to worsen in the present despite the lies of the government or the myth of modernization, an ode to his truth as a black Cuban from the Barrio.

#### V. **Limitations:**

This project's limitations stemmed from the topic's wide scope and the intersectionality of many disciplines to form connections between rap music and a global, social means of decolonizing the mind. There is a great deal of research on certain types of rap as they relate to

certain moments in history, but to assert rap itself as a means of communication with the masses to change their perspective is a much less prevalent and, in turn, researched idea. Rap is often perceived as being revolutionary only when it began in the U.S. as opposed to continuously since its inception as a worldwide movement for change. Though there was some research on rap's cultural significance on a global scale, many people still do not see its scholarly value or position as a key perspective on the realities of systemic racism. Even among those who recognize its potential, many fail to realize that songs not overtly linked to the ideas of Fanon or Dr. King Jr. still hold value as evidence in the discourse of rap. It has also long been demonized as an aggressive and violent genre of music, and such racist discourse has prevented the genre from gaining legitimacy as an art form or a primary source, which has made it challenging to find widespread corroborating evidence for the ideas in this thesis.

Regarding Cuba specifically, due to the underground nature of the rap industry, there are surely many other artists who make impactful music and contributions, but their music is unavailable to the United States market. This is a significant limitation if this study were to be furthered, as an entire data set is inaccessible to this study. In addition, many other categories could be created to analyze other sub-genres of rap, as the topic is so broad that it deserves an anthology as the genre relates to historical global movements of blackness in future studies. On this note, the musical compositions deserve a much more in-depth analysis, and more first-hand interviews must also be conducted with the artists and scholars alike regarding the ideas presented in this particular thesis. Lastly, there are many sources in Spanish that deserve to be given equal attention to the predominantly English sources used in this thesis.

## VI. Theoretical Framework:

The 3 subcategories of rap that I created to analyze these 6 songs are contingent on the understanding and interweaving of certain ideas from other disciplines that better contextualize the historical importance of this music. There are themes throughout each song that connect to music and social justice, the post-colonial narrative towards race, and the connection of slavery and capitalism to today's music industry and how artists subvert or fall victim to it. Keeping this in mind, as understood by Frantz Fanon in 1961, Decolonization Theory is an essential tool in processing the messages and value in rap lyrics. The Theory of Chaos, as outlined in *The Repeating Island* by Antonio Benitez-Rojo (1992), is another necessary framework by which to understand the deeply entrenched roots of the exploitation of black and Caribbean contributions for monetary gain within industries of Western societies, particularly the music industry.

### a. *Decolonization Theory*

When discussing Decolonization Theory, it is crucial first to understand what differentiates Decolonization theory from the simple definition of decolonization and how exactly music fits into that. For this reason, not all music can be considered decolonial, but hip-hop is a genre that qualifies. Decolonization Theory must be distinguished from decolonization as a general term. Coined in the 1930s, decolonization was simply understood as the absence of colonial power, pioneered by a German scholar named Moritz Julius Bonn. It later evolved to focus on solutions and methods of severing dependence on colonial powers and institutions to govern, finance, and exist autonomously.

In the 1960s, Frantz Fanon was known for pioneering the term that came to represent not only systemic changes but psychological solutions for decolonizing a whole way of moving throughout the world. In his later work *Black Skin, White Masks*, he argued that *colonial*



*neurosis* was what was afflicting Black people across colonial boundaries, a series of psychological disorders caused by the impacts of colonialism (1961). The primary desire of the black man, Fanon asserts, is to be a white man or be given the same social and economic standing as the white man. It was not only about achieving political equality but a deeply psychologically rooted problem caused by the European invention of social hierarchies in the colonies. His contributions and analysis of the psyche provided the language to articulate the problems and objectives that exploded this movement worldwide.

Throughout Latin America, many other crucial leaders spread this ideology to formerly oppressed populations and sought to create solutions to this global inequality that plagues formally colonized people (Gutiérrez 1988, Dussel 1977, Mignolo 2000, Ferrer 2014). Fanon's ideas even inspired the ideology behind the Black Panther movement in the United States, and two new emerging interpretations for solutions based on the ideas put forward by Fanon were personified in the differences of thought between Malcolm X, that Decolonization was inherently violent and Dr. King Jr. who believed that civil protest and unrest was the most effective means of creating change. Relating this idea back to music, to solely represent or feature members of an oppressed ethnic group in scholarship on music and music studies is not enough to qualify the music as decolonial. Representation is not equivalent to mobilizing the masses, deconstructing deeply rooted thought processes, and making tangible changes. When music genres and scholars articulate the problems and provide arguments on what can be done, a true impact can be made on policy and people's lives.

*b. Theory of Chaos*

As an immensely influential Cuban writer and essayist of the 20th century on matters of colonial history in the Caribbean from a non-Western perspective, Benitez-Rojo asserts that the

Theory of Chaos lives “Within the (dis)order that swarms around what [humans] already know of as Nature, [where] it is possible to observe dynamic states or regularities that repeat themselves globally (Benitez-Rojo, 2)”. This theory underscores the region's persistent entrapment within a cycle rooted in the historical exploitation of slavery, symbolizing a path leading "towards nothingness" as a result of colonization (3). Such perpetual processes of migration, exploitation, and colonial dependence form a crucial aspect of the Caribbean's identity, tracing its origins to the global slave trade and shaping modern-day globalism.

This theory is relevant to the ways that slavery's impact is a present-day problem that has thematic similarities across the Caribbean and other nations emerging from colonization. The exploitation economy that forces Caribbean migrants into low-skilled positions can diminish their sense of worth and value, further proving the importance of the Theory of Chaos in understanding the effects on how people live and view themselves in relation to colonial, or white, standards even in the present. Relying on the Caribbean perspective as a voice of authority is also imperative to understanding the dynamics of people in the United States, as there are many migrants from the Caribbean living and contributing to U.S. society. Furthermore, in relation to music, African sounds, often by way of the Caribbean, were essential in forming the sonic palette of the hip-hop genre, and this contribution must be explicitly mentioned to break from the cycle that profits off the exploitation of Caribbean people's work for not only Western societies and undermines their contributions to the African diaspora.

## **VII. Literature Review:**

### *a. Colonial Legacy on Global Music*

Colonial music built the foundation for the succeeding styles of music that emerged, and in the 20th century, this legacy was manifesting in the international mixture of sounds and artists.

The music industry and the sounds and genres were increasingly globalized and capitalized, borrowing from cultures that were once out of reach. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* by George Lipsitz is the main authority on this matter, which contextualizes the sounds of pop music in a globalized interaction and exploitation of certain sounds and groups of people. Lipsitz views music as having a great capacity for social change and as a vessel by which people achieve purpose and strategies to combat the constant instability of global politics in formerly colonized spaces.

Artists from formally colonized countries and diasporic populations, though able to use music for change, are also subjected to using their unique cultural identity as a marketable exoticism in the commercial international music industry. This also has the significant power to force the artist to sacrifice authenticity and their original intent for the music to gain international recognition in the first place. Specifically, in the 2nd chapter, “Diasporic Noise: Hip Hop and the Post-Colonial Politics of Sound,” Lipsitz outlines the need to turn national minorities, or those systematically oppressed, into global majorities via sound and music. Hip-hop launched a global movement born out of local specificities to the region but with a global audience in mind and a revolutionary message to share (Guilbault 239). This paradox is exactly where the problem lies when it comes to hip hop specifically, and Lipsitz does much more to prove and use the percussive rhythms brought to the world from the African diaspora as a metaphor for the very fabrics that make up popular music and popular culture, by extension, the modern day world.

*b. Decolonization through Hip-Hop and Music Studies*

It is also important to clarify what constitutes work that truly decolonizes and achieves action. In a journal from 2019, “Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education,” Luis Chávez and Russell Skelchy make a significant distinction between studying music to merely

advocate for more social justice versus music being a genre of decolonization that is invaluable to reviewing present research and planning for the future of music studies and education. They argue that “Decolonization demands fundamental changes in relations of power, worldviews, the role of scholars, and our relationships to the university system as an industry.” It can not be considered as simple as a gesture towards more representation in the field. The ideas presented, and evidence qualified in decolonial music analyses must enact change and demand people to reflect on their biases and formulate new perspectives. This task involves much more than a mere representation or showcase of under-analyzed artists and is important in enacting social change (Chavéz, Skelchy, 119).

There is a distinction between representation and decolonization, and subsequently, the relationship between postcolonial music and decolonization theory is best exemplified through hip-hop. Similar to Lipsitz in *Glocal Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Identities, and the Politics of Language Education*, Samy Alim explains the international dialogue that hip-hop has in youth cultures globally. He also explains how it is a product of globalism yet simultaneously allows highly localized references to have an international platform. Hip-hop is a global vehicle for change and decolonization, as it has inspired revolutions, accompanied protests, and given young people around the world a language with which they can find a voice to contextualize themselves and their struggles (90). Alim’s writing exemplified not only the idea that national minorities make up global majorities but also how this happened in communities worldwide. *Hip Hop Matters* by Craig Watkins is another formative piece of literature that argues that the question is no longer *if* hip hop matters but *who* and *what* gets to define this globally evolving genre as it continues to evolve as a uniquely positioned genre that walks the line between political importance and creative innovation as no other genre has. Furthermore, Watkins speaks

of the same paradox outlined by several other scholars from different disciplines: combatting the commercial and corporate impulse to compromise an artist's initial cultural authenticity for global recognition. This question will become extremely important in Cuban and United States hip-hop culture.

