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FROM PAIN TO PROMISE

Black Musical Cultures as an Emotional & Emancipatory Pedagogy & the Foundation of American Music

By Lanah H. Duque

This research thesis examines how Black musical cultures serve as an emotional and emancipatory pedagogy, creating the foundation of American music through shared restorative power in times of distress. Acknowledging the importance of music in meaning-making and educating, this thesis utilizes Sara Ahmed's (2014) "sociality of emotions" and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2019) "racialized emotions" to contextualize how emotion in the music industry can significantly influence Americans' values. Further, I apply these methodologies to understand marginalized communities' use of music as a tool of resistance and expression to challenge the violence of White supremacy. Through textual analysis and interviews, this research intends to answer, how have Black musical producers utilized the emotionality of music to encode the notion of freedom, moving people from suffering racial discrimination to counting on a promising future? Research findings include insights from participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. I connect the emotionality of Black musical cultures to the multicultural realities of the American experience, defining the concept of American music as Black and multicultural.

I. Introduction

In North America, the 1990s marked the rise of diverse music styles implemented by Black American musicians that served to elevate specific emotions and feelings through auditory and visual art. The history of Black music illuminates its crucial therapeutic function for African Americans to survive slavery and racial terror. Though the American music industry comprises producers that encode certain meanings in music texts, artists utilize the sociality of emotion in their own content for audiences to decode. The research project examines how music has been used to challenge racial exclusion and symbolic violence. I analyze the history of R&B and hip-hop to argue that Black music culture has transformed the hegemony of North American identity from "only White" to multicultural. This research connects to the meaning-making and racialization of particular genres and music styles, prompting further analysis of how these artists and trends were understood by the general public and integrated into the music industry.

The North American music industry holds power for its ability to shape national identity in the United States and legitimate global norms as Eurocentric identity. Since Britain and the United States have come to dominate the music recording sales around the world, this contributes to Anglo-American cultural hegemony.¹

1 Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (E. Arnold, 1992), 12.

With cultural meanings influenced by racial and gender binaries, representation in the music industry engages feelings and attitudes, and mobilizes fears and anxieties in audiences.² Music as a cultural practice shares and enforces meanings in relation to identity which sets up Black presence as a threat to America's Eurocentric cultural development. The mark of Eurocentrism and racial difference in America stems from three major moments of the West encountering Black people. This includes the sixteenth-century contact between European traders and West African kingdoms, European colonization of Africa, and post-World War II migrations from the "Third World" into Europe and North America.³ These encounters established an opposition between the "civilized" White and "savage" Black integrated into social norms and commercial practices. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement and ending of legal segregation led to the Great Migration of Black people into cities and urban centers of the North.⁴ This influx of Black Americans profoundly challenged the representation between racially defined groups in American society, fueled by the rise of rhythm and blues (R&B) into mainstream consciousness. Though mainstream society often groups Black artists into R&B, I emphasize the importance of Black culture in developing multiple genres of music known to be American.

Aside from R&B, Black musical producers in the United States have played a pivotal role in many genres such as jazz, blues, gospel, hip-hop, rock, country, and even electronic dance music, also known as EDM.⁵ While researchers have explored the history of the music industry and the emotionality of music, this thesis highlights the role of race in these studies to demonstrate how the hybridity of Black music shifts the United States' glorification of Eurocentric ideas.

II. Literature Review

A. Primary Methods and Themes

It is essential to acknowledge the comprehensive work of various scholars related to the construction and application of ideology, race, and culture. I break down how Black musical cultures are sites of sociality and identity formation as well as nation-making. As media produces and distributes societal ideals, the themes discussed explain the relationship between music, identity, and nation-making.

1. Sociality and Black Identity Formation

As this music plays a central role in identity formation, it's important to acknowledge the competing theories of primordialism versus instrumentalism. Viewing national identity through a primordial perspective defines groups as naturally-occurring things in the world, independent of historical events and social movements. Primordialism proposes significant challenges for categorizing groups by assuming lived experiences as unchangeable which may limit marginalized communities like people of color to hierarchies that benefit those in power. This illustrates Brubaker's (2004) critique of "common sense groupism" in which he argues that groups are based on contingent events rather than natural categories. In relation to Black music cultures, Black music should not be essentialized as solely R&B and hip-hop but rather demonstrate how Black communities and people of color have constructed collective identities based on their use of music as a tool. This illustrates the philosophical approach of instrumentalism in which Black communities call their identities into being through strategies, like social movements and music, for solidarity, justification, and mobilization.⁶ Consequently, whether hegemonic powers stereotype Black musical producers into genres like R&B and hip-hop, or Black musical producers

2 Stuart Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media," in *Writings on Media: History of the Present* (Duke University Press, 2021), 225, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478022015-019>.

3 Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (SAGE Publications, 1997), 239.

4 Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 256.

5 Christopher Joseph Johnson, "Dance Floor Reverberations: Affect and Experience in Contemporary Electronic Dance Music" (MA thesis, Texas A&M University, 2015), 3, <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/f01b69a6-b727-4cb2-a649-dca57d121bf3/content>.

6 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 166, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674258143>.

assert their identity to establish a sense of belonging, Black musical cultures are socially constructed based on events and processes. The theoretical perspective of instrumentalism provides valuable context for music as a meaning-making mechanism.

Many scholars have conducted extensive research on the social construction of race, gender, and additional identities tied to systems of power. Specifically, Omi and Winant (2014) discuss the theory of racial formation which addresses race as a master category, racialization, the evolution of race consciousness, and racial projects. While the authors acknowledge the importance of intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in understanding cultural marginalization, they argue that race plays a unique role in the historical development of the United States.⁷ The racial formation process links to the evolution of hegemony, creating social structures that organize and rule groups and individuals. In the United States, race has guided the establishment and reproduction of concepts of difference, hierarchy, and marginalization, leading to genocidal policies such as dispossessing indigenous peoples of their land and forcing African peoples into racial slavery.⁸ This underlines the idea of racial projects that “connect what race *means* in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which social structures are socially signified and the ways that racial meanings are embedded in social structures.”⁹ As people learn rules of racial classification and understand their own racial identity, racial projects institutionalize political, social, and cultural standards. Furthermore, Hall’s (1995) discussion of racism and the media clarifies the operation of racism as an ideology as the media produces and transforms ideologies. Individuals make ideological statements within ideology that captures interlinked concepts into a “distinctive set or chain of meanings.”¹⁰ Ideologies are not the product of individuals, but rather a framework to “speak through,” providing the means of “‘making sense’ of social relations and our place in them.”¹¹ In terms of this research, ideology directly influences producers’ and consumers’ preferences and behavior which contributes to categorization in the music industry. Understanding racism as an ideology reveals how individuals see themselves and their relationships in society, making the music industry a site of social struggle between artists and listeners and popular trends maintained. I connect racism as an ideology to Roth’s (2016) multiple dimensions of race which include racial identity, self-classification, observed race, reflected race, phenotype, and racial ancestry. Of particular importance is racial identity, a person’s subjective self-identification, and observed race, the race that others believe you to be.¹² These concepts of race illustrate the sociality of identity formation which is useful in explaining the shaping of Black musical cultures and their impact on the United States. Through institutions like the media, Black music producers may employ their racial identity to connect to audience members based on observed race. In contrast, dominating music industry powers may categorize Black artists and artists of color into specific categories, limiting their audience reach. Roth’s (2016) multiple dimensions of race help conceptualize Hall’s (1995) racism as an ideology as social meanings link to sets of ideological premises that influence meaning-making processes and social structures.

2. Nation-Making: America as a Multicultural Nation vs. Racial Discrimination

The music industry communicates ideologies that may celebrate the talent of Black musical cultures or reinforce criminal stereotypes, reflecting the tension between idealization and pathologization. Folkestad (2002) addresses two main functions of music in expressing and communicating national identity to strengthen belonging or otherness among groups. Firstly, “inside-looking-in” uses music to reinforce bonds between members of a group, conveying the notion that they belong to one another.¹³ In contrast, “outside-looking-in” uses music to “be recognized by

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- 7 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “The Theory of Racial Formation,” in *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2014), 106, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203076804>.
 - 8 Omi and Winant, “The Theory of Racial Formation,” 107.
 - 9 Omi and Winant, “The Theory of Racial Formation,” 125.
 - 10 Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes,” 180.
 - 11 Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes,” 181.
 - 12 Wendy D. Roth, “The Multiple Dimensions of Race,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 8 (2016): 1313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1140793>.
 - 13 Göran Folkestad, “National Identity and Music,” in *Musical Identities*, ed. Raymond R. MacDonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell (Oxford University Press, 1970), 156, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198509325.003.009>.

others as being a typical member of one nation or particular group, and to make people outside the group identify as members of the group as such.”¹⁴ These functions of music in racial formation and nation-making explain how groups employ music for specific purposes such as establishing a group identity and culture. Folkestad (2002) brings in Campbell et al.’s (2000) study about the use of popular music in American schools as they argue that many Americans regard Afro-American musics, like jazz and rock, “as part of their national musical heritage and as a critical signifier of themselves.”¹⁵ Recognizing that American music embodied the roots of rock, the authors assert that “whether psychedelic or soul, metal, grunge, or hip-hop . . . it is appropriated and rejuvenated within the musical creations of other nations.”¹⁶ While the spirit of America returns back to Afro-American musics, racial discrimination in multiple institutions like media and education persists. This demonstrates the utilization of music as a nation-making tool, strengthening bonds between group members or boundaries between groups themselves. As Folkestad (2002) argues that music has an immense impact on the formation of self-identity, this includes both national identity and ethnic identity. He connects to Thorsén’s (1997) writing about music education in South Africa to explain the hesitancy to integrate national and ethnic dimensions of music into school teaching. This conveys debates around multicultural music education that recognizes the importance of music in making statements about nationality and ethnicity. The author delineates that diversity is “a sensitive issue in a nation that has been stigmatized by the myths of ‘natural differences.’”¹⁷ Though Thorsén (1997) focuses on South Africa, the same issue of false natural differences apply to the United States through Sidanius and Pratto’s (1999) systems of group-based social hierarchies. They argue that human social systems are subject to hierarchy-enhancing (HE) forces that produce and maintain social inequality, and hierarchy-attenuating (HA) forces that encourage social equality. These myths legitimize separation between groups and validate racial discrimination through stories shared within groups or told from outgroups, which translates into music categorization. Therefore, Campbell et al.’s (2000) argument captures how Americans use HE myths to appropriate Afro-American musics as part of their national identity and omit the origins of these musical cultures. Underlining the significance of music in ethnic identity formation and nation-making demonstrates the multicultural realities of America. As the music industry serves as a site of racial formation, Black people have leaned toward music as a method to escape racism. For America, the music industry has become a site of performing anti-racism in support of Black musical cultures, thus becoming a site of multiculturalism with people drawing connections to music based on their own backgrounds or overlapping histories.

Analyzing various sources related to Black music culture, scholars connect the notion of freedom and healing to emotions of pride, anger, grief, sexual desire, and excitement in R&B and hip-hop. Specifically, Jacobson (2015) led a focus group of twenty-three women aged eighteen to twenty-four years old, self-identified as non-Black, to investigate racial formation between individuals and media among systemic racism. In contrast to interviews, Hakanen (1995) distributes questionnaires to a sample of 295 African American students in high school to connect music choices and emotional uses of music, revealing racial discourse as a form of social control efforts in the United States. Schmutz and Faupel (2010) use logistic regression to measure the effect of gender on the likelihood that an album achieved consecrated status among *Rolling Stone*’s “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time.”¹⁸ They combined this method with discourse analysis, finding that female artists are less likely than male artists to receive cultural legitimacy of any type. Chac (2017) codes emotional themes through textual analysis of 112 songs from 2014 *Billboard*’s “Top 25 Weekly Hot hip-hop and R&B Songs.” Paul-Stubbs (2024) additionally applies textual analysis to discover themes in sixty-five *Billboard*’s R&B/hip-hop songs between 1946 and 2010. Lastly, Dhaenens and De Ridder (2014) employ textual analysis of gender representations of alternative R&B artists Frank Ocean and The Weeknd, inspecting their varying uses of masculinity in music. These scholars’

14 Folkestad, “National Identity and Music,” 156.

15 Folkestad, “National Identity and Music,” 157.

16 Patricia Shehan Campbell et al., “Adolescents’ Expressed Meanings of Music in and out of School,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 55, no. 3 (2007): 235, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002242940705500304>.

17 Stig-Magnus Thorsén, “Music Education in South Africa — Striving for Unity and Diversity,” *Swedish Journal of Music Research* 79, no. 1 (1997): 105, <https://doi.org/10.58698/stm-sjm.v79.39265>.

18 Vaughn Schmutz, and Alison Faupel, “Gender and Cultural Consecration in Popular Music,” *Social Forces* 89, no. 2 (2010): 685, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2010.0098>.

choices in research methods highlight how they engage with audiences to explain the impact of Black music culture on national identity.

B. The Development of Black Music Culture

Black Music culture has changed American identity by introducing specific emotional themes to unite communities together and their shared experiences. In the nineteenth century, African song, dance, and prayer supported rituals and myths amid the slave trade. African performances influenced the development of music making in which African music was eventually “syncretized with European practices to form new music.”¹⁹ Historically, African spirituals consisted of “sorrow songs” to speak of past and present tribulations suffered by slaves and “jubilees” to express joyful expectation of a better life in the future.”²⁰ Black music culture developed from these African origins into various genres that reflect African American ritual and shared emotional expression. Between 1920 and 1950, the Harlem Renaissance, or the New Negro Renaissance, engaged the entire African diaspora through the development of “spirituals, ragtime, blues, jazz, and gospel music.”²¹ Black music defined the musical culture of the United States, shifting the nation’s definition of freedom as Black Americans gained attention through the powerful meanings behind their music.

1. History of R&B

Originally, corporations limited all African American musicians to the category of “race records” for the American public to know the race of who created different musics. In the 1920s, the American music industry developed a strategy for the mass production of stylized Black music to sell to both Black and White audiences. American composer and songwriter, Perry Bradford served as an integral part in Black music culture as he convinced Okeh Records to record African American blues singer Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues.”²² For years, Bradford argued that Smith sang jazz with more soulful feeling than White imitators which demonstrates the value of conveying emotion in the music industry. Smith’s capable vocal recording cracked the industry color line as the American newspaper, *Chicago Defender*, promoted Smith as “Our Race Artist,” since she joined the ranks of White coon and blues singers. The American music industry promoted “Crazy Blues” to White consumers through “nefarious pseudo-hillbilly and minstrel-styled stereotypes.”²³ Other record labels followed this trend by adding at least one African American singer to their rosters, continuing to promote blackface stereotypes. From the approval of Smith, Black American consumers had the ability to hear recordings sung by those of the same racial community which negatively impacted White artists who traded on the authenticity of their portrayal of Black music.²⁴ The sociality of emotions plays an important role in this pivotal change as Smith’s voice led music producers and audiences to experience new levels of emotions in which they desired to share and promote. In the 1940s, “R&B” replaced the term “race records” which was dominated by sounds of piano, drums, bass, and guitar. R&B expanded with the growth of twenty-first-century African American urban communities in the United States as people turned to Black music culture amid the rise of ethnic consciousness.

