

Rap Lyrics as Evidence: What Can Music Theory Tell Us?

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has shed light on the troubling use of rap lyrics in criminal trials. Prosecutors have interpreted defendants' rap lyrics as accurate descriptions of past behavior or in some cases as real threats of violence. There are at least two problems with this practice: One concerns the interpretation of art in a legalistic context and the second involves the targeting of rap over other genres and the role of racism therein. The goal of the present work is translational, to demonstrate the relevance of music scholarship on this topic to criminologists and legal experts. We highlight the usage of *lyric formulas*, stock lyrical topics understood by musicians and their audiences, many of which make sense only in the context of a given genre. The popularity of particular lyric formulas at particular times appears connected to contemporaneous social conditions. In African American music, these formulas have a long history, from blues, through rock and roll, to contemporary rap music. The work illustrates this through textual analyses of lyrics identifying common formulas and connecting them to relevant social factors, in order to demonstrate that fictionalized accounts of violence form the stock-in-trade of rap and should not be interpreted literally.

Keywords

race and courts, race and sentencing, bias in the criminal justice system, race and public opinion, rap music, hip-hop, lyric formulas

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Every black man who goes into the studio, he's always got two people in his head: him, in terms of who he really is, and the thug that he feels he has to project.

—Conrad Tillard, “The Hip-Hop Minister” (from Hurt, 2006)

There is one musical genre that seems almost wholly devoted to violence. Dozens of the most popular works in this genre graphically depict murders. Male protagonists boast about their physical and sexual prowess, frequently challenging other males to battles for no other reason than sheer pride. Female characters are often cartoonish shells; they are usually portrayed as wanton and shallow and easily manipulated for sexual purposes. In short, the entire genre seems intent on displaying—and celebrating—humanity's basest desires.

That genre, of course, is opera. But opera aficionados understand that violent and sexual themes are conventions within the genre and that it would have been bizarre to treat *Don Giovanni*, *Pagliacci*, or *Rigoletto* as somehow representing the literal wishes of their composers or to interpret the lyrics penned by their librettists as autobiographical admissions of crimes.¹

Recent work, however, suggests that this practice *is* occurring for a different musical genre—specifically that rap lyrics are being used in criminal trials.² Prosecutors are using rap lyrics penned by defendants in several ways: as accurate descriptions of or admissions to past behavior, as implying that they reflect a criminal or violent disposition, or in some cases to criminalize the lyrics themselves as threats of violence (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Rap lyrics have been used as evidence in criminal trials since at least the early 1990s, and their use by prosecutors has been directly advocated in literature produced by the U.S. Department of Justice and the National District Attorneys Association (Dennis, 2007).

There are at least two major and interrelated sets of problems with the usage of rap lyrics in trials. The first broadly concerns the interpretation of artistic products in a legalistic context. As Dennis (2007) notes, courts tend to incorrectly assume that no specialized knowledge is required to interpret lyrics and that lyrics should be interpreted *literally* as reflecting accurate, truthful, and self-referential narratives.³ This usage sets up the potential for a “chilling effect” on free speech (Agorist, 2015; H. A. Anderson, 2004; De Melker & Brangham, 2014; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Manley, 2014; Minsky, 2015; Shumejda, 2014; Valdmanis, 2013). The second set of problems involves the apparent targeting of rap music over other verbal cultural products and the likely role of racism in this focus. Race, racial inequalities, and racism are critical to understanding the usage of rap lyrics in trials, a topic we return to in the discussion.

Despite these problems, and despite coverage and commentary of some of these trials in mainstream news media outlets (e.g., Brick, 2006; Nielson, 2012, 2013; Nielson & Kubrin, 2014; Nielson & Render, 2015), academic work has only recently begun to directly engage with this practice (e.g., Calvert, Morehart, & Papadelias, 2014; Dennis, 2007; Hirsch, 2014; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Tanovich, 2016). Our goal is to add to this discussion in general and in particular to critique the literal interpretation of rap lyrics. Drawing on music scholarship,⁴ we highlight the usage of

lyric formulas, stock lyrical topics and tropes shared by performers and understood by both musicians and their audiences, many of which make sense only in the context of a given genre. In African American music, these formulas have a long history, most notably in blues, but also in other American genres including country music, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and rap music of the present day. In other words, many lyrics—in many musical styles—should be interpreted not as autobiographical but as drawing from stock lyrical conventions well established in the genre. In the context of rap, such formulas may be especially important for amateur artists—those whose lyrics are most often used in criminal trials (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014)—who often imitate the lyric formulas of more successful musicians in the hopes of establishing their own credibility and sharing in that success.

To set the stage, we begin with an overview of some of the key issues in the usage of rap lyrics in criminal trials, engaging in a critique of the literal interpretation of rap lyrics “as depicting true-life, self-referential stories” (Dennis, 2007, p. 4), in order to highlight, as the quote at the outset of this paper suggests, the “two people” in rap artists’ heads. Following this, we introduce the idea of lyric formulas and briefly review earlier genres of music to set up three ideas: That lyric formulas are pervasive in American popular music, that they frequently are intertwined with violent subject matter, and that preferences for certain formulas are often rooted in contemporary social forces and conditions—that formulas, in other words, should be understood in broader contexts. Turning to rap, we begin by setting up the relevant context for its interpretation and then identify a series of common lyric formulas in rap music, paying particular attention to those with violent themes. Finally, we conclude by setting the idea of lyric formulas within the broader critique of the use of lyrics in trials put forth by others.

Rap Lyrics on Trial

Rap music has long experienced a uniquely fraught and contentious relationship with the police and the criminal justice system. From its earliest days, hip-hop culture was resistive: Graffiti art was illegal, break dancing took place spontaneously in public spaces not designed for it, and rapping and DJing were the provenance of house and block parties of questionable legality. With the rise of “gangsta rap” in the late 1980s, this resistance changed from the passive to the assertive, as rappers openly challenged the police and government in lyrics and at concerts. Popular outrage and perceptions of the threat of rap have engendered intensive and persistent legal and legislative attacks from the Parents Music Resource Center’s focus on rap and heavy metal to the obscenity trial for 2 Live Crew, the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s probe of Niggaz with Attitudes (N.W.A.) for “Fuck Tha Police,” to the incredible uproar over Ice-T’s “Cop Killer,” including police union boycott of Time Warner companies and public denouncements from figures ranging from Charlton Heston to the sitting president and vice president (e.g., Charnas, 2011; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Russell-Brown, 2004).⁵

Rap has also been the target of media coverage that frames the music as posing profound dangers to society, a framing unique even in comparison to other frequently vilified genres like heavy metal (Binder, 1993), and which stands in contrast to the

lack of evidence that rap music plays any causal role in crime (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2010; Russell-Brown, 2004). This focus appears to be the product of the “racial composition of the music’s audiences and producers” (Binder, 1993, p. 753). Similarly, race seems to play a role in a public distaste for rap music but not heavy metal music (Lynxwiler & Gay, 2000). The disproportionate moral outrage engendered by rap and the exploitation of this sentiment by politicians mirrors other racial dog whistle issues like “welfare queens” and “urban crime” which rally those with racial biases while avoiding explicitly mentioning race (e.g., Beckett, 1997; Beckett & Sasson, 2004; López, 2014; Tonry, 2011; Wacquant, 2005).

Although there is a long and controversial history of literary trials (e.g., Grüttemeier, 2016), it is significant that the recent usage of lyrics in criminal trials has been reserved nearly exclusively for rap lyrics rather than for lyrics from other musical genres—even those which also contain references to violence or crime. Dennis (2007), for instance, identifies only a single case involving lyrics from another genre in the United States, while Tanovich (2016) reports the same in a review of Canadian cases.

The seemingly disproportionate focus on rap rather than other musical genres in each of these arenas suggests the importance of the role of race and implies a role for racial bias. Research has, in fact, revealed evidence of a specific bias against rap that appears rooted in race. In a famous experiment, Fried (1996; also Fried, 1999, and see the successful 2016 replication by Dunbar, Kubrin, & Scurich) presents lyrics containing violent and criminal content from an old folk song (the Kingston Trio’s “Bad Man’s Blunder”) to subjects, representing them as folk, country, or rap lyrics. When presented as rap lyrics, subjects were significantly more likely to find the lyrics objectionable, more likely to express concern about the consequences of the lyrics, and more likely to support greater regulation of the music by the government—regulations ranging from warning labels to complete bans. Notably, these same results were produced when, instead of referring to a specific music type, subjects were presented with “photos of the singer” depicting them as either Black or White. Even when the lyrics are not directly relevant to the case, an experiment by Fischhoff (1999) finds that simply introducing rap lyrics penned by a defendant may bias juries toward a guilty verdict. Neither of these findings are particularly surprising, given the broader prevalence of explicitly and implicitly held biases against Blacks and stereotypical associations of Blacks with violence and crime (Drakulich, 2015a, 2015b; Eberhardt et al., 2004).