The final and perhaps most accurate source to this thesis is an article named *Reading Rap with Fanon and Fanon with Rap: the Potential of Transcultural Recognition*, which underscores the ways that rap music reflects a Fanonian way of thought as well as the ways that Fanon can be better understood by looking at the lyrics and poetry found in rap. Jarula Wegner looks at Fanon's term of colonial neurosis and its link between the collective and shared trauma of slavery and how this living memory affects present-day realities as expressed in rap music, one of the first sources to ever look at rap through this lens. Colonial neurosis is understood as the manifestations of mental illness and compounded grief from systemic racism and the psychological analysis of the way black people cope. When explored in rap music and hip-hop, this subject organically exemplifies how this trauma is interwoven into everyday life. This theme is seen in hip-hop's revolutionary origins and the subsequent everyday rap that emerged, sharing the gruesome realities of living and being black. Furthermore, rap as an authentic medium of self-expression is a contrary means of coping with hundreds of years of systemic disadvantages. Though Wegner specifically focuses on the sub-genre 'reality-rap', labeled in this thesis as everyday rap, these theories and ideas manifest in many other ways in other sub-genres of rap, especially because of rap's revolutionary inception.

Looking at rap with a scholarly lens counters the long-standing discourse that there is no intellectual capacity for analysis within the genre, and it shows how, even subconsciously, artists can influence their viewers with their perspective. There is more nuance to this debate given the

fact that when hip-hop is analyzed, it is normally analyzed only for its revolutionary capacity or association with protests, but the poetry of rap can reveal entire worldviews, life situations, and meditations on themes of racial identity and self-worth. Though this article set the precedent, the subsequent songs analyzed are equal contenders for analysis and deserve recognition for their cultural role.

*c. Capitalism and Music*

During liberation movements for freedom in the Americas and events that inspired decolonization theorists, different nations were left to reinterpret their cultural and racial relations on the newly emptied battlefield. The American and French revolutions inspired revolutions in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas and the Haitian revolution of independence in 1804. To achieve emancipation, colonies had to either surrender to the social caste system of the colonizers to be ‘trusted’ with their freedom on an international stage, or they had to sever ties and completely rebel like Haiti and reap the severe consequences. In the wake of achieving independence, there was a need to resituate ideas of nationalism and self-identity in the context of being trapped in a colonial caste system or suddenly being without it, in the case of Haiti. Capitalism and Globalization made up the fire flamed by slavery, and even when people were no longer considered enslaved property, the society that was constructed remained intact and had detrimental impacts. Because of this, in the 20th century, there arose a movement of decolonization theorists and activists who understood that the mind and psyche were just as trapped in a colonial chokehold as their countries were economically and physically.

This societal model created the ideal conditions for capitalism to continue exploiting people into the present. One of the most cited scholars is Eric Williams, who published *Capitalism and Slavery in 1944, regarded as a frequently cited classic*. This book was

revolutionary at the time, as it was one of the first books to outline the detrimental “incestuous” relationship between the two ideas, contrary to the popular discourse of the time that claimed capitalism both helped end slavery and create a better labor model for the future. Williams’s work remains relevant in today’s discussions because he asserted that capitalism is the system that perpetuated the same social order and norms as slavery. This book was also the first to acknowledge that capitalism was synonymous with the slave trade, a fact paramount to this thesis. Many other prominent scholars and economists alike concur that slavery was, at the very least, a significant contributing factor to the rise and acceleration of global capitalism and the perpetuation of labor exploitation as the economic blueprint, even if they ultimately still believe that the channels of capitalism are still the most effective solution (Williams (1944), Bales (2000), Rodrik (2011), Parenti (2011), Milanovic (2012), Falola (2013)).

Modern-day capitalism’s wide-reaching effects have permeated almost every facet of life, and scholarship on its particular relationship to the music industry is sparse. One of the most important resources is the book *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*. Timothy Dean Taylor raises many important questions and connects economics, the music industry, and popular culture together into one paradigm, highlighting how music used to be created by the masses instead of consumed by them and explaining the consequences of the changes enacted. Capitalism spurred the music industry's growth as an opportunity to create a brand out of an artist, commoditizing the artist while exploiting the audience in a cycle of manipulation and greed that stretches to the top of the food chain. Taylor also used the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, a formative sociologist, to explore how perceptions of what was trending or popular were changing. He states the “notion of cultural capital stems from knowledge of the hip and the cool, and is no less exclusionary and no less contemptuous of those farther down the ladder” (Taylor,

64). No matter what class ranking someone has, each class defines its own trends and popular categories; whether their cultural capital is based on knowledge of the fine arts, hip hop, or rap, human behavior transcends judgments on genres. Instead of ranking preference as a matter of taste, it is better off being studied objectively based on class distinctions, an apt application of Bourdieu's ideas relating to popular culture and the music industry transitioning into a capitalist economic industry (Bourdieu 1979). This recent literature demonstrates music's historical connection to capitalism and capitalism's subsequent ties to the slave system, with capitalism acting as the commonality that binds the two other ideas together.

## **VIII. Case Studies:**

### *i. Historical Context: Colonial Music*

Music is a powerful tool by which cultural interactions are memorialized, negotiated, and redefined, and the colonial influence on music history is important and revolutionized the sounds, instruments, and lyrics used. The history of colonialism and music's concurrent evolution lays the fabric for understanding the influences and contributions of different groups in music post-16th century. The colonial mixing in the Caribbean and the Americas also exemplified Benitez-Rojo's theory of chaos in the form of migration and forced displacements taking place on the ground of the Americas but between the major groups of indigenous, European, and African people. Different extents of ethnic mixing and interactions took place throughout the colonized world, but the same hegemonic, colonial social order was brought to all places affected by slavery. No matter what country, the hierarchy always put European-born colonizers at the top followed by Europeans born in the colony, or creoles; Mestizos, or people with mixed-ethnicities; the indigenous; and then African enslaved people at the bottom (Stephan 1991, Quijano 2000).



As it pertains to the musical development of the colonial era, these three major ethnic groups each made unique contributions that created new musical sounds and combinations that are no longer explicitly addressed and are taken for granted in contemporary popular music, especially rap today. The main European contributions include guitars and other string instruments, keyboards, Western music theory and notation, and the languages themselves that created the lyrics, mainly Spanish, French, and English. Indigenous groups across the Americas had their own respective instruments before any foreign influences came to their land, including the flute, maracas, and the Clave, which are two wooden sticks used as percussion instruments. Different African groups contributed various percussion patterns such as Dembow, playing clave—a percussive fabric of multiple rhythms playing at once, syncopation, drums, and the xylophone (Moore 2010).

#### **a. The United States**

##### *1. Origins of Hip Hop:*

In the United States, there was a similar blend of people and cultures like in nations of the Caribbean and the Americas, but a distinguishing factor of United States slavery was the degree of segregation of people and the intentional eradication of African languages and heritage very early on. This unification of the black experience in the United States was caused by such a swift and intentional deprivation of culture that began on the slave ship. Compounded by the lack of cultural retention, the U.S. was so geographically vast that it was even easier to separate people physically, and a rich, layered white supremacy existed with much more nuance than in other countries. In the United States, the role of rap served as a way of expressing anger embedded within a cultural movement that aligned itself with civil rights and upward mobility for black people in the U.S. Though not all rap music is about protesting or engaging in activism, the genre

was born out of this need, and the sounds of hip-hop drew from a distinctly black sound that drew on the past as well as much as it pioneered new ideas in music development.

Hip-hop emerged out of the South Bronx in the “summer of 1973”, invented in the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and as a further artistic extension of the black arts movement during its final years in the early 1970s. It was a cultural youth moment that was given a voice via the artistic outlets provided by hip-hop (DJing, MCing, Graffiti, breakdancing, and clothing). Rap served as a genuine and communal-based means of combining sounds of the past to address present political problems in a true form of black expression. The now-recognized “Holy Trinity” of hip-hop consisted of Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash, who performed some of the first shows and established the style of ‘classic’ hip-hop.

DJ Kool Herc was a Jamaican immigrant who used the breakbeat DJ technique from home to add syncopated (off-beat) rhythms to the beats he created. This allowed for the music to bounce more as opposed to being rigid and only emphasizing the downbeats or ‘straight’ rhythms. He also pioneered wordplay and engaged and excited crowds during his shows. Afrika Bambaataa formed the Universal Zulu Nation, which advocated for using hip hop culture as a means for positive and social change in the world, and his foundational impacts shaped the genre. Grandmaster Flash was an innovator in the genre who was the first to use the backspin, scratching on the records he was DJing with as well as manipulating them backward and forwards to create a new toolbelt of DJing techniques. His group, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five wrote several extremely influential songs the most famous being “The Message” which was a pioneering song that revealed the everyday experience of being black in the U.S., focusing on extremely significant subject matter that called attention to the genre as a force for change. The contributions of these artists launched the genre to revolutionary heights, with the

purpose being to provide a voice and platform for black people in their struggle against inequality (PQ).

