

Project Title: The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theory and its Consequences in 21st Century Rap and Hip-Hop

Set-up (300 words)

My research project is an exploration of conspiracy theories in rap and hip-hop music of the 21st century. I focus on the most prevalent theories, which include stories about U.S. involvement in the September 11, 2001 attacks and about an active campaign by the U.S. government to oppress blacks.

In order to explore these conspiracy theories, I have examined songs and lyrics of several prominent hip-hop artists as a sample of a larger population. These lyrics serve as the texts which I am studying. The artists I have researched include Immortal Technique, Jadakiss, Eminem, Paris, Lupe Fiasco, and the Wu Tang Clan. Each one of these artists is connected either to each other, or to the 9/11 Truth Movement, whose stated mission is to uncover the truth about U.S. involvement in the terror attacks. I limited my exploration to music in the 21st century in order to focus in on the contemporary situation and its implications. The community of artists and fans which I am exploring share their ideas and conspiracies through rap and hip-hop music.

The point of my research is to discover why these certain conspiracy theories are surfacing in rap music written and listened to by this particular community. Underneath this broad umbrella are several essential questions I need to answer. How did conspiracy theories end up in the mainstream of the fastest growing music genre? What purpose do these theories serve for the artists and their fans? What are the consequences of the prevalence of conspiracy theories in hip-hop music?

Through my research I found that rap and hip-hop music that contains conspiracy theories can be mainstream, but it isn't always. There is, however, some sort of bond or connection between artists regardless of their popularity. Additionally, the songs all contain shared themes and reference the same historical events. These findings are significant because they hint at both the reasons conspiracy theories are spread in the hip-hop community and the effects these theories have on this community in particular and society as a whole.

Synthesis of the Object of Inquiry (250 words)

The conspiracy theories I am studying all tell a similar story. The basic element is that the U.S. government is trying to subjugate its citizens, especially blacks, and take away their freedom. In songs such as "Bin Laden" by Immortal Technique, "American Terrorist" by Lupe Fiasco and "What Would You Do?" by Paris, the 9/11 theories all say that the U.S. was actively involved in the attacks. These attacks occurred in order to create a state of fear in which liberty could be curtailed and more and more power could be assumed by the government. The theories about the oppression of blacks all say that throughout the institutions in America there is an attempt to hold the black man down and force him to live in urban poverty. This is accomplished through the use of drugs, diseases, assassinations and the like. This same story surfaces in "Why" by Jadakiss, "Harlem Streets" and "The 4th Branch" by Immortal Technique, and "Impossible" by the Wu Tang Clan. The degree of variation between versions of the stories is very small. The most significant difference is that in some songs the Bush Administration is singled out as the culprit while in others the enemy is the entire U.S. government, or even all national institutions.

I am looking only at conspiracy theories that are circulating in the years since 2000. These theories circulate mainly among a community of hip-hop artists, although clearly anyone who listens to the music is exposed to the lyrics. These artists are mostly black, and often hail from the inner city, including neighborhoods of New York City, Detroit, and Los Angeles. I believe that rap artists circulate conspiracy theories in an attempt to explain to themselves and their fans why, despite the end of segregation, the Civil Rights movement, and affirmative action, the urban slums of America are still filled with poverty stricken blacks.

Analytical Description/Interpretation of Sample Source Texts (750-1000 words)

Throughout every source the most basic unifying theme is the questioning of events or circumstances that do not make sense or are not easily explained. After all, this is the basis of most conspiracy theories. It is easier, however, to examine the songs more closely by dividing them into two groups. One group of songs focuses on the 9/11 attacks while the other group theorizes about the general oppression of urban blacks by the U.S. government.

All of the music which deals with the September 11, 2001 terror attacks holds the United States government responsible in some way. What differs is the extent to which the artist says the U.S. is behind the attacks. Some songs say that the government was merely complicit, or knew about the attacks beforehand and didn't do anything. More commonly, however, the government or a group using the government is seen as carrying out the attacks. The clearest example of this is in Immortal Technique's song "Bin Laden". One line in the chorus reads, "Bush knocked down the towers". Immortal complicates things a bit in another song: "I don't think Bush did it, 'cuz he isn't that

smart/...The military industry got it poppin' and lockin'". In this version of the theory it isn't Bush's fault. Instead the blame rests on the military industrial complex which stands to benefit from a global war. In both cases, however, Immortal Technique is questioning the official version of the facts. His reason for doing so is that he sees the U.S. government as having the most to gain. This may seem simplistic, but that is part of the appeal of conspiracy theory. The artist Paris confirms this point of view when he sings "Now ask yourself who's the one with the most to gain (Bush)/...The oldest trick in the book is MAKE an enemy". This idea of a false or created enemy occurs over and over again in these stories. The conspiracists believe the government created a foreign enemy in order to tighten its grip on liberty in the U.S. In the black community, where liberties have come agonizingly slowly over the years, there is a fear of losing these precious freedoms. Many songs allude to government wiretaps or other security operations.

