

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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MATERIAL WITNESS RACE, IDENTITY, AND THE POLITICS OF GANGSTA RAP

Transcript

Michael Eric Dyson:

I want to thank the organizers of this conference for extending to me the invitation to talk about these very important issues, essentialism and notions of identity. And how I want to frame them tonight is to talk about them within the contexts of race, and to talk about the ways in which race is played out, the ways in which race played out in American culture. And how it both indexes our inability to speak about race and identity, and also at once our overwhelming obsession with race. Which is virtually indicated by our refusal to acknowledge its centrality. On the one hand we have a divided mind. We acknowledge the centrality of race as a kind of mantra and shibboleth of our liberal acknowledgement of the realities that we live with. On the other hand, we deny the nitty-gritty realities that result from the presence and practice of race.

Let me say before I begin that what I want to do is to place these theories, understandings of essentialism and anti-essentialism, the politics of identity, notions of multi-culturalism, multi-centricism, pivoting our identities around multiple centers. Because people don't have to give up the notion of having themselves centered. But its so that those centers will not become so dominant that they preclude the possibility of other people pivoting around their centers. So its not a kind of, in one sense, a liberal tolerance that permits whatsoever to happen. Because in a real world of conflict, the ways in which our identities conflict are inevitable. But how do we adjudicate differences? How do we understand and comprehend the necessity for the expression of difference, and at the same time to have constraints and limitations? To talk about particularity and specificity and yet articulate a universal conception of human emancipation that allows all of us—gay, lesbian, straight, African-American, Native-American, Latino, Latina, Asian-American, Caucasian and so on—to move toward a world in which as Dorothy Day says it is possible for all of us to behave decently?

And so I think what I want to do is tell a few stories tonight. To tell stories that index the importance of difference, and talk about the necessity of grappling with it on the ground, right on the ground, as Wes Montgomery say, from a view point of the nitty-gritty of history, a kind of Hegelian muddiness that we want to romp in tonight. Which is appropriate for Saturday night I assume. And to talk a bit about identity politics on the ground, what it looks like in terms of the relationship between race and identity.

So I want to talk a bit about race and identity then talk a bit about my own educational background, which was kind of weird and interesting, I hope. And then to talk about gangsta rap and the whole fight over gangsta rap as one of the arenas within which essentialist notions of identity are being contested and conceded, put-forth and rejected. Both by cultural producers on the ground, who though without the extraordinary vocabulary of essentialism that we command nonetheless engaged in sophisticated forms of cultural analysis and provocation that I think are quite instructive.

I can hardly think of a subject more constrained by confusion and bitterness than the relationship of race to identity. Our anguish about this matter is at least three-centuries older than the current turmoil stamped in the culture wars. American views on race and identity have wearily tracked our Faustian bargain with slavery, an accommodation of moral principle to material gain that has colored national history ever since.

The paradox of our situation is that Americans are continually fatigued and consumed by race. We sense, indeed, we fear, that its unavoidable presence is the truest key to our national identity. Yet we are as easily prone to deny that race has any but the most trivial effect on human affairs. And that it has little to do with personal achievement or failure. Therefore the people whose lives have been shaped by the malicious meanings of race, to be sure there are ennobling ones as well, must now endure the irony of its alleged disappearance and silence. If they speak of the continued effect of racial bigotry, for instance, they are accused of exploiting unfairly their status as victims. If they talk of the injury inflicted by coded speech, that avows neutrality even as it reinforces bias, they are called supporters of political correctness. If they appeal to black or Latino or Native American heritage as a source of security in the face of hostility or neglect, they are said to practice the distorting politics of identity. And if they argue that Emerson be joined by say, Baldwin, in getting a fix on the pedigree of American literary invention, if they insist that the cannon jams, occasionally backfires, when stuffed with powerful material poorly placed, they are maligned for trading in a dangerous multi-cultural currency.

