

## AT THE HEART OF CULTURE: A PSYCHO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF RAP POETRY

IBRAHIM ALI MURAD

Dept. of English, College of education, University of Garmian, Kurdistan Region-Iraq

*(Received: December 11, 2022; Accepted for Publication: May 24, 2023)*

### ABSTRACT

The American literature is a rich body of literature that drew comparatively late attention. And within the American literature, the African American one can be seen as a separate and distinct body as rich as the rest of that comprehensive body. One of the branches of this black body is the sub-genre of rap which the research attempts to study, using cultural and psychoanalytic principles. It is designed to work on two levels: First, Rap's attribution to music or poetry or both, and secondly and more importantly, the cultural and psychological forces behind its existence. Thus, it attempts to highlight the inherent cultural- psychological-based behaviour of the African-American people which is supposed to resist the mainstream trends of the behaviour in the society where they live and act. The study hypothesizes that there is a heavy impact of the culture of rap composers upon the route it takes, along with the social and political circumstances against which it is composed. It also supposes that the effect of such circumstances in this respect could be elemental in the style of this kind of poetry and the themes and subjects it tackles. The study includes four sections: The first one is introduction, while in the second section some definitions of rap along with a historical background about it are presented. Section three tackles the aspect of musicality in rap poetry and in the last section technical and thematic aspects are analyzed. At the end, the study reached a number of conclusions one of the prominent ones of which is the cultural, social, political, and even psychological influences behind composition of rap poems in America and the world at large.

**KEY WORDS:** American literature, rap, culture, sub-genre, composers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional psychological studies stress the psychological aspects and behaviours on the individual level and mostly overlook the behaviours, practices and interchange of communal groups among themselves and towards opposing communities as well. This analytical treatment keeps the psychological-based behaviour of the individual away from the overall behaviour and practice of the group or community where he/she belongs and from which such practices and sets of behaviour were acquired. As a result, a gap appears between the individual-based and cultural-based formations of the personality of the individuals (Rozin: 273-274). Therefore; theories that help in filling such a gap are significant and of great interest in studying myriad conflicting issues among the peoples and communities in the world like The Psycho-Cultural Interpretation Theory and The Psycho-

Cultural Conflict Theory. For the purpose of this research, these theories are used in studying and analyzing rap poetry and performance. Such theories penetrated deep into the heart of the matter which is the cause of the majority of conflicts and inter-accusations among peoples and communities worldwide. The problem is inherent in the wide gap in understanding the process of personal formation between the oppressive and superior powers on the one hand and the colonized and inferior ethnic groups on the other hand as some critics write, "within the Western perspective, the concepts of personality formation and self are derived from a guise of internal understanding of individual existence. However, for persons of collective cultures, personality and self are determined by an interdependent existence" (Qtd in Wilson: 87).

But ethnic affiliation is something inherent and unshakable and it is not liable to be dissolved by modern trends as the recurrent

cases in America between the whites and the blacks prove. This state can be seen clearly in the rap poems that protest against the mistreatment behaviour which their people face and consequently seem to urge the coloured people to defend and preserve their cultural affiliation.

This 'cultural affiliation' refers strongly to the rap poet's culture and his/her psychological state simultaneously since the two aspects cannot be separated. For this reason, 'Cultural Psychology' is strongly applicable here which revolves around the interaction between individuals' shapes of behaviour and their culture or, simply speaking, "the intersections of the sense of self and culture" (Hamilton, 2022). Consequently, cultural psychology stresses the fact that human's mind and psychological state in everyday life interactions are closely related and affect each other. The source of our thoughts, actions, behaviour, etc. is two-fold; internally coming from the mind and externally from the culture that helps in shaping that mind. These aspects and concept seem to form the main basic and route that the rap poets used in composing and performing their poems.

There are, of course, voices that cry for and adopt the opposite and believe that cultural identity for the Africans, including African Americans, is no more a matter of geography or ancestry. The African American writer and critic, Chielozona Eze for instance, refers to literary works by writers from African background to support his claim and states, "in interviews or memoirs, these writers employ their background to call for a re-examination of the notion of African identity" (235). This is a clear reference to the fact that whether being in Africa itself or being linked to it inherently and emotionally from far away; there is still that distinct identity sown in the innermost of every individual from an African origin including, of course, the rap poets; and this feeling is always watered by the double treatment they come across within the societies and communities where they live or came to as immigrants. The negative impact of this double treatment is touched clearly in many of the rap poems where the poets become mouthpiece of their people in this respect. The duality of globalization and modernization the African Americans are exposed to is a clear instance for this case. The huge gap these two (ation)s brought about between the haves and the have nots inspires harsh thoughts and behaviours in those people as

the only method to defend their cultural identity and heritage. Though these modes of thought and behaviour sometimes take violent routes; but, the peaceful ways are more common especially for artists and people of letters whose violence lies only in the harsh language and messages felt in their artistic and literary products. Jazz and blues music, the poetry of highly revolutionist African Americans like Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka, and hundreds of rap poems are just examples for these attempts in defense of cultural identity.

## 2. MEANING AND BACKGROUND

Whenever and wherever the word 'rap' is heard, man's mind turns directly to dance and music. This is hardly puzzling, since the two activities are associated with this confusing word. The famous world dictionaries like *Miriam Webster* and *Cambridge* dictionaries refer to rap as a kind of kick or blow and they are shared in this by some singers, critics, and writers. The musician and critic Cole Mize believes that "initially the word rap meant to strike or to hit. A few centuries later a slight variation of this definition appeared which meant to speak or talk. In America, around the 1960's, it began to pop up in the black community and was used as a slang word to mean that someone was talking or having a conversation" (<https://colemizestudios.com>). This is for definition. What about its status within the realm of art and literature? Its musicality, its graphology, and its overall features, if scrutinized, talk much about this aspect.