Interpreting Rap Lyrics

In legal contexts, rap lyrics are frequently interpreted literally. There are a variety of problems with this practice. First, the commercialization of the rap industry has resulted in distinct pressures for particular kinds of images (e.g., Dennis, 2007; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). In gangsta rap in particular, this involves images that exploit narratives of the danger and violence involved in inner-city gang life. Complicating this is the value placed on authenticity, or “keeping it real,” which requires the presentation of violent imagery in the first-person narratives and a kind of posturing to portray the artists as credible in this role. However, this posturing is, as Watkins

(1998) notes, a “marketing pose” (p. 185, and see discussion in Jeffries, 2011; Kubrin & Nielson, 2014). Rather than necessarily representing some organic change among the preferences of rap artists, this shift was explicitly encouraged by music executives in efforts to target young White consumers (e.g., Watkins, 2005). This appeal may be based in part on the degree to which this image taps into deep-seated racial stereotypes and anxieties (Rose, 2008), and they serve to reinforce neoliberal views of Black citizens and Black neighborhoods as undeserving (Spence, 2011).

In January 2002, actor and rapper Will Smith appeared on *Inside the Actor’s Studio*, where he and host James Lipton had the following exchange:

Lipton: Is there a correlation between rapping and acting?

Smith: Oh absolutely. In rap music, you have to defend yourself. You know, rap music is really aggressive You’ll get chewed up and spit out if you’re not confident and if you’re not strong and assertive And there’s something in rappers’ eyes, there’s something that gets created in the eyes from having been able to create that defense through an offensive posture, and to be able to be in that space where you can sit in a room and feel confident and you don’t care what nobody says, and you don’t care how they come at you: “What. I’m here. What.” And that attitude—the camera really enjoys that strength and that confidence. (Christian, 2002, pp. 21:37–23:09)

Several aspects of Smith’s statement stand out. First is his straightforward acknowledgment of the close relationship between rapping and acting. Second—and perhaps less obvious on the printed page than in the actual interview—is the way in which Smith himself starts to adopt a hip-hop persona at the end of his answer via the lapse into the type of vernacular often employed by rappers. But most striking is Smith’s initial reaction to the question. Asked about connections between rapping and *acting*, he immediately jumps to the ways in which rappers behave *aggressively*, only later connecting that to the type of confidence that an actor requires. For Smith—whose voice is significant here precisely because he is known as one of the “cleanest” rappers—when asked about the ways in which rappers adopt false personas, the first characteristic that jumps to mind is their displays of aggression.

Around the same time, rap scholar Adam Krims (2000, p. 71) wrote:

One must certainly allow the most cynical interpretations of reality rap, especially gangsta rap, namely that it is a ploy by record companies to sell records to infatuated teenagers, a modern kind of minstrelsy. And it may indeed be true . . . that record companies have largely been responsible for pressuring artists to adopt gangsta personae. But at the same time, if there is to be projected some portrait of the lives lived in dangerous and marginal situations by people our society has consigned to ghettos, one must ask whether to expect anything other than a highly mediated representation, embodied in the most lurid commodity form possible.⁶

When juxtaposed, these dual perspectives of performer and scholar help to frame a narrative of the evolution of rap lyrics from the friendly “battle rap” tropes of its

earliest days into the hyperviolent and misogynistic content that most outsiders associate with the genre now.⁷ Rap music, according to Smith and Krims, involves the creation of a character who is aggressive, bold, and supremely confident. Quinn (2004) argues that gangsta rap in particular focuses on two archetype characters, the “badman” and the “pimp/trickster.” Seizing on the often violent tendencies of such characters, record companies, beginning in the mid- to late-1990s, helped to create and nurture the gangsta persona, a “highly mediated” representation of what they perceived the listening public to want.

This narrative might seem overly simplistic, and it is true that the enormous rise in popularity of gangsta rap involves a constellation of related social factors, many of which fall outside the purview of the present paper.⁸ Most significant among these are ingrained social assumptions about Black masculinity;⁹ the caricaturization of Black males by popular culture (a tradition that stretches back at least as far as “Birth of a Nation,” see Hurt, 2006, pp. 49:14–49:48); and the need of young, White, suburban listeners to feel empowered by identifying with “street culture.” But the focus of the present study is on the musico-poetic connections between gangsta rap, earlier rap, and earlier American musical genres, and in that respect, the narrative is actually even simpler than it seems.

Lyric Formulas

Singers in many popular genres rely on lyric formulas. Lyric formulas are fragments of lyrical content—usually lines or half lines—that are shared among singers and recognized by both musicians and listeners.¹⁰ The following section describes lyric formulas in blues—the genre in which such formulas have received the most attention—and elsewhere in American popular music, including country music, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll. This discussion has three important implications for our assessment of lyric formulas in rap. The first is to demonstrate how common lyric formulas are across American popular music. The second is to illustrate how frequently these lyric formulas are intertwined with violent content across diverse genres of music. The third is to show how particular lyric formulas in earlier genres are connected to their historical contexts. Critically, the preference for certain lyric formulas in a genre appears to be tied to social forces and conditions relevant to the era of that genre’s composition—for instance, certain lyric formulas are more common in music created during the turmoil of urbanization and mass migration while others are more common in music that developed in the relative calm and stability of the postwar era. The subsequent sections extend this concept to rap music, describing the social forces and conditions relevant to the development of rap—including deindustrialization, hypersegregation, and concentrated dis-advantage—and then identifying common lyric formulas within rap.

Lyric Formulas in the Blues and Other Genres

The American musical genre in which lyric formulas have received the most attention is blues. Musicians and scholars have firmly established that lyrics in the blues quite rarely represent the literal first-person experiences—much less the literal intentions—

of the singers. Instead, singers frequently draw from an extensive stock of lines, fragments of lines, and textual and topical constructions that are traditional and formulaic. As David Evans (1982) observes,

[t]he Blues are not . . . totally individualistic, for while in their first person delivery they purport to express the sentiments and feelings of the singer, many of their verses are, in fact, traditional and known to thousands of blues singers and members of their audiences. (p. 48)

Similarly, Michael Taft (2006) writes that “there was a traditional storehouse of lyrical material on which singers drew in constructing their songs” (p. 25), and Robert Springer (2006) notes that “A formula, in essence, as it is repeated and reused, becomes part of the genre’s storehouse or library, so to speak, and is absorbed into the tradition” (p. 165).¹¹

In *The Blues Lyric Formula*, Taft (2006) identifies the 20 most common lyric formulas in early commercial blues recordings. He presents the blues formula as a semantic unit composed of at least one complete semantic predication (one complete thought; pp. 33–35), with examples like *human have the blues*, *human come to some place*, *human go away from some place*, *human leave/quit human*, and so on. He gives a representative manifestation of each one:

1. I have the blues
2. I come to some place
3. I go away from some place
4. I have a woman
5. I quit my woman
6. I love you
7. I tell you
8. I treat you good/bad
9. I woke up this morning
10. I am worried
11. I have the blues [rhyming]
12. I cry [rhyming]
13. What am I going to do [rhyming]
14. Everywhere I go [rhyming]
15. I will be gone [rhyming]
16. I’m going back home [rhyming]
17. It won’t be long [rhyming]
18. Some thing is on my mind [rhyming]
19. I treat you right [rhyming]
20. I’m leaving town [rhyming]

(Taft, 2006, p. 193)

Singers typically use lyric formulas in a rhyming couplet, which is the “essential stanzaic structure of the blues” (11), and, as we will see, of many other genres as well. Formulas 1–10 appear at the beginning of a line and have no obligation to rhyme; Formulas 11–20 appear at the end of a line and thus must close with a rhyming syllable. The couplets given in Example 1 illustrate the use of several formulas; the transcriptions include bracketed numbers corresponding to the list of formulas above, nonrhyming formulas on the left and rhyming formulas on the right:

Example 1. Lyric formulas in Blind Blake’s “Early Morning Blues” (1926); Ethel Waters’s “You Can’t Do What My Last Man Did” (1923); and Leroy Carr’s “Take a Walk Around the Corner” (1934).

- [6] I love you, pretty mama; believe me, it ain’t no lie
 [5] The day you dare to quit me; baby that’s the day you die
 (Taft, 2006, p. 210 [Blake])
- Now that last cruel papa, he blacked my eye
 [5] Then he left me alone to sigh and cry [12]
 (Taft, 2006, p. 133 [Waters])
- Judge, I done killed my woman, because she treated me so unkind
 [8] Treated me so unkind, till I swear I lost my mind
 (Taft, 2006, p. 126 [Carr])

In blues, many of the most common lyric formulas—“I have a woman,” “I quit my woman,” “I love you,” and “I treat you good/bad”—convey the main underlying theme of the genre: It is a love lyric (Taft, 2006, p. 18). Many of the other themes concern movement: “I come to some place,” “I go away from some place,” “Everywhere I go,” “I will be gone,” “I’m going back home,” and “I’m leaving town.” Others concern anxiety: “I am worried,” “What am I going to do,” “I woke up this morning,” and “Some thing is on my mind.”¹² As Taft observes, “This travel motif reflects the state of African-American society in the first part of the twentieth century, for the out-migration of rural blacks from the South started in the late 1870s and reached its peak during World War I” (p. 194). Furthermore, the migration was not only north but also into cities, and “During the years when the blues was growing in popularity . . . African American society in general was undergoing massive urbanization” (p. 194). “The anxiety brought about by this state of flux,” writes Taft, “was also reflected in these most common blues formulas” (p. 195). Thus, songs with these themes of movement and anxiety would resonate with an audience because both audience and singer would have known people who had moved away and would have been affected in some way by the massive migration and urbanization of the time. Listeners know that these lyrics do not represent autobiographical accounts of the singers’ lives. Rather, they reflect the general circumstances in the lives of their audience.¹³

Lyric formulas are not exclusive to the blues, and even these specific lyric formulas can be found throughout much American popular music.¹⁴ Some of the examples from other genres—like those above—present formulas in the context of violent content, demonstrating that such themes are common across a wide range of American vernacular repertoire rather than exclusive to any particular genre; and that, especially in the context of formulaic lyrical construction, such references to violence should rarely be taken to literally express autobiographical experience or intent.