All of this makes clear that language is crucial to understanding, perhaps solving, though at other times intensifying the quandaries of identity that vex most blacks, and indeed most Americans. Language simply supremely reminds us that we exist at all. Whether this is positive or negative, an uplifting or degrading experience, depends largely on how language, plus the politics it reflects and the power it extends is used on our behalf or set against us. This is especially true for people of color. Early in American life the furious entanglements of ideology and commerce calls disputes between and about black folk to follow a viciously circular logic. Slaves deprived of the mechanics of literacy, for fear of their use in seeking liberation, were judged inhuman and unintelligent because they could neither read nor write. Even those blacks who managed to show rhetorical or literary mastery were viewed as exceptional or hopelessly mediocre. However unfair language became the most important battlefield on which black identity was fought. This is no less true today, whether its gangsta rap or the discourse of Jesse Jackson. The most important concerns of black life are intertwined in the politics of language. From the canon to

gangsta rap. From the debate about welfare reform to the fracas about family values. From the roots of urban violence to the place of black religion.

The threats of course are not entirely from the outside. The burden of complexity that rests at the heart of cultures across the black Diaspora is often avoided in narrow visions of racial identity within black life. Its earnest proponents evoke a vocabulary of authenticity and purity in their defense. Looking for the primal African-American experience. Searching for the authentic expression of African-American identity. Now, part of that search and quest for authenticity and realness is articulated against a fabric of social relations that over-determine black peoples lives. The material conditions that they have to contend with, the ways in which their intelligence is indicted on a daily basis, the development of the so-called bell-curve argument, actual material texts which indict the fundamental premise of their intelligence. This, then, the imposition of stereotype upon black life, and I'll talk about this later, evokes an essentialist response in defense of quests for emancipation and of claims of black intelligence. True enough then, the cry of authenticity rings as a spirited call for resistance to these damning influences of stereotypes from white quarters. But it echoes as a hollow chant when voiced in lead with the resounding complexity of identities expressed in the literature and the music, the preaching and the art of black culture. Likewise, prolonged concentration on a fictitious, romantic black cultural purity obscures the virtues of complex black identity. And edifying impurity infuses and informs black experiments with self-understanding and fires the urge to embrace and discard selves shaped in the liberty of radical improvisation. Fiction and jazz, for instance, urge us to savor the outer limits of our imagination as the sacred space of cultural identity. When advocates of particular versions of afrocentricism, and essentialist notions of black identity, and Black Nationalist claims, claim a common uniqueness for black life they deny the repertoire of difference that characterizes African cultures.

If this is true for black culture it is even more the case with American culture. The two are intimately joined. Forged into a, sometimes reluctant, symbiosis that mocks the rigid lines of language and identity that set them apart. American culture is inconceivable without African-American life. Can we imagine the high art of fusing religious rhetoric with secular complaint without Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X? Their craft lifted freedom and democracy from their internment in ink and unleashed them as vital motives to social action. Can we imagine the will to spontaneity, and what anthropologist Melville Herskovits calls the deification of accident that threads through American music without the artistry of Armstrong, Coltrane, and Ellington. The hybrid textures of the American grain are the most powerful argument for relinquishing beliefs in American orthodoxies, American essentialisms, in the rigid construction of American and African-American and even global identities, and for celebrating the edifying impurity behind democratic experiments with culture and identity. In this strict sense then, multiculturalism, for instance, doesn't argue for a future state of affairs to come into being. Anti-essentialism doesn't argue for something that's not already always going on, it merely argues for American society to come out of the closet of essentialism and to acknowledge there have been wonderful and edifying transgressions across numerous boundaries of identity already. It is a

request for America to own up to its rich and creolized practice in every corner of American life.

I think of my own early education as one example, an illustration of the possibility of black and white books together shaping a course of learning and arguing implicitly about the politics of anti-essentialism in the very act of reading and appropriating knowledge. In the fifth grade I experienced a profound introduction to the life and literature of black people. Mrs. James was my teacher, a full-cheeked, honey-brown skinned woman whose commitment to her students was remarkable. Mrs. James sole mission was to bathe her students in the vast ocean of black intellectual and cultural life. She taught us to drink in the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. In fact I won my first contest of any sort when I received a prized blue ribbon for reciting Dunbar's "Little Brown Baby," with sparkling eyes. I don't want to relive in the nostalgia of my own fifth-grade experience. Mrs. James also taught us to read Margaret Walker Alexander. I can still remember the thrill of listening to a chorus of fifth-grade black girls reciting, first in turn and then in unison, the verses to Alexander's "Four My People." The rhetorical staccatos and crescendos, their clear articulation and emotional expressiveness, were taught and encouraged by Mrs. James.

