Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music

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In this article we examine Afrocentricity as it is manifested in rap music. We concentrate on the overarching concept of nommo *and its various characteristics to help illuminate Afrocentricity as a method of rhetorical analysis. Specifically, by using lyrics from a diverse selection of rap music, we demonstrate how these particular rap songs reveal the rhetorical dimensions of Afrocentricity. The sampled lyrics in this paper show that rap artists often identify their concerns with African American history and traditions while, at the same time, emphasizing the importance of their own immediate experiences. In keeping with the Afrocentric notion of rhetoric, the ultimate goal for rap artists seems to be achieving balance, harmony, and transcendence in the community.*

KEYWORDS *Afrocentricity, Afrocentric rhetoric,* nommo, *rap music*

Over the course of three decades, African American rhetoric has gradually gained acceptance with mainstream scholars. Before the early 1970s, one could pick up any book on rhetoric or public address and not find the rhetoric of any other group except Europeans mentioned, since neither Black rhetoric nor its rhetors were considered appropriate scholarship (Cummings & Daniel, 1979). Although the discipline has changed somewhat and works of scholarship on the rhetoric of Africa's descendants are slowly gaining acceptance in the American academy, the communication discipline is still lacking in its emphasis of African American rhetoric (Rigsby, 1993). Also, the predominant focus of the rhetorical studies that have examined African American rhetoric, scant as they are, still seems to be speeches and essays by prominent Black officials and religious leaders. There is a distinct paucity of research that looks at the rhetorical dimensions of African American creative expressions such as art, music, and films, among others. While there are rhetorical works that have examined the musical forms of gospels, spirituals, and blues, limited attention has been given to rap music and the influence of and connection to ancestral Africa.

The goal of this article, therefore, is to fill the existing lacuna by showing how Afrocentric theory applies in understanding rap music. Specifically, by using lyrics from a

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diverse selection of rap music, this study seeks to demonstrate how these particular rap songs manifest the rhetorical dimensions of Afrocentricity. While the purpose of this article is not to make a generalizable claim, the sampled lyrics in this study merely function as exemplars to help demonstrate how various facets of Afrocentricity function in rap music. For the purpose of this study, Afrocentricity represents discourse that seeks to bring about harmony and transcendence in the African American community. Therefore, rap lyrics that do not seek to accomplish this aforementioned goal have not been included here.

Rap music has emerged as a major art form in mainstream U.S. popular music. The hard-driving message of rap music has become an anthem for a new generation of African American youth (Collison, 1990). Dyson (1989) writes that rap music, which is characterized by staccato beats, and driving, lancing rhythms, has become especially popular among urban African American teenagers. In *Rap Attack*, David Toop (1984), a music historian, explains the reasons behind the immense popularity of rap music:

> There is a certain attitude that comes with the kind of daily stress experienced by Black and Hispanic youth, which is based on the conditions in which they live. This particular attitude is developed out of the oppressed and exploited history of Black and Hispanic peoples. As long as the same conditions exist, so will that attitude. Hip hop brings with it a taste of this attitude, despite white cultural domination and commercialization. (p. 6)

Rap music's appeal is not only restricted to the African American community, but has also gained phenomenal popularity among young people of all cultural backgrounds, including middle-class White teenagers, who seem to be an "increasingly significant audience" of rap music (Rose, 1994, p. 7).

Despite rap music's mass appeal with youth, it has become a subject of controversy. Several critics of rap music charge that its message is violent and antisocial. They believe that rap music provokes violence, especially against police and Whites. McDonnell (1992) points out that rap music has been blamed for everything from concert muggings to the riots in Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict. Other critics also charge that rap music promotes racism, sex, drugs, and the degradation of women (Samuels, 1991).

According to Aldridge and Carlin (1993), it is often a lack of understanding and knowledge of rap music on the critic's part that is responsible for this kind of negative reaction. A careful analysis of rap music can help demonstrate that not all rap lyrics have negative messages. Aldridge and Carlin (1993) point out, "there are numerous examples of songs, which may have a violent tone, but deal with important issues facing the community such as gang violence or single-parent families" (p. 102). Rap music also contains messages about social issues, including promotion of safe sex and traditional family values and prevention of date rapes. Rap music is a reflection of contemporary urban life.

For African American youth, rap music is a symbol of "hope, increased pride, and self-esteem at a time when any other evidence of the three has been eroded by prevailing social conditions" (McDonnell, 1992, p. 92). Dyson (1991) says rap music should be taken seriously for its musical, cultural, and social creativity. It expresses "the desire of young black people to reclaim their history, reactivate forms of black radicalism, and contest the powers of despair, hopelessness, and genocide that presently besiege the black community" (p. 24). There is every reason for the existence of rap. The psychological and physical pain and anguish coupled with a sense of injustice and oppression and the need to vent anger and release some of the frustrations have helped spawn the lyrics of rap. The modes

of expression of rap music are concerned with the themes of oppression and the need to survive in a hostile environment. According to Rose (1994), rap music contains stories of the "shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture" (p. 3). The cultural and political expressions of rap music serve to empower Black voices from the margins of American society. For many, rap music serves as the "primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world" (Rose, 1994, p. 19).