As the 80s rolled around, there was a new sub-genre of rap emerging from the West Coast which is today recognized as ‘Gangsta Rap’, a name given to the genre after the music was created, named by the members of the group N.W.A (Quinn, 4). This evolution in the 80s was something fascinating that demonstrated the hip-hop movement’s success across the country within 10 years of its inception, reaching new communities and resonating with many people who were exposed to the music and messages of the genre. Furthermore, a great deal of contention exists surrounding the discourse of gangsta rap, as it has a tarnished reputation, having been dragged through the mud by white-dominated media that solely focused on the red herring that gangsta rap glorified misogyny and encouraged violence in black communities. Evidently, there was an extent of subject matter that was violent in nature, but the white media did not look beyond to understand that the lyrics were describing a reality that was inflicted, demanded, and reinforced by the white supremacist patriarchy. Best explained by Bell Hooks in 1994, “When young black males labor in the plantations of misogyny and sexism to produce gangsta rap, their right to speak this violence and be materially rewarded is extended to them by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (5)”. This asserts that the agency of black men in this case is diminished by having to submit and align their messages with putting others down, revealing a hierarchical food chain that places white men at the top, white women next, black men below, and black women at the very bottom. It is no expression of manhood but a demonstration of this societal ranking, simultaneously appealing to the white perception of blackness. This perspective is extremely nuanced and aptly captures the racial dynamics in the U.S. as it relates to the

discourse surrounding gangsta rap, and the participation of rap in reifying or breaking from prejudice.

By the 2000s, rap was a well-established and commercialized genre that allowed new trendsetters to create new sonic landscapes that drew upon past influences in this new setting. The introduction of 808s, more melodic lines, more samples of past soul music and R&B, and lyrics that talked about new subjects marked this new era of DJing and rap techniques. Outkast, 50 Cent, Missy Elliot, DMX, Jay-Z, Kanye West, and 9th Wonder were all pioneers of this time, utilizing these techniques that pivoted the hip-hop genre with the help of advancements in technology. These advancements included changing the way that music was mixed and having the increasing ability to DJ on a computer as opposed to using a turntable with physical records. Each decade of rap was distinguished from all the others and was marked by specific artists who added their legacy to the decade of rap they belonged to. Sir Mix-a-lot, Vanilla Ice, and L.L. Cool J belonged to the 80s as The Notorious B.I.G, Tupac, and Busta Rhymes did to the 90s era of rap.

## *2. Racial Social Structures and Blackness:*

The contemporary racial categories that exist today come out of classification systems Western Europeans created as they expanded their colonial empires into new continents in the 1400s. The Slave Trade and free African labor were the reasons why the colonies could be maintained and profitable, but it was also major in deciding which races and cultural elements were uncivilized and primitive, initially based only on physical appearance. This not only was embraced by white people but it was used as a “factual” rationalization to justify the atrocities of inhumane treatment. As the White man continues to hold the most systematic power to this day, it can now be seen how this is no different from the colonial mindset from over six hundred years

ago. Slavery in the United States was brutal and harsh, and a system was necessary to uphold the same social caste system after the formal abolition of slavery. Although these types of laws were not unique to the U.S., the Jim Crow laws were recognized as one of the most formal apartheid systems ever seen in the legal codes of a country. Established in 1877, the Jim Crow laws effectively lasted until 1968—created in the wake of slavery’s abolition and utilized to keep Black Americans trapped in a lower economic, political, and social status *legally*. There is something particularly evil about enshrining inhumane treatment as a law behavior because the degrading treatment of black people was normalized via the laws, which were enforced without a thought to the inhumanity of the system. The state enforced and encouraged racism in the United States, and the question became about not what is. Some examples of this include the Grandfather clause, separating restaurants, parks, and public spaces by “colored” and white, and even redlining in neighborhoods across the United States. These laws have legacies that kept black people out of homes, societal respect, economic success, and political power— simply because of the color of their skin.

Something extremely important to United States racism was the concept of whiteness vs. blackness. This is an important aspect of social life in every formerly colonized country of the Americas, but in most places, people are encouraged to lean into ‘European-ness’ physically and culturally more than blackness or even indigenous-ness, but in the United States, the segregation was unbelievably regimented. Laws like the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, passed in Virginia, were a chilling reminder that the only people who were considered white were those with not even one drop of blood and that all others should be deemed and categorized as ‘colored’, or The Other. In many other countries of the Americas, including Cuba, leaning into whiteness was always encouraged and necessary to succeed in a society so racially influenced, but there was

never such scrutiny over the quantities of white or colored blood that went into making someone's genetic makeup than in the United States (Snook). Further Supreme Court cases like the Dred Scott Case in 1857 and Plessy Vs. Ferguson proved the bureaucratic and legal manipulation of racial categories to legitimize and normalize racism as *the way things are* as opposed to an inhumane and unacceptable way of treatment of human beings. Dred Scott's case disqualified black people at the time from being categorized as human beings, and the Plessy V. Ferguson introduced and legitimized the fallacy of being separate-but-equal. It made it much easier to be cruel when non-white people were 'legally' labeled as sub-human. Furthermore, it separated white people from everyone else legally and gave them further agency, individuality, and privileges that were not given to any other people, regardless of how they looked or acted.

### 3. Hip-Hop Today:

#### *a. Rap as Revolution/Explicit Protest*

DNA by Kendrick Lamar is a contemporary example of how rap can be used as a revolutionary medium, demanding and inciting change via the lyrics. The very title of the song talks about the genetic origins of the actions and behavior of white and black people alike in the United States. Released in 2017, the song was released amidst a year of severe police violence, where his words aptly gave a voice that matched the anger and necessity of the time. Lamar explicitly states his disgust for white ancestry and the actions that go back generations, naming what so often stays tacitly understood and activating feelings that lay dormant for too long. Internalized racism is so ingrained that it is easy to forget just how cruel and inhumane the racism in this country is. A song so explicit and poignant with its message, connecting the present to times of enslavement, is not just a song of protest but one of ideology. "Alright", another one of Lamar's songs of protest was mobilized much more in protests against police

violence in the United States and contained the lyric: “*And we hate po po’, wanna see us dead in the streets fo sho,*” an assertion felt so profoundly by many black Americans from the reign of terror caused by police brutality in the United States. This song, however, does not serve as an anthem for black consciousness in the way that DNA does.

The lyrics are structured in a juxtaposition of black and white DNA. While rapping about this, Lamar reveals social ideas of blackness and whiteness as well as *his* definitions that embrace blackness and force accountability and acknowledgment of the historical behavior of white Americans.

*“Loyalty got Royalty inside my DNA,”*

alludes to the idea that people with African heritage are descended from kings. Though this is a somewhat controversial statement as it implies that the ancestral value comes from royalty as opposed to enduring enslavement, it is a sentiment that seeks to affirm black heritage and lineage as something separate from the time period of being dehumanized.

*“I got power, poison, pain, and joy inside my DNA,”*

is another line that speaks about Lamar’s personal experience but is surely more widely applicable to just how much black people have experienced adversity and pain, without writing off the simultaneous triumphs and significant moments in black history, making them true soldiers who must battle to succeed. All of these statements speak to what is in the DNA of the people of the present based on the collective history of slavery and suffering that binds black people today.

Lines like:

*“I know murder, conviction, burners, boosters, burglars, ballers dead, redemption  
Scholars, fathers dead with kids, and I wish I was fed forgiveness, Soldier’s DNA”*

give a sample of the things Lamar has seen his whole life, speaking to the reality that many others, who grew up under the same impoverished conditions resulting from systemic racism and its subsequent policies, have witnessed. Police brutality, internal chaos, losing loved ones, and tragic familial circumstances are painful realities that they don't have an option to look away from. The reality presented by Lamar that resonated with so many is the result of laws that forced the black population of the U.S. to remain trapped at the bottom of the racial caste system, forced to have soldier-like DNA from having to battle through even more barriers and cruelty just to get by, let alone succeed. In order to succeed in such a world, people had to either be soldiers against the world or they could fold and fall victim to the cycle. Differentiating himself from those around him, Lamar scathingly states:

*“Problem is, all that sucker shit inside your DNA,  
Daddy prolly snitched, heritage inside your DNA,  
Backbone don't exist, born outside a jellyfish I gauge”*

Being a sucker, snitching, and lacking a backbone are attributes that describe not only white people and their resentment to speak up for black people but also is directed at those in his own community as well. Lamar is using the medium of rap to relay a message directly to those who have appealed to white standards, contemporarily known as respectability politics, in order to get by instead of embracing self-love and blackness and seeing that as the point of success. He surely could also be addressing those in his life who have snitched and betrayed him personally, but if this message were not so applicable on multiple facets, it would not be the anthem or voice for many that it is today (Rose, Malhotra).