Whether the poetry of rap is really regarded as poetry at all, is a matter of heated discussions that range from agreement to agnosticism, to refusal. The prolific writer and critic, Alexs Pate (b. 1950) for instance, considers it not only poetry but an original part of it. "The poetry in rap" he states in his critical and illuminating book *In the Heart of Beats: The Poetry of Rap*, "is poetry because it emanates from the African American community in the same way that all of the poetry that came before rap did" (2). Without acknowledging or rejecting it, knowingly or unaware, Henry Louis Gates in his forward to Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois' *The Anthology of Rap* states that "raping was a performance, rappers were to be judged, and the judges were the people on the corner or in the shop. Everyone, it seems to me as I watched

these performances unfolding even as a child, was literate in the fine arts of signification” (2).

But there are some voices that deny rap’s inclusion in the realm of poetry, yet, they hardly can outdo the supporters of this performance form. The critic and professor Micah Mattix, for example, provides an abrupt reply for his own title question, ‘Is Rap Poetry?’ when he writes, “the short answer is “no,” of course” (<https://www.theamericanconservative.com>). He even goes further on and regards the question itself useless because “rap is a musical-verbal art and poetry is a verbal-musical-typographical one” (Ibid). The linguist John Hamilton McWhorter V (1965) who is specialized in creole languages, societies, and black English, puts himself in the field of agnosticism though his article in *The Daily Beast* reveals the opposite. He may mean people and critics other than himself when he writes, “The only reason rap may seem to nevertheless not be “real” poetry is a skewed take on language typical of modern, literate societies: that spoken language is merely a sloppy version of written language” (<https://www.thedailybeast.com>).

His agnosticism is shown further in another fit of doubt and uncertainty, “Overall the idea that poetry is serious only if it’s on a page and read with tea is actually rather parochial. An epic like *Beowulf* was composed for the ear, with careful alliterations within each line” (Ibid).

The writer, book reviewer, and cultural critic, Chauncey Mabe (b. 1956) is also in doubt about the relevance between the two forms and wants to dismiss it albeit with a great deal of caution. “The problem:” he writes in a short critical article titled “Jay-Z, ‘Decoded,’ and why rap is not poetry”

Any attempt to equate hip hop with poetry ignores the defining characteristics of each genre. Both are musical, but the music of rap is external to the words. That means its wordsmiths have much more in common with songwriters than they do with poets. Poetry, by contrast, must generate its music solely from poetics alone. No DJs. No beats. No samples. . . . I say, let hip hop be hip hop, and poetry be poetry (<https://flcenterlitarts.wordpress.com>).

The quotation above and, in fact, the article as a whole proves that the writer fell prey to a grave mistake not only in his viewpoint about the distinction between the two sides mentioned in his article; but in failing to differentiate between ‘rap’ which is the main word of the title of his article and ‘hip hop’ in the first line of the

quote above. For him, it seems, rap is equal to hip hop, which is definitely not. Simply put, hip hop is a cultural movement whereas rap is a folk genre and just a part of that inclusive culture which is related to almost every aspect of the life of the African-American people like religion, tradition, language, behaviour, etc. This is definitely what Adam Bradley means when he writes, “Hip hop emerged out of urban poverty to become one of the most vital cultural forces of the past century” (xiii). Another critic supports Bradley’s view and writes: “Hip hop-the message and the life- is the messenger. And rap/poetry is the message” (Pate: 5). For the rap artist and producer KRS-One, “Rap music is something we do, but hip hop is something we live” (qtd in Bradley and DuBois: 29). Elsewhere an even more obvious distinction is made, “Hip hop, in other words, is an umbrella term to describe the multifaceted culture of which rap is but a part” (Ibid). Last but not least, the assistant professor of comparative literature at Yale University and the former poetry editor of *Paris Review*, Robyn Creswell goes beyond any doubt and hesitation about the reality of rap as a sub-genre of poetry when he writes, “Most of the poems stuck in my head are rap songs. Rap is the music I grew up listening to, and the lyrics from those days, the late eighties and early nineties, have stayed with me. I’ve forgotten most of the poems I had to memorize at school; of Keats’s “To Autumn,” I remember only the famous lines. On the other hand, Big Daddy Kane’s “Smooth Operator,” Rakim’s “Mahogany,” or Nas’s “N.Y. State of Mind”—these are poems I know by heart, from beginning to end, and will probably never forget (Qtd in Caplan: 109).

It is rational to refer to one more evidence that puts rap in the sphere of poetry which is no more than *The Anthology of Rap*, edited by both Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois in 2010. The anthology comprises 257 rap lyrics by 102 rappers/poets. Such kinds of anthologies are very rare but still there are some that include rap lyrics like *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* by Henry Louis Gates Jr and *From Totems to Hip Hop* by Ismael Reed. The editors of *The Anthology of Rap*, though side with rap as poetry, seem to be eager for more development in this respect. “Though rap is widely disseminated in American culture” they write, “it has yet to attain adequate recognition as poetry even as universities incorporate it into English, African American

studies, and music curricula” (30). These views and counterviews also stress the heavy impact the African American culture and the psychological states of mind of the rappers upon their performances since hip hop is regarded as the culture and background that was elemental in creating rap poems and this distinct culture encompasses distinct psychological states of the rappers and performers which is reflected increasingly especially among the young African American people. In this respect, Alex Kresovich et al concluded their article “A Content Analysis of Mental Health Discourse in Popular Rap Music” by writing that “a content analysis of lyrics to 125 popular rap songs sampled from 1998 to 2018 revealed significant increases in the proportion of songs with references to suicidal ideation, depression, and metaphors representing a mental health condition” (6).

The briefing above, though seems as a digression from the core of the study; yet it is necessary before going into the heart of its origin and message.

As for the origins of this artistic performance, there is a comprehensive unanimity with some extended viewpoints. Some critics take the history of rap back to the classics. For Adam Bradley for instance, grains of rap can be seen in the Greek lyric poetry. “The ancient Greeks” he writes, “called their lyric poetry *ta mele* which means poems to be sung” (xvii). This belief which is supported heavily by semantics, should convincingly be adopted since in later ages as well stories and adventures were told through oral recitations which in most cases were accompanied by folk musical tools. Beowulf, the first surviving English poem, after all, should have been told in the same way before being written down.