Many of Taft's lyric formulas are common in contemporaneous country music. The White population at the time was also experiencing large-scale urbanization (Park & Burgess, 1925; Wirth, 1938), so it is not surprising to find many of the same themes of movement and anxiety, as in the last three verses of Frank Hutchison's "Worried Blues," given as Example 2:

Example 2. Lyric formulas in Frank Hutchison's "Worried Blues" (1926).

- [9] I woke up this morning, freight train on my mind [18]
I believe, old rounders, I'd better hike down the line
- [3] Gonna leave this country, sure gonna leave it soon
In this ice-cold world, they sure can have my room
- [3] When I leave here, hang crepe on your door
I won't be dead, just won't be here no more

Hutchinson's words about yearning to leave don't necessarily reflect any real intention on his part to do so, but they resonated with listeners affected by the general cultural disruptions of the time.

Singers continued to rely on lyric formulas in many postwar popular genres. But, generally speaking, in comparison to early blues and country music, it seems that a greater proportion of the formulas found in postwar popular genres relate to anxiety caused by problems in love relationships rather than to anxiety caused by movement and change, perhaps reflecting the relative stability of the time (e.g., Hart, 1982; O'Neill, 1986). The postwar songs' relative de-emphasis on the formulas specifically expressing the travel motif (Formulas 2, 3, 14, 15, 16, and 20) seems to mirror this change in social circumstances: Our exploratory study found that about half of the lyric formulas in the prewar country music express the travel motif, whereas less than a third of the formulas in the postwar rhythm and blues and rock and roll fall into this category.

The intermingling of lyric formulas with violent content remains common in postwar popular music. Example 4 gives the third and fifth verses of Elvis Presley's "Baby Let's Play House":

Example 3. Lyric formulas in Elvis Presley's "Baby Let's Play House" (1955).¹⁵

- [7] Now listen and I'll tell you, baby, what I'm talking about
[2] Come on back to me, little girl, so we can play some house

Now listen to me, baby, try to understand
I'd rather see you dead, little girl, than to be with another man

Ray Charles also relied heavily on lyric formulas, and verses 1–2 and 4–5 of his “Heartbreaker” provide further examples of their intermingling with violent content:

Example 4. Lyric formulas in Ray Charles’s “Heartbreaker” (1958).¹⁶

Heartbreaker, girl, you sure is gone [15]
Heartbreaker, how you carry on
You're a bobbysoxer, mean mistreater too
You're just a little schoolgirl, but you sure know what to do [13]
Heart teaser, you're running all around
And if you don't stop, baby, you'll be sleeping in the ground
How can I help it if I'm in love with you
I've been your fool, baby, tell me what more I can do [13]

Presley and Charles both had arrest records, but neither of these records included the kinds of violence they describe in their songs.¹⁷ This forms a striking contrast, for example, with Frank Sinatra, whose innocent lyrics belied his violent offstage behavior.¹⁸ The actions that Presley and Charles describe do not represent real intentions any more than the “girl” they are singing about always represents a real individual. In short, a singer’s lyrics are a highly unreliable guide to his or her offstage behavior.

The lyrics above illustrate several core ideas about lyric formulas. First, lyric formulas are common throughout American popular music, and they frequently combine with violent and misogynistic themes set in first-person narratives. Second, through roughly a century of American popular music, and probably longer, the popularity of specific types of lyric formulas appears tied to broader social forces and conditions. For instance, in the midst of the great migration and rapid urbanization, blues and country music were preoccupied with lyric formulas concerning anxiety caused by movement and change, whereas music from the more stable postwar period de-emphasized the travel motif and favored lyric formulas concerning anxiety caused by romantic relationships.

The Context for Understanding Rap Lyric Formulas

In understanding the emergence of specific lyric formulas in rap music, it is important to understand the context in which rap music emerges and develops. The following discussion identifies four key dimensions of this context: (1) the socioeconomic context, (2) the criminal justice context, (3) the cultural context—both socially and musically, and (4) the music industry context. Each is critical in particular for understanding specific types of lyric formulas that often contain violent content—what we describe in the next section as the “brag” topics.

Most histories of rap trace its origins to New York City in the 1970s, appearing in dance clubs and block parties and developing out of older traditions of African and African American music forms and cultural practices (e.g., Chang, 2005; Charnas, 2007; George, 2005). New York, along with most other major American cities, was at that moment in the midst of a massive economic and demographic shift driven by the forces of deindustrialization, class-linked out-migration, and hypersegregation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987). Working-class jobs in urban centers—the very jobs that had created America’s cities by drawing immigrants and migrants from rural to urban spaces—were rapidly vanishing, and the middle-class families not directly affected by this economic shift were taking their resources and fleeing to the suburbs. The result of these forces, combined with the persistent discrimination that maintained segregation and restricted the mobility of Blacks, was an incredible concentration of disadvantageous socioeconomic conditions in central city communities and the profound social isolation of these communities from the rest of the country (Massey & Denton, 1993; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1987). Both the disadvantage and the isolation played major formative roles in the emerging hip-hop cultural movement (e.g., Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b). Forman (2002), for instance, details the construction of the “hood” in rap music as an important marker of individual and collective identity imbued with special significance by these broader structural and cultural forces (see also Quinn’s 2004 discussion of “ghetto discourses”).

The formative years of hip-hop in the 1980s also marked the beginning of a shift in the primary role of government away from the social safety net promised by Roosevelt’s “New Deal” and Johnson’s “Great Society” and toward providing for the safety of individual residents by aggressively enforcing criminal laws and harshly punishing offenders (e.g., Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Hagan, 2010; Simon, 2007; Tonry, 2011; Wacquant, 2005). This shift is connected to the economic changes—punitive controls were presented as an alternative to social welfare options for governing the social marginality that results from labor market instability and severe economic inequalities (Beckett & Western, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). The result has been the zero-tolerance enforcement and harsh punishment of even minor crimes, disproportionately targeting poor and non-White communities (e.g., Fagan & Davies, 2000; Parenti, 1999; Smith, 1986; Terrill & Reisig, 2003; Wacquant, 2009; Western, 2006). One of the consequences of the bias and harsh treatment involved in these criminal justice strategies is a fundamental lack of faith in the police and the justice system in communities of color, even among the majority in these communities who are law-abiding and wish to live in a safe community (E. Anderson, 1999; Drakulich & Crutchfield, 2013; Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005). While some have identified resistance to this treatment as a theme in rap songs (e.g., Martinez, 1997), others have noted that the aggressive law enforcement response to such resistance made it hard to maintain (Nielson, 2014).

This profound lack of faith in the police to provide for the safety of residents of poor and predominantly Black communities, combined with a pervasive lack of hope for the future engendered by the socioeconomic devastation of concentrated

poverty, led to the formation of an adaptive subculture, one which emphasized toughness and a capacity for violence both as a self-protective strategy and a form of self-esteem in a world which otherwise provided few conventional opportunities (E. Anderson, 1999). Thus, the violence in some rap music is, in part, a representation of the difficult environment of inner-city life (e.g., Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). In a major content analysis of hip-hop lyrics, Kubrin (2005a) uses E. Anderson's (1999) subcultural theory to understand the way artists justify and explain violence in rap songs—the motivations include establishing social identities and reputations (self-esteem) as well as exerting social control (including for self-protection). In a related piece, Kubrin (2005b) explores the theme of nihilism in many rap songs, rooted in a lack of hope for the future, the constant threat of violence, and a preoccupation with death and dying.¹⁹

The musical cultural context is also relevant. Hip-hop emerged out of older forms of African American music, from which it appropriated both style and content. Recent scholarship has emphasized the continuum that exists between rapping and musical forms that date back to precolonial times, to West African musical practices (see Adams, 2008; Keyes, 2004). West African bardic poetry was most commonly chanted in rhyme above a cyclical drumbeat, with the bard's utterances frequently affirmed by the *namu-sayer*: the three figures of drummer, poet, and *namu-sayer* bear striking resemblances to the DJ/producer, the rapper, and the "hype man." Among the most common topics in this art form were the strength and sexual prowess (SP) of the poet himself, which resonate with the lyric formulas to be discussed below. As Africans were brought to North America via the slave trade, these poetic forms became lyrical games like "signifyin'" and "the dozens," as well as toasts, sermons, and blues. In the 20th century, as African Americans moved to northern urban centers, these musical practices traveled with them, branching off into spoken-word performances like those of The Last Poets, and, ultimately, rap. Although rap has become a musical genre in its own right, it has musical similarities with many earlier American genres including blues, country music, gospel, soul, rock and roll, and rock; thus, as Robin Kelley (1996) puts it, "we need to go back to the blues ... if we want to discover the roots of the gangsta aesthetic in hip-hop" (p. 119). These similarities include extensive reliance on the rhyming couplet, employment of an indefinitely repeating musical cycle that functions as a vehicle for sung or spoken words, placement of rhyming syllables in analogous metric positions within a cycle (matching the poetic rhyme with a "rhythmic rhyme"), and the placement of the same melodic fragments in analogous metric positions with each repetition of a cycle (Stoia, 2013).