*“I know how you work, I know just who you are”*



is another phrase that precedes the lines just analyzed, which reveals Lamar's birds-eye-view perspective of these racial relations manifesting in the white and black communities alike. The need for black people to keenly observe the behavior and actions of the white people around them was crucial to survival in the Jim Crow South, as it allowed them to remain invisible by knowing what white people expected to see. Many black people had to utilize performance, in the minstrel sense of the word, to not subvert white norms in the United States— playing into the sambo stereotypes of laziness and naivety to remain safe from public scrutiny. To 'act a fool' while knowing very well the commoditized definition of 'blackness' imposed by white people showed how deeply ingrained survival and servitude to white norms were in the black consciousness. There is an argument that this invisibility provided a sense of agency for black people but for Lamar, this behavior of appealing to whiteness is spineless and in no way improves the state of affairs. Surviving in the U.S. is dependent on the notion of invisibility and catering to the white gaze, but it takes a mountain to enact change, and internalized racism within the black community also inhibits progress.

The inclusion of the line:

*“My DNA is not for imitation your DNA an abomination”*

speaks directly to the appropriation of blackness in U.S. culture, whether that be in the form of trends in fashion, music, language, and aesthetics, as well in the form of exoticization and fetishization of black bodies. The paradox between dependence on blackness for culture and the erasure of black influence that has consistently plagued the country is what makes white DNA such an abomination. Furthermore, the quote from Fox News host Geraldo Rivera:

*“This is why I say that hip-hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years,”*

shows the utter lack of responsibility for acknowledging that massive problems do not start out of thin air but as the culmination of centuries of strife. There is a conservative train of thought that has long demonized hip-hop for encouraging violence and glorifying gang culture amongst the youth, when in reality, *who* was it who imposed systems of violence and created an environment of impoverishment for people of color in the first place? Victim blaming in the form of demonizing black cultural products is something that is neither productive nor intellectually motivated, and these words show an utter lack of understanding of what racism's consequences have been across history as well as in the past 'recent years'. Using hip-hop to stand up to people like Rivera shows the revolutionary capacity the genre has for both an internal and external audience. This quote pivots the song into a rapid lyrical and sonic descent into chaos in imitation of the explosive rage felt by Kendrick for being so politically targeted by making art. The audible tension enhanced and reflected the message in the music through the composition itself and furthered the point of the injustice faced by Black people in America. This is exactly what a revolution in Music looks like in the hands of a skillful artist.

*b. Rap as an Authentic Medium of Self-Expression:*

U.N.I.T.Y by Queen Latifah was released in 1993, at the height of the Gangsta Rap movement, and she showed what it meant to be a woman in rap and society at this time. She highlighted experiences of domestic abuse and sexual harassment and how men, as much as women, were responsible for not feeding into cycles of exploiting and exoticizing black bodies. Her message was so impactful because she was one of the first women in the rap industry with such a platform to advocate for the place of gender equality within the existing narrative of systemic racism and rap in the '90s. Queen Latifah's music and presence set the tone for subsequent female artists and the messages they felt emboldened to share with the world

(consequence.net). Her effective critique of internalized and externalized misogyny was extremely formative and captures the nuance of internalized misogyny in the Black community without entirely demonizing black men and women in the process.

There are several lyrical motifs that are played throughout the entire song, including the phrases: “U.N.I.T.Y”, “*Love a black (wo)man from infinity to infinity*”, and “*Who you callin’ a bitch*”. These motifs emphasize that her vision is for black men and women to unite and that they must learn to love each other unconditionally. This theme is extremely significant, particularly when it comes from a female artist, addressing not only the lack of unification in the black community but also the internalized misogyny on the part of black men. Even within the hip-hop genre, it has been significantly more difficult for women to break into the industry as iconic figures and pioneers in the genre (Keyes, 2000). Although she explicitly critiques the painful words and actions of black men, she still does not exonerate women from their role in the cycle and further shows that a lack of unity in the black community is the most detrimental consequence of all. This ultimately reveals the legacy of systemic racism and the idea that black people must be pinned against each other to obtain success in a world dominated by white ideals and norms.

Nonetheless, to men, she has several lyrics that explain situations of abuse and objectification that must be denounced. She says:

*“Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho, you know all of that gots to go”*

Words can be extremely harmful, and more thought must be put into the way that women are addressed generally. Directly after this, she says:

*“Don’t be gettin’ mad, when we playin’ it’s cool but don’t you be calling me out my name,  
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame”*

This counters a common defense from men that often play down their misogyny as a joke, which often further alludes to the way that women are societally painted as being hysterical and unable to ‘take a joke.’ Jokes, however, are only funny when the subject matter is on an equal footing to the person making the statement. She then moves on to address women in a twofold way. She speaks about choosing herself over an abusive partner, even when it is quite difficult for women with children to remove themselves from harmful situations.

*“I guess I fell so deep in love I grew dependent see, I was too blind to see just how it was  
affectin' me,*

*All that I knew was you was all the man I had, And I was scared to let you go*

*Even though you treated me bad,*

*But I don't want to see my kids see me gettin' beat down by daddy smackin' mommy all  
around,*

*A man don't really love you if he hits ya, This is my notice to the door, I'm not takin' it no  
more,*

*I'm not your personal whore, that's not what I'm here for”*

These words are extremely powerful, and serve as a reminder of what true love and acceptance mean for women who are stuck in a situation where abusive behavior is normalized. Latifah describes a life situation that is all too prevalent for black women, who have always existed at the true bottom of the U.S.'s hierarchical society, clearly distinguishing between love and dependency. Moreover, she reminds women that just because someone is familiar or their violence is normalized, it does not mean that their behavior should be accepted and tolerated. The fallacy that women need a man in order to survive in the world keeps them trapped, and no amount of fear should prevent them from protecting themselves and their children and ultimately

breaking the cycle. Queen Latifah is clearly alluding to these themes as she explains that the most powerful and loving thing to do is to choose one's self, even if that means being alone. She highlights that she would not want her children to observe nor learn this behavior from her partner, and uses being a good role model as further motivation to choose self-respect and *real* love over an abusive partnership. This is an important message for women to hear, but her message extends beyond this. Latifah holds women equally accountable for not participating *themselves* in a misogynistic society and understanding that there is nothing cool or trendy about internalizing this culture. She says:

*“You wear a rag around your head and you call yourself a ‘gangsta bitch’ now that you saw Apache’s video I saw you wildin’, actin’ like a fool”*

*“There’s plenty of people out there with triggers ready to pull it. Why you tryna jump in front of the bullet Young Lady?”*

This is something that scholar Bell Hooks even commented on the year after U.N.I.T.Y’s release, even though it was not directly meant for Latifah. She states: “Black females must not be duped into supporting shit that hurts us under the guise of standing beside our men. If black men are betraying us through acts of male violence, we save ourselves and the race by resisting.” This encapsulates the raw emotions expressed by Latifah, explaining why it is so significant to resist and leave. Hooks goes further to say that a feminist critique of sexism among black men from a feminist standpoint isn't effective if it exclusively blames black men. It is essential to take one further step back and look at the context to see that the true problem is caused by the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” as it manifests in all facets of life in U.S. society, including gangsta rap (5).

c. *Everyday Rap:*

*Changes* by Tupac Shakur features lyrics that are a genuine representation of his inner thoughts and are very conversational in their tone where he is discussing the changes, or the lack thereof, in the state of racial relations in the present. He was born in 1971 to two active members of the Black Panther Movement at the very beginning of the hip-hop movement. He was named after the descendant of the last remaining Incan ruler, an indigenous revolutionary, because she “Wanted him to know he was part of a world culture and not just from a neighborhood” (Walker). This within itself reveals the value in passing down the names and legacies of those who remain forgotten in dominant history as well as the idea of giving the subsequent generation upward mobility in any way possible— even through the name. The neighborhood he was initially from was East Harlem, and she wanted to remind her son that his existence was a part of a global, collective, and colonial history, not just a mere neighborhood in a city without rhyme or reason. It is quite clear that he took this legacy to heart in his lyrical poetry— pioneering the subgenre of everyday rap that is so emblematic of the quotidian realities of systemic racism’s legacy.

In this song, Shakur talks about police brutality and the impact of state-sanctioned racism on the behavior of people around him, with anecdotes and accusations interlaced throughout.

*“I’m tired of bein’ poor and even worse, I’m black, My stomach hurts so I’m lookin’ for a purse to snatch, Cops give a damn about a negro, Pull the trigger, Kill a nigga he’s a hero”*

These words very bluntly show the factual disadvantage that black people have in society, with Shakur attributing his blackness to an additional reason for the poverty he faces. He further speaks about how hunger and desperation are the reasons people have to steal, stating later in the song that he never did an unnecessary crime, explaining the reasoning for criminal actions. The

primary intention of saying something like this was to counter the dominant narrative that black people were naturally disposed to being more violent and committing crimes, yet another example of attacking the victim as opposed to examining the structural causes for such prejudices. He then points out that the police are not only indifferent towards black people, but they are actively praised for their violent actions towards them.