Definition of Rap Music

Rap music has its strong roots in African culture (G. Stephens, 1991). It manifests several important characteristics of African music and dance such as "percussive performance style," "multiple meter," "call and response," "inner pulse control," and "songs and dances of social allusion/derision" (G. Stephens, 1991, p. 76). Similarly, Miller (1992) points out that rap music involves "(re)calling, (re)presenting and (re)constituting African-American histories and experiences as bases for political awarenesses that foreground and (in)form 'Afrocentric' understandings of the conditions that African-Americans now face" (p. 5). In essence, Miller (1992) argues that rappers are informed by the African American history and experiences and the artists, in turn, create culture through their lyrics. According to Nelson (1991), there are characteristics of rap that "show the persistence of black aesthetic, which is rooted in a dynamic spirituality and the power of rhythm and the spoken word" (p. 52). Similarly, Smitherman (1997) emphasizes the African roots of rap music:

> Rap music is rooted in the Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativising, signification/signifying, the dozens/playin the dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices. . . . The rapper is a postmodern African griot, the verbally gifted storyteller and cultural historian. . . . [Rap artists] decry, for all the world, to hear the deplorable conditions of the hood. (pp. 4–5)

As stated previously, the expressions of rap music are Africa centered as they rely on rhetorical devices such as proverbs, idioms, repetitions, sing-songs, environmental images, metaphors, and folklore, among others. The rap artist serves, as the African griot did, the role of the village oracle, making life comprehensible, defendable, and reachable. Rappers are traditional storytellers in that they are both creators of rhetoric as well as critics of rhetoric. These artists have created with their songs a form of orature that has taken the traditional African forms of communication and redefined and refined them. According to Toop (1984), rap music originated from the narrative poems called toasts, which are "rhyming stories, often lengthy, which are told mostly amongst men" (p. 29). Toasts are often "violent, scatological, obscene, misogynist" and "have been used for decades to while away time in situations of enforced boredom, whether prison, armed service or streetcorner life" (p. 29). Toop (1984) indicates that the origins of rap as a vehicle to recount history and current events can be traced back to the story/teller/historians/musicians of West Africa known as griots. These griots are known for using "gossip and satire" to express their ideas about history and politics (Toop, 1984, p. 32).

Music historians point out that rap music has evolved several times to reach its current stage. According to Dyson (1989), the modern version of rap has gone through three distinct stages. The original form is characterized by "light-hearted banter and boastful

self-assertion" (p. 143). The second stage is marked by "social critique" because the message is about "the hurt and horror that make urban life a jungle" (p. 143). This stage of social critique, Dyson says, can be broken down into three subgenres of gangsta, hardcore, and activist. The third stage of rap is "pluralization," involving "experimentation and coupling of rap with different musical styles (such as soul and rock) and various combinations of elements borrowed from rap's first two stages" (p. 143).

Boyd (as cited in Aleman, 1992) argues that rap falls into two classes: the popular and the political. The popular form of rap is represented by music that is generally devoid of specific racial content for commercial success, or seeks to reaffirm the dominant culture in the United States. Political rap, on the other hand, is represented by music that "questions the contradictions of the dominant culture and poses an Afrocentric alternative to the cultural dilution of the music by those in search of 'popular' recognition" (Boyd, 1991, cited in Aleman, 1992, p. 5).

The language of urban youth provides a rich field for exploration of a culture within a culture. It is distinctly African centered and grounded in the historical experiences of a people who have been oppressed by their social and political realities and marginalized by their economic and familial conditions. This culture exists alongside an equally African-centered culture, but one with a similar worldview surrounded by oppression and sustained by religion and a transcendent spirit. At times the rhetoric of urban youth appears to be antithetical or dichotomous to its more seasoned counterpart (i.e., gospels and spirituals), but upon closer examination, when using the perspective of Afrocentrism, it becomes clear that where the rhetoric converges, the similarities are remarkable.

Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music

As stated earlier, this article explores the Afrocentric framework of rhetorical criticism in order to demonstrate its relevance in analyzing the lyrics of rap music. According to Asante (1987), Afrocentricity implies the "most complete philosophical totalization of the African being-at-the-center of his or her existence" (p. 125). Afrocentricity encompasses all facets of African American life: psychological, political, social, cultural, and economic (Asante, 1987). For Asante (1987), Afrocentric rhetoric is the "productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony" (p. 35). Daniel and Smitherman (1976) and Hamlet (1994, 1998) also underscore the importance of balance and harmony in the African American community, and it is through the creative power of the spoken word, *nommo*, that the African American communicator brings about harmony and balance.