2. History of Hip-Hop

Following R&B, hip-hop traces its roots to the South Bronx section of New York City as a 1970s cultural movement of MCing, or rapping, influenced by Black American culture and economic depression. From ethnic

19 Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195109757.001.0001>.

20 Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 38.

21 Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 38.

22 Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Duke University Press, 2010), 190, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jq7b>.

23 Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 189.

24 Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 194.

dislocations to severe cuts in federal funding to local job loss, hip-hop serves as an opposition cultural realm based on the “crossroads of lack and desire.”²⁵ Socially and politically conscious hip-hop emerged from the social, economic, and political experiences of Black youth in America to articulate the post-Civil Rights generation’s responses to racial and class inequities.²⁶ Phillips et al. explain how Tricia Rose (1994) describes this artistic production as an “intersection of ‘social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning’ where postindustrial condition, technological innovations, and Afrodisasporic cultural frames and priorities came together to produce ‘techno-black cultural syncretism’ known as rap music.”²⁷ Black music culture continually gains momentum from its ability to channel the United States racial tensions into music through the ideology of the Civil Rights movement and Black Freedom Struggle. This further illustrates the sociality of emotions as Americans better understand these tensions by acknowledging the anger, pain, and grief expressed by Black Americans through hip-hop. Even on a global scale, the hip-hop genre continues to represent the “voices and visions of the culturally, politically, and economically marginal and disenfranchised.”²⁸ Black presence in the music industry points to how cultural difference has been labeled as an ongoing internal threat to White America.²⁹ Hip-hop directly speaks to existing social structures through the “shores of racism, sexism, double-consciousness, patriarchy, and hegemony, exploiting and rejecting its treasures for survival, as well as acceptance.”³⁰ This complexity of social engagement explains how hip-hop artists lean into White patriarchal values to uplift their own glory or offer alternative representations of masculinity to counter these oppressive social assumptions. It is vital to note the significance of women in the evolution of hip-hop culture through rap style, aesthetic standards, and technological practices, despite the lack of historical accounts crediting women in the industry. As the production pipeline functions like an “old boys club,” women’s entry and ascent to power within the music industry has been subtly and overtly limited.³¹ Hip-hop has enabled women to critique sexism of men of their same race but also express mutual critique of mainstream society’s racism. Racial discourse deeply informs social efforts as Black music culture critiques the nation’s engagement in racism and imperialism through the sociality of emotions and racialized emotions. Black music culture utilizes the notion of freedom to convey specific emotions for audiences to interpret in context of White heteropatriarchy.

C. Challenging Racial Discrimination Through Emotional Registers in Black Music Culture

As Black music culture employs specific emotional registers to challenge racial discrimination, I outline Sara Ahmed’s (2014) model of “sociality of emotions” to analyze the pedagogical impact of music on national identity. Ahmed explains the sociality of emotion as first having feelings which are *then* moved towards objects and others or back to oneself.³² Emotions are produced socially in cultural practices in comparison to affect as a pre-language reaction to stimuli. The sociality of emotions connects to Hall’s (1997) othering as society perceives Blackness because of its contrast with Whiteness. Therefore, our application of emotions is informed by our existing or non-existing understanding of people, the world, and ourselves. Rather than emotions as individual feelings, they circulate between bodies and signs to solidify social and political bonds and group identities.³³

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- 25 Layli Phillips, et al., “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976–2004” *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (2005): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jaahv90n3p253>.
 - 26 Derrick P. Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas,” *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (2005): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jaahv90n3p226>.
 - 27 Phillips et al., “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm,” 253.
 - 28 Phillips et al., “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm,” 254.
 - 29 Ernest A. Hakanen, “Emotional Use of Music by African American Adolescents,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 5, no. 3 (1995): 215, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646179509361664>.
 - 30 Crystal Belle, “From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 4 (2014): 299, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934714528953>.
 - 31 Phillips et al., “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm,” 254.
 - 32 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 9, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142>.
 - 33 Meeta Rani Jha, “Afterword: Aesthetic Citizenship and Necropolitics,” *Citizenship Studies* 28, no. 1 (2024): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2363624>.

This concept heavily plays into the music industry as producers and artists inject certain emotional terms into music content that audience members collectively experience and interpret. As African spirituals promoted the expression of pain or hope, this emotional urge toward freedom continues with R&B and hip-hop in America as a tool of resistance, expression, and mobilization in face of White supremacy.

Furthermore, I connect the sociality of emotions to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2019) "racialized emotions" which are emotions specific to racialized societies. He outlines racialized emotions as group-based and relational, noting that racial subjects emerged because people experience, learn about, and interpret racialized relationships.³⁴ This connects to the sociality of emotions as "hardness is not the absence of emotion, but a different emotional orientation towards others."³⁵ Racialized emotions illustrate that "Whites fear Blacks in interracial encounters and many people of color experience anxiety and discomfort when entering 'white spaces.'"³⁶ Racial communities experience certain feelings they then move towards other subjects or back to themselves to make sense of their emotions. Connecting the sociality of emotions and racialized emotions provides significant context to how emotion in the music industry can powerfully reshape Americans' Eurocentric values. As Black music culture developed to accommodate shifting experiences, research about the progression of emotions in R&B and hip-hop overtime offers valuable insight about changing American identity.

1. Pride in R&B and Hip-Hop

Through both R&B and hip-hop, Black Americans have underlined the emotion of pride to express themselves and validate their experiences in White America. Though the term 1920s "race records" was established to identify a market of Black musicians, this term borrowed from the African American vernacular use of "race man" to express racial pride and solidarity.³⁷ Models of music for mood management highlight how R&B/soul music often relates to feelings of pride for the authentic vocal capabilities of Black artists.³⁸ Additionally, rap has historically reflected a sense of pride through the healthy defiance of American systems that range from politics to social expectations.³⁹ By utilizing the emotional theme of pride in R&B and hip-hop, Black artists bring together communities of similar interpretation. Cultural pride in Black music presents themes of freedom and healing to work against the racial exclusion established by Eurocentric America.

2. Anger in R&B and Hip-Hop

Furthermore, research shows that R&B and hip-hop often voice the emotion of anger, confirming the injustices that Black Americans historically faced in the United States. In the beginning of hip-hop, rap attracted audiences for its substantive content of gangs, drugs, and community involvement. Since hip-hop offered new discourse to challenge the root of poverty and effects of racial exclusion, White media powers aimed to paint hip-hop as inherently violent to frame rappers as enemies of the ideal American.⁴⁰ These hateful White emotional readings of rap work to stick or to bind the imagined subjects and the White nation together.⁴¹ Individuals employ emotional rationality to express their affection for group members and antipathy toward non-members of their race.⁴² R&B and hip-hop uplifts the emotions experienced by people of color to work against America's Eurocentric values that minimize representation of Black culture. Additionally, substance use in Black music videos reveal that

34 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 1 (2019): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418816958>.

35 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 4.

36 Bonilla-Silva, "Feeling Race," 3.

37 Mark Puryear, "Tell It Like It Is: A History of Rhythm and Blues," *Folklife Magazine*, September 20, 2016, <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/freedom-sounds-tell-it-like-it-is-a-history-of-rhythm-and-blues>.

38 Hakanen, "Emotional Use of Music," 214.

39 Hakanen, "Emotional Use of Music," 215.

40 Errol A. Henderson, "Black Nationalism and Rap Music," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 3 (1996): 321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479602600305>.

41 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 43.

42 Bonilla-Silva, "Feeling Race," 7.

anger typically correlates with alcohol-use.⁴³ The sociality of emotions illustrates how hip-hop channels feelings of anger through alcohol to underline the symbolic violence Black Americans encounter in everyday life. Black music culture conveys the emotional theme of anger to denote Black Americans' frustration with political and social institutions in America.⁴⁴ Anger in R&B and hip-hop signifies a freedom of expression about racialized relationships in the United States as artists express this emotional orientation towards a greater system rather than a specific person.

3. Grief in R&B and Hip-Hop

The emotional expression of grief further explores the pains of marginalized communities and validates Black Americans' experiences. In R&B and hip-hop, grief has been used to demonstrate Black Americans' awareness of hurt, pain, and disappointment. Black musical producers' use of emotional vulnerability discloses the adversity Black Americans faced from slavery to the Civil Rights movement. Expressing grief demands equal rights by applying the liberal human rights frame of democracy. This speaks to the politics of pain as the differentiation between forms of pain and suffering in stories told are crucial mechanisms for distributing power.⁴⁵ By openly grieving the painful realities of oppression, Black music culture defies the American institutions that aim to control the narratives of underrepresented communities. Moreover, the stigmatization of Black men's emotions exacerbate differences in the emotional norms between themselves and women. Regarding Black masculinity in R&B and hip-hop, "it is difficult to decipher what is real and what is merely a performance instigated by a White gaze."⁴⁶ In turn, Black men grieve in solitude and often lean into hypermasculinity and hypersexuality to assert their manhood through music. For instance, the alternative R&B singer, The Weeknd, promotes gender relations at the heart of his music, presenting ownership over submissive females.⁴⁷ In contrast, Frank Ocean presents an alternative masculinity by publicly disclosing his same-sex desires.⁴⁸ Rather than leaning into the glorification of the stereotypical patriarchal male, Ocean engages in non-normative gender behavior that diverges from hegemonic masculinity. Through alternative R&B music, Ocean expresses his emotional struggles in same-sex relationships in the public eye of American society. His use of grief challenges American social expectations of men that limit both his sexuality and emotional expression. Despite some Black artists who accept pre-existing social norms, the mixed expression of grief and pain in R&B and hip-hop alludes to freedom of symbolic violence.

4. Sexual Desire in R&B and Hip-Hop

As R&B and hip-hop's use of grief often connects to romantic or sexual relationships, sexual desire serves as a significant emotional register itself. Race and social class interact to shape cultural constructions of gender in popular music which creates sets of expectations, rules, and ideals socially sanctioned for Black women in the American music industry.⁴⁹ R&B and hip-hop Black female musicians' expression of sexual desires signify freedom and liberation amid male-dominating social structures. Douglas (2020) defines the modern media's relationship with feminism as enlightened sexism as mass media exaggerates certain kinds of stories, people,

43 Christina Chac, "Emotions and Content Themes Associated with Substance Imagery in Hip-Hop and R&B YouTube Music Videos" (BS thesis, Oregon State University, 2017), 16.

44 Laurence Paul-Stubbs, "Emotional and Motivational Expression in Hip-Hop/R&B vs. Country Music: A Comparative Analysis" (MA thesis, Rutgers University, 2024), 22, <https://doi.org/doi:10.7282/t3-2nnm-1w65>.

45 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 32.

46 Belle, "From Jay-Z to Dead Prez," 289.

47 Frederik Dhaenens and Sander De Ridder, "Resistant Masculinities in Alternative R&B? Understanding Frank Ocean and the Weeknd's Representations of Gender," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2014): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549414526730>.

48 Dhaenens and Ridder, "Resistant Masculinities in Alternative R&B?" 284.

49 Lanice Renée Avery, "The Sound of (Black) Music: Black-Oriented Media Use and Hegemonic Gender Beliefs as Liabilities to Black Women's Sexual Well-Being" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2016), 1, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/133193>.

values, and attitudes while minimizing others or rendering them invisible.⁵⁰ Enlightened sexism suggests that oversexualization in Black music culture renders this representation of feminism as misguided by reminding girls and women they are fundamentally female. However, Black women articulate their sexual desires to oppose the restrictive social norms set up against these pleasures. Historically, Black women did not fit the ethnocentric Western norm and were “symbolically . . . constructed as ‘Other’ . . . reduced to her body and her body in turn was reduced to her sexual organs.”⁵¹ Black women in R&B and hip-hop present themselves as powerful by asserting their own desires without concern for American norms that may interpret these expressions as vulgar. Sexual desire expressed by Black women points to how “weakness is defined in terms of tendency to be shaped by others.”⁵² Therefore, women’s sexual desires in R&B and hip-hop music serves as a potent healing tool for women and greater American society in understanding the autonomy of women.

5. Excitement in R&B and Hip-Hop

In addition to pride, anger, grief, and sexual desire, excitement serves as a valuable emotion in R&B and hip-hop. Calling on models of mood management, the use of excitement in rap music compels the listener to respond by “getting pumped up.”⁵³ As R&B was not explicitly political in the late 1940s, this music was depicted as dance music at its core to embrace healing and wellness. While Black music culture speaks about the history of marginalization, the emotion of excitement in this music offers emotional bonds that link Americans of all races and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, substance imagery in hip-hop music videos highlights content themes of “partying” or “having a good time.”⁵⁴ Specifically, the use of cocaine in Black music culture connects to feelings of euphoria which provides commentary on Black Americans’ socialized understandings of joy and freedom.

III. Research Methodology

In this research project, I deploy the Birmingham School circuit of culture methodology developed by Paul de Gay and Stuart Hall (1997) to explain how the representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation of Black music move people’s perception of racial discrimination in America. The circuit of culture connects these five elements to underline how Black music culture provides an alternative narrative to identity in the United States. This methodology further illustrates the sociality of emotions and racialized emotions by providing context for both producer and listener experiences.

A. The Circuit of Black Music Culture

Producers in the American music industry attempt to uplift and undermine specific emotions in R&B and hip-hop to maximize profit. Music has transformed from a social affair in public spaces to “. . . competitors, seeking to maximise their profits at the expense of others.”⁵⁵ The importance of profit in the music industry shows the reliance on existing systems of power to market genres like R&B and hip-hop to American society. This connects to Hall’s (1997) argument that culture is a continuing site of struggle between the ruling class, who own communication networks, and the public. Representation in media texts signifies how meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture, with dialogue sustained by the presence of shared cultural codes.⁵⁶ Media producers in the American music industry drive audience consumption through these codes, which

50 Susan J. Douglas, “Fantasies of Power,” in *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism’s Work is Done* (Times Books, 2010), 18.

51 Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” 265.

52 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 3.

53 Hakanen, “Emotional Use of Music,” 214.

54 Chac, “Emotions and Content Themes,” 18.

55 John Williamson and Martin Cloonan, “Rethinking the Music Industry,” *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143007001262>.