*“Give the crack to the kids, who the hell cares? One less hungry mouth on the welfare  
First ship 'em dope and let 'em deal to brothers, Give 'em guns, step back, watch 'em kill each  
other”*

This lyric directly addresses the crack epidemic and the government’s negligence in predominantly black areas of the U.S., alluding to the Iran-Contra affair that began in 1985. This affair proved the government’s involvement with funding Contras, or guerilla groups in Nicaragua that trafficked cocaine that were converted to crack in the predominantly black neighborhoods of Los Angeles. The inner cities of the U.S. were most impacted, and the majority of inner cities were disproportionately filled with black people, causing in turn, a disproportionate amount of black people to be afflicted by the crack epidemic (Dunlap, 2006). Instead of providing addiction services and rehabilitation to these populations, a War on Drugs was declared by Ronald Reagan instead. This ‘war’ demonized drug use and was another highly effective method of imprisoning addicts and targeting people of color instead of providing any services whatsoever. Shakur even comes back to this specific War on Drugs as a specifically racist set of measures later in the song by saying:

*“It’s a war on the streets and the war in the Middle East, Instead of war on poverty, They got a  
war on drugs so the police can bother me, And I ain’t never did a crime I ain’t have to do”*

This so clearly shows the anger felt by Shakur and many others about the legal prejudice in the country at the time. With a plethora of resources, for the U.S. government to focus on the war on drugs and the Middle East, a far-off place, as opposed to solving local, internal problems that plagued people on a mass scale, is an atrocity. Though there is plenty of discourse and controversy surrounding the war on drugs, Between 1975 and 2019, the U.S. prison population increased sixfold to 1.43 million Americans, with about 20% of those imprisoned for a drug offense, according to an Associated Press study (Morrison). In the span of 1970 to 2000, however, the percentage of incarcerated black people skyrocketed at disproportionate rates to their white counterparts. A study by the Vera Institute of Justice revealed that in 2016, black people represented 13% of the overall population, and yet they represented 38% of the total number of people sentenced to federal prison for drug offenses. White people made up 71% of total drug possession and distribution arrests, and yet they only represented 22% of those sentenced to federal prison for drug offenses (Henderson). The disparities are clearly documented and serve as a testament to the cruel infliction of the war on drugs on the black population of the U.S. Shakur's words are a response to this targeted attack against black people in the U.S. but in a more raw, vulnerable way that reveals the feelings and daily thoughts of someone who has been oppressed as opposed to merely discussing the statistics of inequity.

*“It ain't a secret, don't conceal the fact, the penitentiary's packed and it's filled with blacks”*

This reveals the explicit nature of U.S. racism on a social and federal level and furthers the point that many people knew that the lucrative prison business was booming, and a disproportionate amount of the people who filled the spaces were black.

*“It's time to fight back', that's what Huey said, two shots in the dark, now Huey's dead”*



In this lyric, Shakur brings up Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panther movement, who based the movement off of Fanon's ideas, and who was assassinated in 1989. The purpose of these words is to call attention to what will happen when people attempt to make a true difference in the racial dynamics of the country: death.

Then, the inclusion of lines like:

*“I see no changes, all I see is racist faces, Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races,” and “We gotta make a change, It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes, Let's change the way we eat, Let's change the way we treat each other, You see, the old way wasn't workin', So it's on us to do what we gotta do to survive”*

demonstrate absolute desperation for action towards progress. The constant mentioning of a need for change or a lack of progress is a theme reminiscent of the white moderate's need for *gradualism*, an ideology that inhibited racial progress and civil rights, most famously critiqued by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, explicitly stated in *A Letter from Birmingham Jail* in 1963.

Gradualism is the idea that more time was needed before change could be enacted and that when things finally started happening, they should come about slowly and not all at once. The claim that the country needed a lot of time to better education, improve persuasion and debate, and create fairer laws was an irrational belief stemming from the privilege of never knowing such atrocities of human treatment. Like Dr. King, Shakur implored people to open their minds to change their behavior and thought processes because everything prior to that point had still not been enough, as there was no more time to stifle progress.

*“And as long as I stay black, I gotta stay strapped, and I never get to lay back, cause I always gotta worry 'bout the payback, some buck that I roughed up way back”*

The horrific irony of the song beyond the lyrics is that it was released posthumously in 1998, just 2 years after Tupac was killed even though it was recorded in 1992. These last few lyrics of the song show how violence internal to the black community is a real consequence of the U.S. economic and social system. It pits black people against each other and forces them to fit the stereotype imposed by white or to be seen as illegitimate. This certainly is a representation of how the idea of respectability politics influences the discourse towards black on black crime. This is a term that has been used racially. Shakur was killed by another black person, and his insightfulness on the cyclical nature of consequences resulting from systemic racism was not enough to alter his fate.

## **B. Cuba**

### *1. Origins of Hip Hop:*

Hip-hop's emergence in Cuba is a testament to cultural fusion caused by colonization, rebellion, and socio-political critiques, which reveals a broader context of colonialism and ideas towards race, even when most rappers today are forced 'underground' for their public and scathing critiques of the government. Rap in Cuba emerged as a direct response to hearing rappers from the United States, where U.S. rappers were unafraid and emboldened to speak up against police violence and the harsh conditions of being black. In the early 80s, Cubans living on the island's eastern side picked Florida radio stations that played rap for the first time, and ever since, rap has given a voice to those without one. In Cuba, the voiceless are often poor and black, disproportionately struggling and suffering to their white counterparts on the island and plagued by a mentality that demeans black features and attributes (Lacey, 2006).

Cuba is another example of a former colony that was driven by a slave economy, where the legacy of racism and inequality remains strong in all facets of contemporary life. There is a

disproportionate amount of white Cubans who receive remittances in contrast to black Cubans, and the income gap is only increasing. Furthermore, with little to no economic growth on the island itself, it is challenging to make a living based on most professions, excluding the tourist industry, which is the most exposed to contact with U.S. dollars (Arsenault, 2016, Lacey, 2006).

The tourist industry is an exception to the mostly isolated economy of Cuba, where the government has rejected capitalism in most facets, including rap. Furthermore, with little to no economic growth on the island itself, it is challenging to make a living based on most professions, excluding the tourist industry, which is the most exposed to contact with U.S. dollars (Arsenault, 2016, Lacey, 2006). The tourist industry is an exception to the mostly isolated economy of Cuba, where the government has rejected capitalism in most facets, including rap.

This genre holds a unique positionality in Cuba, raising complex questions about authenticity, exploitation, and the role of music as a force for social change even though it became a major capitalist enterprise in the U.S., catering to a majority white audience. While hip-hop has been exploited, its significance lies in the voices it amplifies, particularly those that celebrate blackness, address societal issues, and serve as a platform for advocacy and protest. An important primary source directly from Cuba relating to hip-hop's revolutionary role despite censorship is a documentary called *La Fabri-K* which was released in 2004. There are interviews with pioneers of the Cuban underground rap scene, who paved the way for the subsequent artists, and the perspective of the five members of La Fabri-K, a collective that advocated for hip-hop's place in Cuban society, says a lot about the initial role of rap itself in decolonizing from this legacy. One of the members, Yrak Sáenz, defines the role of a rapper as holding the responsibility to represent his whole community, generation, and country, and the collective's purpose was to see themselves in the music and teach the world about Cuban sound while never

forgetting their roots, even when abroad (2:44). He then states that the rap scene in Cuba was a revolution and inspired people in its unique way, particularly in a society where people ignore the issues that are in front of them, and look the other way in situations of utter desperation (11:00). Upon first glance, it is quite strange that the people suffering the most are silent on the matter, but with the context of Cuba's censorship and control over media, and artists, it becomes quite evident that there is nothing to say. Racism is very ingrained in Cuba, and many have to endure extreme poverty that is unheard of in other parts of the world due to the government's resentment of moving towards a capitalist economy. This degree of suffering is so severe that although there is obvious hopelessness, there are also solutions that exist domestically, and the objective of rap is to remind people of this fact.

Moreover, Cuba's rap scene had an entirely different connotation than that of the U.S., even if it was based on the same principle of revolutionary expression. It was seen as a foreign product that made its way to Cuba's shores via Florida to stir up dissidence with the government, but it never started out nor gained unanimous legitimacy as an authentic cultural practice the way that it did in the U.S. This ultimately forced the majority into the underground scene to avoid censorship unless they received international attention for their work. This history reveals a particular paradox considering rap is not the dominant genre people associate with Cuba, and yet a plethora of scholarship exists about Cuba's rap scene and Cuban hip hop as it relates to U.S. conceptions of revolting and self-identity via blackness. Much of this literature does not present the genre in its own right, but there is a distinguishing focus and intention from Cuban rappers to further societal advancement and the improvement of self-love towards the black part of their heritage. This ultimately ties back to Lipsitz's concept of a genre of music being a local minority

that becomes internationally relevant due to the global consciousness that the music was written with.