The second group of songs contains a wide range of conspiracies, but the basic elements are all the same. The artists all see the U.S. government and various other institutions as working to keep the urban black community in poverty. Many songs reference the disastrous introduction of crack-cocaine into black neighborhoods. Immortal Technique writes, "Harlem streets stay flooded in white powder". Although it isn't always spelled out, the implicit message is that the government and/or CIA was responsible for this. This is merely one example of the stories being told in the music. Other conspiracy theories include the mass media as a government propaganda tool and the introduction of AIDS into the black community by the government.

Each of these stories helps to explain a troubling aspect of life in the inner city. Whatever one feels about the conspiracy theories themselves, the problems facing the urban poor cannot be disputed. In “Harlem Streets” Immortal Technique sums it up perfectly, “But you can’t read history at an illiterate stage/And you can’t raise a family on minimum wage/Why the fuck you think most of us are locked in a cage”. This is what the conspiracy theories are truly addressing. These rap artists look around at the rest of America and wonder why their neighborhood is a slum. No panacea for the situation has been discovered. The urban black community has tried protests and nothing has changed. They have tried using the political progress to no avail. They have put their hope in non-government organizations and still the inner city is mired in poverty. At this point conspiracy theories are very appealing. The stories that appear in hip-hop music can be seen as filling a vital void. People need to understand the “why” behind a problem before they can fix it. The conspiracy theories explain that “why”.

Analytical Description of the People and Groups Circulating these Stories (250 words)

There are many people who come into contact with rap/hip-hop music and the conspiracy theories it contains. The first, and most obvious, group is the artists who write the songs. Some of these artists are members of the Wu Tang Clan, Paris, Jadakiss, Eminem, Lupe Fiasco, and Immortal Technique. For these people, conspiracy theories are a way to explain the situation facing the urban poor (often blacks). Both Immortal Technique and Jadakiss grew up in New York City, Eminem lived in Detroit, and Lupe Fiasco in Chicago. As Goldberg points out, these communities are rife with conspiracy theories due to a mixture of circumstance and historical events. Thus, artists are not only

comfortable with spreading conspiracy theories themselves, but they also know that such ideas will resonate within the community that is their primary fan base. This leads us to the second group: the fans. While the fans can also pass along the stories, they are mainly the consumers. The conspiracy theories help the fans understand why they live in poverty and whose to blame, namely the government. The final group is composed of the record labels and the music industry which distributes the songs, and thus the conspiracy theories as well. Many of the rappers I have mentioned have deals with large record labels including Atlantic Records, Shady Records, and Ruff Ryders. For these labels, music is a business, and business is about making money. The music industry is willing to distribute these songs containing conspiracy theories because it resonates with the fan base.

Important Background Information About the Moment(s) in which These Texts are Circulating (300 words)

Understanding the moment (politically, culturally, and historically) is key to understanding any hip-hop song, and so it becomes essential when trying to understand the conspiracy theories present in these songs and how they function. The first task is to examine the time and place in which stories surface. This means taking a look at the situation inside America's cities in the 21st century. The values, problems, and attitude of the inner city community needs to be understood. As stated before, the conspiracy theories could be an attempt to answer why living conditions are so poor. Learning about the rise of rap and hip-hop music is also important. This genre began to grow in the 1990s and then exploded in the new century. Next, the nature of the relationship between hip-hop artists and the urban poor can be looked at. Some of the artists grew up in the

inner city while others seem to identify with the community for other reasons (often race) and see themselves as spokesmen. As successful artists, these men have been able to leave both poverty and the inner city behind. Thus, they are able to see the full contrast in lifestyles that exists in America. Finally, it is necessary to understand the historical context these songs are written, both in terms of contemporary history and events in the past. Clearly, the events of September 11, 2001 had a huge impact. The questions that linger over this event are represented in the music. The Global War on Terror, including the Iraq War, is a topic many artists can't resist to weigh in on. Added to all of this are historical references to the CIA, the spread of crack, the spread of AIDS, assassinations, and other troubling events.