But she also opened to us the lore and legend of the Black west long before it became stylish to do so. We read about the exploits of black cowboys like Deadwood Dick and Bill Pickett. We studied about great inventors like Jan Matzeigler, Garrett Morgan, and Granville T. Woods. The artists and inventors we learned about became for us more than mere names, more than dusty figures entombed in historical memory; they came leaping off of the historical page. Mrs. James helped bring the people we studied into our own lives. Before it became popular, she accented the multicultural nature of American culture and the complex nature of black identity. She was de-essentializing before the word became *au curreant*.

She was teaching us to challenge the politics of essentialism by embracing the broad variety and complex expressions of African American culture. She told us about the debates between W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, my alleged ideological father. And made us understand the crucial differences in their philosophical approaches to educating black folk. There was never a hint that we could skate through school without studying hard. There was never a suggestion that the artistic intellectual work that we investigated was not open to criticism and interpretation. It was never the assumption that this was the last word or the only way to be black. On the contrary, Mrs. James taught us that to really be black we'd have to uphold the empowering intellectual and artistic traditions that we were being taught to understand and explore. And she taught us the importance of not reproducing the same old class biases that shape black curricular around high culture. Learning the real text of African American society. She taught us the importance of Rolland Hayes *and* Bessy Smith. She taught us to appreciate Marion Smith *and* Mahalia Jackson. She encouraged us to revel in Paul Robson *and* Louis Armstrong.

This last element of her pedagogy was particularly important since so many of her students lived in Detroit's inner city. She provided a means of appreciating the popular culture that shaped our lives. As well as extending the quest for literacy by

more traditional means. Thus we never viewed The Temptations or Smokey Robinson as the raw antithesis to cultured life. We were taught to believe that the same musical genius that animated Scott Joplin lighted as well on Stevland Morris, better known as Stevie Wonder. We saw no essential division between “I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings” and “I Can’t Get Next To You.” Thus the postmodern came crashing in on me before I gained sight of it in Derrida and Foucault.

Another event in my adolescence also shaped my quest for knowledge. I can vividly remember receiving a gift of the Harvard Classics by a generous neighbor, Mrs. Bennett when I was an early teen. Her husband, a staunch republican, a fact, which despite my own politics, cautions against my wholesale reproach of the right, had recently died. And while first inclined to donate his collection to a local library, Mrs. Bennett gave them instead to a poor black boy who couldn’t otherwise afford to own them. I was certainly the only boy on my block and undoubtedly in my entire ghetto neighborhood who simultaneously devoured Motown’s music and Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*. I can barely describe my joy in owning Charles Elliot’s monumental assembly of the world’s great literature, this kind of Matthew Arnold construction of the best that has been learned and transmitted. And I was deep into that. I was wading, probably drowning in the knowledge that it offered. I was remembered Tennyson’s lines “Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” That was turning me on.

I cherish as well the sad beauty of Thomas Gray’s poem “Elegy Written in a Courtyard.” Reading into one of its stanzas the expression of unrealized promise for black children in my native Detroit. “Full many a gem of purest ray serene The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear: full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air.” I read over Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography and exulted in Marcus Aurelius, I drank in Milton’s prose and followed Bunion’s pilgrims’ progress. I read John Stewart Mill’s political philosophy and also Thomas Carlisle. And I read Carlisle because I’d always heard Martin King Jr. quote Carlisle, “No lie can live forever.” I read Lincoln and Hobbes and Plutarch, the metaphysical poets and Elizabethan drama. This last indulgence of course led a review of my first book to chide me for resorting to Victorian phrases, which in his view was inauthentic for a *negro* to describe a painful incident—he was a black man himself—of racism in my own life. I was tempted to write him back and explain the origin of my faulty adaptation, but alas I concluded that that way lie tears.