A principal aspect of the "African-originated 'orality' found in rap is *nommo*, the supernatural power of the spoken word" (R. J. Stephens, 1991, p. 25). Rap music is known for its emphasis on lyrics. As Roach (1992) points out, the "main focus of rap itself seems more poetry than music because the audience is saturated with bombardments of verbiage" (p. 204). According to Aldridge and Carlin (1993), since the "lyrics provide the foundation for the overall meaning of rap, the terms lyrics and music are used interchangeably" (p. 105). Keyes (1984) says that "rapping is a stylized form of conversational folklore which is defined as a 'fluent, lively way of talking characterized by a high degree of personal narration'" (p. 144). All Afrocentric scholars acknowledge this generative power of language, commonly known as *nommo*. Smith (1970) explains that African Americans have

"cultivated [a] natural fascination with *nommo*, the word, and demonstrated a singular appreciation for the subtleties, pleasures and potentials of the spoken word which has continued to enrich and embolden [their] history" (p. 296). Yet *nommo* goes beyond the mere use of words, phrases, or linguistic conventions. It also signifies the generating and sustaining powers of language that inform every facet of African American life. As Hamlet (1994) points out, language constitutes the life force, the productive power in African American culture. In the words of Smitherman (1986):

> [A]ll the activities of [wo]men, and all the movements in nature, rest on the productive power of the word, which is water and heat and seed and *Nommo*, that is, the life force itself. . . . The force, responsibility and commitment of the word, and the awareness that the word alone alters the world. (pp. 78–79)

Thus, *nommo* in Afrocentricity signifies the generative power of the spoken word. The generative function of *nommo* stems from its focus on collectivity, which is the essence of African American spirituality. According to Hamlet (1998), *nommo* is necessary not only to actualize life but also to give people a mastery over things. *Nommo*'s presence can be felt in all facets of African American life, including interpersonal, group, public, or mass communication events in which African culture and experiences are fused. It is the quality of *nommo* that has shaped the perception of African Americans to regard a communication event not just as an act where words are spoken in the presence of an audience, but also as a communal experience where those words, songs, dance, and so on give life and meaning to the event.

In the Afrocentric perspective, rhythm, like speech, must coincide with the generative power of the word so that the communicator, word, and audience are all of one accord. Rhythm plays a crucial role in Afrocentric discourse. It is that force that helps to bring about harmony. Rhythm in the African American context is described as "the architecture of being . . . only rhythm gives (the word) its effective fullness" (Jahn, 1961, p. 161). Asante (1987) sees rhythm as the "basis of African American transcendence" (p. 38). Transcendence is conceived here "not as an escape from but as a reconciliation of the dualities of existence—mind vs. body, sacred vs. profane, America vs. Africa" (G. Stephens, 1991, p. 74). In rap music, the musical elements combine to provide rhythm that facilitates rhyme and other forms of expressions such as dance.

Another quality of Afrocentric rhetoric is the call–response function, also known as "harmony indicators" in Asante's parlance. The rapper seeks harmony by summoning the audience to participate in the rapping. According to Keyes (1984), "call-response is an interactive network between performer and auditor. The role of such discourse is to unify and establish cohesiveness. . . . The execution of a rap depends on this interplay between the participants and communicative resources within context" (p. 146). Thus, rap music, with its rich lyrics, rhythm, and poetry, helps bring the audience members to participate and identify with the rapper. In sum, then, African American rhetoric, including rap music, often manifests several characteristics of *nommo*. They are rhythm, soundin' out, repetition, stylin', lyrical quality, improvisation, historical perspective, indirection, call and response, and mythication.

Rhythm demonstrates how well a speaker regulates his/her flow of words with correct pauses and intensifications. In African American culture, words are often expressed musically and rhythmically and function as a basic measure of the success of the speaker (Asante, 1987). An example, among many, would be Sugarhill Gang's "Rappers Delight."

It is considered to be the first successful rap song that served as a precursor to the hip hop culture. Dyson (1991, p. 13) notes that this song, as with many of the earlier rap tunes, was characterized by the rappers use of "rhythmic, repetitive speech and staccatoed syllabic dexterity." He also notes the infusion of technology with the use of drum machines and instrumentation in later songs helped to create rhythmic appeal (p. 13). Dyson (1991) points out that the lyrics of "Rapper's Delight," with a "hip-hop, the hibbit . . . hibbit, hip-hop, you don't stop,"[1] virtually nonsensical by themselves, appealed to audiences immediately. Because of the rhythm and syncopation, young people danced and shouted the lyrics at every function. With subsequent rappers, lyrics became more poignant as the rhythm continued to capture the attention of young audiences. For example, in KRS-One's "Stop the Violence" in which Black-on-Black crimes are held up to ridicule, one is able to see and hear the constancy in the lyrics and the rate of delivery of these lyrics to correlate with the beat of the music. The following excerpt from KRS-One's "Stop the Violence" demonstrates how the lyrics and rhythm come together in rap:

'Cause the way we live is positive

We don't kill our relatives

Back in the sixties our brothers and sisters were hanged

How could you gang bang?