The identity of the rappers is a useful clue towards their origins since the majority, if not all, rappers are from black and brown, or African American origins. Critics take this origin back to the griots of the west African societies who were the oral story tellers of their societies and people like the case in most other ancient communities. The Associate Professor of Music, Patricia Tang, defines them as “musicians, oral historians, praise-singers, genealogists, and storytellers found in West Africa. They are considered hereditary artisans of the spoken word. They specialize in musical instruments such as the kora, balafon, and sabar drum” (<https://africanmusicuga.wordpress.com>).

Whether the griots of Africa or their likes in different communities and societies, to be a story teller necessarily needs to be an artist though may not be in the modern sense of the word. Therefore, rap can be said that originates from folk artists who set the foundations of the postmodern rap performance. That is why the editors of *The Anthology of Rap* write, “Rap is a postmodern version of an African American vernacular tradition that stretches back to chants, toasts and trickster tales” (Bradley and DuBois: 24).

This ‘vernacular tradition’ which, according to Bradley and DuBois, fathers Rap; could be rightfully regarded as the legal ancestor of some other sub-genres of poetry, namely the African-American poetry and poets who were initiated to serve the same functions that the ‘vernacular tradition’ was doing. Looking at the messages of the poetry of African American poets like Claude McKay (1890-1948), Langston Hughes (1901-1967), Maya Angelou (1928-2014), Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) and Nikki Giovanni (b. 1943), to mention just a few of them, proves the above allegation, since in the majority of their poetic works, those poets and all the African American poets try to identify, defend, and safeguard their original culture against the huge degradation and oppression it faces by the white community and its institutions. Amiri Baraka’s poems like “Black Dada Nihilismus” and “Black Art” which were later performed with the accompaniment of the jazz music, are just examples in case. In this respect, the Australian writer and teacher, Amy Smolicz states that rap “has become a platform for young people to share their views on exploitation, prejudice, police brutality, injustice and violence. In 2011, Maya Angelou and rapper Common married poetry and rap together on his track ‘The Dreamer’, where Angelou recited a poem, she had written. A new-wave of rappers have been associated with the sub-genre in recent times due to the police brutality and Black Lives Matter protests in the US” (<http://bowenstreetpress.com>).

The short survey above confirms the belief that a rap poet is actually a performer himself since when he composes his lyric, he has the mode of its performance in mind. His lyric is more created for living audience than hard and dry papers and books and this feature connects it strongly to one of the main aspects of his culture, i.e., the vernacular tradition.

### 3. MUSICALITY AND METRICAL ASPECTS

For the Roman critic, Horace (65-68 B.C.), “The poet should try to blend together the delightful and the useful. Teaching is his business, but teaching with pleasure” (Qtd in Hall JR, Vernon. 14-15). The question, here, will be whether rap can achieve these goals and functions or not. As for Horace’s first function, in most cases only the lyric poetry can achieve the wished-for destination of delighting and, as a classic, Horace should have this sub-genre in mind when he put these pre-conditions for poetry. The first and foremost step in the process of delighting comes clearly from the musicality that the text provides, ballads, lyrics, and songs, among other sub-genres of poetry win attention and appraisal for the rhythm they provide before the messages they carry within their lines and stanzas.

Rap as a form of performance and music can be attributed originally to spirituals, the Christian music that is associated to the African American performance which later evolved into blues. It is from this origin that the spiritual raps and even Christian raps appeared. This attribution should be extended to blues and jazz, among other genres of African American music. The sub-genre of jazz Rap is certainly an ensuing outcome of that attribution and inter-dependability. The result is that rap encompasses elements and features of most precedent African American genres of music as part of the original African American culture (Pate: 28-30)

The majority of the rap performances, including the gangsta rap which is also called ‘reality rap’; follow the example of the old ballads and lyrics in their rhyme and music. And this proves the heavy impact of the culture of the rappers and the psychological states under which they compose and perform their raps. Here is a piece of refrain in Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks”:

**Brakes** in a bus, **brakes** on a **car**  
**Breaks** to make you a **superstar**  
**Breaks** to win and **breaks** to **lose**  
 But these here breaks will rock your **shoes**.  
 (Bradley and DuBois: 86).

Hearing these lines or reading them, it is not quite easy to differentiate them from lines of any song, lyric, or ballad by a famous jazz poet. It is not difficult to compare Blow’s extract above to any jazz poem because the musicality it provides even before its message resembles Amiri Baraka’s poem “Somebody Blew up America” which was written about the air attacks in

September 11, 2001 and recited to the accompaniment of Jazz, is a clear example in case. Here is an extract from the poet, performer, and playwright, Ruth Weiss (1928-2020):

Patie cake patie cake  
 Home momma home  
 Don’t wanna be a momma  
 No more  
 Don’t wanna sew  
 All the lost buttons  
 No more  
 The dance  
 Calling me  
 Calling.  
 (Whaley: 62).

The extract above and the poem from which it is taken, do not reflect Weiss’s culture and heritage since she was an Austrian Jew who escaped the Nazi occupation of her country; yet her first settlement in Harlem and mixture with African American writers and artists, introduced her to jazz music and she started reading to jazz after that. In this respect, one critic writes “I am referring to the physical environment in which a particular person, a particular member of a particular culture lives. This is a subset of Kitayama and markus’ cultural affordances” (Rozin: 279). Kitayama and markus’ cultural affordances can be translated into acquired culture which is used to describe such situations.

Blow’s rap poem which is referred to earlier, seems to parallel the extract above, not in its colloquial beginning but in other facets. Weiss’s nursery rhyme is almost reflected in Blow’s extract. Furthermore, the rhythmic repetition and the call and answer style in the extract from “Patie” are unconsciously answered by Blow. The music in Blow’s extract is as internal as that found in Weiss’s which is after all a beat poem, and this turns those assumptions down that call for a difference between rap and poetry in this respect and claim that the music in a rap is external to the text while in poetry it is internal. In fact, rap, unlike other kinds of poetry, encompasses two levels of musicality: First, the internal music which is the outcome of the rhymes and patterns of the lines, while the second one is external and it comes from the musical instruments that accompany the recital of the lines and this one connects the rap poem strongly to its African culture.

The musicality of rap is not restricted to end-rhymes that end the four bars in Blow’s couplets alone. Some rap texts include within their bars,

rhymes other than just the classical end-rhymes. Here is how Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five use it in “Superrappin”:

It was a party **night**, everybody was **breakin**  
 The **highs** was screamin and the **bass** was **shakin**.