56 Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (SAGE Publications, 1997), 10.

underlines the use of specific emotions employed by artists. Breaking down social reality to convey particular messages points to areas of exclusion, contradiction, and the origins of the pressure for change.⁵⁷ As audiences' identity helps them decode and interpret these concepts, representations of race in music informs their context, which illustrates racialized emotions. Furthermore, the State monitors intertextual citations of regulation through legal frames and censorship that the American music industry must follow, like music licensing for businesses to work with creators.

The circuit of Black music culture points to the reconstruction of American identity, prompting qualitative analysis to observe the historical context and development of American culture.⁵⁸ Black musical producers implant the concept of freedom to expand listeners' understanding of racial discrimination and counter Eurocentric limitations against them. Analyzing Black musical cultures through album covers and song lyrics, I focus on content created by Erykah Badu and Missy Elliot, as these Black artists served as pivotal forces in the 1990s music industry. Content analysis of these artists' debut albums and later works reveals how music at different points in time makes an argument about historical change.⁵⁹ In order to capture the circuit of music culture of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation, I conduct both textual analysis and interviews. These methods reveal encoded meanings from producers in music texts and disclose audience interpretations.

B. Textual Analysis

Black music culture challenging racial exclusion comprises semiotic, ideological, discursive analysis, and star study. Media texts are social phenomena often part of the debates about society and institutions.⁶⁰ Semiotics, as a type of textual analysis, helps society interpret codes and signs to understand aspects of a text with culturally specific social practices.⁶¹ This connects to the sociality of emotion, as communities interpret music through common emotional investments and desires, creating a sense of belonging for people who may feel marginalized or disconnected from society.⁶² Black music culture implements signs through specific emotional registers that address dominant ideas of contemporary culture and resist oppressive Eurocentric systems. This relates to ideological analysis as dominant ideological power relations within race, class, age, gender, and ethnicity are encoded in texts.⁶³ Black musical producers utilize R&B and hip-hop to reproduce different cultural values and ideals, working against ideologies that reinforce dominant beliefs of the American music industry as White. The discursive approach of textual analysis pairs with star study to emphasize the historical specificity of representation and how a star's public personas develop in differing ways.⁶⁴ This research observes how Badu and Elliot convey specific emotions in music to bridge the history of Black music culture. Specifically, I utilize Chac's (2017) textual analysis of decoding emotions from R&B and hip-hop songs to confirm how Black musical producers employ emotional registers to shift American identity. This connects to Dhaenens and De Ridder's (2014) textual analysis of R&B artists to determine key themes in connection to social status and power. Additionally, I apply Schmutz & Faupel's (2010) discourse analysis to note the historical importance and social networks of Black music culture to conceive ideas of a promising future.

Through textual analysis, I break down ideologies correlated with symbolic visual codes in Badu and Elliot's respective album art. These visual symbols connect to the lyrical meanings and musical production of each song, which depicts music as a form of emotional expression and social communication. While Black musicians encode meanings in their artistry, the music industry sells Black talent through its own codes of

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- 57 Matteo Stocchetti and Karin Kukkonen, *Critical Media Analysis: An Introduction for Media Professionals* (Peter Lang, 2011), 19, <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-00775-6>.
 - 58 Bonnie S. Brennen, "Interviewing," in *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies* (Routledge, 2021), 36, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003122388-3>.
 - 59 Jane Stokes, "Analysing Media and Cultural Texts," in *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* (SAGE Publications, 2003), 57.
 - 60 Stokes, "Analysing Media and Cultural Texts," 54.
 - 61 Brennen, "Interviewing," 37.
 - 62 Jha, "Afterword" 124.
 - 63 Brennen, "Interviewing," 33.
 - 64 Stokes, "Analyzing Media and Cultural Texts," 93.

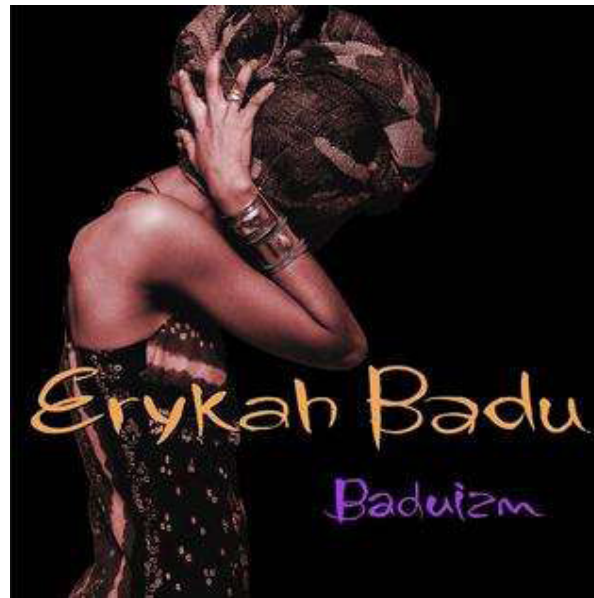


Figure 1. *Baduizm* (1997).

This figure is the album cover for the song “Drama.”

meaning, potentially exploiting and discrediting the artists behind these works. As I focus on the case studies of Badu and Elliot, I emphasize how the 1990s mark a pivotal time for a thriving landscape of Black artists across various genres. The rise in popularity of Black music cultures in this time occurred at the same moment in which “national politics took a turn towards the right, a time in which the most wealthy in our society concentrated their wealth, an era in which patterns of suburbanization and urban gentrification made contact between inner city residents and the rest of the population even less frequent than they had been, while the prison population, within which people of color are vastly overrepresented, skyrocketed to new global highs.”⁶⁵ Black artists turned to the music industry to prompt discussion about pressing social, political, and economic issues of the 1990s that extend from racist institutionalized structures since the United States’ founding.

1. Erykah Badu

In 1997, Badu released her debut album *Baduizm*, gaining significant attention as people tied her music to the neo-soul movement of “earthy musical substance over glossy style.”⁶⁶ The neo-soul genre pays homage to past Black music culture by fusing soul, jazz, funk, R&B, hip-hop, and gospel music into songs with emotional depth and often spoken-word poetry.⁶⁷ As the sociality of emotions helps artists convey specific messages to audiences, this blend of genres can be understood as an attempt to connect with specific groups amid the 1990s rise of Black artists. Through her music, Badu asserts agency, like through her live performance of “Tyrone” as she sings, “See why can’t we be by ourselves sometimes . . . I think you’d better call Tyrone (Call him) And tell him to get your shit . . . ’Cause Miss Badu’s always comin’ for real.”⁶⁸ She embraces the power of individuality and challenges the norms of a woman needing a man for support. Acknowledging the development of Black culture in relation to music, I analyze Badu’s “Drama” from her 1997 debut album *Baduizm* and “Master Teacher Medley” from her 2007 album *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)*. I chose these songs for their unique blend of musical styles and thought-provoking lyrics centered around a better society.

65 Loren Yukio Kajikawa, “Centering the Margins: Black Music and American Culture, 1980–2000” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2009), 8.

66 “Neo Movement Stirs Soul Feud,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 2003, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2003/10/17/neo-movement-stirs-soul-feud/>.

67 Miles White, “Neo-Soul,” *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2289160>.

68 Erykah Badu, “Tyrone (Live),” track 12 on *Live* (Kedar Entertainment and Universal Records, 1997).

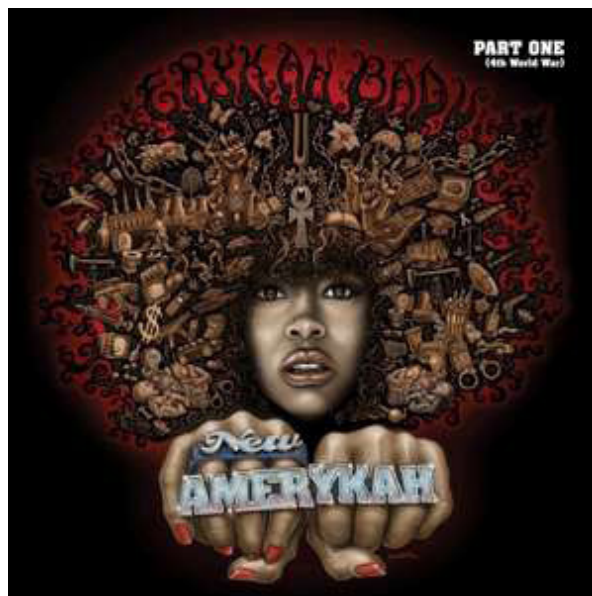


Figure 2. *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* (2007).
This figure is the album cover for the song “Master Teacher Melody.”

Since the release of *Baduizm*, Badu has served as a pivotal R&B, hip-hop, and soul artist, and strong political force in the American music industry (see figure 1). Badu underlines the ongoing racial exclusion in America as stated in her song “Drama”: “Race relations, segregation, no occupation / World inflation, demonstration, miseducation.”⁶⁹ In these lines, she underlines the persisting segregation in the United States that contributes to economic inequality and the lack of employment of people of color, specifically Black people. Badu points out the lack of education about these injustices and acknowledges related political demonstrations. Further in “Drama,” she notes the dichotomy in the contemporary era of the Black Freedom Struggle by expressing “With all the problems of the day / How can we go on / So tired of hearing people say / How can I go on.”⁷⁰ She recognizes the difficulty in constantly fighting against intersectional systems of power and the inclination to accept these problems due to fatigue. However, Badu also recognizes the necessity of standing up for oppressed peoples by calling out those who choose to accept segregation rather than fight alongside the community.

Analyzing the album cover of *Baduizm*, Badu is pictured in distress, holding her head and hiding her face. She rejects Eurocentric beauty standards by embracing Afrocentric styles through the hairstyle of a head wrap, which challenges stereotypical notions of Black femininity and sexuality. The album title itself, *Baduizm*, coined by Badu, suggests more than just an album, but rather an experience or philosophy, further countering hegemonic norms by introducing a new way of being. As the font used compares to handwriting, the album art conveys natural imperfections of penmanship from humans, centering humankind over polished production. Madden et al. (2000) indicate that orange is often associated with distress, disturbed, or upset, and purple with dignified or stately, suggesting Badu’s duality in accepting and understanding herself in the world through music.

In 2007, the four-time Grammy Award winner reinvigorated the term “woke” through her song “Master Teacher Medley” in *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* as being alert to social and racial injustice (see figure 2). She pushes the audience to remain educated and active in face of adversity by stating, “Even though you go through struggle and strife / To keep a healthy life, I stay woke / (I stay woke) / Everybody knows a black or white, there’s / Creatures in every shape and size / (I stay woke).”⁷¹ Badu first addresses individual struggles of maintaining a balanced life amid national and global issues that range from economic, political, and social matters. She then underlines how communities of all backgrounds face these struggles, calling on people to “stay woke” about the intersecting hegemonic structures that often disadvantage majorities to privilege the few elites already in power. Additionally, Badu repeats the lyrics, “See, I am in search of myself / (A beautiful

69 Erykah Badu, “Drama,” track 11 on *Baduizm* (Kedar Entertainment and Universal Records, 1997).

70 Badu, “Drama.”

71 Erykah Badu, “Master Teacher Medley,” track 8 on *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* (Universal Motown Records, 2008).

world, I'm trying to find) / Ooh it's just too hard for me to find (A beautiful world, a beautiful world) . . . 'Cause I'm in the search of something new (A beautiful world I'm trying to find) / Search inside me / Searching inside you / And that's the thrill."⁷² Longing for this "beautiful world" at the same time as "staying woke" highlights how people must hold themselves accountable to contributing to a promising future. As Badu mentions "search inside me" and "searching inside you," she calls on communities to look within themselves and those around them to invigorate social and political change to stand up against oppressive systems. Given that "Master Teacher Medley" resides within *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)*, it is reasonable to assume this new, idealized "Amerykah" requires awareness of past injustice and active opposition to ongoing segregation and oppression.

The album art for *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* contains multiple symbols and motifs that represent America according to Badu. Illustrated within Badu's afro are symbols related to the United States, such as handcuffs, chains, industrial factories, dollar signs, and guns. These images are juxtaposed with elements associated with culture and society, such as fists held up, butterflies, infants, music notes, doves, and peace signs. With over fifty signs and symbols, Badu recognizes past tribulations of the founding of the United States, shines light on social movements intended to right generations of wrongdoing, and proposes a future America of peace and harmony. Since these elements reside in her hair, Badu acknowledges how both progress and pain are intertwined and part of her. Badu herself is drawn with red painted nails, a firm stare, and brass or silver knuckles. I note that brass knuckles have historically been associated with self-defense and combat, which suggests Badu's preparedness to fight for this "New Amerykah." The intentional spelling of "Amerykah" further emulates the personable experience Badu makes out of her music, as she created with the philosophy of "Baduizm." With red often described as stimulating and exciting, the color around Badu's afro implies attention toward the elements of this new nation.⁷³ As Badu continues to release music and engage with media, her artistry offers valuable insight into how political and cultural messaging by Black artists continues to serve as a defining force in the American music industry.

2. Missy Elliot

Like Badu, Melissa Arnette "Missy" Elliot also released her debut album in 1997, titled *Supa Dupa Fly*, marking her monumental entry into Black music culture through rap, funk, and futuristic sounds. Elliot penetrated the male-dominated hip-hop scene by drawing attention to her confidence and storytelling, like in "Izzy Izzy Ahh": "None of y'all fools ain't got shit on me. You never heard beats like this before (uh, uh) . . . Our style be tighter than before (uh, uh)" (Elliot, 1997).⁷⁴ She acknowledges the difficulty in gaining respect on a mainstream level and attempts to get the audience's attention to educate and inform them about the systems of power in American institutions. Many scholars credit Elliot as a primary proponent of hip-hop feminism, a concept that "combines elements of Black feminism and hip-hop sensibilities, which challenge gender ideologies and center the Black identity."⁷⁵ Contextualizing the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women in the United States, I break down Elliot's "They Don't Wanna F*** Wit' Me" from her 1997 debut album *Supa Dupa Fly* and "Wake Up" from her 2003 album *This is Not a Test!* I selected these songs as they indicate a wide range of emotional themes universally experienced by the Black community while rejecting discriminatory power dynamics between women and societal norms.

Elliot's *Supa Dupa Fly* reconceptualizes masculinity and femininity, breaking stereotypical boundaries of women's success in the music industry, as hip-hop, and the music industry in general, has historically succumbed to patriarchal norms (see figure 3). In "They Don't Wanna F*** Wit' Me," Elliot addresses the opposition to her entering the rap scene: "They hate the way that I hee-haw / 'Cause I got too much dough / You know my

72 Badu, "Master Teacher Medley."

73 Thomas J. Madden et al., "Managing Images in Different Cultures: A Cross-National Study of Color Meanings and Preferences," *Journal of International Marketing* 8, no. 4 (2000): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1509/jimk.8.4.90.19795>.