Presentation and Discussion of Your Tentative Conclusions (300-500 words)

The conspiracy theories that surface in the rap and hip-hop music of the early 21st century are all geared toward explaining the plight of the urban poor, especially black Americans. This community has been victimized by the government and the rest of society in the past, and so they more likely to buy into conspiratorial thinking. The rap artists who write the songs are either products of this community or strongly identify with it.

Looking back over the last fifty years it appears that a lot of progress has been made in terms of the rights and living conditions of black Americans. Segregation has ended, the Civil Rights Movement has had its effect, and affirmative action programs have been put in place. But for anyone growing up in the inner city, the picture is not so rosy. The black urban community is stricken with poverty, crime, drug addiction, disease, and poor educational opportunities. How is this possible if so much "progress"

has been made? In the face of this question, hip-hop artists have turned to conspiratorial thinking. They see the United States government is the enemy and the problem. This government, run mainly by white males, is actively holding down black Americans. It was the CIA that introduced crack into black neighborhoods, and corrupt cops are to blame for rampant crime. These stories make sense to a community of people whose collective memory contains recollections of slavery, segregation, government oppression, and police brutality.

The stories also make sense because they offer an uncomplicated answer to a very complicated question. No politician, bureaucrat, or expert has been able to successfully explain why the living conditions are the way they are and been able to offer a practical solution. So what chance does the common person have? And what actions should they take? If, however, you do understand the problem, then you can work toward a solution. So if the government is the problem, then resisting the government and its propaganda is the solution. This helps to explain the presence of 9/11 theories in rap music. When the government claims the nation is attacked by terrorists and then begins to limit civil liberties, alarm bells begin to ring in an already hyper-suspicious community.

Examining conspiracy theory in rap music is a window into conspiracy theory in general. Theories are formulated, spread, and believed because they explain something about the world which we are otherwise unable to understand. Those who consume the stories aren't stupid, they are just faced with questions that are impossible to answer even for experts. Yet answers are needed in order to know what actions to take. And so the simple answers (inside of complex stories) offered up by conspiracy theories are appealing. If one believes conspiratorial thinking to be dangerous, then actions should be

taken not to stamp out or debunk conspiracies, but to remedy the situations that make people open and willing to believe in the stories.

Discussion of Relevant Secondary Sources from the Field of Conspiracy Theory Studies (250 words)

After sharing my research with the rest of the conspiracy theory field, I see Robert Alan Goldberg as being the scholar most likely to take an interest. My work takes many of his theories and explores and applies them in the context of a specific community and conspiracy theory. Not only do I touch on the mainstreaming of conspiracy theory in terms of its presence in popular hip-hop music, but I also explore conspiracy theories and their relation to a predominantly black community just like Goldberg does in Chapter 5 of his book Enemies Within. At the end of the chapter Goldberg writes, “Conspiracism demands confrontation and breeds activism and social-movement mobilization. Essential to its reception is a grounding in past markers and the ability to represent current experiences and voice collective fears” (pg 188). This passage parallels my hypothesis that conspiracy theories in rap music are an attempt to explain the fundamental problems facing the urban poor in order to allow people to act.

The scholar most challenged by my work would be Daniel Pipes. Unlike Pipes, my work is not about labeling conspiratorial thinking as a source of evil. Instead, my aim is to understand how conspiracy theories function and why they are appealing, all in a specific context. Pipes would say that it attempting to study conspiracy theory this way is useless because it gives too much credit to those who consume the stories. According to Pipes those people are not “the cultural elite but its rearguard, not...the finest mental creations but its dregs” (Knight, pg 6).

My research contributes to the field of conspiracy theory by opening up a new chapter. Rap and hip-hop music is an exploding field that is influencing the younger generations. Thus it is important to understand the conspiracies that surface in the music, why they are present, and the consequences.

Implications of this Report for Further Research (150 words)

My study is limited for two reasons. First, I am dealing with a relatively new topic and so my research is being conducted at a time when things could still be changing. Often it is easier to look back on a span of time and see patterns. Instead, I am attempting to see and interpret patterns while the action is on-going. I am further limited by the fact that I have chosen to contain my topic by taking an in-depth look at the artists who write the rap music but not at the fans who consume it. It would be interesting to see just what effect the music has on the fans. I hypothesize about this, but I do not have the research needed to draw any conclusion. Do the fans really understand the conspiratorial thinking present in the music? Do they buy into the stories, or do they just enjoy the song? Are the conspiracy theories received differently among whites than among blacks? Or among those who reside in suburbia and not the cities? All of these questions require further research to answer.

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