.....  
 To the **hip-hop**, a **hip-hop**  
 A- **don't stop, don't stop** that body rock  
 (Bradley and DuBois:138, 142).

In the first couple of lines, six rhymes are used instead of the normally expected two end-rhymes; thus, connecting the two lines with the internal rhymes in (night) and (highs) in addition to the end-rhymes of breakin and shakin. The four rhymes in the second line participate as well beautifully in creating the intended music of the line. The ascending rhyme in (highs) is slowed down by the descending one in (screamin) and gets its power back in (bass) as if the composer wanted to use it as a compensation to the lack of an internal rhyme in (screamin) and (shakin) in the same line. In lines 3 and 4, a similar game is applied. The anaphoric hip-hop rhyme internally with its rival, the anaphoric don't stop and this, it seems, draws the attention of the hearer or reader away from the highly expected end-rhyme in the words (hop) and (rock) towards the originally created internal rhymes in the two lines through the repeated hip-hop and don't stop. The performer should also have his heritage and culture in his unconscious mind while using the slang words like (breakin), (screamin) and (shakin); expressions that link him back where he originated or his unconscious mind is drawn, i.e., the African culture where the griots used such methods of performances.

Other assumptions which do not seem to stand on a stiff ground and they are hardly convincing again stress the matter of musicality upon which their adopters differentiate rap from poetry. Having anthologies specified to rap poems is just one of the proofs for the researcher to believe that those assumptions are not convincing. One of such postulations is made by the critic John McWhorter, the American linguist who is also specialized in creole languages and black English. “Generally,” he states, “rap is intended to be heard on the fly, often in a concert arena” (<https://www.thedailybeast.com>). The quote deserves scrutiny and illumination. It is a fact that rap is mainly meant to be heard more than read since it emanates from the heart of the

African culture; yet, this point is an advantage rather than disadvantage to its musicality, because it frees the rapper in regard to the position of the rhymes and the poem's musicality. Rap's musicality, then, is internal and external simultaneously; the external being the rhythm and folk music that accompanies its performance while the internal lies in the rhythms of the bars through various devices and techniques. Unlike most other poems, some raps entertain with their internal rhymes that necessarily please hearts before being consumed in minds. Here are some lines of a verse by Melle Mel:

A child is born with no state of **mind**  
 Blind to the ways of **mankind**.  
God is **smiling**  
 on **you** but he's **frowning too**  
 Because only God knows what you'll go through  
 .....  
 The place you **play** and where you **stay**,  
 Looks like one great big **alleyway**.  
 (Bradley and DuBois: 69).

Like the extract from “Superrappin” above, in addition to the normal end-rhyme of any lyric, the reader or listener comes across other rhymes. The rhymed words which are bolded in the extract, are necessarily stressed, since they are pronounced in the original performance with stress and these stressed words entertain greatly before their meanings and messages become comprehended by the hearer. The stressed (smiling) in the third line is echoed by the stressed (frowning) while (too) echoes (you) in the same line. The words (play) and (stay) in the fourth line also do the same role. These internal and end-rhymes together please greatly but they do a greater function and their stresses serve the musical as well as the semantic roles of the lines and the performance at large. The extract above can show the mind-state of its poet or composer as a “wave of inward-looking sensitivity” (Qtd in Kresovich: 7). It can also explain that the physical surrounding for a rap poet and his/her African American people is effective culturally and psychologically as well, and this is what Kresovich's short quotation above hints at.

The significance of vocal aspect of rap poems in this study or anywhere else becomes more obvious when the performers and the audience are discussed. The rapper is mainly a young black or brown male or female who addresses young black and brown people, though, consequently, he/she addresses his/her

community and humanity at large, the black, being African American while the brown is a reference to the non-white people like the Latinos. A message to be exchanged between two young parties needs to be full of action, movement, and theatricality in addition to musicality which are all fundamental for the performance to be received and consumed heartily before even achieving its final destination. The message is conveyed, the study intends to show, is not just the content of the poems or performances; rather, they are confirmations that differentiate their messengers' distinct culture.

One more point of worth about music in rap is to differentiate the music of the old school of rappers from that of the new. In this respect, Adam Bradley believes that "Old-school rappers tended to employ end-stopped lines with rhymes falling at the end of lines, often in couplets.... Today you are more likely to hear conversational flows and natural rhymes, both internal and end rhymes, delivered in something closer to the rapper's natural voice" (78). As for the most modern raps, Bradley's point is almost accurate, yet, the other part of the story needs review and investigation. Most of the raps of the Old-School but not all of them use end rhymes. The conversational flows he attributes to today's rap, can clearly be seen in the raps of the Old-school as well though may not be in the same frequency. The same is true for today's raps where end-rhymes are married to the internal and conversational method accompanies single-recital performances. Here is an example for more illustration from "Dollar Day" by Mos Def:

This for the **streets**, the **streets** everywhere  
The streets affected by the storm called ...  
America  
I'm doin this **for** y'all, and **for** me, **for** the  
Creator  
God save **these streets**  
One dollar per every human being  
Feel that Katrina **clap**  
See that Katrina **clap**.  
(Bradley and DuBois: 934).

Def does not go into the details of Hurricane Katrina that hit New Orleans in 2005; rather, he tries to draw attention to the damage the hurricane inflicted upon the city which is historically one of the centers of the African immigrants and consequently their culture. This, he achieves through repetition of accented words

in the first five lines and repetition of the ironical word 'clap' in the last two lines which is technically called epistrophe and helps in stressing the intended irony. The lines above seem as an unconscious application of one of Rozin's principles of cultural differences. "Many cultural differences" he writes "are expressed in individuals in terms of different default responses or interpretations or preferences for the same situation" (277). It can also be attributed to a psychological regressive state of mind of the poet in regard to the economic status of his African American people of the ghettos compared to that of the dominant white and authoritative people around them.