74 Missy Elliot, "Izzy Izzy Ahh," Track 12 on *Supa Dupa Fly* (East West Records and Goldmind, 1997).

75 Andrae Alexander and Andrea F. Garcia-Borbón, "Missy Elliott's Hall of Fameworthy Career: Hip Hop Feminism, Culture, and Capital," in *Sage Business Cases* (SAGE Publications, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071941386>.



Figure 3. *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997).

This figure is the album cover for the song “They Don’t Wanna F*** Wit’ Me.”

steelo / So what you come here for / See, you don’t wanna fuck with me.”⁷⁶ “Steelo” refers to a hip-hop term that conveys someone’s unique style or aura, which was popularized by R&B group 702 in their 1996 song “Steelo,” helped, written, and produced by Missy Elliot, Chad Elliot, and George Pearson. These lyrics exude confidence and autonomy as Elliot uses her own work with “Steelo” to back up “They Don’t Wanna F*** Wit’ Me.” She maintains unique styles as later in the song, she asserts, “Yo, I’m a just (sue) / Dance a little bit / You don’t mind if I get my boogie on, do you? / He-he, yeah, you know what I’m sayin’? / We don’t gotta rhyme through the whole track / The track is bargin’ by itself.”⁷⁷ Through these lyrics, Elliot expresses her joy of making music by dancing to her own work, further asserting herself in the music industry regardless of backlash against women rappers.

The album cover of *Supa Dupa Fly* frames Elliot looking down on the viewer, depicting her as laid back and confident in a baseball jersey labeled “Missy,” gold hoop earrings, baggy pants, and sneakers. As the rise of hip-hop comprised youth and young adult subcultures concerned with racism and social status, clothing styles represent the subcultural and adornment spirit of the time.⁷⁸ As gold jewelry symbolizes strength and power, Elliot also sits on a chair that resembles a throne, with red curtains behind her that further emulate a sense of royalty or monetary value.⁷⁹ Next to the bold album title resides her name, “Missy Misdemeanor Elliot,” which suggests opposition to the criminalization of the Black community. By self-proclaiming a type of criminal offense, Elliot acknowledges her positionality in challenging racism as an ideology in the prison industrial complex that disproportionately targets Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Additionally, the PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT trademark, or “PAL Mark,” enforced by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), acts as a warning placed on music releases to indicate the content may be unsuitable for children. As *Supa Dupa Fly* carries this label, this points to the depictions of strong language, drug use, and similar “explicit content” determined by RIAA, potentially suggesting the restriction of social practices despite their normality. As red often implies active, vibrant, and hot, Elliot juxtaposes this with her white outfit, a color that signifies peaceful or calming.⁸⁰ This album cover decision may be interpreted as Elliot serving as a grounding force in the music industry as a Black woman rapper.

76 Missy Elliot, “They Don’t Wanna F*** Wit’ Me,” feat. Timbaland, track 6 on *Supa Dupa Fly* (East West Records and Goldmind, 1997).

77 Elliot, “They Don’t Wanna F*** Wit’ Me.”

78 Vanessa T. Brantley, “Hip-Hop Clothing: The Meaning of Subcultural Style” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1999), 54, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304510440>.

79 Brantley, “Hip-Hop Clothing,” 49.

80 Madden et al., “Managing Images in Different Cultures,” 97.



Figure 4. *This Is Not a Test!* (2003).

This figure is the album cover for the song “Wake Up.”

Elliot’s 2003 album *This Is Not a Test!* promotes the strategy of resistance through the song “Wake Up,” using lyrics like, “Yep, I’m a top leader, I got the Martin Luther King fever. I’m a feed ya, what ya teacher need to preach ya (c’mon). It’s time to get serious, Black people all areas. Who gon’ carry us? It ain’t time to bury us (ooh!). ‘Cause music be our first love” (see figure 4).⁸¹ Elliot’s political communication and acknowledgement of Black people’s connection to music reveals the value in historical context through textual analysis. She calls on Martin Luther King to contextualize the political messaging of “waking up” in the face of systemic racism, similar to Badu’s “staying woke.” She continues to repeat “You don’t got a cellular phone (it’s alright) / And ya wheels don’t spin (it’s alright) (uh) / And you gotta wear them jeans again (it’s alright).”⁸² Through these lyrics, Elliot spotlights economic inequality under capitalism, affirming the audience of their adequacy despite not fitting monetary expectations of having a stable car, working cell phone, or multiple options for clothing. Elliot confronts the idealization of middle to upper-class lifestyles, which points to the negative perception placed on marginalized communities with economic disadvantages despite their lack of resources to escape from poverty. This reveals the intersectional limitations of race, class, and additional socially constructed systems of power supported by ideologies such as racism and classism.

The album cover further frames Black music as a site of oppositional consciousness by providing an alternative narrative to political power that decenters White dominance. Elliot herself wears all black leather and holds a dog on a leash to assert dominance in her warning of *This Is Not a Test!* As the album title resembles a national warning with Missy and additional Black figures ready for combat, she calls listeners to action through key themes of Black empowerment and community-building in her music. Like *Supa Dupa Fly*, this album has the “PAL Mark” enforced by the RIAA, further labeling Elliot’s music as explicit content and potentially inappropriate. This categorization undermines the universality of Elliot’s music, thus limiting the notion that her music reflects the realities of America’s racial segregation. The militaristic setting of the album cover, with a camouflage truck and pitbull dogs, suggests Elliot and her squad are ready for combat to fight against backlash in the music industry and against oppressive social norms. This connects to symbols of the Black Panther Movement, in which the uniform of an Afro-represented pride in Black Panthers’ natural hair and a black leather jacket pointed to masculine ideals.

The albums and songs selected capture emotional themes, such as pride and grief, called out by relevant scholars in the literature review. Badu and Elliot specifically underline themes related to Black and feminist communities, offering significant insight into the role of music over time and its potential impact on audience

81 Missy Elliot, “Wake Up,” feat. Jay-Z, track 3 on *This Is Not a Test!* (Elektra/EEG, 2003).

82 Elliot, “Wake Up.”

members. It's important to note that other albums and songs from Badu and Elliot provide valuable themes aside from freedom and hope, and that additional Black artists have played essential roles in advancing emotional themes in the music industry. This research prompts further investigation of Black musical cultures from the 1990s to the modern day of both underground and mainstream artists to deepen understanding of racial discrimination in the United States.

C. Interviews

As this research calls attention to emotional and cultural experiences shaped by music, the additional method of interviews provides meaningful insight into how audiences make meaning of Black music culture. The textual analysis of Badu and Elliot provides an interesting real-world measure to compare with interviewees' perceptions.⁸³ Interviews serve as in-depth, purposeful conversations that seek complex information about complicated issues to better understand historical and social experiences.⁸⁴ The interview questions for this thesis pull from themes discussed in this literature review, highlighting the connection between Black music culture, American identity, and the emotional registers of R&B and hip-hop music, which fuel oppositional consciousness. Follow-up questions for clarification delve deeper into the experiences and emotions of each respondent. I employ Jacobson's (2015) method of semi-structured interviews to analyze how the sociality of emotions in R&B and hip-hop music can inform perceptions of national identity.⁸⁵ Given that this research will be conducted within the Department of Media Studies at UC Berkeley, the sample includes college students aged between eighteen and twenty-four years old. Noting the importance of demographic backgrounds in interpretation, interviewees must identify with different racial groups and genders. In a pre-interview survey, potential respondents will select at least one racial group from American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Hispanic, White or Caucasian, and/or multiple ethnicities/other.⁸⁶ Respondents self-identify their gender from options of man, woman, nonbinary, gender not listed here, or prefer not to say.⁸⁷ I completed the "Social and Behavioral Research Investigators" course from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) for research, ethics, compliance, and safety training.

83 Stokes, "Analysing Media and Cultural Texts," 96.

84 Brennen, "Interviewing," 29.

85 Ginger Jacobson, "Racial Formation Theory and Systemic Racism in Hip-Hop Fans' Perceptions," *Sociological Forum* 30, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12186>.

86 Eric Jensen et al., "Measuring Racial and Ethnic Diversity for the 2020 Census," United States Census Bureau, August 4, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/08/measuring-racial-ethnic-diversity-2020-census.html>.

87 Jenny Marlar, "Asking Inclusive Questions about Gender: Phase 1," *Gallup News*, March 28, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/methodology/505664/asking-inclusive-questions-gender-phase.aspx>.

Table 1. A summary of participant self-input responses in a form to participate in interviews.

	Gender	Race	Ethnicity
Participant 1	Woman	Hispanic, White or Caucasian	Irish/Mexican
Participant 2	Woman	American Indian or Alaskan Native, Hispanic	Indigenous Mexican, Argentinian, and Native American
Participant 3	Woman	Hispanic	Mexican
Participant 4	Woman	Black or African American, Hispanic	Hispanic/Afro-Latiné
Participant 5	Man	Hispanic	Mexican/Latiné
Participant 6	Man	Asian or Pacific Islander	Filipino
Participant 7	Woman	Asian or Pacific Islander	Filipino
Participant 8	Woman, Nonbinary	Asian or Pacific Islander	Punjabi Indian
Participant 9	Man	Multiple ethnicities/other	Kurdish/Middle Eastern

Note: This table excludes the contact information provided by each participant

Through nine semi-structured interviews, I examine and compare the connections between music and different cultural and social identities. I conducted interviews in-person on the UC Berkeley campus in Eshleman Hall conference rooms that lasted about one hour each. Participants were recruited through the promotion of an interest form in different digital Slack workspaces, which include “Student Union Student Staff” and “The Berkeley Project.” Each participant volunteered to participate and signed an informed consent form. As demographics play a unique role in informing participants’ views of society, I attempted to secure interviewees of different genders and races. Despite potential similarities of participants as UC Berkeley students, this research does not overlook the invaluable uniqueness of each participant’s experience and perspective in relation to music (see table 1). Research findings include insights from people with ethnicities that range from Irish, Mexican, Indigenous Mexican, Argentinian, and Native American, Hispanic, Afro-Latiné, Filipino, Punjabi Indian, Kurdish, and Middle Eastern.

The interviews began with general questions about individuals’ relationships to music and knowledge about Badu and Elliot, then followed with participants listening to the aforementioned songs while shown the associated album cover, and ended with a final question of how they felt at the end of the interview. Aside from the artist’s name, song name, album name, and release year, participants were not given additional information about the artist or song.

IV. Findings and Analysis

Comparing textual analysis and interviewee responses, I outline five primary themes that capture Black musical cultures as an emotional and emancipatory pedagogy: “contagious emotions,” “begrudgingly hopeful,” “innovatively breaking norms,” “calling in community,” and “the same but different.” To effectively expand on these themes, I juxtapose participant insights to aforementioned scholars and connect these findings to the textual analysis of Badu and Elliot. I note that nine out of nine participants indicate they like R&B music while eight out of nine mention that they like hip-hop. The singular participant who stated their disinterest toward hip-hop noted that “sometimes lyrics in rap can be degrading to women or kind of aggressive.”⁸⁸ Noting their preferences or disinterest in R&B and hip-hop music provides necessary context for their understanding of Black music culture and music in America.

A. Contagious Emotions

The findings reveal that music socializes emotions by establishing meaning and educating people through cues. When asked, “what does music mean to you?” each participant describes music as a form of emotional expression, mood amplification, or method of human communication. They describe music as an outlet to understand themselves and their experiences, turning to specific genres to get into certain moods. Participant 2 declares: “It’s a way of expression, like whether it’s through what you’re hearing, but also like, what it does to you, or like what you resonate with. The music you’re listening to and how it makes you feel and the emotions it brings out in you.”⁸⁹ She emphasizes the emotionality and sociality of music by explaining that people relate to the feelings or experiences described in a song and pull out messaging to understand themselves. This connects to Ahmed (2014)’s sociality of emotions as people use music to feel or enhance their emotions rather than emotions being individual feelings, meaning music brings communities together through shared feelings. Participant 4 further illustrates fundamental qualities of music by stating: “Music is the life force behind communication.”⁹⁰ This demonstrates music as a necessary tool to understand institutions and social ideals, whether people find solace in universal encounters or validation in individual experiences. As the music industry communicates various ideologies and subcultures, Black musical cultures counter mainstream consciousness by revealing the layers of shared emotions among communities that are oppressed due to racism as an ideology. This highlights music as an emotional tool of resistance and mobilization in the face of adversity since racialized emotions foster connections among group-based experiences.⁹¹ While artists may use music to compel people to empathize with artists’ causes, this is made possible through the emotionality of music.

B. Begrudgingly Hopeful

As music conveys the amalgamation of community experiences, the findings further reveal the conflicting emotions that arise from generations of systemic racism. Describing their emotions listening to “Drama” by Badu, participant 9 states: “I feel like it’s like begrudgingly hopeful, almost, where it’s like, here’s all of the things that are like, wrong here . . . how can we go on with all this stuff going on? But it’s still like showing like some opposition to that mentality of like, you can’t be saying this.”⁹² His description captures the distress of people disadvantaged by hierarchical forces in America that legitimize racial discrimination and intersecting forms of power.⁹³ He underlines the difficulty of living through underprivileged circumstances and the need to avoid succumbing to this violence against communities of color. As Badu expresses grief over harsh realities of oppression, Black music culture challenges the prejudiced authority of American institutions by accepting the pain that comes with generational healing. These powerful statements through music connect to the politics of pain as expressions of suffering in stories are strategies for dispensing power, which illustrates music as a method to assert oppositional consciousness.⁹⁴ Participant 2 adds on to this contrast of hope and skepticism in reference to Badu’s “Master Teacher Medley” by expressing: “I connect with it because I’m in a constant state of stress about the state of the world, but trying to find hope in that. I can relate to staying hopeful even though the world is on fire.”⁹⁵ Her ability to identify with Badu’s sentiments derives from the emotional pulls of grief that encompass a wide range of feelings such as anger, sadness, and hope. Through shared emotions toward societal issues, audience members understand the empowering oppositional consciousness of Black musical cultures.

89 Participant 4, interviewed by author, March 18, 2025.

90 Participant 2, interviewed by author, April 2, 2025.

91 Bonilla-Silva, “Feeling Race,” 4.

92 Participant 9, interviewed by author, April 2, 2025.

93 Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, “Social Dominance Theory: A New Synthesis,” in *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139175043.002>.

94 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 32.