I never ever ran from the Ku Klux Klan

And I shouldn't have to run from a black man

'Cause that's self-destruction

Ya headed for self-destruction [2]

A second characteristic of *nommo* that is recognized in rap music is called "soundin' out." This refers to a speaker's creative manipulation of volume and musical quality in the delivery of the message. Smitherman (1986) says that an overriding device used in connection with sounding out is the use of the intrusive "I" and the use of braggadocio. Similarly, Dyson (1989) and Nelson (1991) point out that boasting is a common characteristic of rap music. It is used as a way to assert one's value and personhood. Practically any one of the popular rap songs, such as Big Tymer's "Get Your Roll On" demonstrates this characteristic. More often than not, these rappers are bent on outdoing one another. "Get Your Roll On" not only demonstrates braggadocio, but it also reflects quality in lyricism and rhythm. In the following excerpt, Big Tymer raps about his car, his toys, his woman, and his jewelry—all the accoutrements that show his success:

Big rims, mo' ice

V-twelves, or better

No, it's strictly leather

Playstation, DVD's

Don't worry about yo trick

She comin wit' me

Leavin stickers on the Bentley

To show off the price

Arm out the windows

Just to floss my ice[3]

Another popular rap artist, Nelly, though not directly answering Big Tymer's rap, picks up the taunt, which is a virtual battle for who is the "baddest" in the neighborhood and raps a song that he calls "E-I":

Then I slide up in an Escalade

Me and E gettin' solid like the ice capades

And me and Heezy, Frosty Roger the Rabbit

You understand me, wrap wrist like mummys

If you compare me to your local grocery

Then you'll see I got more carrots than aldee

More bread than algae, you can bag and scan me

Sure like Al B, you can meet tha'tics in Maui[4]

In the above two rap songs, both rappers brag about who they are; the cars they drive; the money they have; the jewelry they wear; and how impressed the girls are with them. It brings braggadocio to a new level. Each rapper will sound on the other; each will flaunt his or her clothes, cars, and jewelry more; the bigger the better; the flashier the finer.

Earlier in the history of rap, rappers used the concept of soundin' to demonstrate their superior verbal agility rather than their money. Each one dared the other to outdo him or her. For example, in the rap, "I Go to Work," Kool Moe Dee compares himself with an architect and uses hyperbole to say that his rhymes are so tall and erect that even "skyscrapers look like atoms." He continues boasting that his rhymes have helped build "a nation of rappers," and he is the big "daddy" of all rappers:

Daddy's home . . .

Start the race

I'm coming in first

With each verse

I build a curse

So rappers can't capture Moe Dee's rapture

After I got ya

I have to slap ya

Senseless with

Endless rhymes don't pretend this

Is anything short of stupendous

And when this rhyme is done

Your mind will become

So trapped in the rap[5]

Here, in this rap, Kool Moe Dee seems to be challenging rap artists such as Tone Loc, M.C. Hammer, and Fresh Prince, among others, who have commercialized rap music. While on one level the challenge is materialistic, where attention is given to how many more things one artist has than the other, on the other level, however, the rapper is challenging the mind, the ability, and the creativity of other rappers.

Repetition for intensification is also a common characteristic of African American speakers and certainly a focus of *nommo*. Rose (1994, p. 70) points out, "repetition and rupture in new and complex ways, building on long-standing black cultural forces" are quite common in rap music. For example, it seems that the more the rap group Outkast repeats "so fresh, so clean," the more the audience gets involved. The repetition itself seems to carry the song. The members of the audience not only sing along, but they also primp and preen, as well as style and model their person, their clothes, and their jewelry on the dance floor. A sample of repetition is in the often-repeated chorus of Outkast that is picked up by the audience:

Ain't nobody dope as me I'm dressed so fresh so clean

(So fresh and so clean clean)

Don't you think I'm sexy I'm dressed so fresh so clean

(So fresh and so clean clean)

Ain' nobody dope as me I'm dressed so fresh so clean

(So fresh and so clean clean)

I love when you stare at me I'm dressed so fresh so clean

(So fresh and so clean clean)[6]

Stylin', as a characteristic of *nommo*, refers to the conscious or unconscious use of language and/or mannerisms on the part of the communicator to create favorable influence on the audience (Hamlet, 1998). An essential element in Afrocentrism is an acknowledgment of Africa in ways that one dresses, names himself/herself, styles his/her hair, and recognizes the prominence of the ancestors and homeland. Queen Latifah, for example, was an instant attraction because of her Afrocentric styling. First, her name is African; second, she is given the moniker, queen, which together suggest power and grace, even royalty. While very few female rappers are recognized for their music, such is not the case with Queen Latifah. Her album, *All Hail the Queen* established her as an important rapper with serious concerns to share with her audience. Roberts (1994) points out:

> Queen Latifah's Afrocentricity is most prominent in "Ladies First" when she uses footage from South Africa and attacks apartheid. Furthermore, Queen Latifah's style and dress and rap itself are Afrocentric; through them she looks to Africa for

> inspiration. Queen Latifah's Afrocentricity operates both culturally and politically. Her regal bearing, her name and her self-promotion associate her with a tradition of African royalty. Through her attire, she draws attention to styles and colors that are African in their ethos. Her military dress and the colors that she wears (red, black, and green) evoke the African National Congress. Scenes in the video depict armed struggle in South Africa, emphasizing that, in her case, style is used to underscore a political message. (p. 247)

Much of Latifah's message, as is the case with other female rappers, is about the strength and power of women. For instance, Queen Latifah in *Ladies First* reminds her audience:

> A woman can bear you, break you, take you . . .
>
> Who said the ladies couldn't make it must be blind . . .
>
> If you believe, well, here, listen to my rhyme.[7]

Another prime example of stylin' is Outkast's "So Fresh and So Clean." On the 2001 BET Music Awards as they performed their hit rap song, the audience, rappers, and the emcees became one as each styled his or her own clothes, jewelry, and hair to the beat of the music and the flow of the lyrics. Also, a similar coperformance can be seen in Big Tymer's "Get Your Roll On" when the song (or video) is played in nightclubs or in cars as passengers ride down the street "jammin" one is able to observe or hear the listeners become one with the rapper, the music, and the lyrics. Unfortunately, some language and mannerisms are so powerfully engrossing that even small children can be observed playing in yards, mouthing the lyrics and mimicking the actions or the messages of the song (such as killing, drinking, disrepecting women, and using foul and inappropriate language). Nevertheless, it is a testament to the powerful influence, both positive and negative, that the rap music has on its audience.

The quality of the lyrics is also an area where the African American audience is able to show their appreciation for the importance of poetry as a vehicle that conveys emotion and imagination. This is one of the reasons that some critics say that the African American communicator's approach to language is essentially lyrical. Kool Moe Dee's "Pump Your Fist" captures a poetic spirit. The rhythm and lyrical qualities of the song go back to the African notion of *nommo*. His song is filled with rich imageries and metaphors, comparing the slavery experience with a "holocaust." He uses irony to show that African Americans are still not free: "But are we free in actuality/Let's talk reality/Can't you see the slave mentality." His powerful metaphor paints the imagery of enslavement to drugs: "It's a sickness that eats you up like cancer" and "it's a shame you got the chains on your brain."[8]

Tupac Shakur continued this proud tradition of quality lyricism in his anthem to African American women who suffer in the tradition of sexism, neglect, and degradation from their own men in their own neighborhood. His metaphors and images of dejected women are vivid and powerful, and they portray a clear picture of urban pain. A sample of his lyrics from "Keep Ya Head Up" are as follows:

> Some say tha blacker the berry
>
> Tha sweeter tha juice
>
> I say, tha darker tha flesh and tha deeper tha roots

I give a hollar to my sisters on welfare

Tupac cares, but don't nobody else care . . .

When he tells you you ain't nothin

Don't believe him

And if he can't learn ta love ya, you should leave him

Cuz sister you don't need him

I ain't trying ta gash up, but I call, 'em how I see 'em[9]

In the Afrocentric view of rhetoric, a rhetorical act contains a great deal of improvisation. It is important that the communicator is able to invent and create his or her speech or song while the delivery is in progress, that the speaker is moved by the spirit, and that he or she is not chained to the written word and to the podium. This delivery also includes the communicator's creative use of the voice and the body. One popular, but now defunct, hip hop group, A Tribe Called Quest, initially became famous by their adept ability to "free-style" from words and ideas thrown at them from the audience. Snoop Dog also enjoys showing his verbal ability to audiences by free-styling at the will of the audience. Many clubs catering to young people gained their popularity by sponsoring free-style open-mike nights where contests were won or lost on the basis of an audience vote for the person who showed the most creativity and verbal alacrity.