Finally, the influence of the music industry marketplace is essential to understanding the development of rap music and the lyric formulas which became popular. Rap came of age in a racially segregated music market, in which major recording companies had "Black music" departments and the most profitable radio stations consciously avoided Black artists in the fear of driving off the most valued White male audiences (e.g., Charnas, 2011; Negus, 1999; Watkins, 2005). In the early years, rap artists were constrained in their access to practice spaces and concert venues (e.g.,

Rose, 1991). Rap music was central to the desegregation of the music marketplace, and rap music is now an important part of pop music more broadly and a large and extremely profitable industry (Charnas, 2011; George, 2005). However, the market forces also exerted pressure about the kinds of rap music and even the images and personas adopted by rap artists, which were seen as most profitable. Rather than acting as a mere conduit for the cultural expression of Black artists, music industry executives play “a direct and heavy-handed interest in determining which artists were signed, promoted, and marketed throughout the media” (Rose, 2008, p. 221). One of the early shifts was from the “righteous” to the “real” or from more politically oriented music to “cynical street tales” (Charnas, 2011, p. 408). The marketplace, guided by these actions of music industry executives, rewarded not only street tales of involvement in violence and crime but also authenticity—the product was the proliferation of “boastful fantasies” in which aspiring rappers represented themselves as authentic gangsters, even in the many cases where such claims were not true (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014).

Race informs each of these dimensions in critical ways. Rap music is born in the context of massive racial inequalities and develops as purportedly race-blind policies and institutions operate to preserve these inequalities—including the rise of mass incarceration and a persistent underinvestment in addressing socioeconomic traumas in African American communities (e.g., Peterson & Krivo, 2010). Rap faces both overt and more hidden and “color-blind” forms of racism in the larger culture, the justice system, and the music industry (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In short, racial inequalities and the racism that support them provide a central and crucial context to understanding both rap and the popular, political, and institutional reactions and responses to rap.

All four of the dimensions discussed above—the socioeconomic, criminal justice, cultural, and music industry contexts—bear directly on the content of rap lyric formulas we discuss below.

Lyric Formulas in Rap Music

The following section will connect the use of lyric formulas from the earlier genres to the present-day rap music. In particular, we will focus on a specific subset of lyric formulas, the brag formulas, and trace their transformation from early freestyle rap battles to the violent lyrical tropes of modern rap. Our argument will proceed via three main points:

1. Early, improvised rap music relied on formulaic lyrical displays of masculinity and power over one’s enemies; these became codified as “battle” or brag topics.
2. As rap moved into the studio, rappers continued to rely on the same lyrical formulas, including the brag; however, both the enemy and the battle itself became stylized and fictional.

3. Given the high value that rap music places on authenticity, and the concomitant rise in popularity of “gangsta” rap, rappers began to imbue their fictional battles with realistic depictions of street life, although the fictional nature of these lyrics remained unchanged.

Although the practice of using hip-hop lyrics in criminal trials is a recent one, it is necessary to explore old-school hip-hop in order to fully understand the origins of violent lyric formulas in rap and their connections to modern lyrical practices. Like the blues, rap music has always relied on stock phrases and formulas, some of which have become so deeply entrenched in modern culture that even the most rap-averse listener could speak them in the “correct” rhythm:

Now throw your hands in the air
and wave ‘em like you just don’t care.

This formulaic approach is likely a result of rap’s improvisatory origins. Just as jazz pianists might strategically deploy the same stock improvisatory riffs in every song, altering details to suit each particular situation, early rappers, “freestyling” (improvising) their lyrics, relied both on stock phrases like the one above and on stock topics to rap about. As rapper KRS-One (Kris Parker) explains, “the rhyme that you’ve written is written for any environment, so you can interchange words, you can use the freestyle ability on top of a written piece” (Spirer, 2005, pp. 19:21–19:32). As with the musicians of other genres discussed in an earlier section, hip-hop artists thus craft rhymes around generic topics, altering them for the needs of a specific song.

Early instances of rapping served as the emcee’s way of celebrating both the skills of the DJ and his or her own skills on the microphone.²⁰ As a result, one of the most popular topics in old-school (i.e., early) rap music became what Edwards (2009) calls the “braggadocio/battling form” (pp. 25–29).²¹ Rapper Murs (Nick Carter) describes the topic and its origins:

When you’re a young, black male in America, you feel powerless—you feel like you don’t have a voice, you’re disenfranchised—so when you get the microphone, you wanna just pump yourself up. I think that’s where all the bravado comes from, where all the braggadocio comes from. (Edwards, 2009, p. 26)

In other words, the rise of this form is rooted in the social status of Black men in America at this time, a product of the socioeconomic, criminal justice, cultural, and racial contexts discussed above.

Although Edwards separates braggadocio and battling, both of them involve celebrating the emcee’s greatness, with the only difference being that braggadocio rap is first person and battle rap is second person (addressed to a real or fictional opponent). In fact, we can productively classify both of these as brag topics, an umbrella term for rap lyrics that celebrate the rapper’s skill, wealth, power (including the power to inflict

real or metaphorical violence), or any combination of those three. Within the brag topic are three subcategories:

1. First-person brag (1 PB): I am the greatest.
2. Second-person brag (2 PB): I am greater than you.
3. Third-person brag (3 PB): I am greater than everyone (or some subset thereof).

All three brag topics are on display in The Cold Crush Brothers' verses from "Live at Harlem World 1981." The lyrics are shown below, with the relevant topic labeled to the left.

Example 5. The Cold Crush Brothers, "Live at Harlem World 1981."

Topic	Lyrics
3PB	The Cold Crush Four versus Fantastic Five They ain't no comp, we'll eat 'em alive
1PB	Because we're the best when it comes to rappin' And like the flier said, it was bound to happen Well the time has come and let the battle begin And let the crowd be the judge of who wins . . .
2PB	Hey, y'all, yes it's true The four got a brand new song for you We got routines, rhymes, and dancing too So what you wanna do? Case, Tone, and the Four You never heard a crew like this before
1PB	And the way we rock a crowd should be against the law We got much more Grandmaster Caz raising hell And I'm the hut-maker called JDL And I'm easy A, don't forget the D And I'm KG—the Almighty No doubt we're the best With the CC4 you do not mess And if there's a battle the four won't fess

Note that this particular battle—from a live performance—is addressed to an actual "enemy," the Fantastic Five, who presumably were sharing the stage, waiting their turn to respond. This type of freestyle battle typifies early rap music and, in fact, continues as an important subculture of modern rap music (Eminem, notably, gained initial exposure through freestyle battles).

Greg Dimitriadis (2012) eloquently describes the formulaic nature of these and other early hip-hop lyrics,

Early rappers . . . often had a number of floating chants such as “shock the house” or “throw your hands in the air”—chants which framed freestyle rhymed couplets, calls to members of the audience, or short non-semantic vocable routines.” (p. 584)

What he describes as “floating chants” are what we here refer to as lyric formulas. Dimitriadis continues,

There is absolutely no evidence of a clearly organized and delineated song structure [in old-school rap]. Rather, loose boasts and brags . . . and loose chants . . . are most important. These boasts and chants are often repeated with slight variations, further evincing the absence of a narrative song structure. (p. 585)

In other words, as noted above, as early rappers “freestyled” their lyrics, they came to rely on a stock group of formulas that they could plug into a variety of lyrical settings; furthermore, the formulas themselves came to focus on the battle against their hip-hop opponents.

As hip-hop moved into the studio, rappers imported many of the lyric formulas of their freestyle predecessors. Dimitriadis notes that technologically mediated production had a profound effect on rap lyrics, especially insofar as “boasts and brags [are no longer] dependent on face-to-face interaction and communication” (p. 586), giving rappers the ability to imagine themselves either representing, or as battling, entire communities of people. And as battles shifted from the real to the imagined, so too did the brag formulas become ever more hyperbolic. Big Daddy Kane (Antonio Hardy) offers a case study in the use of these lyric formulas in early studio rap. Two of his early hits, “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” and “Raw,” both from 1988, exemplify the use of the three brag topics.

Example 6. Big Daddy Kane, “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” from *Long Live the Kane* (1988), verse 1.