95 Participant 2, interview.

C. Innovatively Breaking Norms

From instruments to fashion to lyrics, Black musical cultures redefined societal expectations and brought new possibilities to the music industry. Participant 7 underlines these shifts while describing Elliot's *This is Not a Test!* album cover: "It's a reimagination of military and power and asserting dominance. [It is] reframed to put Black women and marginalized people in the power who have been butt of society for so long."⁹⁶ By acknowledging the transformative composition of Black empowerment in mainstream media, she demonstrates how Black artists reformulate social norms to support marginalized communities. This connects to the significance of intersectionality in the music industry as Black music culture includes challenging the normalization of racial terror but also limitations of lifestyle choices. Participant 6 explains: "Missy for the time did her own thing. '[She] didn't have to show her body . . . but the same time there's some women who thought I look good and would. It's the same amount of feminism.'"⁹⁷ He addresses how Elliot's streetwear style stimulates culture change by opposing gender binaries socially sanctioned in the American music industry as Black women were historically positioned out of ethnocentric ideals of the Western norm and reduced to their sexualized anatomy.⁹⁸ Moreover, he notes the empowering nature of women who may choose feminine-coded clothing still challenges gender expectations of women by reclaiming sexual autonomy for themselves. This exemplifies how Black musical cultures developed from African origins into various subcultures to counter White American norms that may interpret these expressions as vulgar. For instance, the neo-soul movement of the 1990s, embodied by multiple Black artists including Badu, gained significant traction as people understood it as a shift in mind-set.⁹⁹ By embracing the fusion of elements of traditional soul with jazz, funk, R&B, hip-hop, and gospel music, and providing alternate lifestyle narratives, Black musical cultures set the scene for the power of hybridity in music.

D. Calling In Community

As Black artists use music as an emotional and emancipatory pedagogy to call out unjust institutions, they additionally call in community to take action on pressing issues. Discussing Elliot's "Wake Up" from *This is Not a Test!*, participant 9 expresses: "I'm always a fan of songs that like are pushing for like class consciousness type of vibe. People should be more aware. I thought there's a lot of artificial discontent that gets like sewn in in groups. . . . I know she's referencing like the Black community, but it's like you are the reason you're pulling us down rather than like all people like standing together and working towards things that benefit everyone."¹⁰⁰ By pointing out issues of class conflict among the Black community, he identifies the intersecting limitations of socially constructed systems of power that prevent communities from standing a united front. He indicates the displaced anger oppressed peoples may have toward each other, showing how economic inequality under the ideology of capitalism can divide people of color as institutions avoid promoting the intersectional ideology of racism.

Though some artists may lean into dividing ideals of wealth, artists like Badu and Elliot call in community by affirming that the Black community needs to collectively oppose cultural, political, and economic institutions that exploit people of color.¹⁰¹ Participant 7 builds on the urgency of calling in community: "A lot of important things about marginalized people are not always mainstream, not always in school curriculum. It's up to us to learn about our own histories, but just as important to support artists from marginalized communities."¹⁰² She recognizes how mainstream consciousness overlooks the historical context of intersectional inequalities, which emphasizes the pedagogical value of Black musical cultures. Her interpretation further mentions the value in learning about personal histories as well as supporting communities of underserved backgrounds. This underlines

96 Participant 7, interviewed by author, March 20, 2025.

97 Participant 6, interviewed by author, March 17, 2025.

98 Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 266.

99 Chicago Tribune, "Neo Movement Stirs Soul Feud."

100 Participant 9, interview.

101 Phillips et al., "Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm," 254.

102 Participant 7, interview.

how music can uplift both similarities and differences of marginalized communities to recognize overarching structures that facilitate inequitable norms.

E. The Same But Different

In addition to music producers and industry structures regulating ideologies and discourses, the findings exhibit how audiences decode content to draw connections between themselves and artists' messaging. Race representation in music continues to serve as a key factor in connecting people through the emotionality of music. Listening to Badu's "Drama" from *Baduizm*, participant 3 shares: "Coming from a low-income community, I feel like a lot of times it's really hard for communities to be represented through one voice. . . . When I hear songs like this or messages like this, I really resonate or admire her ability to be able to incorporate that feeling or just kind of that connection and sense of community into a song. . . . Thinking about it now in regards to my community or my experience, I tie it to the lack of ability to connect with my community at times."¹⁰³ By breaking down her own experiences witnessing intersectional conflict, she relates to the emotions Badu conveys about segregation and miseducation. She recognizes the struggles in accepting community differences amid societal pressures living dominating norms or opposing them. Through emotional themes of anger and grief toward external structures and internal communities, Black musical cultures reveal the nuances of survival among those exploited. Participant 8 supplements this perspective of music as an honest yet resilient tool in America when opening up about Badu's "Master Teacher Medley": "I think hers is more out of like survival instincts because she is a Black woman. And like understanding the struggles that she may be like faced with is something that I should be educated on as well. But I think the way I would be like "I stay woke" is more to empathize with others. Just because I understand my own privilege as well and just to have compassion especially with like the president that we have."¹⁰⁴ As participant 8 elaborates on their own responsibility to remain educated on racial injustice, this demonstrates how Black music culture pushes audience members to recognize their role in consuming content in context of pressing social and political environments. Shared emotional narratives through music foster a sense of community among groups of people who might otherwise be excluded from dominant culture.¹⁰⁵ As the 2025 Trump administration continues to enforce and validate the ideology of racism through policies and media, the findings reveal the history of racial terror and discrimination the nation was founded on.

V. Discussion

The research findings reveal patterns in producer and consumer attitudes toward Black music culture that convey three primary takeaways: "music is a pedagogy," "American music is Black," and "American music is multicultural." I discuss how the textual analysis and interviews intersect to reveal how Black musical cultures serve as an emotional and emancipatory pedagogy, contributing to the foundation of American music.

A. Music is a Pedagogy

Music teaches communities by influencing the social, cultural, and political development of listeners. People understand the world through socialized emotions as music educates people about the pains and joys of specific groups. Referencing Elliot's "Wake Up," participant 1 conveys how much can affirm and represent people's realities: "The extra voices in the background—I feel like more community-oriented which would make me feel more confident. The chorus felt more of like a mantra too."¹⁰⁶ As people use mantras to concentrate and ease themselves in different situations, Black music culture as a pedagogical tool allows people of all backgrounds to find comfort in coming together to discuss social issues like mentioned in Elliot's "Wake Up." The community aspect of music exhibits Ahmed's (2014) sociality of emotions in which our emotional responses are shaped

103 Participant 3, interviewed by author, March 20, 2025.

104 Participant 8, interviewed by author, March 19, 2025.

105 Jha, "Afterword," 124.

106 Participant 1, interview.

by the presence or absence of experiences. This further connects to participant 6's thoughts about society's relationship with music: "I see all these babies listening to Kendrick Lamar and they're recognizing and dancing to it and like they can catch the rhythm and beat. I think music is just something that's human. . . . We start to think of music as skills to be mastered, but I think it's very fundamental to be human and just be connected to music."¹⁰⁷ Kendrick Lamar currently plays a significant role in the music industry as a Black male rapper whose music provides political commentary on state-sanctioned killings of Black Americans and violence within Black communities."¹⁰⁸ Participant 6's explanation about babies connecting to Lamar demonstrates the emotional and pedagogical characteristics of music as humans interpret this art through not only language, but also sound, movement, and feelings. The interview analysis supports this concept that music allows people to effectively share emotions and get people empathetic toward specific social and political messaging.

B. American Music is Black

With Black presence viewed as a threat to America's Eurocentric cultural development since the sixteenth century, Black music culture acknowledges the continued resistance of Black Americans facing racial terror. Black artists like Badu and Elliot emulate the intentions of African spirituals of sorrow songs and jubilees to call for a more inclusive America. Participant 4 addresses powerful influence of Badu: "It's Black empowerment music. It's telling a story through your music of what you experienced and where you're going."¹⁰⁹ She highlights the intentionality of music as an emotional and emancipatory pedagogy, illustrating how artists push Black empowerment into mainstream consciousness to challenge dominant beliefs of the American music industry as White. As White America's systemic racism has historically dissociated Black talent from Black people through White imitators, the way music socializes emotions defines American music's Black roots. Participant 7 further addresses the storytelling aspect of music in reference to Badu's *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* album cover: "She's reclaiming Black identity and presenting it as the American experience. White America tries to put everyone else down but we need to look at our stories. This is the American experience."¹¹⁰ Recognizing how the United States was founded on the enslaved labor of Black people, participant 7 acknowledges the history of Black music culture and its essential role as a resource for African Americans in enduring slavery and racial terror. The findings solidify that American stories are Black stories and Black artists spearhead social movements through music to mobilize social change.

C. American Music is Multicultural

While the findings substantiate the foundation of American music is Black, the innovative nature of Black musical cultures draws a strong connection to multiculturalism. Participant 3 summarizes to intersectional injustices in American culture: "I feel like something that was really prevalent during that time was talking about the gap of communication within communities of color . . . in this song it alludes, if there's no Black people, what are we to do. We must persist and continue to make those strides."¹¹¹ She represents how audiences decode and interpret messages through the lens of their own identities and asserts the importance of recognizing layers of oppression among people of color to support entwined needs. The emotional and emancipatory employment of Black musical cultures allows people to break down the Black American experience in relation to their own experience, signifying how American music is multicultural. Participant 5 expands on the: "Multicultural struggle of like having to face that the world will always have people who have better opportunities, but it's more so about understanding what we can do toward it. . . . Music is a sense of liberation in itself, but could see it reinforce

107 Participant 6, interview.

108 Nicole Lowman, "The Political Efficacy of Kendrick Lamar's Performance Rhetoric," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 12, no. 2 (2022): 66, https://contemporaryrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Lowman_12_2_3.pdf.

109 Participant 4, interview.

110 Participant 7, interview.

111 Participant 3, interview.

barriers.”¹¹² By identifying the ability to associate or distance oneself from identity, this connects to Hall’s (1997) argument that culture remains an ongoing site of struggle between the ruling class who control communication networks and the general public. This notion underlines the emotional connections people forge for themselves through music to understand their own identity, but also the limitations of the music industry confining artists to White ideals that overlook the abundance of multiculturalism.

VI. Conclusion

From learning about the roots of American music to hearing about its effect on participants first-hand, this research demonstrates the importance of music history. Music is a teaching and learning tool crucial to understanding generations of communities, and music will continue informing communities over time. Through Black musical cultures, it is evident that music serves as both a deeply personal and collective experience, socializing emotions and educating listeners about lived realities that often go unspoken in dominant cultural narratives. Participants’ responses convey how American music is rooted in Black cultural innovation through oppositional consciousness in which listeners draw parallels between their own frustrations and those expressed in music produced by Black artists. Ultimately, to say music is a pedagogy is to recognize the intentionality behind its production and the meaning-making process.

As this research utilizes Badu and Elliot as case studies for Black music culture, additional artists of different generations would provide useful insight to further understand key themes. In particular, research about current popular Black artists such as Doechii and Kendrick Lamar may reveal the persistence of emancipatory themes or expose new concepts that address the foundation of American music. I also note the importance of researching the history of different music genres such as electronic dance music and country, as Black artists have served as defining forces in multiple sectors of the American music industry. Furthermore, as interviewees remain limited to UC Berkeley students, this research would benefit from responses of Black music artists themselves and people who work in the American music industry. With interviews serving as in-depth conversations to better comprehend historical and social experiences, additional perspectives may further reinforce Black musical cultures as an emotional and emancipatory pedagogy.

Despite the mentioned limitations, this research supports how the hybridity of Black music shifts the United States away from a glorification of Eurocentric ideas through an emotional and emancipatory pedagogy. By collecting data from participants of eleven different ethnic backgrounds, the findings reveal the versatility of Black musical cultures and its transformative nature across communities. As Black music producers emulate pride and confidence, they also recognize the strength in expressing anger and grief, and taking risks to counter dominating ideologies. From pain to promise, the pedagogical essence of music demonstrates its vital role in sharing restorative power in times of distress.

112 Participant 5, interviewed by author, March 18, 2025.

VII. Appendix A: Informed consent form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: How have R&B and Hip-Hop enabled racial justice and freedom?

Name of Researcher: Lanah Duque

As a researcher, it is my duty to ensure that my research is being considered in an ethical manner. Ethics will be considered in every aspect of data gathering, analysis, and distribution to ensure that you as an individual will not be harmed in any way, will be respected in terms of your autonomy, will be provided with benefits/balance benefits against risks, and will be obligated to fair distribution of the benefits and risks involved with this project. The purpose of this document is to ensure your consent in participating in this research project, as well as the safety and privacy of any information provided by you as an individual. The data gathered will be kept indefinitely and in a secure location. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without being penalised, or disadvantaged in any way. Your identity will remain anonymous unless you give explicit permission for this. Alternatively, a pseudonym can be utilized upon request to ensure anonymity surrounding your identity. You will help to contribute to understanding the role of Black musical cultures such as R&B and Hip-Hop in shaping identity, emotions, and ideas of freedom and justice.

By signing, I confirm that I have read and understood the information for the above project which I may keep for my records and have had the opportunity to ask any questions I may have.

I agree to take part in the above study and am willing to:

Be interviewed and audio recorded.

Contemporaneous notes may be taken during this process.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher: Lanah Duque

Contact Information: lanahhduque@berkeley.edu (360) 271-4634

VIII. Appendix B: Pre-interview survey

Pre-Interview Survey for Honors Thesis

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed for my research honors thesis for Media Studies! Please complete this short survey at your earliest convenience for us to complete the interview. Your identity will be hidden (i.e. replaced with "Participant 1") in the research paper unless you give explicit permission for this.

Interview Overview

- About 40-50 minutes (initial questions, visual/audial experience, follow-up questions)
- You select the location

If you have any questions/concerns, text me at (360) 271-4634 or email me at lanahhduque@berkeley.edu.

* Indicates required question

Full Name *

Your answer _____

Gender *

- ☐ Man
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Nonbinary
- ☐ Gender not listed here
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Race *

- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ White or Caucasian
- ☐ Multiple ethnicity/Other

What is your ethnicity?

Your answer _____

Preferred Location *

Interviews will be completed in-person. If you prefer a location not listed, please specify in "Other"

- ☐ On-Campus
- ☐ At your home
- ☐ Other: _____

[Clear form](#)

IX. Appendix C: Semi-structured interview topic guide

General questions
• When do you tend to listen to music? • Do you ever find yourself leaning toward specific genres of music? • What does music mean to you? • How would you describe music culture in America? • Do you like R&B and hip-hop music? • What are your thoughts on Erykah Badu? • What are your thoughts on Missy Elliot?
Questions after song and viewing experience
• How do you feel after listening to this song? Do you like this song? • When would you listen to this song? • Were there parts of the song you felt specific emotions shifting or becoming stronger? • Did anything stand out to you in this song? If so, what? • Can you make any comparisons of this music to other worlds? • Do you identify with this music? • What do you notice about this album cover? Does this album cover make you think of anything? • How does this album art make you feel? • How do you feel viewing the album cover and listening to the song?
Final questions
• What emotions do you feel right now after talking about everything?

Note: Some participants were asked follow up questions such as “Can you expand further?” and “Why do you think that?” for better context about their responses.

X. Appendix D: Interview transcripts*A. Interview with participant 8 on March 19, 2025*

Interviewer: Okay, thank you. Thank you again for filling out pre-interview and informed consent form. Basically, like, hopefully it doesn't take the full hour.