Historical perspective in African American discourse is used as a way to motivate audiences to look to their own culture for inspiration, wisdom, and strength in order to survive and grow in a racist America (Hamlet, 1998). Throughout history in America, music has always been one of the few ways African Americans have been able to express themselves freely. It has been used, in whatever form, to articulate their deepest and most enduring feelings and certainties. Some scholars have stated that it is in the secular song where the record of African American people's consciousness can be found (Cummings & Daniel, 1979). Rap music is an extension of this legacy. Rappers, as the contemporary griots, are expected to be fluent, to testify, to speak the truth (Smitherman, 1997). Kool Moe Dee's "Pump Your Fist" is a prime example. In this rap, he speaks of liberation as the responsibility of the oppressed. Similarly, in their rap anthem, "Proud to Black," Run-DMC speak of racial pride unlike any other artist since James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud". Their lyrics are fiery, innovative, artistic, and patriotic:

Ya know I'm proud to black ya'll

And that's a fact ya'll

Now Harriet Tubman was born a slave

She was a tiny black woman when she was raised

She was livin' to be givin there's a lot that she gave

There's not a slave in this day and age

I'm proud to be black.[10]

One of the most enduring and recognizable characteristics of *nommo* is call and response. In the African American communication setting, the communicator is not a solitary voice. There is usually a high level of synergy present between the communicator and his or her audience. The audience members typically participate in the speaking or concert event by calling and responding to the communicator in different ways. This back-and-forth interaction between the audience and communicator is an art form that provides the audience with an opportunity to react favorably to the message while helping the communicator establish a common ground between himself or herself and the audience. Religious events are replete with call–response interactions, but so are secular events, including rap music. Oftentimes rap music functions as a conversation drama in which the rappers invite the listeners to participate in the dynamic process of call and response as in the case of KRS-One's "Who Protects Us from You":

> Fire! Come down fast!
>
> You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?
>
> Every time you say, "that's illegal," does it mean that's true?
>
> [Chorus:] Un hun.

Call and response is again evident in the same song by KRS-One:

> There was a time when a black man couldn't be down with your crew
>
> [chorus:] Can I have a job please?
>
> Now you want all the help you can get. Scared? Well ain't that true
>
> [chorus:] Goddamn right.[11]

In this section, when KRS-One asks if the charges of the police concerning illegality are true, a voice resounds "Uh hun," acknowledging that what the police say functions as the truth. Also, when the lead voice points out that the police are understaffed and are fearful of their lives and this is why they are looking to recruit minorities, a voice calls out, "Goddamn right," implying that the police have reason to fear for their safety, given the mistreatment of African Americans by police.

Similarly, "Do It Again" ("Put Ya Hands Up") rapped by Jay-Z is another example of how rappers and emcees are able to totally involve the audience in a concert. Emcees at clubs or concerts get the audience pumped up by intoning (or calling out) a favorite artist's well-known chorus, or simply a favorite line. An example would be "put your hands in the air, and wave 'em like you just don't care." The audience gets excited and responds with their hands and their voices, responding to the emcee, who works the audience to a frenzy, getting them ready for the rap artist to appear. The scene is similar to a religious event, since it is the job of the emcee and/or the artist to get the spirit of the crowd moving. Jay-Z in "Holla," for example, will come to the stage calling out, "If you real and you know you a G, Holla!"[12] It is a familiar line, one that the crowd is ready to hear, so they respond with a "holla." Jay-Z will again call, "Deep in these streets when you pumpin that D, Holla!" and the crowd and the artist begin the pattern of call and response. Call and response is a spontaneous happening that occurs when the spirit moves the leader (minister, rapper, emcee, and so on). This can be accomplished sometimes by simply using a few key words

in a rhythmical way; sometimes it is necessary to facilitate the process with drum beats or lines of old familiar sayings or songs that the audience tosses back and forth. The minister (or the rapper, in this case) accomplishes his or her purpose through the generating power of *nommo* (Cummings, 1993).

Another characteristic of *nommo* in African American discourse is the use of indirection. This method refers to a way that speakers (or rappers) deal with central issues by "beating around the bush" rather than meeting them head on. Some feel that indirection is used to arouse the audience's interest (Asante, 1987). It is often manifested in the communicator's use of innuendoes, insinuations, implications, and suggestions in order to make a point (Garner, 1994). African American music is filled with indirection. It has been a part of the Black reality since slavery when spirituals were sung to tell the story of escape or an uprising. Rose (1994) points out that contemporary rap music often operates as a hidden script. It uses

> cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities. Not all rap transcripts directly critique all forms of domination; nonetheless, large and significant element in rap's discursive territory is engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans. (p. 101)

For example, KRS-One's "Who Protects Us from You," as discussed earlier, is a song about police harassment, but the police are never mentioned by name. Another example of indirection is Ice Cube's "A Bird in the Hand," where he uses indirection to talk about the reasons some African Americans resort to selling drugs:

> Now I pay tax that you never give me back
>
> What about diapers, bottles, and Similac?
>
> Do I have to sell me a whole lotta crack
>
> For decent shelter and clothes on my back?[13]