Topic	Lyrics
3PB	Rappers stepping to me, they want to get some But I’m the Kane, so, yo, you know the outcome Another victory, they can’t get with me
2PB	So pick a BC date ‘cause you’re history I’m the authentic poet to get lyrical For you to beat me, it’s gonna take a miracle and Stepping to me, yo, that’s the wrong move So what you on, Hobbes? Dope or dog food?
3PB	Competition I just devour Like a pit bull against a Chihuahua ‘Cause when it comes to being dope, hot damn
2PB	I got it good, now let me tell you who I am
1PB	The B-I-G-D-A double-D-Y-K-A-N-E Dramatic, Asiatic, not like many

- 2PB I'm different, so don't compare me to another
 3PB 'Cause they can't hang, word to the mother
 At least not with the principal in this pedigree
 2PB So when I roll on you rappers you better be
 Ready to die because you're petty
 You're just a butter knife, I'm a machete
 That's made by Ginsu, wait until when you
 Try to front, so I can chop into
 Your body, just because you try to be basing
Friday the 13th I'ma play Jason
 1PB No type of joke, gag, game, puzzle, or riddle
 The name is Big Daddy yes, big not little so
 2PB Define it, here's your walking papers, sign it
 And take a walk as the Kane starts to talk, 'cause ...

[chorus: *Ain't no half-steppin'*]

Kane transitions seamlessly between the three brag types: the lyrics are phrased, throughout, such that Kane is telling a hypothetical “you” that “they” should know how great he (“I”) is. But even more subtle are the ways in which Kane transitions between different depictions of metaphorical battling. The first eight lines clearly refer to a rap battle, in which Kane will be victorious over other MC’s. The imagery gets slightly more violent as Kane compares himself to a pit bull two lines later, but it is obviously still figurative. This is a crucial point: Although the lyrics may *describe* acts of violence, their sole function is to boast about the MC’s rapping prowess versus his contemporaries. These metaphors set the scene for later lines: When Kane compares himself to a “machete” and says that MC’s should be “ready to die,” the listener understands that he is speaking hyperbolically, just as he is in comparing himself to Jason Voorhies from the *Friday the 13th* franchise.

Understanding the type of imagery in Kane’s rhymes helps contextualize a song such as “Raw,” from the same album, given as Example 7.

Example 7. Big Daddy Kane, “Raw” from *Long Live the Kane* (1988), verse 2.

- | Topic | Lyrics |
|-------|---|
| 1PB | Here I am ... R-A-W
A terrorist, here to bring trouble to |
| 3PB | Phony MC’s, I move on and seize
I just conquer and stomp another rapper with ease
'Cause I'm at my apex and others are be-low |
| 1PB | Nothing but a milliliter, I'm a kilo
Second to none, making MC's run |

- 2PB So don't try to step to me, 'cause I ain't the one
- 3PB I relieve rappers just like Tylenol
- 2PB And they know it, so I don't see why you all
Try to front, perpetrating a stunt
When you know that I'll smoke you up like a blunt
- 1PB I'm genuine like Gucci, raw like sushi
The Sage of Rage is what rap did to me
To make me want to create chaos and mayhem
Cold rock a party until the A.M.
I'll make a muscle, grab the mic and hustle
- 2PB While you stand dazed and amazed, I'll bust a little
Rhyme with authority, superiority
- 3PB And captivate the whole crowd's majority
- 1PB The rhymes I use definitely amuse
Better than Dynasty or Hill Street Blues
I'm sure to score, endure for more without a flaw

'Cause I get RAW!²²

The (by rap standards) comparatively tame lyrics of “Raw” contain the sort of violent imagery for which rap would later become notorious. Kane refers to himself as a “terrorist” and talks about how he would “stomp” and “smoke” other rappers; and words like “chaos,” “mayhem,” and “rage” serve to further the aggressive atmosphere. But the verse from “Raw” reverses the chronology of “Ain't No Half Steppin'.” Here, Kane begins with violent metaphors and later clarifies that he is referring to his battles against other rappers. A crucial topical shift occurs at the lines “To make me want to create chaos and mayhem/Cold rock a party until the A.M.” Everything prior to those lines contains imagery associated with actual violence; everything afterward talks about rap battling. Like the verse from “Ain't No Half Steppin',” Kane's conflation of the two types of violence, and the ease with which he transitions between them, contextualizes all of the imagery as extended boasts about his rap skills.

To these three formulas, we can add one more: the “SP” topic, dedicated to celebrating the rapper's successes at love and/or sex. Similar to the earlier sexualized lyrics used by Ray Charles and others (see Example 4 above), this topic was originally manifested in fairly tame rhymes about dating and hookups. It quickly devolved, however, into the misogynistic, sometimes violently sexual lyrics of groups such as N.W.A or, famously, the 2 Live Crew. Just as with the brag topics of rap or the sexually themed blues, country, rhythm and blues, and rock-and-roll lyrics discussed earlier, the SP topic in hip-hop is characterized more by flights of fancy than by any reference to sexual exploits in reality. This topic could easily be considered a subset of brag topic—after all, the point of rapping about one's SP is to brag about it—but it is common enough to warrant its own category.

The three brag topics and the SP topic were by far the most common topics for early rappers. They account for massive numbers of old-school rap verses, and virtually all rappers employ at least one of them at some point. These four formulas provided the groundwork for the darker gangsta topics so closely associated with rap music today. Substitute “I will metaphorically slay you with my rapping skills” with “I will literally inflict violence upon you” and braggadocio/battling rap changes into gangsta rap. But—and most critically—its *fictitious* nature does not change. To confirm this point, and as a segue into our discussion of gangsta rap and the persistence of its topics into the 21st century, the words of Robin Kelley (1996) are here worth quoting at length:

Gang bangin’ itself has never been a central theme in the music. Many of the violent lyrics are not intended literally. Rather, they are used as boasting raps in which the imagery of gang bangin’ is used metaphorically to challenge competitors on the mic—an element common to all hard-core hip-hop . . . [E]xaggerated and invented boasts of criminal acts should be regarded as part of a larger set of signifying practices . . . these masculinist narratives are essentially verbal duels over who is the “baddest motherfucker around.” (p. 129)

The year 1988 was a pivotal year for rap music; in fact, Loren Kajikawa (2015) has convincingly argued that it was the single most important year in rap history. Just 12 days after Big Daddy Kane released *Long Live the Kane*, the culmination of old-school hip-hop traditions, N.W.A. released *Straight Outta Compton*, the seminal gangsta rap album and one that would dramatically change the lyrical style, production, and geographic center of rap music. It is no accident that these albums were released so close together: The extreme violence and misogyny on N.W.A.’s album represent no more than an extension of the brag and SP topics used by Kane and nearly everyone else. As Kajikawa (2015) says,

[r]ather than critique [the problems of police brutality and drugs] from a third-person perspective, N.W.A. adopted the first-person personas of gangsters themselves. N.W.A. offered listeners a voyeuristic tour of the devastation and mayhem [of south-central Los Angeles] . . . by taking on the role of the “bad guy,” they captured public attention and put themselves in a position where they could respond irreverently to authority. (p. 309)

While their lyrics were extreme and their purpose was scathing social critique, their raps took place in the same braggadocio/battling context that Kane’s did. Consider Ice Cube’s (O’Shea Jackson) verse from the title track.²³

Example 8. N.W.A., “Straight Outta Compton,” from *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), verse 1 (Ice Cube).

Topic	Lyrics
1PB	Straight outta Compton, crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube From the gang called Niggaz with Attitudes

- When I'm called off, I got a sawed-off
Squeeze the trigger and bodies are hauled off
- 2PB You too boy, if you fuck with me
The police are gonna have to come and get me
Off your ass, that's how I'm goin' out
- 3PB For the punk motherfuckers that's showin' out
Niggas start to mumble, they wanna rumble
Mix em and cook em in a pot like gumbo
Goin' off on a motherfucker like that
- 2PB With a gat that's pointed at your ass
So give it up smooth
Ain't no tellin' when I'm down for a jack move
- 3PB Here's a murder rap to keep y'all dancin'
With a crime record like Charles Manson
AK-47 is the tool
- 2PB Don't make me act the motherfuckin fool
Me and you can go toe to toe, no maybe
- 3PB I'm knockin' niggas out the box daily
Yo weekly, monthly, and yearly
Until them dumb motherfuckers see clearly
That I'm down with the capital CPT
- 2PB Boy you can't fuck with me
So when I'm in your neighborhood, you better duck
Cause Ice Cube is crazy as fuck
- 1PB As I leave, believe I'm stompin'
But when I come back, boy, I'm coming straight outta Compton

When analyzed against the backdrop of the dominant rap topics of the day, “Straight Outta Compton” becomes nothing more than a profanity-laden example of the first-, second-, and third-person brag topics we saw earlier. Ice Cube even gives a nod to contemporaneous rap practices in the 15th line: “here’s a murder rap to keep y’all dancin’.” This is a more or less explicit acknowledgment that the song belongs in a dance club, its violence no more real than Kane’s identification with *Friday the 13th*. To be sure, these lyrics are more explicitly violent—even though it is metaphorical violence—and the reasons for the sudden shift in lyrical content, though too complex and numerous to explore completely here, are worth mentioning. First, the ascendancy of the music video as the primary form of song transmission increased the pressure on artists to portray a kind of hyperrealism, positioning themselves as willing and able to carry out the kinds of violence described in their lyrics (Dimitriadis, 2012; Rose, 2008). Dimitriadis notes in particular that the gun, having always been used as a symbolic stand-in for the microphone, now “came to signify a gun and a gun alone”

(p. 589). Second, as argued by Perry (2004), rappers, in personifying the gangsta, thug, or outlaw, force listeners and society as a whole to confront the social and economic conditions that created them. She compares gangsta rappers to “the arm of the women’s movement that engages in activism around sexual assault,” insofar as both position themselves as survivors rather than victims, and in doing so “fight against [victimization] and examining the social practices that lead to such violence” (p. 111). Thus, N.W.A., in crafting the gangsta persona, took the preexisting lyrical formulas common to African American vernacular music and deliberately imbued them with an uncomfortably powerful critique of the socioeconomic conditions in which they tried to survive.