The rappers use even more methods to guarantee the intended pleasure for the audience which is the pleasure that comes from the rhythm before that of the meaning and message. One of these methods is called chiasmus where the words or expressions within a line or a bar (as it is used instead of line in rap) are inverted. Here is how the American rapper, singer, song writer and actor, Calvin Cordozar Broadus, Jr. (b. 1971) who is better known as Snoop Dogg, uses the technique in his "Gin and Juice": "Rollin down the street, smokin indo, sippin on gin and juice / Laid back (with **my mind on my money and my money on my mind**) (Ibid: 693). The reversion of the expression necessarily raises emotion especially when (my mind) and (my money) are stressed respectively and creates a kind of music which is different from those in the end-rhymes and other poetic devices.

Whether end-rhymes or Bradley's 'natural rhymes' or any other poetic devices, it is the matter of the range of enjoyment the rap provides rather than such metrical perspectives. It should be acknowledged that not all raps could be classified as good poetry or poetry at all; yet, the majority of this theatrical form, old or new, rival poems written by well-known English poets throughout ages. They are hardly short of the music that songs, lyrics, and ballads of previous ages produce. The difference, however, is not only in the ages that came up with those old forms on the one hand and rap on the other hand; rather, it is in the character of the producers and listeners, addressees and addressees. Rap is performed mostly by learned people and addressed to young audiences who are in the main street wanderers, coffee dwellers, and poorly educated people. That is why, what is important may not be just what the rapper says; rather, how he/she says it, to use the

**paraphrased form** of how Adam Bradley answered a friend who asked him about the reason of listening to rap in his car (86). It is, certainly, this way of performance that won rap the popularity it achieved more than the contents of the performances themselves though the contents and the messages behind the majority of the rap performances are as important or even more important than just pleasing the audience.

Rap's music with its loud cry and enthusiastic shouts is indebted to Jazz as William J Harris states. "Like avant- garde contemporary music" he writes, "free jazz self-consciously incorporate noise; however, this noise originates in the black tradition. Unlike white avant-garde music, which is self-consciously arbitrary- free jazz is rooted in the African American audio past; that is, more specifically, it is rooted in the shouts of the black church and hollers of the field, sounds saturated with the history of slavery" (212-13).

With their loud voices, shrieks, and cries, the modern rappers show a stern commitment to the culture that they consider theirs instead of the one most of them were brought up in; and this should be rooted unconsciously in their innermost and their blood and proves their instinct culture and necessarily distinct psychological component.

#### 4. TECHNICAL AND THEMATIC ASPECTS

The present study considers rap as poetry because it encompasses features that any other genre of poetry has, like the poetic devices, themes, and messages. Through using traditional themes, devices, stories, and historical events and facts, the poetry of rap, to use Pate's label in his *The Heart of the Beats: The Poetry of Rap*, tries to link the audience's and reader's present to their past because the environment that surrounds them helps to make them forget that past which lies at the heart of their culture of origin. This point is crucial because in most cases, rap is described as a means for dance, enjoyment parties, and spending good times while this article is trying to prove more through stressing the techniques, themes, and messages that most of the rappers try to send like the miseries of the African American people, the inequality they face in their present communities, and the continuous discrimination their people suffer specially in America, in addition to other poetic features that can be seen in any other poem.

The Jamaican immigrant and American rapper, Afrika Bambaataa (b. 1957) links the form of rap to the African American writers and poets when he says, "You could get your poetry rap from Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, the Last Poets, the Watt's Prophets" (Qtd in Bradley and DuBois: 73). The quote above proves a high cultural awareness of most rappers like Bambaataa because it touches upon cultural and political cases and problems that the rappers and consequently their black communities suffer from. And this forms one of the major themes for most rap poems. In "Zulu Nation Throwdown" for example, he stresses the authenticity of the African culture in the deep psyche of the African American and other non-American rap poets: "{All} / Say, what is the name of this nation? / Zulu, Zulu / And who is gonna get down? / The cosmic force, the cosmic force" (Ibid).

The poem starts, as the case of many folklore songs, in a conversational mode and so, the poet wants to stress, from the beginning, the distinctive nature of his product and performance by making the Zulu, an ethnic group in south Africa, its subject and purpose. In fact, the poet uses the psychological defense mechanism of regression here. It is called regression because "it carries our thoughts away from some present difficulty" (Tyson: 15). He is dragging his listeners and readers' attention away from the misery of the African American people exemplified, here, by the Zulu people who form the largest ethnic group in Africa towards a brighter future in which the oppressors of those people will get down. It may refer to the organization that the poet himself founded as Jeff Chang writes, "The Universal Zulu Nation is an international hip hop awareness group formed by and formerly led by hip hop artist Afrika Bambaataa" (54).

"The alliterations seen in (name), (nation) in the first bar, (gonna) and (get) in the second, and the refrain in (Zulu) and (the cosmic force) in the third one, serve the cultural- musical feature of the addressees or the audiences. The significant point in Bambaataa's rap and its likes, lies in the fact that they are African-centered views and approaches that tick the wound from inside and prove continuous line for the African culture that started long in the past and seems to continue as far as its followers and supporters are there. This Afro-centric approach stands out against the Euro-centric approaches that simply objectify the African Americans and their culture and



literature. These different approaches come from the different cultures of those people more than the people as individuals and this is what Paul Rozin confirms as the first principle in his article "Five Potential Principles for Understanding Cultural Differences in Relation to Individual Differences" when he states, "the differences between 'cultures' seem bigger than the actual differences between the individuals in these same cultures" (274).

Political themes in rap poems come as a logical result of this Euro-American centered approach that seems to inhibit different voices and conquer different cultures. The reactions, through such artistic and literary methods, almost equal the acts and actions that originally brought them about. Rappers use performances and records of their rap poems to show and publicize their daily life troubles, their wishes and longing for the original culture where they consciously belong but they are away from. So, the impact of the black culture is touched clearly. These concerns and wishes are, in fact, the concerns and wishes of the African American working class whom the rappers represent and address as well. So, rap is considered an artistic and literary weapon that can address social, political, economic, and cultural issues beside the pleasure its music provides. Here is how Melle Mel from The Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five group tackles one of the above themes in "The message": "It's like a jungle, sometimes it makes me wonder / How I keep from going under" (Bradley and DuBois: 142). For a black singer, writer and performer, life in Bronx, New York is a mere jungle. The flat simile puzzles him since life in a jungle follows the rule of the jungle where the strong pushes the weak aside. He connects the social, political and economic environment to himself and his race alone to give the impression of a duality of life there in which the blacks are on the opposite side of the scale to the mainstream side. Believing in this duality in his psyche, he says:

Don't push me 'cause  
I'm close to the edge  
I'm trying not to  
Lose my head.  
(Ibid: 146).