Participant 8: Yeah.

Interviewer: But for the structure, I'm going to start with initial questions, then we're going to listen to some songs, and then look at album covers, and then follow-up questions. Also, don't feel compelled to make your answers super long or super short And you can answer many questions also.

Participant 8: Okay, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so for the first question, when do you tend to listen to music?

Participant 8: Um, usually when I'm walking to places or if I am doing work.

Interviewer: Do you ever find yourself listening to certain genres?

- Participant 8: Um, I like to go with whatever I'm feeling, to be honest. It's like not really genres, I go with more artists.
- Interviewer: Oh, who are your favorite artists?
- Participant 8: Like SZA, Kendrick Lamar. Yeah, Zayn Malik.
- Interviewer: Okay! And more like general question, what does music mean to you?
- Participant 8: Music, I think it just like amplifies how I'm feeling, or how I want my feelings to be like. So if it's in the morning, but then sometimes I want to feel more calm, so I'll put on more calm music, like Daniel Caesar or something. But then when I want like hype music, when I'm like getting before I get to like a party or something, I'll put like, you know, Nicki Minaj, or like, you know, Megan Thee Stallion. So like, it really either amplifies how I'm feeling, or it wants me to put me in like a mood.
- Interviewer: And then kind of like speaking about like, America as in the United States, how would you describe music culture in America?
- Participant 8: I think it's like very, I think especially with the apps that we consume, like TikTok and Instagram, there's a very focus on music. Like on TikTok, it's like kind of like the music that blows up kind of translates into like Spotify streams, or like music awards and stuff like that. That's their outlet of like how to kind of go into mainstream. And Instagram, like social media, like lots of times sticks take, especially with like band culture and like being stans and stuff like that on Twitter or something like that. I think it's very ingrained in our culture. And I think just because like America is like such a fusion of different cultures too and backgrounds, music is the one that you get to share a lot. Especially in like, I think it just like highlights different communities as well.
- Interviewer: And you mentioned you, you've already listed like SZA, you should say you're more R&B and you're like Kendrick, so yeah, you like R&B and hip-hop, you said?
- Participant 8: I mean, yeah, but then I also like pop, like I'm like very everywhere, I think the least that I listed was probably like country.
- Interviewer: Who are your favorite R&B artists?
- Participant 8: Probably like SZA, Zayn Malik, like his previous album, like R&B, he like goes to a lot, but like that would be probably like my favorite, Kendrick, like some of his albums like that. I don't know, I don't really focus much on like R&B, like genres usually, it's more artists, like lots of times they like go to dip into different genres and it's like I like it when they don't put it in a box and they really like experiment. So it's like not, it's like very versatile and I really like lean towards those more as well.
- Interviewer: For hip-hop music, do you have like specific songs you like or artists again?
- Participant 8: I think it's kind of like very mainstream, it's like like J. Cole you have like, for me, I don't really see genres, so like when someone's like hip-hop, I don't really think of like artists, it's more like I just, I'm like this is what I like, kind of like these are the artists. Because I feel like a lot of times artists don't really like go into one genre, they're not strictly one.

It's like, it kind of counts and like you also have just like different, you also have just like the intersectionality of like race too, so lots of times they get branded as that as well. But I think like J. Cole's really good, Mac Miller, Tupac, like I think just literally like anything. Yeah. I'm like, what is hip-hop? Rihanna. She's like, hip-hop right? Lizzo keeps being called R&B, but she's straight up pop. That's literally pop, that's straight up pop. So it's just like, yeah, the label.

Interviewer: Well, as I mentioned, I'm researching the role of Black musical cultures such as R&B and hip-hop in shaping identity, emotions, and ideas of freedom and justice. With that, I've decided to focus on Erykah Badu and Missy Elliot. And it's okay if you don't like know much about them, but do you know about Erika Badu?

Participant 8: This is like a very niche thing, but I only know about Erika Badu, because Bridgette Mendler has this one song, and everyone was like, okay, that too. And then I went through that little hole of the internet, and I was like, wait, it kind of does. I listened to it because of that, and then I kind of went through that little hole of the internet. I liked it. It was like very I feel like it was like calming like kind of in a way I really liked her like the voice she has like I think it's like very like you can feel a lot of emotions with it.

Interviewer: And then, what about Missy Elliot? Do you like or know her?

Participant 8: Oh yeah, I think it feels like a very hyped music, right? Like very like, if you're like going to the club, you'll probably like hear her song. And like, I think I really like those musics. I think like, but it's like very specifically, like I don't really like to listen to that all the time. It's like very much when I want that energy. That's why I like music when it's like kind of like, that's why I like versatile singers, cause then they can like, you can always listen to some songs.

Interviewer: Okay, cool. Well, we're gonna have some music now. So in 1997, Erykah Badu released her debut album, *Baduizm*. And I have the album cover here. We're gonna listen to this song called "Drama." And due to time, about halfway through the song, I'll ask you some questions but we'll keep it playing in the back.

Participant 8: Okay.

[SONG PLAYS]

Interviewer: So, how do you feel listening to this song?

Participant 8: I like it. I think it's very similar to music produced in the '90s. I think it's like an artist, like another artist is like, what is love but a broken like something. I don't know. It's very much similar to the '90s culture in the '90s, 2000s, and I'm guessing that's like, from even like the artists like the album too, I think playing very much during that time period. I've never heard of this song before, but I do like it and I think it's like very calming and like the R&B essence I like, I think if you see that if you like feel that you could probably get that from like UMI or like, just like other artists as well but I definitely see like, this kind of music getting sampled into like modern music as well.

Interviewer: Did you notice anything specific about the song that stood out to you?

- Participant 8: I feel like, I don't know if it's like, just like knowing that she's a Black woman. I think it could have like a political like kind of tone to it, like the way of like, it could just be like very much first world but I feel like the way she was kind of like talking about things that seemed a little bit more on her like culture and like being a Black woman and the struggles that she went through and like I do know that like Black artists did that like do that like with like Jorja Smith she did that with like "Blue Lights" I think it's called and like just talking. So I think it's like, I like I really like it when like artists kind of like have like a little societal influence of it rather than just like talking about like, just things that kind of anything can interval I like when they have like substance towards it.
- Interviewer: And then about the album code, what did you notice about it?
- Participant 8: It's like angsty. Yeah. It's like very angsty. I think I can kind of like see this on like a graphic tee or something. I feel like it's very much, I feel like Rihanna probably had like a similar artist like album too. Britney Spears. Because it's like very angsty, like kind of not like men like crisis, but like that like womanhood kind of angst in it. Rather than like a teenage, it's like more matured.
- Interviewer: And, do you think the song kind of pairs with the album cover?
- Participant 8: Yeah, I think it's like kind of like the angsty. It's like, I'm too like deep for this world type of vibe. Yeah, it's like kind of like, you know, you will get me kind of thing. And I think she kind of had that too in the like album and like the song too. So I think it's like very, it feels the vibe.
- Interviewer: What do you notice in your own emotions when you look at this?
- Participant 8: In my emotions, I think it's kind of like more like whenever I listen, I would probably like to think more deeply to this song. And it's probably because like even in this atmosphere right now, I'm like, that's the one thing. Yeah. I am like more paying attention more to like the lyrics and stuff like that. But I think just even like the instruments used, I think it's kind of need like more like a little bit of a jazz, a little I think like the instruments used. I feel like they use like a lot of like percussion and they seem to like very much like you could tell it's like not a modern music song just because it's like not popified. Like I know a lot of people talk about like the TikTok effect. And then this one, like technically it's like very much like in like times in that capsule.
- Interviewer: Yeah. It's like more like beats and stuff. Yeah. When would you say you would listen? What time would you listen?
- Participant 8: Honestly, I think I would listen to when I'm like calm, like in a calm mind, probably like if I'm like really tired, I would want to do it. Or like when I'm in the morning, you know, I don't want all that energy yet. Just like you want something calm, you know, then I would probably put that on. But I don't think I would like to put it on to get my energy or anything like that.
- Interviewer: Would you say you identify with this song?
- Participant 8: I mean, I feel like if I, I think first class, yes. But I think it's a deeper meaning. I would probably have to like watch if there's a music video. I would have to watch it. I would just

literally look at the lyrics to really see if I identify in a line with it. But just like off of like the top of like the main things I remember of talking about it, it does like give that like the angsty feeling that I kind of aligned with.

Interviewer: That's cool. Well, she made like a bunch of different albums. We're going to skip to 2007 now. And we're going to listen to *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* "Master Teacher Medley." It's going to be the same thing because it's about six minutes. I'll just lower it halfway through.

[SONG PLAYS]

Interviewer: So, the same thing. How do you feel about this song? Do you like it? Do you not?

Participant 8: I think I like the message of it, but I don't think I would like feel myself playing it just because it has like the interest, the instruments were like kind of unique in that way and I know it's like very much like to its time 2000s music it did sound like that, but I think in like some genres they sound very similar in that way, but I think I like I could appreciate it I like the message with it again it I think it seemed like in a political sense like just like saying like "I stay woke" and stuff like that I understand like the essence I hold and like the importance it probably has in like a in a musical field to have that like kind of respect in that way, but I don't think I would like play it just because the instruments in it. It's funky, it is funky like I could appreciate it, but I don't think I would be like if someone handed me the aux I don't think I would play this song

Interviewer: I know you said you appreciate the message of it as far as like emotion rise did you notice parts of the song, your emotions like shifting from one to another or becoming stronger because like she said one thing or you heard was there any instruments?

Participant 8: To be honest the instrumental was like too overpowering for me to really like I remember like not really like paying attention to some lyrics except "I stay woke." Because I was like wait what does she say about staying woke again. But I do I just remember like the instrumental part more. Yeah and I feel like if I don't see the lyrics in front of me or I don't really know exactly the lyrics I don't see myself really like paying attention to the lyrics.

Interviewer: Would you compare like this song to any other song either in that time or not?

Participant 8: There is I forgot. Yeah I think like Biggie had like a similar song. He like I like honestly cannot like give you a name but I feel like Biggie or something. They just have that funky like the instrumental it just makes me feel like I'm looking through a laundry mat and like seeing myself go around or like just the water and everything. The like one scene of like Patrick and Spongebob when they're listening they're like in the laundry mat. Like I feel like I feel like if someone's like on a substance this would really hit. No yeah. I feel like it's like something definitely a vibe it would definitely have a vibe to it.

Interviewer: So, I know you said you mentioned, "I stay woke" stood out to you in the song. Would you say you identify with this music?

Participant 8: Yeah, I mean with that line yeah. But I think hers is more out of like survival instincts because she is a Black woman. And like understanding the struggles that she may be like faced with is something that should be educated on as well. But I think the way I would

be like “I stay woke” is more to empathize with others. Just because I understand my own privilege as well and just to have compassion especially with like the President that we have.

Interviewer: Then the album cover. Did you notice anything about it?

Participant 8: Yeah I think I was like noticing the graphic design. And it seemed like very much like I can see that they’re gonna do right here. But then even like there’s the dollar sign here. You have the cross I’m guessing. And then you also just have like random things like flowers and butterflies. Because I was like I think it does have like probably some motifs that she probably speaks in her like music. And then yeah like you have like a Grammy or like just instruments. I think guns yeah so like I think there’s like a fetus or something in here too. So I think and chains so like probably like slavery or just notes on that too. So I think it’s just like probably speaks to like it being more like a political kind of piece more. And I think that’s like really strong message especially like in 2007 because like you had like Obama like right after right?

Interviewer: What emotions are you getting from this? How does it make you feel?

Participant 8: I think if I like really like I feel like I would feel one part of if I was reading through the lyrics of it and seeing that. But since it’s just like the music and like the instrumental, it just gave me a more of a funky feel rather than like understanding like the lyricism behind it. Yeah, like I remember like the being like “a beautiful world I’m trying to find.” And then I wonder what she means like by like masters teachers I don’t think she really like. Yeah, they don’t really explain what that means like masters teachers like the one thing I could think of is I know like in slavery like the slave owners were called masters. So maybe they’re talking about like White people like what if there’s only like White people in charge or in power and um. Like because like she does use like the n-word so I’m guessing she’s more talking about like Black men in a way. Just because she like has that distinction.

But yeah, like I can tell like it’s like a political piece and like talking about the next generation, like probably like you see that fetus is even in the album cover. So it’s like talking about like how to like save like the next generation, she wants to be more educated in that way to like help in like that’s probably why she says teachers for like master teachers because they’re teaching the next generation and like she even says like, I think something about teaching as well. And so like, like she but like there’s some stuff that I’m like a little confused with like pretty rings and pretty thieves with shiny lights and like little pieces of tomorrow, because she doesn’t really expand on that. Like, I feel like she tells like a story, but there are some stuff that like, come alone, I don’t know where and I feel like I would have to know more like, kind of have more context for me to really like understand it fully.

Interviewer: So when would you listen to this song?

Participant 8: I feel like, honestly, just because it’s so timed like I could tell that this was made in 2007. But I feel like if someone sampled it, I’m pretty I would appreciate it. I would appreciate it so much. But it’s that one instrument. Like, I just can’t get behind. Yeah, unless I’m like, only listening to throwbacks and that song just looks like you can’t even notice because you just been listening to that type. But I think just with like the modern music right now, it’s too much of a clash. You wouldn’t hear that on the radio, unless this gets TikTokified. I

feel like I definitely would listen to like the first song. Like definitely like that would be in my playlist. But this one, I don't know which playlist it would be in. Like it has to make its own standalone playlist. Yeah, that's why I feel like maybe if I was just listening to Erykah Badu and like that like slipped in I would be like, okay, and like that goes on. But honestly, I can see myself like skipping it just because it's like, I'm not in the mood for this.

Interviewer: Okay, well, we can like, obviously, you can bring up more though if they come up, but we'll move on to Missy now. So what's funny is that they both released their album this year. Their debut albums in 1997. So we're going to listen to Missy Elliot's *Supa Dupa Fly*. We're going to listen to "They Don't Wanna F*** Wit' Me."

[SONG PLAYS]

Interviewer: Alright, let's do it again. How do you feel about this song? Do you like this song?

Participant 8: Yeah, I feel like definitely this song is something I would put in my playlist, similarly to the first song. But this is more for getting to party or getting ready and stuff like that. I don't really like the guy's part to be honest, but I really like the girls part, Missy Elliot's. I think it was really good and I can still see how it's near the same time because of the instrumental. The instruments are very similar to that, but then the lyrics for the vibe, I guess, is different. But, I do like it a lot and I think it's definitely something that I like.

Interviewer: Do you notice yourself feeling specific emotions?