Despite—and simultaneously because of—its highly controversial nature, *Straight Outta Compton* was hugely successful, especially among suburban White audiences. As a result, the extreme versions of the three brag topics and the SP topic (which likewise became more profane) came to define mainstream rap music as a whole. It is not overly cynical to view this transformation, as Krims did, as motivated by the desire of record labels to cash in on the popularity of these topics with young White audiences: Kelley (1996) argues that

for middle-class white males, gangsta rap unintentionally plays the same role as the Blaxploitation films of the 1970’s It attracts listeners for whom the ghetto is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, and erotic fantasy, or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom. (p. 130)

Indeed, industry figures, scholars, and rappers themselves see the popularity of gangsta topics among suburban Whites as the prime reason for the proliferation of gangsta rap. As Carmen Ashurst-Watson, former president of Def Jam records, puts it, “The time when we switched to gangsta music was the same time that the majors bought up all the labels, and I don’t think that’s a coincidence.” (“Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes,” 2006, pp. 43:21–43:29). Scholar James Peterson connects this explicitly with the consumption of hip-hop by Whites: “Once the market forces have helped that shift come along, that’s when you get sixty, seventy percent of the buying community is now a White community.” Rapper Jadakiss concurs: “After 700,000 it’s all white people The white people want to hear that killing and everything” (“Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes,” 2006, pp. 44:20–44:43). Thus, rappers, even when they employ extraordinarily violent and misogynistic metaphors, are still employing metaphors in a tradition stretching back to the earliest battle raps and through the blues and earlier forms.

To explore the prevalence of brag topics in rap, we performed an exploratory corpus study of the 259 rap songs transcribed in Bradley and DuBois (2010).²⁴ We identified 20 lyric formula topics in the corpus, which spans the years 1978–2010. Since these formulas refer to more generalized topics than Taft’s blues formulas, we identify them here by description:

1. First-person brag (1PB)
2. Second-person brag (2PB)
3. Third-person brag (3PB)

4. Sexual prowess (SP)
5. Party
6. ID
7. Love
8. Vocable
9. Sociopolitical
10. Black history
11. Philosophical–spiritual
12. Wordplay
13. Trouble/love–sex
14. Trouble/money
15. Trouble/law
16. Trouble/race
17. Trouble/general
18. Drugs/positive
19. Drugs/negative
20. Playlet²⁵

Identification of lyric formulas was mostly ad hoc, that is, the formulas were mostly generated from the lyrics themselves. Since the study set out to explore the three brag formulas, those were naturally identified as such in advance, as was the SP formula. The Party and ID formulas (referring, respectively, to exhortations to partygoers and naming of the rappers and/or DJs), both cornerstones of early rap music, were also identified in advance. The Wordplay and Vocable formulas, both consisting of rhyming for rhyme’s sake and distinguishable by the presence or absence of actual English words, both also evolved from rap’s party origins. Although constraints of space prevent us from discussing the other formulas in detail, most of them can be more broadly categorized as “serious” formulas (7, 9, 10, and 11), as “trouble” formulas dealing with the tribulations of lower class urban life (13–17), or as formulas depicting drug use and its effects (18 and 19).²⁶

Analysis of this corpus of lyrics reveals the overwhelming preponderance of brag topics in rap. Of the 16,292 lines of lyrics in the corpus, the first-person brags alone account for nearly a quarter of the topics (3,969 lines or 24%). The first-person brag formula accounts for more than double the number of the next most common formula (sociopolitical at 1,902 lines or 12%) and nearly double the number of all the “trouble” formulas combined (2,123 lines). Moreover, if all three brag topics and the SP topic are combined, they account for a remarkable 7,831 lines of text in the corpus or 48%. That the brag topics comprise nearly half of all lyric formulas over a 33-year span of rap music certainly bears witness to Bradley and DuBois’s characterization of rap as “an art form famous for first-person assertion.”

In modern rap, even the most ostensibly violent of rap lyrics continue to blur the line between hip-hop battles and “actual” battles. In the 1995 track “Duel of the Iron Mic” by the Wu-Tang Clan—a group whose lyrics are known for their extremely violent imagery—rapper Gary Grice (GZA) includes the lines “Yo, picture bloodbaths

and elevator shafts/Like these murderous rhymes tight from genuine craft.” By the second line, it is clear that the lyrics themselves, not the rapper, are “murderous” in their ability to eliminate GZA’s competition. Nearly a decade later, 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson) ended his single “Ghetto Qua’ran” with the line “If the flow don’t kill you the MAC will.” This second-person brag is clearly a threat against Jackson’s enemies, but that threat just as clearly has metaphorical origins. Jackson, who has been shot 9 times in gang-related violence, may indeed be a violent person. But his lyrics do not offer evidence of that.

Understanding that (1) boasts about one’s strength coupled with metaphorical threats against one’s enemies have been a defining feature of rap lyrics since the genre’s inception and (2) depictions of violence in said lyrics are metaphorical both in origin and in practice, helps both to contextualize the lyrics and to understand the misguidedness of criminal proceedings in which they are presented as evidence. In 2011, in the most recent and high profile of these cases, rapper T-Bizzle, a persona constructed by Mississippi high school senior Taylor Bell, rapped in the song “PSK da Truth” about allegations of sexual misconduct at Bell’s high school. Evidently, several female students had complained to Bell about sexual advances from two of the school’s coaches, prompting Bell to write a rap song condemning and threatening the coaches. It is worth noting that out of 44 lines in the song, only 5 make any kind of threats of violence; the rest detail the accusations of sexual misconduct, engage in typical and often juvenile *ad hominem* attacks against the coaches, or call out T-Bizzle’s friends.²⁷ Example 9 gives the five lines in question (the last two appear together, since they are spoken in succession):

Example 9. T-Bizzle (Taylor Bell), “PSK da Truth.”

I’m a serve this nigga like I serve the junkies with some crack
 Run up on T-Bizzle/I’m going to hit you with my Ruger
 You fucking with the wrong one/Going to get a pistol down your throat
 Middle fingers up if you want to cap that nigga
 Middle fingers up/he get no mercy nigga

The first two of these lines are clear third- and second-person brags, with the addition of the same sorts of violent images used by N.W.A. (and, earlier, Johnny Cash and Jimmie Rodgers). It is worth noting that nowhere in the suspension ruling against Bell does the school express concern about his dealing drugs; this suggests the school knew full well that “like I serve the junkies with some crack” was not to be taken literally, and was cherry-picking examples that suited its preconceived ideas about Bell and hip-hop. The third line is another second-person brag, united with the second line in evoking the concrete image of a gun. However, as affirmed by Nielson, Kubrin, Gosa, et al. (2015) in their brief to the Supreme Court, Bell was merely “engag[ing] the conventions of mainstream rap, particularly the commercially successful subgenre of ‘gangsta’ rap,” by drawing on lyrical formulas that would resonate with his intended audience. The “pistol down your throat,” in particular—like the

earlier “the day you quit me, that’s the day you die” trope from early blues and country music—has become a staple image in contemporary rap, with the line “it’s hard to yell when the barrel’s in your mouth” being used almost verbatim by Jay-Z, the Notorious B.I.G., and T.I.

The fourth and fifth lines are most telling of all, because they exhort an imaginary crowd to join the rapper in his anger. In so doing, they resonate all the way back to the Party formula identified in our corpus study, dating from the earliest rap songs, in which emcees spoke directly to “party people,” encouraging them to dance, have a good time, and so on. Bell, following the tradition of gangsta rappers, modified this topic to suit “PSK da Truth,” in exactly the way described above by KRS-One: He used a generic rap formula and injected his specific theme into it. Viewed this way, Bell’s lyrics follow a tradition that is traceable all the way back to hip-hop’s origins. One can easily substitute any of these five lines into an N.W.A. song like the one cited earlier. Moreover, if we substitute some of Bell’s lyrics either with tamer imagery or, ironically, more cartoonishly violent lyrics, his lines could easily find a home in old-school hip-hop. Imagine the second line rewritten as “Run up on T-Bizzle/I’mma hit you like Freddy Krueger,” and the lyrics could easily belong to Big Daddy Kane. The ease with which these substitutions can be made is a direct result of the formulaic nature of their composition, by which standard lyrical topics are modified to suit particular songs. Bell used the brag topics that had been fundamental to hip-hop for nearly 30 years, infused them with popular gangsta themes, and adapted them to his specific topic, just as rappers and other American vernacular musicians have always done.