The Harvard Classics whetted my appetite for more learning and I was delighted to discover that it opened an exciting world to me, a world beyond the buzz and bullets and the whiplash of urban violence. One day however that learning led me right to the den of danger. Inspired by reading the English translation of Sartre’s autobiography *Le Mots, The Words*, I rushed to the corner store to buy a cigar thinking that its exotic odor would provide a whiff of the Parisian café life, where the aging master had hammered out his existential creed on the left bank. My fourteen-year old mind was reeling with anticipation as I approached the counter to confidently ask for a stogy. Just then I felt a jolt in my back, it was the barrel of a sawed off shotgun, and its

owners ordered me and the other customers to find the floor as he and his partners robbed the store. Luckily we survived the six guns brandished that day to take our money. Long before Marx and Gramsci would remind me, I understood that consciousness is shaped by the material realm, that learning takes place in a world of trouble. I was thrilled later on that the pastor of my church, Frederick Sampson, was also a figure of enormous erudition, who himself engaged in reading both Dubois and Shakespeare, and engaging in popular culture as a way of showing to us the complexity and beauty of black identity. Mrs. James, Dr. Sampson and my early habits of reading are to me models of how the American experiment in identity can be made broad and deep enough to accommodate the complex meanings of our identities. To embrace Shakespeare we need not malign Dubois, to explore black identity we need forsake the learning of the so-called majority culture.

The controversies surrounding identity and essentialism are sharply drawn for my, mine, and my thinking, around the controversies of hip-hop culture. Which brings us full circle in grappling with how race language and identity are joined, and how their contradictory meanings sometimes collide. Because of its extraordinary visibility and de-vilification in the larger society, and because of the strong veto it has aroused in many black quarters as well, rap perfectly symbolizes the failure of neat pure analysis to illumine the complex workings of black culture and multiplicities of black identities. The debates about hiphop culture strike the deepest nerves in black culture. How we name ourselves. How the white world views us. How we shape images and identities that are tied to commerce and exploitation. How black culture preserves itself while continually evolving. And finally, perhaps most importantly, how survival is linked to the way words are used for and against us, and the politics they enliven and make possible.

And so what I want to do then is talk a bit about the conflicts especially around gangsta rap. And the ways in which conflicts within African American communities index the crucial importance of identity in a way in which an anti-essentialist conception of identity is crucial to understanding complex black cultural products. If the fifteen year evolution of hip-hop teaches us anything, it's that history is made in unexpected ways, by unexpected people, with unexpected results. Rap is now safe from the perils of quick extinction, predicted at its humble start. But its birth in the bitter belly of the seventies proved to be a Rosetta stone of black popular culture. Afros and blunts, funk music and carnal eruptions define a back in the day hip-hop aesthetic. In reality, the severe seventies busted the economic boom of the sixties. The fallout was felt in restructured automobile industries, and collapsed steel mills. It was extended and exported employment to foreign markets. Closer to home, there was the depletion of social services to reverse the material gain of ruin of black life. Later public spaces for black recreation were gutted by Reganomics or violently transformed by lethal drug economies. Hip-hop, then, was born in these bleak conditions. Hip hoppers joined pleasure and rage while turning the details of their difficult lives into craft and capital. This is the world hip-hop would come to represent.

Within hip-hop culture representation signifies privileged persons speaking for less visible or vocal peers. At their best rappers shape the torturous twists of urban fate into lyrical elegies. They represent lives swallowed by too little love or opportunity.

They represent themselves and their peers with aggrandizing anthems that boast of their ingenuity and luck in surviving. The art of representing that is must ballyhooed in hip-hop, is the witness of those left to tell the afflicted story. As rap expands its vision and influence, its unfavorable origins, and its relentless quests represent black youth are both a consolation and a challenge to those who talk about essentialist politics. They remind rappers in particular and young people even more especially that history is not merely the stuff of imperial dreams from above. Representing history is within reach of those who cease the opportunity to speak for themselves, to negotiate the complexity of their historically constructed identities, to represent their own interest at all costs.