Mythication is another important characteristic of *nommo*. Mythication shows the communicator using language that suggests that his or her message is sanctioned by some suprarational force to demonstrate the righteousness of the cause (Asante, 1987). Rap music is a contemporary response to conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment; therefore, it has a moral edge (Dyson, 1991). Despite some of the language, rappers comment on conditions experienced by communities that are not necessarily the fault of the communities, but of the White-run government that routinely ignores their plight. Rappers, then, speak of solutions to these conditions by invoking the name of God, truth, history, or the ancestors. There are times when rap artists offer themselves as the mythic hero, for example in "Chain Remains" by Naughty by Nature:

> Too many of my people got time
>
> It shows as crime unfolds
>
> Their goals locked in a facility where time is froze
>
> God knows the heart hurts
>
> to see no sky, just dirt[14]

In "Chain Remains," Naughty by Nature uses God as the mythical presence who understands the plight of the race. The implication is that if God knows and understands, the situation will change if honest attempts are made to show God that change is wanted or being sought.

Similarly, Kool Moe Dee invokes mythication in the form of truth, history, and the ancestors in his rap, "Pump Your Fist" as he speaks of the need for African Americans to take the "chains [off] your brains." In "Pump Your Fist," Kool allows history and the ancestors to intercede to remind the community what is necessary to be a free people and to be in control of one's destiny:

> We feel the wrath
>
> From what happened in the past
>
> Has made us walk a path made by slavery . . .
>
> . . . We lost our unity our source of power and we lost
>
> All race pride in our Holocaust
>
> Now it's my creed I'm from a stranger breed
>
> My ancestors indeed had to bleed whipped 'till they were freed
>
> . . . Selling drugs for fame that's the weak man's game
>
> It's a shame you got the chains on your brain.[15]

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics of *nommo* that are often present in rap music, rap music, like any other form of Afrocentric rhetoric, is frequently a strong expression of protest against the racist White establishment. According to Asante (1987), African American rhetoric is "combative, antagonistic, and wholly committed to the propagation of a more humanistic vision of the world" (p. 170). Dyson (1991) writes that rap is

> A testimony to the intraracial class division that has plagued African-American communities for the last thirty years. The increasing social isolation, economic desperation, political degradation, and cultural exploitation undergone by most underclass communities in the past few decades have given rise to a form of musical expression that captures the terms of underclass existence . . . its main ingredients (major themes and styles) continue to be drawn from complexities, conflicts, and contradictions of urban black life. (p. 17)

Aleman (1992) points out that rap music operates through both resistant and empowering voices to create a sense of unity in the African American community "against dominant and oppressive structures, as well as by identifying unjust contradictions in the existent political system" (p. 5). Similarly, McDonnell (1992) says that rap music is the "expression of a politics of resistance that has emerged within the African-American culture" (p. 90). The police, the government, and dominant media apparatuses are often the primary targets of critique in rap (Rose, 1994). For example, NWA captures the familiar reading of police violence and brutality against African Americans in their song "F—— tha Police":

> F——tha police, comin' straight from the underground
>
> A young nigger got it bad 'cause I'm brown

And not the other color, so police think

They have all the authority to kill a minority . . .

Searchin' my car looking for the product

Thinkin' every nigger is sellin' narcotics[16]

Rap music is replete with examples of lyrics that are vocal protests of police brutality, racism, and harassment. Another example is L.L. Cool J.'s "Illegal Search," which is also an antipolice rap about racial profile arrests of innocent African Americans:

What tha hell are you lookin' for?

Can't a young man make money anymore?

Wear my jewels and like freakin' on the floor

Or is it your job to make sure I'm poor?

Can't my car look better than yours . . .

You tried to frame me, it won't work

Illegal search.[17]

Rappers not only protest police harassment and brutalities, but they also attack the system that continues to oppress African Americans. For example, in their famous song, "The Message," Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five paint the tragic life of African Americans living in the inner cities in the United States:

Got a bum education, double-digit inflation

Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station

Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge

I'm tryin' not to lose my head

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder

How I keep from going under.

It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under.[18]

In another famous rap, Public Enemy addresses, in a sarcastic and sardonic manner, the serious problem in inner cities, where emergency public services such as 911 do not respond to calls from African American and Hispanic neighborhoods:

Now I dialed 911 a long time ago

Don't you see how late they're reactin'

Late comings with the late comin' stretcher

That's a body bag in disguise y'all I betcha

I call 'em body-snatchers quick they come to fetch ya

With an autopsy ambulance just to dissect ya . . .