As a result of the song, Bell was accused of “threatening two named educators with gun-related violence,” suspended, and moved to a different school. Bell appealed this decision on first-amendment grounds, but the U.S. Supreme Court denied certiorari review of Bell’s case, despite the pleas of several major scholars and rappers, including Big Boi (Antwan Patton) and Killer Mike (Michael Render; see Gordon, 2015). Render, who together with El-P (Jamie Meline) makes up the hip-hop duo Run the Jewels, is an important figure in any discussion of rap lyrics and violence. Although he raps under the name Killer Mike, he has been adamant in countless interviews that his moniker refers to his ability to “kill microphones.”²⁸ The son of a police officer, Render identifies with the frustrations of African Americans at police brutality even as he expresses his support and admiration for the police. And yet his lyrics engage in the same sorts of violent boasts as those of his predecessors. Example 11 gives part of Render’s verse from “Jeopardy,” the opening track from *Run the Jewels 2* (2015).

Example 10. Run the Jewels, “Jeopardy,” verse 1 (Killer Mike).

Topic Lyrics

1PB I’m up at midnight, I’m dippin’ off in my Nizzikes²⁹
 A gun and a metal pizzipe, a knizzife is to my rizzight

- 3PB I'm lurkin' servin' on pussies who lack a purpose
 I've got 'em filled up with frizzight like Mizzike is you all rizzight?
 I'm lookin' lurkin' on bitches twerkin' for service
 The bitches bag is a Birkin, I'm yellin' screamin' and cursin'
 I'm putting pistols in faces at random places like
 Bitch give it up or stand adjacent to Satan
- 1PB Batman chillin', the villains is here
 No Jesuses here, I hear the demons in my ear
 And I want it, I need it, see it, I take it
- 2PB Never fake it, wrap you motherfuckers up, leave you naked
- 1PB The jewel runners, top tag team for two summers
- 2PB Live and let live, fuck you cuz cause that's a fool's honor
- 1PB I'm walkin' totin' on two llamas
- 2PB You niggas ass and trash and trash, fuck it, I'm too honest
 So fuck you fuckboys forever, I hope I said it politely
- ID And that's about the psyche of Jaime and Mikey
 You meet another pair better—highly unlikely
- 2PB And if I can't rap, then maggot fuck, then fight me

Compared to the old-school lyrics presented in Examples 6 and 7, Render's lyrics certainly appear more graphically violent. But the lyrical topics remain the same: Nearly all of the lines presented here can be understood as an intensified version of one of the three brag topics, which Render mixes and matches freely just as Big Daddy Kane did. Also of note is Render's invocation of Batman and the word "villain," both of which recall Kane's invocation of Jason Voorhies. Indeed, the only way to reconcile the lyrics of Killer Mike, the rapper, with the peaceful social and political activism of Michael Render, the citizen, is to understand his lyrics as derivative, fictionalized accounts—in other words, as lyric formulas.

Discussion and Conclusion

Three stories emerge from this examination of lyric formulas. First, throughout many genres of American popular music, artists draw from a collection of shared lyric formulas when composing new songs. Second, singers across genres frequently mingle this stock material with first-person claims of violence and misogynistic content. Third, the popularity of particular themes or tropes in lyric formulas at particular times appears connected to contemporaneous social forces and conditions.

Rap music is no exception, with popular lyric formulas—including brags and metaphorical references to violence, as well as complaints about the difficulty of urban life and often graphic depictions of drug use—seemingly rooted in the concentrated disadvantage and hypersegregation wrought by deindustrialization, as well

as the marginalization and repression experienced by Black men at the hands of criminal justice and other institutional actors as well as by the broader racial hierarchy, encouraged both by an adaptive subculture rewarding violence and toughness in the face of the marginalization and isolation of these circumstances and by the record companies seeking to profit from a market demand for artists representing themselves as simultaneously authentic and dangerous.

What is apparently exceptional about rap music is the treatment in legal settings of some of these lyrics as truthful and autobiographical. The argument that any song represents the literal first person experiences or intentions of the singer is, at best, doubtful—do we really believe the Beatles when they describe committing arson, as in “Norwegian Wood,” or claim to live in a yellow submarine? In the context of genres in which singers draw extensively from preexisting collections of lyric formulas, such an argument is highly dubious, even absurd. The broader issue is that it does not seem likely that these kinds of arguments against the literal and self-referential interpretation of an artistic product would be necessary for lyrics from other musical genres.

Scholars and fans alike have noted a seeming paradox in rappers’ portrayals of themselves and their lyrics: The genre places significant value on “authenticity” in word and image, only for its adherents to claim that the lyrics are fictional. Tricia Rose (2008) addresses this point eloquently, and at length:

The rhyme in Lil’ Wayne’s ‘Damage is Done’ that describes him as running away with a ‘hammer in my jeans, dead body behind me, cops’ll never find me’ would be interpreted by many critics as a description of actual events. This assumption . . . is the result of both rappers’ own investment in perpetuating the idea that everything they say is true to their life experience . . . and the genre’s investment in the pretense of no pretense. That is, the genre’s promoters capitalize on the illusion that the artists are not performing but ‘keeping it real.’ . . . Part of this ‘keeping it real’ ethos is a laudable effort to continue to identify with many of their fans, . . . part of it is the result of conformity to the genre’s conventions. (p. 38)

The “conventions” to which she refers at the end include, of course, the lyric formulas that we discuss here. But her larger point is that the facade of realism adopted by so many rap artists is crucial for maintaining a connection with their core fan base: Black youth who in many cases continue to experience the same marginalization that the artists once did and who in all cases will likely never experience the kind of material wealth that the artists enjoy. Thus, the use of lyric formulas is a convention stretching back through nearly a century of African American vernacular music and the infusion of rap lyric formulas with realistic portrayals of violence—like the emphasis on movement and anxiety in blues lyric formulas—serves to maintain the connection between musicians and listeners.

The ubiquity of particular lyric formulas makes their interpretation as autobiographical particularly dubious. The commonness of formulas across musical genres, and in particular the commonness of formulas mingled with violent content, raises troubling questions about why rap has been singled out. Finally, the links between the popularity of particular formulas and contemporary social and cultural

context suggest the meaning or motivations behind the selection of particular lyrics may be found not in the individual artist but in broader external social processes and forces—in other words that meaning of the lyrics is often external rather than internal.

Of course, some lyrics may refer to actual violent or criminal incidents. Even here, the interpretation may not be clear. Given an emphasis on authenticity and lyric formulas favoring the first-person accounts, artists may draw inspiration from people they know or have heard about but present the stories in a first-person narrative (see, for instance, Kubrin & Nielson's, 2014, discussion of Clyde Smith's case). The argument is not that no artist has even written about a criminal act they committed, but instead that having written about a crime—even alluding to a real crime—cannot be interpreted as equivalent to an admission made by an actual person (rather than a character or persona) made outside of the artistic context of a musical composition.

In light of all this, it is hard to ignore the racial dimensions of the issue. Rap music arises in the context of massive social and economic inequalities along racial lines and in an era in which a wildly racially disparate criminal justice system grows to a scale that is unprecedented globally and historically (e.g., Peterson & Krivo, 2010). Despite the election of a president with substantial African heritage and the economic dominance of rap in the music industry, race remains an important lens through which people view social problems while superficially race-blind policies and institutions continue to operate in ways that ensure a persistently subordinate role for African Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Drakulich, 2015a, 2015b).

A critical mechanism in maintaining this racial hierarchy is the particular racial ideology: A preference for individualistic attributions—blaming both labor market and criminal justice inequalities on individual mistakes and moral failings—and a de-emphasis on the importance of race, while simultaneously ignoring the differential opportunities and constraints faced by members of those groups (Drakulich, 2015a; Jackman & Muha, 1984), a phenomena that is at the heart of concepts like *laissez-faire* and color-blind racism (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The interpretation of violent rap lyrics—but not those from other genres—as representing literal and autobiographical admissions and personal moral failings, while failing to take into account the context that explains the lyric formulas prevalent in the genre, presents a striking parallel to this broader repressive mechanism. A focus on violence and crime in Black music, just like the focus on Black crime more broadly, serves to highlight the undeserving nature of an irresponsible group and justifies harsh punitive rather than economically ameliorative policies (Drakulich, 2015a, 2015b; Spence, 2011; Tonry, 2011; Wacquant, 2009). In this light, then, the disproportionate legal focus on rap lyrics compared to those from genres stereotypically identified with other racial groups may not be surprising, but it is no less problematic.³⁰

Conclusion

Rap music, like rock music, places enormous value on authenticity. In fact, one of the most important features to distinguish “rock” from earlier “rock and roll” is the idea that in the former, the artist is expected to be the sole creative force, writing, singing, and

often even producing the song (see Gracyk, 1996, pp. 1–36, 219–226). This explains, among other cultural phenomena, the disdain and even contempt expressed by listeners for cover bands and for singers who don't write their own songs. Gracyk (1996) suggests that both artists and audiences like to maintain the fiction that rock “is immediate or ‘real’ in a way that serious [i.e. classical] music is not” (p. 219), something that also holds true for rap.³¹ And rap musicians themselves often play up this illusion of authenticity, constructing elaborate “street” personas in order to gain credibility among the rap community. This practice stretches back to the earliest days of rap, embodied, for example, by the “street” attire of Run-D.M.C. or the original frat boy personas of the Beastie Boys—both of which were entirely fabricated. It is understandable, then, that when a rapper or rap group dresses in gang attire, raps in the first person about killing, and then insists on the authenticity of their lyrics, a listening public unfamiliar with standard generic tropes of American vernacular music would take them at face value.