Even hip-hops largest controversies are about the politics of identity and representation. Hip hops attitude toward women and gays, continually jolt us in the unvarnished malevolence that they reveal. The sharp responses to raps misogyny and homophobia signify its central roles in battles over the cultural representation of other beleaguered groups. This is particularly true of gangsta rap. While gangsta rap takes the heat for a range of social maladies, from urban violence to sexual misconduct, the roots of our racial misery remain buried beneath moralizing discourse that is confused and sometimes outright dishonest. There is no doubt that gangsta rap is often sexist and reflects a vicious misogyny that has ceased our nation with frightening intensity. It is doubly wounding for black women in particular, who are already beset by attacks from outside their communities to feel the thrust of musical daggers to their dignities and identities from within African American culture. How painful it is for black women, many of whom have fought valiantly for black pride, to hear the dissonant chord of disdain carried in the angry epithet "bitch."

The link between the vulgar rhetorical traditions expressed in gangsta rap and the economic exploitation that dominates the market place is real. The circulation of brutal images of black men as sexual outlaws, and black females a "hoes," in many gangsta rap narratives mirrors ancient stereotypes of black sexual identity. Male and female bodies are turned into commodities. Black sexual desire is stripped of redemptive uses in relationships of great affection or love. Gangsta rappers however don't merely respond to the values and visions of the marketplace. They also help shape them, even if in limited ways. Don't want to surrender a notion of agency, or the belief that popular culture in a kind of early, you know Horkheimian critical theory sense has no possibility of responding within the context of its own consciousness to the possibility of its domination and resisting it simultaneously. Even if that resistance is a relative resistance. The ethic of consumption that pervades our culture certainly supports the rapacious materialism shot through the narratives of gangsta rap. Such an ethic, however, does not exhaust the literal or metaphoric purposes of material wealth in gangsta culture. The imagined and real uses of money to help one's friend, family and neighborhood, occupies a prominent spot in gangsta rap lyrics and lifestyles. Equally troubling is the glamorization of violence, and the romanticization of the culture of guns that pervades gangsta rap. Even as it argues against an essentialist conception of black identity, it reinscribes and reinforces the construction of a rigid notion of what a real authentic gangsta is. The recent legal troubles of Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dog and other gangsta rappers, chastens any defense of the genre, based on simplistic claims that these artists are merely performing roles

that are divorced from real life. Too often for gangsta rappers, life indeed does imitate art. But gangsta rappers aren't simply caving into the pressures of racial stereotyping and the economic awards in a music industry hungry to exploit their artistic imaginations. On this view, gangsta rappers are easily manipulated pawns, in a chess game of material dominance, where their consciences are sold to the highest bidder. Or else gangsta rappers are viewed as the black face of white desire, to distort the beauty of black life. Some critics even suggested white record executives discouraged the production of positive rap, and the reproduction of incredibly complex black identities, and positive identities, and reinforced the desire for lewd expressions, packaged as cultural and racial authenticity.

But such views, of course, are flawed. The street between black artists and record companies runs both ways. Even though black artists are often ripe for the picking, and thus susceptible to exploitation by white and black record labels, many of them are quite sophisticated about the politics of cultural representation. Many gangsta rappers help to create the genres artistic rules. Further, they have figured out how to financially exploit sincere and sensational interest in ghetto life. Gangsta rap is no less legitimate, because many gangstas turn out to be middle class blacks faking their homeboy roots. This fact simply focuses attention on the genres essential constructed-ness, its literal artifice. Much of gangsta rap makes voyeuristic whites and naïve blacks think they're getting a slice of authentic ghetto life when in reality they're being served colorful exaggerations. That doesn't mean, however, that the best of gangsta rappers don't provide compelling portraits of real social and economic suffering. Critics of gangsta rap often ignore how hip-hop has been developed without the assistance of a majority of black communities, precisely because the debate about what constitutes an authentic black identity was up for grabs. Even positive or nation-conscious rap was spurned by those not calling for its revival in the face of gangsta raps ascendancy. Long before white record executives sought to exploit transgressive sexual behavior among blacks, many of us failed to lend support to politically motivated rap. For instance when political rap group Public Enemy was at its artistic and popular height, most of the critics of gangsta rap didn't insist on the groups prominence in black cultural politics. Instead, Public Enemy and other conscientious rappers were often viewed as controversial figures, whose inflammatory racial rhetoric was cause for caution or alarm. In this light, the hue and cry directed against gangsta rap by the new defenders of legitimate and authentic hip-hop and black identity rings false.