The speaker's cultural background opposes anything that emanates from the dominant power and mainstream culture. The addressee, therefore, should symbolize that dominant culture and mode of life that unceasingly push

him aside and force him towards their edge. The speaker, as a representative of the black and Latino people, has a strong desire to resist the mainstream white culture on the one hand and to express and stress upon himself and his original culture on the other hand. Here, Melle Mel seems to be using the defense mechanism of displacement "which is the psychoanalytic name for transferring our anger with one person onto another person" (Tyson: 11). So, the addressee, here, could be the authority that supports that dominant culture against Melle Mel and his people's culture. By 'lose my head' he may mean losing his original culture and history since he has already come 'close to the edge'. The speaker stresses his claim in the next verse:

They pushed that girl in front of the train  
Took her to the doctor, sewed her arm on again  
Stabbed that man right in the heart  
Gave him a transplant for a brand-new start.  
(Ibid)

Racism and brutality cover a community at large rather than simply one individual speaker. It is the culture of people which is targeted and, therefore, the first-person speaker is in the position of defending a culture and life-style where he originally belongs. The conflict is a trans-cultural rather than a trans-individual one as Rozin's first principle above confirms.

Rap poetry and performance proves that the rap poets and performers have enough capacity for fighting in that unbalanced cultural conflict and the support they need should come from the poor and helpless people of the ghettos who cannot find a convenient way to express what they feel and suffer from. Hoping to win that aid and support, the rap poets try to address them in the way and language that they can understand and comprehend easily. That is why, Melle Mel says:

A child is born with no state of mind  
Blind to the ways of mankind  
God is smiling on you but he's frowning too  
Because only God knows what you will go through  
You will grow in the ghetto living second rate  
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate.  
(Ibid: 147).

The first two bars could refer to every child in Bronx especially that the hip hop culture gradually developed towards a multicultural and Melle Mel may have wanted to express this universality. The third and fourth bars as well are harshly pessimist and, through an

apostrophe, the speaker addresses the child and warns it of the dark future awaiting it. The extract is reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's "To an Unborn Pauper Child". Like Hardy, Melle Mel is also a dark pessimist about the social and political environment; yet, he could not become as universal as Hardy and in the last two bars of the excerpt, he turns back to his origin and people to whom he finds himself committed to defend. For him, a child with such a destinate is no more than an African American one living in a ghetto where will be rated second to the white people among whom he is living. The phrase, 'a song of deep hate' is a normal reaction of the child, Mel stresses, who is full of psychic conflict and hatred towards any white individual and even towards the social and political make-up of the country. (Dear doctor, this is my analysis of the extract and Hardy's title is quite familiar; so, I do not think that I should document it)).

Such rap poems can work on a double level: First, they fix and confirm psychological mind-sets that should stand in opposition to the mainstream white culture, and secondly, they prepare the African Americans culturally and psychologically for the black-white cultural conflict that started long ago and is still going on; thus, providing the popularity and support that rap poetry and performance need for winning more success and approval for the black people and their culture which is underestimated. In this respect, Lois Tyson, the author of *Critical Theory Today* writes in her precious book, "Although contemporary black American authors certainly hold top honours today . . . producing some of the most widely acclaimed literature in America; works by black writers, past and present, are still too often unrepresented on course syllabi in American literature courses" (361-362).

This feeling of cultural oppression and inequality is also presented by the Run-DMC group in "It is Like That":

Money is the key to end all your woes  
Your ups, your downs, your highs and your lows  
Won't you tell me the last time that love bought  
you clothes?  
It's like that, and that's the way it is.  
(<https://www.stlyrics.com>).

The music of the rap performance presented through the rhythmic and metrical devices, is highly enriched by one of the main concerns of the African American and Latino people which is related to economy and social status.

Addressing the African Americans and the Latinos, semi-hidden messages are thrown. The main malady of those people is poverty, the solution of which is beyond grasp. This complex woe, regrettably, is almost deserted and the reaction of its target, the performer wants to show, stands opposite to regular expectations. The rhetorical question of the third bar about love, the context alludes, should necessarily be related to love of and loyalty to the state and the authority which are responsible for the economic crisis that those people suffer from.

The white authority could consider the message as a matter of stirring turmoil, yet, it is an attempt of arousing conscience towards the home culture of the targeted people more than causing chaos and instability. **The case is rooted deep unconsciously in the psyche of the performer and the effort is to convey it even more firmly to the audience who are mainly Afro-Americans or Latinos, even if the performer himself/herself is not a colored person (taking into consideration that there are white rappers as well).** This internal conflict the speaker seems to be suffering from can result from the social situation that Paul Rozin refers to in the fourth principle in his five principles of understanding cultural differences which says "much of the effect of culture, and our impression of culture differences, results from the physical social artifacts (environment, institution) created by the culture" (279). So, the black pessimist view is caused by the mainstream culture.

The inclusive aim of such performances seems to be understood as part of a process of rebirth of cultural awareness for the young people who are virtually uprooted from their original culture. The simple language of the poem along with the traditional poetic devices are convenient to the social level of the audience, and feeling that the psyche of the audience needs more straight arrows, the performer says:

Here's another point in life you should not miss  
Do not be a fool who's prejudiced  
Because we're all written down on the same list  
It's like that (what?) and that's the way it is  
Huh! (Ibid).