Participant 8: Yeah, I feel like it would make me more hyped, more like, damn, I'm a bad b*. I feel like it's more giving that high confidence, my self-esteem, and it's kind of in that way, I would identify in that way. I'm like, okay, you know what, Meg Thee Stallion probably took inspiration to this, I can see it, she was raised on this, I can see that a lot. So I feel like that's definitely the vibe and I think that's very similar to other people as well. Just because you can just tell that she's hyping herself up, you probably feel hyped as that too. But it still has that 2007 vibe, like, instrumental taste to it. So I think I would have to put this in a throwback song that's way different to my White girl music throwbacks. This cannot be there, unfortunately. Unfortunately, this is not Katy Perry. "Last Friday Night" cannot be in the same playlist as this.

Interviewer: Yeah, what else stood out to you?

Participant 8: I think I really liked that beginning part of it. I think it was like, kind of like hyping yourself up and that was very. And I think the still that I could still really pay attention to the instruments, that still stood out to me. And I think, obviously, I'm biased right now knowing it's from 2007, but I feel like I would kind of still know it's from the 2000s era just because of the instrument usage. And just from that way, I feel like I can really. . . . That stands out to me a lot. I see. No, that makes sense.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah, this one was 1997.

Participant 8: Oh, 1997? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, it did sound old.

Interviewer: What other music would you compare this to?

- Participant 8: I mean like, probably like Nicki Minaj like any like hype rap music. I guess like I wouldn't I see Doja Cat in there because I feel like Doja Cat more is like pop more or like she's like more versatile you can't really put that in the box but like I feel like maybe that or like maybe maybe like Iggy Azalea. I can kind of see that in a way but more like old school sound.
- Interviewer: So would you identify with this music?
- Participant 8: Yeah I think definitely that this would be like something if I'm like going I think I wouldn't play this on my own I wouldn't be like craving this music I don't think so but I feel like if I'm in the mood for '90s music today and then I'm like oh I want this on that playlist so like if I want that like if I'm really instrumental I would probably have that in my playlist.
- Interviewer: And then I like focusing a little more on the album cover what do you notice about it?
- Participant 8: It's like very much like you can see like a confident kind of fearing about it because I feel like just the body language is like laid back like looking down on the camera yeah like foot in front it's like very much like nonchalant kind of. Like I feel like definitely like if you have like one and the other person you can just see like this person is going through it and then this person is just like even like this the lacks I think I feel like the bigger like obviously like that's a '90s trend with like big T-shirts and stuff like that but I feel like you can still like sense that like more of a relaxed fit and then just like she is she just seems like that that girl you know she just seems like that girl and I can definitely like see that even like the title name *Supa Dupa Fly* like why exactly like you know what she knows who she is yes. I can kind of see these two in the same because of the similar instruments but it's a message but I feel like both of them are needed in like a space.
- Interviewer: So, one more. So we are taking a skip from 1997 to 2003. Okay. She released another album called *This Is Not A Test!* And since I see you're observing, we can do the album cover right off the bat. Do you notice anything about it?
- Participant 8: Mmm, I feel like this, I mean, I think this is like a take behind and just like army feel, like a military feel to it. Kind of like with the suits, very like uniformed and like the dogs, like it's a pitbull, kind of like going off of that. I feel like this is more, *This Is Not a Test!* Like maybe there's like going to be like a political aspect to it or just like something, definitely very different vibes to this [referencing *Supa Dupa Fly*]. So I'm like, it's like not relaxed because I feel like I could see like this is more of like, either like you could tell it's like a very calm thing, album more of like a personal album, whereas this could just be a political or it could just be like a professional form too. But I think this can like go along with many like songs, but I think it definitely, it could go more like political. We're gonna listen to her song.
- Interviewer: Well we're going to listen to her song "Wake Up" from that.
- [SONG PLAYS]
- Interviewer: Okay, yeah. How is this song making you feel?
- Participant 8: Yeah, it's like very much like a political I was thinking about like, I remember like Black Panther Party like definitely had like, I remember they having like political music like

political songs too. And like, it was more of like, for the message. And that was like, this was like, definitely that like a message part. And I feel like this, you could see like, even like, it was more stripped. There wasn't as many instruments. So I think they really wanted you to pay attention to the lyricism. Similar to like, I feel like, I feel like with Black Panther Party, they definitely had some songs that I was like more stripped and you wanted to like pay attention to songs like they had like, and like war cries or like battle like, I remember them having that and like, she like quoted like Martin Luther King like, talking like having this like political correctness like awareness kind of. Like, she talked about Miss Anita Baker like these are like very like influencer people. And like, I feel like it's definitely like even was like I kind of like had like Beyoncé what vibes from it to like way like old Beyoncé. And I could definitely see that with like Jay-Z like featuring in it. I feel like you can definitely see that artist in mind. But yeah, I feel like kind of it's like very representative of the album to cover.

Interviewer: Are you noticing any emotions in yourself?

Participant 8: Yeah, I think it's like a war like a battle, not a battle cry. It's like wake up. I think that was like the way that they amplified that wake up to it was very much like you need to like get up and do something. And that's why I thought of like Black Panther Party too because like I remember them doing it more of like to like show like you need to do something like you know give back to your own community because this was like to like Black people to their own communities like help out and like have that community aspect to it. And like that being in a village type vibe. And I think that definitely was in that way and like, they were like was like very like, kind of, I want to say like, okay with like, you know, like you don't have to have a gun you don't have to make legal money you don't have to do like all this like correct stuff. But you know what, it's like what you have to try it's like if you try it's oh well, it's more like you need to try it's like breaking out of that cycle because you don't cause systemic racism and stuff like that it's like hard to kind of break that cycle and I did talk about like prisons institutions like being institutionalized and stuff like that which um so like you definitely have like a lot like a very big message. So I think it's definitely like more. I would want I would hear this more like when we have a message to do it. I feel like it's like kind of like I feel like you should like I wouldn't hear this like a day to day life just because I feel like it's gonna like lack its meaning. It's gonna be too normalized and like, it's not going to give you that kick, but I can definitely hear this like during parades or like when there is like a political like message that needs to be drawn up I can definitely see this like really carrying it away.

Interviewer: You highlighted like a lot of different parts of the song as well which and like obviously you have some contextual knowledge. Would you say you identify with this music?

Participant 8: Yeah. I think definitely when i was like like the first line when they said motherfuckers better wake up stop selling cracks to the like the Black people it reminded me of like basically the war on drugs like kind of with um i think it was Ronald Reagan who created all that and also like the gang affiliation and all that that was like all in LA. And that was and I know I think Jay-Z's from LA. So definitely I think like the contextual of it i can definitely like see it happening and like have that contextual and I really like, resonate with the message.

Interviewer: Would you relate this or connect this music to any other works?

Participant 8: In other works, I think Black Panther Party. I know they had a lot of musical artists coming out that kind of like amplified it and I know because in like Black community music is like very integral to their culture as well. So I feel like that's like kind of like how they kind of this is like making music for them by them and I think that really highlights the message as well also because of like literacy and like all that. So I definitely and also I think the instrumentals that they use was like also very like important in the way of like it still resonated with like kind of that time frame music so like any kind of regular person could like listen to it and kind of have that access to like get the knowledge that they were trying to like show like even the the words that they've used and stuff like that it was like very much like local like vernacular and I feel like that's like really important. I think like especially like just like going off and just vernacular in general like you had like Kamala Harris like talking to her in political speeches right but she was well very well spoken. So like that like kind of didn't reach the audience that we wanted to reach yeah but you know like she couldn't like dumb it quote unquote dumb it down either because then they would be like oh she's uneducated because she's a Black woman yeah so it's like that fine line but here because this is like a music for them by them type thing. I feel like the vernacular they use was like very much like integral to the resonance to like kind of do this and it's more like kind of like talking about like more about trying rather than the fruit of the whole thing. Like they've said like if you try that's like all right you know you don't have to like make you don't have to do everything but like you know you gotta like kind of get in touch with it. So this feels like I don't know if I could say identify in a way of like because I'm not from the community. But I definitely can see the importance of it.

Interviewer: Now like, listening to both Erykah and Missy, like listening and like talking, what emotions would you say you feel yourself right now?

Participant 8: I think just like there's that one meme of like "I've been in shock of all the culture" it's like more like the substance of it and I think it's like obviously this is like something in the back of the mind so like obviously it's like very versatile and you see all parts of it. But, I think having it back to back to back you can kind of see like the versatility of it all and I think it's like really like nuanced in the way and I think there's a balance like you kind of need that political kind of messages through especially for minorities because they kind of have to protect themselves. Because like you know like if we don't protect ourselves like who's gonna protect us type of thing and like that was like I feel like definitely this song was that like it's like you know no one else is gonna protect Black people we have to protect like Black people have to protect themselves type of vibe. But then you still have like the angsty like kind of like calm calm kind of vibe which is like very similar but then you also have like the confidence which is really important too because like you know because of all these like political struggles and stuff like that they've been beaten down over and over again but you know they got to remember that they're still that bad b* you know. They still have to remember all that. You know like confidence is really important and it's like kind of like you need you need everything for the world to like go around it's like not something like one doesn't have more flavor or more substance or more importance than the other. I feel like when you are just like paying attention to like the angstiness you just remember the angstiness. But then if you're only remembering with the political message and you kind of don't have a life without it and that could get really depressing as well. But obviously you can't really be confident all the way because that's this ignorance in some ways yeah. So, I feel like definitely you kind of get all that it just shows you like how um everything has like a substance to it and how each thing carries like a movement to it towards it and like it just like shows like how everything kind of like is for the community

and how everything's needed. And like it's nothing that needs to be like pitted against each other. It's not like this artist is doing better than the other because they're focusing on the real things no you kind of needed you need everything for, for a community yeah.

Interviewer: What do you feel? Do you feel hyped up mellowed out? Happy, angry?

Participant 8: I think like each song made me in that way. When I was listening to one song, I wasn't still thinking of the before song. So like right now I'm like that political mindset. So I think I was like, it's more in that way because I'm like, you know what, like how did the song even sound like? But it's not because like it wasn't memorable. It's just that like the last, like each song had a lasting effect to it. So I think that was like really important. And I think I can really understand like, like for the time, I can understand why it did so good. Yeah, you know, like obviously because we've grown up in like surrounding like a modern nice like instruments and like everything like that. It's like very different and like this is like so palatable, but like not as digestible as like what we used to listen to. And there is that shift. So, I can understand like how like older generations would be like, you know what, what is this all a sampling? Yeah, like this like all of the music. Yeah, like, you know, I can understand why they think this is the real music. But for us, this could just be overstimulating. Yeah, so I think it's like very fitting for the time.

Interviewer: That makes sense. And you said yourself like when you listen to music, it's to feel a certain way.

Participant 8: Yeah, exactly. So it's like, this makes me feel like I time traveled.

Interviewer: Yeah, well that's all I have. Thank you, again.

B. Interview with participant 9 on April 2, 2025

Interviewer: Thank you again for offering your time to participate in this interview and for filling out the consent form. For structure, I'll start with initial questions, then we will listen to a handful of songs and view album art, then we will end with follow-up questions.

Participant 9: Okay.

Interviewer: When do you tend to listen to music?

Participant 9: Almost always. I walk around with headphones. Listen to music while walking around, sometimes I fall asleep to music.

Interviewer: Do you ever find yourself leaning toward specific genres of music?

Participant 9: I'm a big fan of indie, alternative rock, hip hop, or any other genre. Not really mainstream but it depends. When doing homework, I listen to non-English music and when I'm sleeping I listen to jazz music.

Interviewer: What does music mean to you?

Participant 9: Music to me? It's an accessible way of self-expression. There's like a difference between a painting with no lyrics than the art form of music. Words convey stuff. The vibe of songs

convey things. It like resembles the human experience better in this mix. It's powerful with how it delivers emotions.

Interviewer: How would you describe music culture in America? As in the United States?

Participant 9: I feel like music culture is going to be like, the first thing that came to mind when I think about it, it's like, I think America is a very, very big hub for like music of other cultures. And it's also like, there's so many concerts, there's so many events that happen here. And I feel like, yeah, probably part of America being like such a melting pot is like, I there's so many different like, styles of music that come in. And I feel like a lot of music was born in America, too. Something that comes to mind is like blues and jazz, a lot of like rap and things like that did stem from like, the Black community and various parts. I grew up in St. Louis, and that's where blues was found, and like a big boom in jazz and stuff like that. And so I feel like that's the stuff that feels like very American to me. But we also have like, there's a big reason why K-Pop is really popular over here. People carry their cultures and their music over. And I feel like America has gotten a lot of influence from those, the music that that sounds like you hear stuff on the radio in rural Missouri that has like afro beats or like that has like a Latin drum pattern or stuff like that. It's cool.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah, I mean, you already mentioned you listen to like, a lot of different stuff. Would you say you like like R&B and hip-hop? Or no?

Participant 9: Yeah, I definitely I think that's like, probably like top three genres.

Interviewer: Do you have any like favorite songs or artists?

Participant 9: Oh, um, the answer is yes, but I need to think. I'd like, okay, I had a really big phase of like Daniel Caesar for a while. Um, I love like JID, like, um, there's like Saba and Smino, you know, those, um, they're from St. Louis, so I actually like saw them a bunch. Yeah, yeah, Smino is at least. Um, and I like still like also like the more popular stuff, like SZA is amazing. But yeah, I feel like there's also probably a bunch of artists. I feel like I'm less of someone that listens to like artists and more like specific songs.

Interviewer: Do you have specific songs?

Participant 9: Oh god, I'd have to find, there's one song called "Are We Still In Love?" I think it's about Gloria Tell. No, I've never heard anyone speak about this artist. I've never seen another song this artist made, but I think it's one of the greatest instrumentals I've heard in a while. So it's stuff like that. I feel like I use a lot of Discover Weekly type stuff on Spotify, I've been searching on YouTube, and I pull songs rather than stuff from big artists. That's always a beef I have with some friends. They try to ask me, what's my favorite album? Is it like, I don't really listen to albums?

Interviewer: That makes sense. And then more specifically, like you've read, I'm researching, like you mentioned, Black musical cultures, but mainly R&B and hip-hop, like shaping ideas of freedom and justice and identity and just conveying emotions. So with that, I decided to focus on two artists. So one of the first artists, do you know Erykah Badu?

Participant 9: I do, yeah.