Also, many critics of gangsta rap seek to curtail its artistic freedom to transgress the boundaries defined by racial or sexual taboo. And here is where the real politics of authenticity and identity come into force. That is because the burden of representation in a far different manner than the one I've described above falls heavily on what may be termed the "race artist." The race artist stands in for black communities. And we can see immediately how this encourages a sort of essentialist posture. Why? Because the race artist is a substitutionary figure for the authentic range of identities expressed in black culture, but they have to be conflated in order to be represented in a solidified way. She represents, that is, the race artist, millions of blacks by substituting or sacrificing her desires and visions for the perceived desires and visions of the masses. We see now the construction of essentialism within African-

American culture, and the essentialist stereotypes that it combats. Even when the race artist manages to maintain relative dependence or vision, his work is overlaid with and interpreted within the social and political aspirations of blacks as a whole. Why? Because of the appalling lack of redeeming or non-stereotypical representations of black life that are permitted expression in our culture. So what I'm trying to really argue here, then, is that when we talk about essentialism within African American culture, we have to nuance it with the notion that essentialism is developed often in response to the impoverished visions of black identity, imposed via the vehicle of stereotypes outside of black culture.

This situation makes it difficult for blacks to affirm the value of nontraditional, de-essentialized or transgressive artistic expressions. Instead of viewing such cultural products through critical eyes, seeing the good and the bad, the productive and destructive aspects of such art and representations, many blacks tend to simply dismiss such work with hypercritical disdain. Thus a suffocating standard of legitimate and real art is produced by the limited public availability of complex black art. Either art is seen in this view as redemptive because it uplifts black culture, and shatters stereotypical thinking about blacks, or it is seen as bad because it reinforces negative perceptions of black culture. This bifurcation, this bi-polarism, this suffocating dualism is imposed precisely because of the lack of the flourishing of a tradition of critically engaged black art that is complex, that is allowed to exist within American culture without being seen through the narrow prism of stereotype on the one hand or essentialism on the other.

I never will forget when I went to Harvard to lecture and I was talking about the relationship of biography to the construction of black identity. And I ended, as I am want to do sometimes, by quoting a rap lyric. And I quoted "fuck the police coming straight from the underground, a young nigger got it bad cause I'm brown and not the other color, some police think they have the authority to kill a minority, fuck that cause I ain't the one for a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun to be beaten on and thrown in jail, messing with me cause I'm a teenager, with a little bit of gold and a pager, searching my car, looking for the product, thinking every nigger's selling narcotics." And I was trying to talk about that lyric in terms of its prescience about predicting, first of all, the Rodney King hostilities that went on in L.A., and the capacity of black autobiographical narratives within the context of hip-hop culture to index the crucial forces that are being exerted against black people. And a young black person came up to me, several of the Harvardian types came up and said to me, and there are many wonderful people who are Harvardian types and I want to add that, but one of these prototypically interesting Harvard types came up to me and said "you know there wonderful until you got to that part where you really compromised the edifying expression of black culture. We don't want to give our culture over to these people who are not noble." And so the production of discourses about nobility really are hinged upon a rather essentialist conception of black identity, but that essentialism itself responds to the stereotypical visions of black life that are allowed to flourish in our culture. That is too narrow a measure for the brilliance and variety of black art and cultural imagination. Black folks should surely pay attention to how black art is received and perceived in our culture. We must be mindful of the social conditions

that shape perceptions of our cultural expressions, and that stimulate the flourishing of one kind of art versus another.

But black culture is too broad and intricate, its artistic manifestations too unpredictable and challenging for us to be obsessed with how white folk view our culture through the lens of our art. And black life is too differentiated by class and sexual identity and gender and region and nationality to navel gaze about negative or positive representations of black culture. Black culture is good *and* bad, uplifting *and* depressing, edifying *and* stifling, all of these features should be represented in our art, should find resonant voicing in the hetero-glossolalia of black cultural expressions. Gangsta rappers are not the first to face the grueling double standards imposed on black artists. Throughout African American history, creative personalities have sought to escape or enliven the role of race artists with varying degrees of success. The short machismo with which many gangsta rappers reject this office grates on the nerves of many traditionalists, who end up sounding like narrow essentialists.