2. *Racial Social Structures and Blackness:*

Cuba was a sugar colony that underwent two major waves of success: the first being in the 1500s and the second in the 1800s as a direct result of the Haitian Revolution, which saw a gap in the sugar market that the Cuban planter elite was hungry to fill. The second iteration of the sugar revolution in Cuba was also marked by the tightening of enslavement laws as a response to the independence movement of Haiti that revealed a peak of “the explosive forces” that lay dormant within societies built upon “racially defined forced labor”(Andrews, 54). Cuba’s independence movement sought to eradicate concepts of race entirely in response to the longstanding precedent of colonial society. While nations like Haiti embraced their blackness and declared themselves an all-black republic after the Haitian Revolution ended in 1804, Cubans, in their independence movement, accomplished this by uniting under Cuban ‘heritage’, but at the cost of diminishing blackness, to be certain. However, this strategy did provide upward mobility for black people that other former colonies did not see, particularly in the military. In the 3 rebellions against the Spanish for independence, the army’s makeup was “unique in the history of the Atlantic world—the Army of Liberation, a multiracial fighting force that was integrated at all ranks... [with] 60 percent [being] men of color” (Ferrer, 25). Additionally, 40 percent of those men of color were in high-ranking positions of respect and authority in the Army of Liberation.

During the third and final rebellion, however, The United States intervened in the revolution, which is today recognized as the start of the Spanish-American War that led to many other territorial acquisitions on the part of the U.S. Under the guise of support for Cuban

independence, the U.S. crept in as an equally damaging colonial force that maintained the precedent of the racial caste system. The U.S. curbed any possibility of being a truly raceless nation and repressed true Cuban sovereignty, intervening specifically when there was a chance to stifle a “Victory of an explicitly anti racist, multicultural movement” (Ferrer, 26). The U.S. had a vested interest in its sugar cane investments but, more importantly, disagreed with Cuba’s racial ideology and intervened militarily to decide if Cubans were ‘worthy’ of self-governance. Foreign ethnocentrism devolved into a means of control, forcing Cubans to conform to a dynamic of inferiority in order to be truly free of military occupation. It was not until Cuba abandoned ideas of racial integration and racelessness that the U.S. saw Cuba as truly ready to be left unattended, with the resolution resulting in the Platt Amendment, forcing Cubans to agree to let the U.S. come back and seize control at any time they felt things were getting out of hand.

In the 20th century, after independence and Cuba’s 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro, many laws were introduced, including Cuba’s famous literacy campaign, to improve staggering rates of entrenched inequality resulting from Cuba’s colonial past (Arsenault). Although this was helpful, the fundamental problems of Cuba’s economy being built upon a plantation model of labor prevailed. Particularly when the issues were compounded by decades of separation from capitalism and the global economy, which have decimated the livelihoods of many Cubans, particularly those who have black ancestry and features. In the present, the census has consistently undercounted black citizens, and black Cubans have additionally self-reported themselves under different racial categories due to these convoluted attitudes towards blackness that emerged from the ultimate need for survival.

### 3. *Hip-Hop Today:*

#### a. *Rap as Revolution:*

*“Rap en Cuba le ha dado muchas soluciones sociales que mucha gente había copiado.*

*En su manera es revolución, manera a inspirar.” - Yrak Sáenz (Obsesión)*

There is no doubt of rap’s revolutionary capacity, but in Cuba, there was a particular spark in the words of Cuban artists, who recognized what the medium accomplished for the cause. *Rap es Guerra* was performed and written by Los Aldeanos, two other trailblazers in the Cuban hip-hop genre who managed to emerge from the underground scene with international attention. Brian Oscar Rodríguez Gala and Aldo Roberto Rodríguez Baquero grew up in “una aldea,” a small village and community where their name, Los Aldeanos, originated. Launched in 2003, the group began to make impactful songs that soon reached worldwide attention from not only others in the hip-hop industry but in the media as well, receiving a feature in the New York Times in 2006.

With such an internationally renowned discography, Los Aldeanos remains one of Cuba's most internationally successful hip-hop artists. In *El Rap es Guerra*, the perspective of misery and pain of the people is contained in lyrics that resonate intimately with many Cubans. Not only did their message represent the lives of the majority, but they also asserted that rap itself was war. The moment the words were written on the page and the messages delivered by their voices, confrontation, and war were incited. Rap was a contentious subject in Cuba, with so many artists being forced underground for their messages against the government, and in an interview, Rodríguez-Baquero admits: “What we sing, people can’t say... They think we are crazy [but] we say what they only whisper.” Having fame and support gave the group more autonomy and agency to speak truths that most people back in Cuba were not able to vocalize, and it shielded

them from the government's censorship. Rap provided the means of both engaging with and escaping from co-optation for their messages.

*“Esta es otra madrugada de insomnio, un aire ahogada en el odio”*

*“It's another sunrise with no sleep, an air drowned in hate”*

This is a clear representation of what many people in Cuba go through on a daily basis; the situation is truly dire due to Cuba's global economic isolation.

*“No frenas la redacción es la acción de libre expresión de una pasión con misión, salvación”*

*“Don't stop writing, it is the act of free expression, of a passion with mission, salvation”*

These lyrics posit the pen and paper as the means of expressing oneself with a goal of reaching an audience wider than a local one, the exact definition of a global consciousness that goes into the creation of rap music (Lipsitz).

*“Luchar por un cambio social que no le conviene al gobierno, Serás un problema interno”*

*“Fight for a social change that isn't convenient for the government, you will be an internal problem”*

This is a direct allusion to the government's attitude towards rappers, which depicts them as internal problems whose voices need to be immediately quashed for disagreeing with the government's management of the conditions of inequality. There is no freedom of speech in Cuba like there is in the United States, and dissent with the government is taken very seriously.

*“Son balas mis palabras y no mi boca mi mente las tira”*

*“My words are bullets, and not my mouth but my mind shoots them”*

The medium of rap and poetry can not be reduced to mere noise but he is stating that the lyrics themselves are his weapons that are controlled by his intellect and that his words are



carefully calculated. The demonization of rap has often led to the conclusion that it is an inferior genre that has no layers of analysis to explore, but these lyrics demonstrate just how intentional words can be. The revolution and capacity for change come from the very medium by which he delivers this message to his audience, encouraging the audience to understand the positionality of where he, the artist, is coming from. This further attributes the revolutionary power to the medium of rap and the thought put into the messages shared by the artists.

*“Voy de camuflaje, la censura no me ve, Quieren que llenemos nuestros demos de canciones movidas pero se olvidan que el rap es guerra”*

*“I’ll go in camouflage; censorship doesn’t see me, They want us to fill our demos with upbeat songs but they forget that rap is war”*

Being released in 2009, several years after the NYTimes article was released, these words can be attributed to a sentiment shared in Los Aldeanos' interview in 2000 when Rodriguez-Boquero credited international fame for receiving immunity from censorship that is uncommon for most others who can “only whisper” these realities that they asserted with vigor (Lacey, 2006).

*“El rap es de guerra por eso en TV no sale, mis tapes se expanden como plaga y no hay nada que pueden hacer, están escuchando la violencia del hip-hop Cubano”*

*“Because rap is war it won’t appear on TV, My tapes are spreading like a plague and there’s nothing they can do, They are listening to the violence of Cuban hip-hop”*

This is one of the most significant lyrics of the entire song, highlighting many vital nuances of hip-hop’s connotations in Cuba and globally. The first lyric shows the government's tight control over what media is presented to the country but further asserts that his music is uncontrollably spreading regardless of this. The violent nature of hip-hop, which aligns with Frantz Fanon’s idea that decolonization is inherently violent, is the quality of the music that

makes it resonate so widely with the people of Cuba, regardless of the governmental scrutiny (Fanon, 35). This was even alluded to earlier when they spoke of their words being bullets, showing that decolonization *is* violent, but it doesn't mean that people have to die.

*b. Rap as an Authentic Medium of Self-Expression:*

*Cabello Bello* by Robe L. Ninho is one of the most recent contributions to the genre, having been released in 2023, and it is one of the most poignant examples of rap's decolonizing capacity to date. The song begins with the words "Decolonización mental", which is the goal of Ninho's message in his lyrics that place African hair as the subject for decolonizing the mind. The explicit audience for this song is clearly black Cubans who have been taught to internalize hatred for their blackness— particularly, in this case, in the form of their hair. It is, however, also directed directly at racist white Cubans who have continued to impose this ideology and hatred in society today. The chorus, or primary lyrical motif, that is featured throughout the song is as follows:

*"Y no lo voy alaciar na', porque mi cabello es bello, Y no lo voy alaciar na', mi cabello tiene historia, Decolonización mental, Orgullo de mi raíz, mi etnia mi identidad,"*

*"And I'm not gonna straighten anything because my hair is beautiful, and I'm not gonna straighten anything, my hair has a history, mental decolonization, proud of my roots, my ethnicity, my identity"*

These powerful words verbalize the symbolism of hair in the culture of enslaved black people and show what a source of pride natural hair should be, and they assert this point forcefully to perhaps those who have historically put them down. Black people straightening their hair to appeal to white beauty standards has been a longstanding method of assimilation and survival to prevent public stigmatization and to ensure workplace opportunities (Tate 2007,

Dumas 2007, Opie, Phillips 2015). The dominant white beauty standards of the time were not only preferred, but black features were pushed down and seen as particularly unworthy in contrast. This is why Ninho's words that explicitly state pride in his history and identity via his hair are such important contributions and a true example of using rap and African sounds as a reclamation of self-love for black Cubans.