I can prove it to you watch the rotation

It all adds up to a funky situation.[19]

While an important facet of Afrocentricity is to challenge the racist system and look for ways to ameliorate the conditions of African Americans, the ultimate goal of an African American communicator is "transformation." As Smith (1972) points out, Afrocentric rhetoric is concerned with the stability of the community, and, in cases of conflict and strife in the community, the Afrocentric public discourse functions to bring back harmony and stability in those problematic areas. This transformation and harmony is usually accomplished through the creative use of language (Smith, 1972). In contemporary times, many rappers use their creative and persuasive powers to inspire African Americans to transcend the problems that plague them and aim for a better life for themselves and their community. For example, in the song, "The Avenue," Kool Moe Dee, an earlier rapper, admonishes his audience to transcend superficialities and seek a more meaningful, honest life. He tells them that the community will prosper if they work together:

We can do this

The right way

You'll get money and respect

Livin' large and correct

Then come back through the neighborhood

When you look good

We all look good

'Cause it's all for one

And one for all

Got to be a better way[20]

Similarly, the KRS-One, exhorts African American youth in "Stop the Violence" to avoid venting their rage and frustration against society and stop killing one another:

This might sound a little strange to you

But here's the reason I came to you

We got to put our heads together and stop the violence

'Cause real bad boys move in silence

When you're in a club you come to chill out

Not watch someone's blood just spill out

That's what these other people want to see

Another race fight endlessly.[21]

These rappers are concerned with healing and maintaining the community, helping the community to survive even in a hostile environment. These expressions are Africa centered, using rhetorical devices like proverbs, idioms, environmental images, and metaphors. Clearly, we see the rappers serving as the African griot or the village oracle, making life comprehensible, defendable, and reachable. These rappers have taken their lyrics to explore and criticize community traditions, social conditions, and mainstream values. They are creating harmony and balance, the very essence of Afrocentricity.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to capture the essence of rap music as it is manifested through its African centeredness. In this article, we have concentrated on the overarching concept of *nommo* and its various characteristics that help to illuminate Afrocentricity as a method of rhetorical analysis. The sampled lyrics in this paper demonstrate that rap artists often identify their concerns with African American history and traditions while, at the same time, emphasizing the importance of their own immediate experiences. In keeping with the Afrocentric notion of rhetoric, the ultimate goal for rap artists examined in this study seems to be achieving balance, harmony, and transcendence in the community. The rappers seek to attain transcendence through their attention to the different facets of *nommo*. Each of these facets (rhythm, soundin' out, repetition, stylin', lyrical quality, improvisation, historical perspective, indirection, call and response, and mythication) contributes to the creation and sustainability of harmony and balance in the community. Following the Afrocentric notion of rhetoric, the lyrics of rap music that have been examined in this study often seem to lead the audience to what Asante (1987) describes as "complete harmony from which comes our transcendence" (p. 194). Clearly, the lyrics that have been used in this study convey powerful messages to its audience, providing a rich field for exploration of rhetorical continuities that are represented in the hip hop culture. Future studies might look at the issue of empowerment with regard to rap's African American audience. Another important issue to examine would be the portrayal of women in rap music. Some critics point out that rappers often depict African American women in denigrating ways as objects of sexual desire and violence. Afrocentric rhetorical critics might want to examine rap lyrics to determine if the lyrics do indeed pose a threat to African American women or the lyrics simply function as banters or playing the dozens between African American males and females, as some scholars argue. Finally, future investigations of contemporary African American rhetoric might also expand the focus of investigation by including other forms of popular discourse such as films and television shows, among others, which are primarily aimed at African American audiences.

Notes

[1] Sugarhill Gang, *Rapper's Delight* (Sugar Hill Records, 1979).
[2] KRS-One, *By All Means Necessary* (Zomba Records, 1988).
[3] Big Tymer, *I Got that Work* (Cash Money Records, 2000).
[4] Nelly, *Country Grammar* (Universal Records, 2000).
[5] Kool Moe Dee, *Knowledge Is King* (Zomba Records, 1989).
[6] Outkast, *Stankonia* (Arista Records, 2000).

[7] Queen Latifah, *All Hail the Queen* (Tommy Boy Music, Inc., 1989).
[8] Kool Moe Dee, *Knowledge Is King* (Zomba Records, 1989).
[9] Tupac Shakur, *2-Pac Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (Amaru/Jive, 1993).
[10] Run-DMC, *Raising Hell* (Arista Records, 1986).
[11] KRS-One, *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop* (Jive/Zomba Records, 1989).
[12] Jay-Z, *Life and Times of S. Carter, vol. 3* (Roc-a-fella Records, 1999).
[13] Ice Cube, *Death Certificate* (Priority Records, 1991).
[14] Naughty by Nature, *Chain Remains* (Poverty's Paradise and Tommy Boy Music, 1995).
[15] Kool Moe Dee, *Knowledge Is King* (Zomba Records, 1989).
[16] NWA, *Straight Outta Compton* (Priority Records, 1989).
[17] L.L. Cool J., *Mama Said Knock You Out* (Def Jam Records, 1990).
[18] Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, *The Best of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five*, vol. 2 (Deep Beats, 1996).
[19] Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam Records, 1990).
[20] Kool Moe Dee, *Knowledge Is King* (Zomba Records, 1989).
[21] KRS-One, *By All Means Necessary* (Zomba Records, 1988).

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