But as this article has shown, there is all the difference in the world between engaging in lyrical flights of fancy—in any genre, whether rap, rock, country, blues, or opera—and actually intending to enact those fantasies in reality. Building upon the ubiquitous tradition of formulaic lyrical composition—especially as established by their forbears in the blues, where formulas are often vehicles for violent and boastful content—rappers added the additional layer of gangsta culture, invoking images of drugs, guns, and warfare to reinforce their images of boastful masculinity. But these images are just images; they are designed and deployed to elevate a rapper above his peers by imbuing him with almost superhuman power. Ultimately, though, rappers are actors, despite whatever claims they make of authenticity: T-Bizzle, Ice Cube, Big Daddy Kane, and the Fresh Prince are characters portrayed by Taylor Bell, O’Shea Jackson, Antonio Hardy, and Will Smith, respectively. However compelling and realistic their lyrical stories might seem, they are fundamentally formulaic, designed specifically to resonate with acculturated listeners in predictable ways. They are no more to be taken literally than the operatic hyperboles of centuries past.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Opera, notably, is the preferred music of those seated on the Supreme Court and tasked with addressing the first amendment implications of putting lyrics on trial, according to Justice Sotomayor (Liptak, 2015).
2. We will follow the practice of the musicians themselves, referring to “rap” as the vocal branch of “hip-hop,” an umbrella term originally including three other art forms: DJing,

breakdancing, and graffiti art. “Gangsta rap,” a subgenre of rap music, will feature prominently in this article and will be described below.

3. As Calvert, Morehart, and Papadelias (2014) note, jurors who are not rap literate (and thus not likely the intended audience for the lyrics) may judge lyrics to be substantially more threatening than those who are rap literate and may be influenced by racial stereotypes about rap music.
4. The goal of this article—a collaboration between a criminologist and music theorists—is translational: to highlight the relevance of specific music scholarship relevant to this topic to criminologists and legal experts.
5. In a series of ironies, the song was not actually a rap song (although it was frequently portrayed as such by its critics), and Ice-T is best known these days for his 16-year long portrayal of a police officer on a television show.
6. It should be noted that Taylor and Austen (2012) take exception to the appropriation of the term “minstrelsy” in describing gangsta rappers, even as they understand some of the reasons for doing so (pp. 225–257).
7. In discussing modern (i.e., post-2000 rap), we do not distinguish gangsta rap as a subgenre, since gangsta topics have become a de facto requirement for mainstream rap success, and since anecdotal experience indicates that most outside listeners equate the two (see discussion in Russell-Brown, 2004).
8. From here on, the term gangsta rap will be used in its commonly understood meaning, as articulated by Taylor and Austen: “a subgenre of hip-hop featuring remorseless lyrics about violence and crime . . . and often including misogyny and coarse language” (231–2). It will also, however, be used in a broader sense, to encompass such lyrics even as they appear in songs from other genres like “mack rap” or “party rap” (see Krims, 2000).
9. The differences between assumptions about Black males and White males is reflected by the fact, noted several times throughout this article, that rap music is the only genre in which violent lyrics are taken literally.
10. Milman Parry (1980), who developed the theory of formulaic composition in oral poetry, describes the formula as “an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea. What is essential in an idea is what remains after all stylistic superfluity has been taken from it” (p. 13). As several blues scholars observe, formulaic lyrical composition is quite common in blues, but blues is metrically looser than epic poetry (Evans, 1982, pp. 315–316, 2007, p. 486; Taft, 2006, p. 35). Another significant difference is that blues is frequently transmitted through recordings in addition to oral tradition.
11. Albert B. Lord observes that, within a tradition of oral poetry, there is “a large group of formulas known to all singers,” that “these represent the most common and useful ideas in the poetry,” and that “This common stock of formulas gives the traditional songs a homogeneity which strikes the listener or reader as soon as he has heard or read more than one song and creates the impression that all singers know all the same formulas” (2000, pp. 49–50). His observations are also generally applicable to genres of popular music that rely heavily on formulaic composition.
12. Concerning how the formula “I woke up this morning” conveys anxiety, Taft (2006) observes that “Generally, the figurative ‘waking up’ is from a situation in which the person feels good or in which the person is in a good, stable love relationship to a situation in which the person feels bad or in which the love relationship has gone awry” (p. 195)

13. Evans (2007) offers a critique of Taft's approach. He argues that many blues scholars have noted that among the most common topics in blues are love, movement, and anxiety, but that they have arrived at this conclusion through thematic analysis rather than formulaic analysis (Evans, 2007, p. 496; Taft, 2009, p. 78).
14. For the purposes of this illustration, our corpus for country music, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll includes the complete recordings of Frank Hutchison, made between 1926 and 1929; recordings made by the Carter Family from August 1927 through May 1931; Fats Domino's first three Imperial albums, released in 1956 but recorded as early as 1949 and often released as singles; Elvis Presley's studio recordings made between 1954 and 1956, many of which were released later; Ray Charles's albums *Ray Charles* (1957) and *Yes Indeed!* (1958); and Johnny Cash's albums *Johnny Cash with His Hot and Blue Guitar* (1957) and *Johnny Cash Sings the Songs that Made Him Famous* (1959). Our exploratory corpus study found 42 instances of Taft's formulas in Hutchison's songs; 21 in the Carter Family's; 33 in Domino's; 28 in Presley's; 29 in Charles's; and 30 in Cash's. The study includes singers—notably Elvis Presley, but also Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, and others—who sang songs written by others, reinforcing our view of songs as performances that do not necessarily reflect the literal experience of the singer.
15. Presley's song is based on Arthur Gunter's song of the same name from 1954.
16. "Heartbreaker" was written by A. Nugetre (Ahmed Ertegun).
17. See, for example, Guralnick (1994, pp. 345–346) and Lydon (2004, pp. 245–247). On Cash's arrest record see for example Hilburn (2013, pp. 280–283).
18. See, for example, Freedland (1998, pp. 135–137, 225–226, 234–235, 317, 330–332) and Kaplan (2015, pp. 29–30, 219, 324–325, 387, 447, 587–588, 677–679, 705, 727–731).
19. However, others have pointed out that the violence and misogyny in rap music in fact reflect themes common throughout mainstream culture (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Russell-Brown, 2004; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). In this light, we should see the violent content not necessarily as the product of a violent and isolated subculture, but instead as a successful appropriation of major themes from mainstream pop culture—not as subversive but as conformist.
20. The early practices of rap are discussed by Rose (1994) and Keyes (2004).
21. We will use the terms "early rap" and "old-school" rap interchangeably. The exact chronology of the development of rap music is hard to pin down, but most scholars locate the "golden age" of rap somewhere around 1988–1993 and categorize the "old school" as any rap created earlier than that. Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois are unusual in ending old-school rap much earlier, in 1984, without giving concrete reasons for doing so (see Bradley & DuBois, 2010). In fact, "old school" typically involves more stylistic than chronological concerns; it is characterized by rap songs with end-rhyming couplets and (often) simplistic beats, even those released during or after hip-hop's golden age.
22. Lyric transcription from Bradley and DuBois (2010, pp. 137–138).
23. It is worth noting at this point that rappers virtually always rap under pseudonyms. "Ice Cube" is a violent, hypermasculine character; one of many portrayed by O'Shea Jackson, the writer, rapper, actor, producer, and filmmaker.
24. A few dimensions of this exploratory corpus study are worth mentioning. The 259 songs in the Yale anthology comprise 16,292 lines of text. Our definition of "line" was a complete

syntactical unit in English (not necessarily a complete sentence), whether or not that unit was coterminous with a transcribed line of verse or a single measure of music. We began with the principle of no more than one topic per line, under the assumption that it would be prohibitively difficult to parse out multiple topics within the same line.

25. The Bradley and DuBois anthology was chosen as the basis for the corpus study for both its chronological and stylistic scope (the book encompasses virtually all styles of rap from party anthems to gangsta). The fundamental principle for identifying lyric topics was no more than one topic per line. There are, no doubt, other ways to identify some topics; for example, one could easily create a “trouble/family” category. A detailed description of our method of categorizing and identifying lyric formulas is beyond the scope of the present article, in which our primary purpose is to demonstrate the prevalence of “brag” topics, and their content, throughout rap history.
26. The “playlet” is different in kind from the other formulas, it describes lyrics that are obviously fictional, like those in the Beastie Boys’ “Paul Revere,” which reimagines the rappers as wild-west cowboys. The playlet therefore comprises entire songs rather than single lines.
27. Complete lyrics can be found on pages 5–7 of the decision by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals: <http://www.ca5.uscourts.gov/opinions/pub/12/12-60264-CV0.pdf>
28. Render explained the origins of his name in a 2016 interview with Stephen Colbert: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhudugDR0n0&t=1m26s>
29. Render is using “izzle” slang in which the middle syllable of a word is replaced by the “izz” sound.
30. Notably, White rappers with violent content—Iggy Azalea’s 2014 hit Fancy includes the line “I’m still in the murder business”—anecdotally appear more likely to be accused of cultural appropriation than criminal violence.
31. In fact, Gracyk (1996) interrogates the concept of “authenticity” across a variety of musical genres (pp. 219–226).

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