In the second verse, he lays a direct argument that implicates the colonizer in the prejudice of today, saying:

*“Y se ha metido en la cabeza esta gente, que mi pelo es malo si mi pelo fuera un delincuente, mi pelo no ha robado, ni matado, ni estafado, ni violado a nadie”*

*“And these people have lied in their heads that my hair is bad as if it was a delinquent, but my hair hasn't robbed, killed, deceived, nor raped anyone”*

There is a clear and powerful assertion that although black people have never killed nor committed the horrific atrocities that white colonizers had for hundreds of years, it was black people and blackness that was penalized and demonized more than anything else. Considering the sentiment of distaste towards African features that Ninho is actively trying to undo in this work, the internalization within society becomes quite apparent.

*“El fuego de tu discriminación vio en mi cabello la leña, desde que son pequeñas las negras se le enseña, que tu cabello es malo, frijoles para esa greña”*

*“The fire of your discrimination is seen in the firewood of my hair, since they were little, Black girls learned ‘your hair is bad’, knots in that messy nest of hair”*

These lyrics are some of the most impactful of the entire song, showing the layers of messages being relayed towards blackness. By using “tú” or “you”, Ninho directly calls out those who have put down his hair, and he says that the fire of their hatred manifests in the physical

form of his hair, which he sees and interacts with every day. It is situations like these that have taught young children to hate their blackness via their hair from a very early age. Ninho even mentions the words “frijoles para esa greña”, which is a colloquial term that is, in this case, used by white Cubans to insult the African hair textures of their fellow Cubans. Frijoles denote the knots, and ‘una greña’ is a derogatory term for a messy mop of hair, mainly used on those with a curlier hair texture.

Then, while addressing to other people with hair like his he says:

*“Tu fortaleza no es debilidad, mira ese cabello es bello, cuanta diversidad, el racismo no es más que un complejo de inferioridad, por no superar nuestra capacidad”*

*“Your fortitude is not a debility, look this hair is beautiful, so much diversity, racism is no more than an inferiority complex for not exceeding our capacity”*

This section serves as an affirmation for people who have looked down upon their hair for so long and tried to suppress their features. Ninho explains that the diversity of hairstyles and textures is a quality that is unique and beautiful and that racism stemming from white fragility towards blackness is what causes people to feel otherwise. Racism, although extremely harmful, can be combated by seeing how it permeates everyday life and experiences and recognizing that it is a fallacy. Self-love and embracing blackness is the key to breaking away from the imposed inferiority, another idea that stemmed from the Black Panther movement in the U.S. He then goes further to say:

*“A mi me gusta llevar mis pelos parados, ¿Quién te dijo que yo estoy despeinado? Loco, este es mi peinado, sirvió para que ocultaran informaciones y semillas para mis ancestros negros, cimarrones, sublevados, Con las trenzas enviaban los mensajes y dibujaban puntos de*

*referencia, caminos, pasajes, una especie de mapa que tejían y seguían, y servían de ruta de escape para cimarronaje”*

*“I like to wear my hair up, who told you that my hair is disheveled? Crazy, this is my hair; it served to store information and seeds for my black ancestors, the maroons, the rebels; With their braids they sent messages and drew landmarks, paths, passages, a kind of map that they wove and followed, which served as an escape route for the maroons.”*

This passage is a powerful testament to not only the beauty of hair but also the functionality and crucial role it had in the anti-enslavement movement throughout Cuba and the African diaspora in the Caribbean and Americas. The first part discusses various beautiful hairstyles that should be reclaimed, and Ninho combats the stereotype that natural curly hair looks *disheveled*, as others who have internalized this racism might assert. This is an important reclamation of the beauty aspect of hair, but the second part reveals just how it is a part of the foundational fabric of African identity in the colonized world.

The other crucial functions of hair in the colonial history of enslavement included storing information, trace routes, and carrying on any possible cultural retentions, whether in the weaving patterns of hair or storing seeds and crops from home on the passage with them. This long standing connection to the legacy of slavery is what makes this particular physical attribute so contentious and politicized. Furthermore, by bringing up the term Cimarronaje, a certain cultural history, and attitude towards the colonial slave system by black people in the Caribbean is denoted and is a formative term to include in contemporary lyrics that seek to decolonize. Los Cimarrones, or marrons, were a group of people descended from enslaved people who escaped captivity in the 1500s and maintained their independence from re-enslavement throughout the colonial period in the Caribbean (Diouf, 81). These people were a symbol of rebellion and

freedom for enslaved black people, and remain an emblem in the present black consciousness, connected through the collective history of what hair did, does, and *could* represent with the right mindset.

*c. Everyday Rap:*

*Pesadilla* by Silvio Rodriguez, or Silvito el Libre paints the powerful and chilling reality of what many Cubans endure or feel in the present day, or 2021. Silvito el Libre is another artist who rose to prominence at the same time as Los Aldeanos, also giving him a greater extent of lyrical freedom than many other rappers. His career has spanned 2 decades, having begun in 2003, and his music in the present has not yet lost the initial messages nor intentions. This song is definitely directed at his fellow Cubans as a voice of comfort and understanding; he not only heard and saw the suffering around him, but he articulated it into scathing critiques that he demands people to understand what life is really like for Cubans on the island. The song title means nightmares, and though he is not advocating for specific changes, he is certainly demanding accountability and recognition for the legacy of inequality and selfish desire brought about by the Cuban government. He begins by saying:

*“yo vengo de una tierra de miseria y apagone s de playas con palmeras y también de situaciones, donde los dirigentes viven en grandes mansiones pero el pueblo no tiene ni cojone”*

*“ I come from a land of misery and black outs, of beaches with palm trees and situations, where the political leaders live in big mansions but the people in pueblos don't have shit”*

The lyrics of Rodriguez are like a poem, including details of the quotidien that often go overlooked very similarly to the U.S. example, *Changes*. Beaches, blackouts, palm trees, and obvious inequality are all paramount to understanding life in Cuba and what goes into being a

part of its essence. This is the first line of the song and it clearly establishes the reality for many before Rodriguez goes on to share his own opinions. He then says:

*“ voy a prenderle fuego a los lacayos del tirano por el futuro de mis hermanos, el gobierno que hay en Cuba normal no sirvió, son 60 años de engaño, de muchas familias tú le has hecho mucho daño. de qué aún extranjero lo vean como extraño, de qué no hay comida ni papel pa’ ir al baño”*

*“I’m going to set fire to the tyrant’s loyal followers for the future of my brothers, Cuba’s government normally didn’t serve [the people], 60 years of deception, to many families you’ve caused much harm, you look at foreigners so strangely, and there’s no food or paper to use the bathroom”*

Rodriguez also uses the direct form “you”, “tú” in order to call out the selfish desires of people in power that continue to gain money and prosper at the expense of the basic well-being of the majority of the population. In a country still ravaged by extreme wealth inequality, stemming from the colonial caste system, Bentiez-Rojo’s Theory of Chaos rings true, with the emergence of rap as a means of expression in the face of systematic oppression that is hundreds of years in the making, forcing the majority of the country into desperate poverty. He is also critiquing the government’s refusal to move towards a free market economy, critiquing the suspicion held by the government towards foreign influences, and stating that no principle is ever more important than the suffering of people on a mass scale (Rivera Rodriguez, 75). Such a large majority of the population are forced to live in houses of carton, or “casas de cartones,” without even food or water, and this is the point that *Silvito el Libre* is bringing to the forefront. To further this point he states:

*“ sin causalidad ni problema el dinero en Cuba lo tiene el sistema, nadie quiere hablar ni tocar el tema ”*

*“It’s no chance nor a problem that the money in Cuba is held by The System, no one wants to talk about it or even touch the subject”*

This line speaks about another theme also seen in the ideas of the rappers in La Fabri-K,, which talks about the public’s unwillingness to address the problems faced in Cuba head on due to censorship. Censorship in Cuba is a major problem that has definitely been manipulated by foreign media to demonize the Cuban government, but it remains a true problem that afflicts the citizens on a wide, yet silent, scale. It is extremely scary to break away from this imposed governmental order, and Rodriguez describes what many people reduce their lives to instead.

He says:

*“Sabes tú lo que es necesidad, levantarse en las mañanas sin un pan ni na’, sin dinero pa’ tirarte ni una limona, La patrulla calentando y el transporte que no pasa, cada día es un nuevo reto es una historia una amenaza, siempre todo se repite cuando llegas a tu casa”*

*“You know what is necessary, to wake up in the morning without bread or anything, without money to go out or get a lemonade, The patrol ‘heating up’ and the transport that never comes, every day is a new challenge, a story, a threat; everything always repeats when you get back to your house”.*

In the U.S. example, Shakur proposes solutions or ways to enact change in the United States, as a response to a similarly stagnant approach to progress, that stemmed from different racial hierarchies founded in the same colonial roots as Cuba. Rodriguez; however, describes the unbelievable grit and repression of the public that resulted out of generations of being forced into silence. To endure food scarcity, police brutality, and the constant knowledge that the state of



things will not improve, is an everyday repeating cycle that is playing out over and over again for Cubans across the island. This repeating cycle that is brought on by racism and colonialism in the contemporary day is dragging people down into unimaginable depths of solitude and hopelessness. Obviously there is room for hope and things to do, but the censorship of Cuba and the government's bias is extremely powerful and trumps all other sentiments for hope. This is the nuanced take of Rodriguez, who is reaching beyond the lines of censorship and isolation to reach the ears of people who had no idea of the dire situation for the citizens of Cuba (Sipiapa).