In a didactic method and warning language, the speaker tries to draw the audience's attention to the misunderstanding he/she commits by being biased elsewhere and this supports the interpretation of the word 'love' in the previous

excerpt. Whether they acknowledge it or not, the audiences are in 'the same list' with the performer. **Psychoanalytically speaking, the poet seems to be warning against the defense mechanism of avoidance which is defined as "staying away from people or situations that are liable to make us anxious by stirring up some unconscious-i.e., repressed- experiences or emotions" (Tyson: 15). The plight of the performer could not be separated from that of the audience, and therefore, the audiences have to be armed psychologically against the oppression and the oppressors.** This is how rap performers carry the responsibility of disclosing the negative side of the life of black people in the ghettos and thus achieving the main function of poetry. The exclamatory 'Huh' concludes the excerpt to denote the shared cultural background between the performer and his audience, an attempt to draw the audience's attention to the inferior rate the white authority regards them in.

In this poem, the Run-DMC group seem warn against the impact of globalization upon the culture of their people which is raised by a critic, among many others, who writes, "I do not ignore the fact that as much as globalization has shrunk the world it has also increased the gap between the haves and the have-nots. In many instances it has indirectly encouraged fundamental thinking and behaviour as people seek to protect their cultural heritage that is at the risk of being destroyed by external influences" (Eze: 237).

Some of the mainstream critics of rap like the American academic and author, Michael Erik Dyson (b. 1958) contend that black nationalism and culture which are reflected in the black arts and literature, should not be restricted to the Blacks alone; rather, it is better to be treated on wider scopes to include the American culture as a whole so that it can run the danger of being accused of racial consciousness. But this comprehensive understanding and approach seems idealistic and unattainable since the gap that separates the dichotomy is so wide and broad that any such attempts render their followers frail and unproductive. In fact, as one critic states, **"in both social and cultural movements, it is not accomodationism but the challenge of the authority and centrality of the dominant society that retains the attention of both blacks and the mainstream" (Farr: 33). This is a fact that can be felt deep in the psyche and culture of all the African Americans and the Latinos as well and can be**

**touched as a piece of reality whenever rap poems are heard or read.** That is the reason why the majority of the American-born and even England-born rappers and performers reflect the concept above in their raps and performances, and this wide scene and image seems to stand at a stark opposition to those who call for accommodation and fraternity among the opposing cultures. This is an expected response to what have happened and still happen to the Blacks and the Latinos where the Whites are the authority. In 1984, as Gabriel Szatan states, "'fast chat" pioneer Smiley Culture had a hit with "Police Officer," describing racial profiling with enough of a smile to be palatable to white audiences. (The star died of a stab wound in 2011, sustained while police searched his home in England — an incident officially ruled a suicide but shrouded in mystery to this day.)" (<https://tidal.com>).

Under such circumstances, the rise of political and racial consciousness is never unexpected. One ample example is Lawrence "Kris" Parker, well-known by his stage name KRS-One, he is a politically conscious and a rap poet of the ghetto. His father was from Trinidad while his step-father was Jamaican (Bradley and DuBois: 606). Despite having an American mother and growing up, like his peers, in the heart of the mainstream dominant culture and authority; he could not transcend the everyday reality of the gulf he used to witness in the community where he lives. He expresses the reality of the scenery in a rap poem he cleverly titled "Reality": "Reality, ain't always the truth / Rhymes equal actual life, in the youth" (<https://genius.com>). Through using a simple language almost void of complex techniques and devices, he sets the foundation for his proposed message and theme. For him, reality does not equal truth. As the hip hop culture is rooted deep in his unconscious, what the Blacks face every day in America is the reality which is never acknowledged by them as truth. In a stanza used as refrain, KRS-One discloses what a kind of reality is there for his people:

"These are the streets!  
Shit is real out here!  
This ain't no fuckin joke!"  
(Ibid).

The reality equals 'shit' for the poet/performer who uses the vulgar and profane word to suit the condition which is nonsense,

foolish, trivial, and meaningless, among other possible meanings of the word, for him and his culture. Though using a language with words like 'shit', 'fuckin', and 'ain't' is considered low or unpreferable by the standards of the everyday language of the people; yet, it is true to certain principles. It is the language of a Black young person addressed to people who share him that same language and an inclusive culture. The poet/performer did not overlook this concept, but he conceptualizes the motive behind it: "It seems like disrespect is what rap is all about / But hip-hop as a culture, is really what we give it" (Ibid). As far as his culture encompasses it, it is of little worth what rap is accused of. The strong impact of the speaker's culture deep in his unconscious is dropped out in the mike and on the page to confirm the range of the service rap poetry bestows upon its people and culture.

It is this impact that drives Lonnie Rashid Lynn, also known as Common, to compose one of the moving allegorical rap poems titled "I Used to Love H.E.R.". It goes on as a love story between him and a girl, but interestingly, their conversation takes a different course: "She said that the pro-black was goin out of style / She said Afrocentricity was of the past" (Bradley and DuBois: 512). Such a kind of exchange of words in a love date is hardly expected and so, it calls for an extent of puzzlement. But Common himself sheds some light upon the underneath message of the poem, "I wrote 'I Used to Love H.E.R'... as a way of expressing how I felt about where hip-hop was at that point and where it might go, because it was that serious for so many of us. We didn't just grow up with hip hop; we grew up with hip hop as hip hop was also growing" (Ibid:510). The story of Common's performance is more about the African American and Latino culture and heritage than just a love story with its ups and downs. And this allegorical approach raises the poet/performer into the level of well-known poets of conscience

The girl's speech in the couple of bars above hints at the concept of real fraternity among the whites and the Blacks within one society and even globalization that surpasses such race-based definitions. For Common, however, everything is vile and deceitful; that is why the connection does not interact:

I might've failed to mention that this chick was creative

But once the man got to her he altered her native  
Told her if she got an image and a gimmick

That she could make money and she did it like a dummy.

(Ibid: 512).

The originality of rap poetry becomes something of the past not due to its decline or withering; rather, because of the workings of racism by intent which has worked and still is working on the individual level (like the case of the girl here) to implant and impose a belief in the superiority of the whites over the non-whites in a given society. The bars above disclose the psychological core issue of 'low self-esteem' which the poet wants to show through the situation of the girl there.