- Interviewer: Yeah, what are your thoughts on her?
- Participant 9: Okay, yeah. My sister was really, really obsessed with her. And so a lot of my, I feel like it's like randomly a feeling of nostalgia for that. Where I know that like, that style of like soul and R&B music definitely does like translate into a bunch of other things. I feel like it's been like a stepping stone for a lot of other artists.
- Interviewer: And then I'm also going to say I'm Missy Elliott. Do you know Missy?
- Participant 9: I do know Missy Elliott.
- Interviewer: What are your thoughts about her?
- Participant 9: I know that when I think about her, there's a lot of stepping stones, I feel like she was the story of a lot of really, really popular and empowering Black female artists who are making music right now. I've seen clips of concerts and stuff from her and they're super cool.
- Interviewer: Okay, well, we're going to listen to some some songs now. So, in 1997, Erykah Badu released her debut album, *Baduizm*. This is the album cover. And we're going to listen to one of her songs, "Drama." It is like a six-minute song. So, about halfway through, I'll just start asking questions and it'll just play in the back.
- Participant 9: Okay.
- [SONG PLAYS]
- Interviewer: Okay. How are you feeling after listening to this song? Do you like this song?
- Participant 9: I do like the song. I feel like it's definitely on the slower side from some of the stuff I listened to, but it's very nice. I feel like a lot of the stuff I'm going to come back to is going to be about jazz and stuff because I've been jazz band for a really long time. But it's a lot of the chords and the pattern of the hi-hats as well. It's cool seeing that stuff compounding because a lot of jazz and blues goes into R&D and hip-hop and then go into a lot of other things. That progression is really fun. And the lyrics are very, very good. I like the dichotomy of she's saying, how can we go on? And she's also saying, I'm tired of people saying, how can we go on?
- Interviewer: Yeah, when you were listening to the song, did you notice any specific emotions in yourself arising?
- Participant 9: I feel like it's like begrudgingly hopeful, almost, where it's like, here's all of the things that are like, wrong here, all the like, suddenly people are going, like, the vibe is definitely always going to be, how can we go on with all this stuff going on? But it's still like showing like some opposition to that mentality of like, you can't be saying this. And I feel like the emotion of the song really conveys that too, with like the slow tone, with the repeating like, yeah, love. I feel like it's a reminding of a lot of like, still write songs that you hear of like, ripping some sort of like, chance or being some sort of, other things like that, yeah.
- Interviewer: And then I remember you saying you listen to different songs at their attention today. When do you think you listen to this song?

- Participant 9: I feel like this is like, like long walks or something like that. I feel like it's not something I could be like, I feel like songs are slower. I like paying more attention to, um, or if I'm listening like fast-paced music or something like that, it's when I'm like doing other like multitasking or didn't work for things like that. Um, yeah, I feel like this is like, like songs like that move slower and pace and like have like lyrics that you want to like dive into and think about are good to like focus on more than a lot of the other times I can't listen to music.
- Interviewer: And then you already mentioned some lyrics and like some beats, but was there anything else that stood out to you specifically in this?
- Participant 9: Definitely religious undertones is there a lot. I feel like a lot of music also comes from church hymns and stuff. That's the style that translates through to other aspects of music when you're making other genres and things like that. I took a lot of stuff into music and stuff I was in high hymns and melodies from that and like a lot of the messaging being around like God and things and then it continues down the line.
- Interviewer: Would you compare this music with any other works or people? Either old or modern.
- Participant 9: At the top of my head I'm blanking.
- Interviewer: That's okay. Would you see you identify with this music? Or not really?
- Participant 9: I mean I think it does like talk about the human experience as a whole to a lot of the extent but like obviously I don't have like a lot of the the place where she's coming from she mentions like segregation from like race discrimination and things like that and I feel like that doesn't affect me as much as it would for sure. But again I think it's very like antithetical to the human experience of like there's always there's a lot of like problems going on in the world there's a lot of injustice and different groups experience different types of injustice. But the ones that you can speak on still translate and I think that's also a good part of music where like I can listen to this is a silly example, but like I can listen to a song by like a female singer talking about how awful our boyfriend is and so pull something out of that you know. I am not a woman. I don't have a boyfriend that's being awful to me this there's things the emotion is what you can take and you can translate but it's less like the actual lived experience.
- Interviewer: What about the album cover? Do you notice anything about the album cover?
- Participant 9: Um, it seems like she's having like a headache, she's in pain of some sort. Like the, the, the call the thing on her head and like the bracelets as well are also like probably her being true to herself, pretty unique to her. Um, um, yeah, it does seem like she's in like some sort of like headache, pain, thing like that though.
- Interviewer: I see, I see. Is it making you feel a certain emotion for anything?
- Participant 9: I feel like it's definitely conveying, like, feeling overwhelmed, feeling stressed, something like that to me, feeling like the muscles in the hand seems, like, strained and it seems like there's, like, a lot of things, thoughts in your head.

- Interviewer: Okay, so we're going to skip to 2007. She made music in between, but we're just going to skip. In 2007, she released *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)*, another album, and we're going to listen to it. Same thing since it has six minutes. Like halfway through I'll just start.
- Participant 9: Cool.
- Interviewer: It's called "Master Teacher Medley."
- [SONG PLAYS]
- Interviewer: Yeah, Same thing. How do you feel? Do you like this song, do you not like this song?
- Participant 9: Yeah, I definitely, I like this one a fair bit, to be honest, I play the, the, this, the way that they do the back of the base and like the harmonies and stuff is similar to some other music I listened to.
- Interviewer: Are there certain parts that stood out to you?
- Participant 9: Yeah, I feel like the repetition of a beautiful world I'm trying to find gets paralleled really cool, where it's like both trying to find that within herself is what she seems to be saying. And then, also looking at all the things in the world and being like, I don't know if I'm finding it here, it's the vibe I kind of got from it. Big fans, like the piano rums and stuff. Yeah, that and the repetition of the beautiful world when it's like being aware, I feel like a lot of this, I lost my turn of thoughts.
- Interviewer: It's okay.
- Participant 9: I think the representation definitely stands out, again, for me a lot, I think. It's like looking at the things in multiple different contexts, but the part that's repeating is changes that's meeting through the different contexts it's looking at.
- Interviewer: And were there any emotions you felt yourself leaning toward while listening to this song?
- Participant 9: I think that like the way the harmonies like work on the like, there's like distance built in there, where I think that it's meant to get you feeling a little uncomfortable. Where like, again, additionally, I stay woke, but going through different things where some of them you want to be woke for some of them you probably like, it's like a downside of your life, the fact that you're so aware of these things. Yeah. And I feel like it's, again, with the beautiful world thing too. It's like, I it's very like introspective. It makes you like have to think a lot.
- Interviewer: When do you think you listen to this song?
- Participant 9: Um, I think probably similar to the last one, to be honest with you, I think it's, I categorize them using a listen to like different boxes. And I feel like we'd fall into like, again, something you'd want to like pay attention to while you're listening to. Um, yeah, but definitely is a lot more like easy to have in the background than the other song I'd say. I think that was like slow. Yeah.

- Interviewer: Would you compare this music to anything else?
- Participant 9: Something that came to mind was like “Redbone.” They do like the the vocal style and the harmonies are very very similar.
- Interviewer: Would you say you identify or connect to this music?
- Participant 9: I think similar to before where it’s like, I’m obviously not going to connect with the the roots of what she’s saying, but the emotions you definitely can experience like different parts of your, your daily life of just like the struggle of like trying to figure out like the beautifulness inside yourself and also with like the different things in the world, finding the beauty in things when things are rough and like the history of the world is kind of like putting people down as a general, as a general that happens a lot.
- Interviewer: Yeah. And then about the album. Do you notice anything? Anything to send out to you? Is it making you feel certain of the way?
- Participant 9: The spelling of America is obviously intentional. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think it’s similar to the previous one where I think it was the clothing she was wearing, but this one’s more about her hairstyle and that kind of stuff, which is trying to be proud of her Blackness, I’m guessing. And also, I love the instruments that are all in her hair. It’s interesting, because there’s a lot of instruments, but there’s also a dollar sign in there. There’s also like—yeah, there’s stuff that looks like treasure, almost. Like a cross, an onc. I think it’s just meant to be encapsulating that all these things, yeah, they’re all part of whatever, the new Amerykah, she says. Her face also looks very, very serious.
- Interviewer: Yeah, okay. We can like come back to things if you have like a lingering thoughts that pop-up, but we’ll move on to the next one. So also in 1997, the same year, as Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott, also released her debut album called *Supa Dupa Fly*. So we’re gonna listen to “They Don’t Wanna F*** Wit’ Me.”
- [SONG PLAYS]
- Interviewer: Okay same thing. Do you like this song? How do you feel?
- Participant 9: It’s nice. I really like the um with the vocal percussion that they they put in there too with like the um like the fast notes worked right so that was fun. Um I’m always a sucker for drum beats. I did drums for way too long. Um yeah I feel like this one is also like you can listen to it and I’m sure you’re asked about it but you can probably listen to it. It feels easier to listen to like other like multiple parts of your day, multiple contexts stuff like that. Um the last one that you have to think about were one that feels like it’s like uh like there’s a complex spot.
- Interviewer: And would you say, would you say you, like, identify with this music?
- Participant 9: Um, identify probably not a ton. I feel like sometimes you like listen to songs to like impose that vibe on yourself though. Like there’s a lot of times where I’ll be in like a low productivity mood and I put on songs that’s like, you’re killing it. You know, I’m like high, high upbeat songs. That’s like, you’re gonna like murder this day. You know what I mean?

I feel like it's something like that where it's like manifesting almost that they don't want to sound like them. But I don't know, I don't think that's my vibe alone.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that stood out to you in this song? Besides what you already mentioned?

Participant 9: I feel like it's also probably like trying to break some norms and stuff like if I were just like I'm not gonna rhyme on this part I'm just gonna like do the fuck I want I thought that's always fun. Um yeah I feel like especially because there's probably a lot of like scrutiny on her with her first album yeah it's like uh female rap artist. It's like tough in the time where she was like the be popular to be respected and stuff like that. Um and so I feel like having the attitude of like I'm just gonna do it the fuck I want is um contagious and it's good and yeah.

Interviewer: Would you compare this work to anything?

Participant 9: Um I feel like that she inspired definitely like you can see the inspiration in a lot of like modern like female uh Black like rap artists um like Doechii you can tell pulled some stuff from this. You can uh yeah there's a lot of that I feel like the Doechii's the one that comes to mind these like similar like flow patterns and um yeah arrogance almost.

Interviewer: And then, what do you notice about the album cover?

Participant 9: Definitely like confidence vibe like she's like leaning back out of the foot to the camera is good touch. Yeah this one just feels like very laid-back.

Interviewer: Is it making you feel a certain way??

Participant 9: Uh, probably just like the same confidence thing I mentioned before. I feel like it's, uh, that's the energy it's trying to put out. That's something that gets contagious.

Interviewer: Okay, cool. So now for the last, she also made music in between but we're going to skip. In 2003, she released her album, *This is Not a Test!* And we're going to listen to her song, "Wake Up."

Participant 9: I'm excited for you to ask me about this album coming.

[SONG PLAYS]

Interviewer: Yeah same thing. How is it making you feel? Do you like it?

Participant 9: I very much like this one. I feel like I'm always a fan of songs that like are pushing for like class consciousness type of vibe. People be more aware. I thought there's a lot of artificial discontent that gets like sewn in in groups. And I feel like a song that we loved for a while was, I think, oh, it was a Jay-Z song called The Story of Bunfing. I think The Story of Oppa. Yeah, "The Story of O.J." is what it is. And it's a similar vibe of like people who spend a lot of time like targeting each other of like people in like any group. I know she's referencing like the Black community, but it's like you are the reason you're pulling us down rather than like all people like standing together and working towards things that benefit everyone. I like the thing of like even if you don't have like even if you're

making legal money versus someone who's like doing like guns or stuff like that. I think referencing like sex worker is a turning part of this. Regardless, like you all have like similar interests. You have reasons why you should be like advocating for each other still. I always, I enjoy messaging like that, I enjoy songs like that.

Interviewer: Did you feel certain emotions as well during this song?

Participant 9: Yeah, I feel like it makes you feel like inspired almost like you want to go out and like start making a difference for things. Like that's important. That's a good feeling to have.

Interviewer: When do you think you listen to this song?

Participant 9: Um I feel like you would listen to something like this like in like the gym. I didn't like I'd listen to music there for that too but like things where you need to like work up like motivation I feel this is a good song like feel motivated about things where it's like you're doing this for yeah.

Interviewer: You mentioned that Jay-Z song, would you compare it to anything else?

Participant 9: I think that's the best comparison I have.

Interviewer: Would you say you identify with this music?

Participant 9: I mean, again, like the emotion behind the general messaging, yes, obviously, I think it's not that I'm not the target audience. But I had a big phase where I listened to a lot of like union music, stuff like that, which is a similar vibe where it's like, you should be supporting the people around you and realizing that there's like bigger problems of but rather than like, tackling each other. Oh, something I forgot to mention that the song, the song does this where it's talking about like, buying expensive jewelry is not gonna like, be the fix. I think that's like a critique I've heard in both songs, like, about a lot of like, people in the Black community get very, very famous. Yeah, they talk about like, you're not building up for a generational wealth, you're just trying to show that like, I did this and here's all the ways I'm gonna show off about it. Yeah. And it ends up like putting other people down and like setting people further behind. And I feel like when Jay-Z did that about like, O.J. and the song here where it's like, it's not buying jewelry is not going to fix this is what like she said in the movie. I think that rings true. A lot of people do try and like, like, artificial wealth and show things make themselves seem more important and bigger than they are. And the process they put other people down toward the same boat but don't have that same like means to show boat.

Interviewer: And then, oh yeah, and what about the album cover? Do you notice anything about it? What is standing out to you?

Participant 9: *This Is Not a Test!* seems like to be like a call to action it has like the the truck that has like the speaker phones on top of it that's generally used for like alarms or like getting people like oh there's an emergency started like doing stuff. I feel like that's the biggest thing, especially because the people on top of the truck are standing up straight, they seem ready to go. And the name of the album goes with that too, where it's like, this is not a drill, this is actually time to start doing shit. I couldn't tell you what the dogs mean.

- Interviewer: Are you getting any certain like, emotions from this?
- Participant 9: It definitely just you feel like preparing for like a combat like time to like actually like suit up and start doing things.
- Interviewer: Okay cool. And then now, like, after we listened to those songs, and just like, talking about music, do you notice like, any emotions in yourself right now? Just after everything?
- Participant 9: I feel like a lot of it is just back to what I said about like music is a good way to express emotions really directly about like things that people haven't experienced. Like with art you have to have like paintings you have to have some sort of background of like what is this thing I'm looking at for music you're able to like imbue that in people. And I feel like it's a good way to get people like empathetic towards whatever you're trying to talk about. It's a good way to get people like engaged and involved and I definitely think that I'm feeling all those things if I listen to music like this where it's like all of these events are things that like are very very important to the history and culture for a lot of people and they're like even though I am was not there for like all this stuff that they're like talking about when they're making these albums and stuff, you can see parallels in that. And that's just the case in like history in general where a lot of it's like about like repetition and seeing like that when things you can learn from the past and I feel like that's a, it gives a cool way of like learning to be honest to you.
- Interviewer: Yeah, that's all I have for you. Thank you so much for just being down for this process.

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