Many critics argue that since gangsta rap is often the only means by which white Americans come into contact with black identities, its pornographic representations and brutal stereotypes of black culture are especially harmful. The understandable but lamentable response of many critics is to condemn gangsta rap out of hand. They aim to suppress gangsta raps troubling expressions, rather than critically engage its artists to talk about the complexity of black identity, and to deal with the provocative issues they address. For instance, the recent attempts by black figures like Tucker and Dionne Warwick, as well as national and local lawmakers to censor gangsta rap or to outlaw its sale to minors is surely misguided. What we have to do is to acknowledge the difference between censorship and edifying expressions of civic responsibility and community conscientiousness. The former, that is, censorship of gangsta rap, seeks to prevent the sale of vulgar music that offends mainstream moral sensibilities and rigid identities constructed within the context of bourgeois black culture, and even working class culture. Also, it extends the suppression of the first amendment. The latter, that is, civic responsibility and community conscientiousness, which is enacted upon a profound conception of the complexity of black identity, suggest that we have to do more difficult but rewarding tasks to oppose the expression of misogyny and sexism in hip-hop culture through protests and pamphleteering, through community activism, and through boycotts in consciousness raising. But before we discard the genre of gangsta rap we should understand that gangsta rap often reaches that its ugliest lowest common denominator. Misogyny, violence, materialism, and sexual transgression are not its exclusive domain. At its best, this music draws attention to complex dimensions of black identity, and especially of black identity in a ghetto, which is ignored by many Americans. Of all the genres of hip-hop from socially conscious rap to Black Nationalist expressions, from pop to hardcore, gangsta rap has most aggressively narrated the pains and possibilities, the fantasies and fears, of poor black urban youth. It is situated in the violent climbs of post-industrial L.A., and its bordering cities. It draws its metaphoric capital in part from the mix of myth and murder that gave the western frontier a dangerous appeal a century ago. But it is largely an indictment of narrow constructed identities that are imposed upon young black people for the outside. Gangsta rap at its best is a challenge to the hegemony and dominance of narrow visions of African American identity.

More troubling, of course, is how many of the most vocal black critics of gangsta rap fail to see how the alliances they forge with conservative white politicians are plagued with problems. Many of the same conservative politicians, who support the attack on gangsta rap, also attack black women from Lani Guinier to welfare mothers, affirmative action and the redrawing of voting districts to achieve parity for black voters. The war on gangsta rap diverts attention away from the more substantive threat posed to women and blacks by conservative white politicians. Gangsta rap's critics are keenly aware of the harmful affects that that genres misogyny can have on black teen identity, ironically, such critics appear oblivious to how their rhetoric of absolute opposition to gangsta rap has been used to justify political attacks on the construction of a complex black teen identity.

Finally, in conclusion, the construction of black identity through a variety of discourses and narratives is essential to challenging the narrow notion of essentialism within African-American culture. What is crucial to the construction of black opposition to essentialism is accenting the way in which the debates about black intelligence inform notions of black identity. What happens in terms of oral expressions, what happens in terms of the quest for literacy, is the important matter of dealing with the complexity of black identity in a racist white environment that refuses to allow the beauty of its diversity to flourish. Politics of essentialism within African American culture have to be contended by exposing the historical context that shape the quest for black essentialism, and therefore to accent the political possibilities to resist the political degradation of black identity. Anti-essentialism, must, essentially, be historicized. The historicization and politicization of anti-essentialism will only further the debate about a broad variety of discourses that can enable us both to accent our quest for emancipation, b. to underscore our commitment to a universal dialogue that moves beyond the narrow boundaries of African American culture, and thirdly, to generate a commitment to the practices of a wide variety of discourses, including differences in race and gender and class and sexuality to come forward. This is the most powerful, on the ground attempt to articulate and elaborate our politics of anti-essentialism. Thank you very kindly.

[END]