This excerpt and its likes could be interpreted as signs of a great concern at the attempts of integration of the non-white individuals into the white-dominated societies. This process of individual integration leads, if continued, to a more serious process of racism by consequence which targets ethnic and racial groups at large other than mere individuals. But Common, as an optimistic artist and poet, recovers from the state of helplessness at the end of his performance and concludes the poem/performance in a desired way for the audiences and the readers as well:

I did her, not just to say I did it

But I'm committed, but so many niggas hit it

That she's just not the same, lettin all these  
goofies do her

I see niggas slammin her and takin her to the  
sewer

But I'ma take her back hopin that the shit stop

'Cause who I'm talking 'bout, y'all, is hip-hop.

(Ibid: 513).

A large number of profane words and expressions in this excerpt and everywhere else in rap poetry cannot be denied; a case that is used recurrently by the opponents of this lyrical form to deny rap the label of poetry.

It is acknowledged that expressions like 'I did her' and words like 'nigga' among many other profane words and expressions, are readily expected because, as the critic and writer Alexs Pate remarks, "to many in the world of hip hop, profanity is natural, an elemental component of their daily discourse. And how people talk will inevitably lead us to how they create art" (58-9). So, rap poems and performances are just reflections of the popular language which actually exists and used on daily bases in those communities. Even this profane and slang language, the research confirms, is the logical product of the harsh treatment and behaviour the non-white people received by their white

oppressors. And rap poetry and performance are no more than off springs of the culture that they are serving.

### CONCLUSIONS

Dealing with such an astringent subject along its ups and downs; some conclusions were formed where psychological states and a distinct culture are essential players:

**First:** The impact of the African culture of the high majority of the rappers can be touched clearly in the studied

texts and the rappers stress their cultural distinction in the poems to draw their readers and audiences'

attention to the range of discrimination they always face in the community and culture where they live.

**Second:** Its oral nature, advantageous as it is for its public and inner-city popularity, harmed it, the study concludes, only in the critical academic milieu that considers it lesser than a valuable literary make-up.

But in the public sphere, the same orality is elemental in conveying the messages the poets wish to send to their African American audiences in a way that can be received and consumed easily.

**Third:** The plenitude of profane and taboo words and expressions in rap reflects a cultural spectrum implanted deep in the psyche of most of its composers to help in expressing the high range of the internal conflicts that they suffer from on behalf of themselves and their people.

**Fourth:** Those profane words and expressions do not reduce the artistic value of rap, since they are parts and particles of the home and guest cultures against which rap poems are written and performed, especially that even high rank white people in America also use such words and expressions. President Donald Trump's description of the central America's countries as "shithole countries" to CNN in 2018 is just an example in case.

**Five:** The thematic concerns of most of the rap performances legalizes the genre as both a poetic and cultural force against dehumanization, oppression, and cultural assimilation that the African American people faced in the past and continues to the present time.

### Works Cited

- Bradley, Adam. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. Basic Civitas. New York: 2009. Print.
- Bradley, Adam and Andrew DuBois. *The Anthology of Rap*. Yale University Press. London. 2010. print.
- Caplan, David. *Rhyme's Challenge: Hip hop, Poetry, and Contemporary Rhyming Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2014. Print.
- Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin's Press
- DMC, Run. "It is Like That". <https://www.stlyrics.com>. Accessed in 30/11/2022
- Dyson, Michael eric. "Performance, Protest, and Prophecy. The Emergency of Black and the Emergency of Rap". *Black Sacred Music*. Vol.5. No. 1. Pp. 14-23
- Eze, Chielozona. "Re-Thinking African Culture and Identity". *Journal of African Culture Identity: The Afropolitan Model*. 26:2. Pp. 234-247.
- Farr, Albert Devon. *The socio-Political Influence of Rap Music as Poetry in the Urban Community*. Master Thesis. Iowa State University. 2002.
- Greenblatt, Stephen (General editor). *The Norton Anthology: English Literature*. Vol B2. London: W.W. Norton 7 Company. 2012. Print.
- Hall JR, Vernon. *A Short History of Literary Criticism*. New York: New York University Press. 1963. Print.
- Hamilton, John. "What is Cultural Psychology?". 22/3/2022. <https://study.com>. Accessed in April, 1, 2023
- Harris, William J. "How You sound?": Amiri Baraka Writes Free Jazz". *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2004. Pp. 312-325.
- Kresovich, Alex et al. "A Content Analysis of Mental Health Discourse in Popular Rap Music". *JAMA Pediatr*. 2021 Mar; 175(3): 1-8.
- Mabe, Chauncey. "Jay-Z, 'Decoded,' and why rap is not poetry". December, 10, 2010. (<https://flcenterlitarts.wordpress.com>). Accessed in 17/11/2022

- Mattix, Micah. "Is Rap Poetry?". 2014. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/is-rap-poetry/>. Accessed in 5/10/2022
- McWhorter, John. "Americans Have Never Loved Poetry More—But They Call It Rap". *The Daily Beast*. Apr. 14, 2017. <https://www.thedailybeast.com>. Accessed in 15/11/2022.
- Mize, Cole. "History of Rap – The True Origins of Rap Music". September, 23, 2014 <https://colemizestudios.com>. Accessed in 21/11/2022
- One, KRS. "R.e.a.l.i.t.y.". <https://genius.com>. Accessed in 2/12/2022.
- Pate, Alexs. *In the Heart of Beats: The Poetry of Rap*. London: The Scarecrow Press INC. 2010. Print .
- Rozin, Paul. "Five Potential Principles for Understanding Cultural Differences in Relation to Individual Differences". *Journal of Research in Personality*. 37 (2003) 273–283.
- Smolcic, Amy. "Is Rap Poetry?". 2016. <http://bowenstreetpress.com>. Accessed in 15/11/2022.
- Szatan, Gabriel. "The Evolution of U.K Rap". 2020. <https://tidal.com>. Accessed in 17/11/2022.
- Tang, Patricia. "The Rapper as Modern Griot". 2013. <https://africanmusicuga.wordpress.com>. Accessed in 22 / 11 / 2022.
- yson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Taylor and Francis Group. 2006. Print.
- Whaley, Jr, Preston. *Blows Like a Horn*. London: Harvard University Press. 2004. Print.
- Wilson, Derek. "African Cultural Psychology". *Alternation*. Vol. 27. No. 1. 2020. Pp. 85-112.