It is not a pessimistic take to have, but it is one that reveals the brutal truth behind the poverty and suffering that is only heard about on foreign shores. Even more powerfully, Rodriguez ends with this:

*“ por eso es que mucho se piran pa fuera en un bote como quiera o cruzando fronteras hay dolores y vacíos que no se recuperan ellos saben cuando caigan lo que les espera ”*

*“For that reason, so many fled on a boat or by crossing borders, there are pains and emptiness that they can never recover from, they know when they fall what awaits”*

These concluding lyrics at the end of the song show the even more dreadful ‘solutions’ to escape this claustrophobic prison of an island, which is to flee as an exile. This forces Cubans to risk the extreme dangers that come with leaving the island ‘however’ they can, and being reduced to mere illegal migrants in the discourse of the West. These lyrics go on to further challenge the existing prejudice that migrants like Cubans and others from the Caribbean come to the U.S. for any reason besides necessity. The desperation is so high; the plight of a new country is filled with pains and vacancies that will never be fully healed. Regardless, people flee anyway in order to break from the cycle of stagnancy and internalized racism that has become the hallmark of Cuba.

**IX. Analysis:**

The artists as well as the music they create and the poems they share accomplish progress in the rap genre unlike many other genres, with each artist having a fire lit beneath them to enact collective change. Through just the analysis of these 6 songs alone, a plethora of subjects, sentiments, and realities were revealed that speak to the wider-consciousness represented in the intention of the genre. *DNA* and *El Rap es Guerra* are both potent songs of protest that convey an ideology and tell brutal truths that force many to reconcile with the false history they've been taught their whole lives. For Lamar, the Revolution is found in the act connecting to the colonial past and holding people in the present for their lack of courage and humanity. By rapping this for the masses to hear, Lamar created an anthem for black people that encapsulated the anger as well as the explanation for the present reality of systemic suffering. Helping people to make these connections and change their way of thinking about racial hierarchies is the definition of a revolutionary medium. His ideas also allude to an incredible amount of historical references that paint the history of systemic disadvantages and prejudice. For Los Aldeanos, the revolutionary act was the act of rapping itself, as it was a medium of expression with a grassroots intention of reclaiming blackness and encouraging activism against systemic racism. Both of these artists proved that rap is revolutionary in its ability to mobilize people and share ideologies, and although rap was revolutionary in its inception, it continues in the present.

Though this subgenre does this most explicitly, upon examining the 4 other songs representing everyday rap and rap that embraces blackness, it becomes clear that all of these songs have accomplished a change in mindset to different capacities. Lamar forced white and black people alike to acknowledge that, at the very least, the racial problems in the world today did not emerge out of nowhere but from a legacy of racism and pushing down a race of people

just to get ahead. Queen Latifah's message for unity was about unity between black people in the United States. Systemic inequality towards all black people was difficult enough to endure, but the misogyny by black men themselves compounded onto that problem was something that needed to be exposed. Fanon's idea that decolonization is inherently violent manifests itself in this song, showing the internal ways that black women face violence more than any other demographic of people. Gangsta rap was at its height during the release of this song, and as stated by Bell Hooks, when black men spoke of misogynistic subject matter in the songs, they engaged with stereotypes on blackness that reified the racialized colonial structure. This is not to demonize the victims, but to reveal that the agency of black men stripped in a music industry that rewards continuous division internally. This is why U.N.I.T.Y was so revolutionary; it spoke of the same subjects but from the opposite perspective and it is a song still resonating with people today.

The violence of decolonization that the black panthers agreed with is also seen throughout Tupac's work as well as his personal life story. Although peaceful means of protest like rap and music are effective means of decolonizing, violence has undeniably been a huge part of breaking from colonial powers throughout history. These ideas were highlighted by Los Aldeanos and Silvito El Libre alike in the Cuban, and they both painted a stark reality through the words they shared. There is so much anger towards the spiraling effects of colonization that grip onto present-day society in every facet, and this reality must not be silenced or ignored. In the U.S. artists achieve awareness of systemic racism via the subject matter, but in Cuba, rapping and lyrics are the weapons and the subversive means of rebelling. It gives artists a wide reaching platform that defies most governmental precedents for censorship; it is a way of sharing the

realities of what is happening to international audiences as well as providing a voice of truth for the people of Cuba.

Robe L. Ninho similarly confronts the stigmatization of blackness and black culture within Cuba, remnants of a colonial mindset, by spreading love about his hair. This song was aimed very clearly at all people of the African diaspora who have been told their African features are less-than, and Ninho asserts the power and rebellion in accepting black hair to be beautiful and wearing it naturally. With many cultural colloquialisms sprinkled in throughout the lyrics, it is clear that it was also meant to resonate deeply with other Cubans who might have experienced these prejudices in the exact language utilized by Ninho. This idea connects back to rap's ability to engage with a global audience while remaining culturally specific, and amplifying local culture to an international level. This within itself is an incredible way of decolonizing and valuing black contributions throughout the African diaspora. In his song, there is additionally a clear fusion of sounds unique to post-colonial music in the Americas. With a layered pattern of percussion and the use of trumpets and brass instruments, Ninho used colonial music to decolonize and reclaim the blackness in the music.

It is further interesting that the Caribbean was such an active region in developing the sound of colonial music, yet when rap, a true genre of the Americas, came to Cuba, it was considered to be a foreign and external product. This foreign stigma is because of governmental censorship but it also goes to show the lack of recognition for the Caribbean's contributions to the African diaspora, colonial music, and modern-day popular music.

In every single one of the songs, Benitez-Rojo's Theory of Chaos was exemplified, and the language provided by a wide array of decolonization scholars provided the language by which to outline the ways in which it manifested itself. The collective history of enslavement has

marked the lives and lyrics of these artists and remained a significant part of the present-day consciousness. This compounded with the current systemic poverty of black people across the formally colonized world creates the collective trauma that is uniquely addressed in rap music. Even further, the modern day music industry is a capitalist industry that forces engagement in similar prejudices in order to be seen as legitimate. This system was navigated by every single artist, and each one of them maintained their message and honored blackness in their work, shining through as truly decolonial figures in contemporary society. Music has much more relevance to world history, globalization, and economics than it is given credit for. It is a medium of social activism and at its very core, a way of touching the soul of another and speaking about things that are deeply relatable. This emotional connection is what gives music the power it has, and rap's lyrical poetry is an incredible emblem of music's ability to intimately connect with people.

#### **X. Conclusion:**

The profound legacy of colonization that scars the Caribbean has been documented, reified, and subverted in the music to come from the Caribbean, and it has accomplished a lot as a social force. Music is an active social force as much as a historical document, and though other primary sources articulate struggles faced against racism, there is no other contemporary source that encompasses all these themes and serves as an accessible means of consumption. It lies in the intersectionality of recounting collective pasts, lived experiences, and imagined futures, and rap situates these feelings within a particular time and racialized space. Above all other genres, hip-hop embodies this musical representation of the paradox between being a product of colonization and a simultaneous means of decolonization, and it is even considered one of the more contentious genres when it comes to the question of authenticity.

Many of the United States artists featured in this thesis are very well-known in popular culture beyond the hip-hop community, but the Cuban artists featured are much lesser-known. The three artists selected clearly have a larger reach than most, considering rap isn't the dominant genre of music in the country, and the fact that their reach was large enough to reach the U.S. in a time of censorship. By further looking at the pervasive role of racism in the U.S. and Cuba and its underrepresented connections to music, rap emerges and can be seen functioning as a platform for challenging ingrained mentalities, addressing systemic racism, and fostering self-identity.

The poetry in the lyrics serves as a primary source into the window of inequity and to the psychological effects on the black community that are essential to listen to in order to enact change and improve people's lives. Hip-hop is more than something to listen to and mindlessly enjoy, but a genre with explosive force and power. Every genre of music has its place on the global stage of sound and its intersectionality with history, and the narrative of rap is closely intertwined with historical discourse and events that pertained to the pain of experiencing systemic racism and oppression. Hip-hop as a cultural movement both engages with this narrative of societal inequity and subverts expectations of capitalism by shining through as an authentic and elevating platform of self-expression. This work is significant and music must be taken seriously as a means of analysis and a method of change in academic disciplines, and I hope to continue to expand this project in the future, as there is much left to explore. I sincerely hope that this inspires you the next time that you listen to music to truly *hear* the music; to escape your comfort zone, and to gain a new appreciation for the work and intentions of the artists featured.

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