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# The Transcendentalist hip-hop movement

Justin Michael Atwell  
*Iowa State University*

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**The Transcendentalist hip-hop movement**

by

Justin M. Atwell

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment for the requirements of the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:  
Matthew Wynn Sivils, Major Professor  
Barbara Ching  
Benjamin Percy

Iowa State University

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Regional distinctions play an important role in hip-hop music. The short version of the history of regionalism in hip-hop goes something like this: the East Coast gave birth to the genre, the West Coast produced gangsta rap, and the South created Crunk. The Midwest is notably absent from this brief history which is repeated time and time again by hip-hop scholars. This is perhaps because the Midwest is most notable for its contributions to independent<sup>1</sup> hip-hop. This movement is difficult to track not only because its artists lack the visibility of their mainstream counterparts, but also because it is expansive and immensely varied; however, in this project, I will provide some sense of the basic characteristics of the movement by comparing it to a better known intellectual discourse—that of the American Transcendentalists. The artists of the Midwestern hip-hop scene share much common ground with these 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers. Michael Meyer writes of the Transcendentalists, “Because [they] were eclectic rather than systematic, any brief description of their views tends to be reductive” (9). Though the Transcendentalists were diverse in their views, Meyer claims it is possible to find a common thread in their work. He asserts, “The unity within this diversity was a feeling that American literature, philosophy, and religion, as well as government, society, and individuals were not fulfilling the potential that the Transcendentalists believed was possible” (9). This same feeling the Transcendentalists had is at the core of the Midwestern hip-hop movement. In addition to adopting various forms of

1. The term “independent” is a common but slippery label in hip-hop studies. Every artist, whether they eventually enter the mainstream or not, is at one point independent. My use of the term throughout this project recalls Tricia Rose’s concept of “conscious” rap (243), wherein artists place themselves in direct opposition to the mainstream.

social critique, these artists believe their peers in mainstream hip-hop are not living up to their full potential. Just as the Transcendentalists worked to change many facets of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, Midwestern hip-hop artists in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century work to change the trajectory of hip-hop music and, in turn, re-shape American identity.

For some within the discourse of hip-hop, the division between the underground and the mainstream speaks to the matter of authenticity. This search for authenticity in music predates hip-hop. Hugh Barker writes of the importance of the “authentic musical experience”:

Whether it be the folklorist’s search for forgotten bluesmen, the rock critic’s elevation of raw power over sophistication, or the importance of bullet wounds to the careers of hip-hop artists, the aesthetic of the “authentic musical experience,” with its rejection of music that is labeled contrived pretentious, artificial, or overly commercial, has played a major role in forming musical tastes and canons, with wide-ranging consequences. (ix)

The bullet wounds Barker writes of may be a symbol of authenticity in mainstream hip-hop—representative of an artist’s street credibility and violent past. The Midwestern hip-hop community has its own ideas about authenticity. Midwestern artists discuss violence in America’s streets, but are careful not to glorify involvement in gang life as a point of pride (Schell 371). In the independent hip-hop community, one’s authenticity comes from their decision to refrain from becoming too commercial. “Selling out” by signing to a major label or exploring themes prominent in more popular hip-hop music (material wealth, misogyny, violence) can mean a major blow to an independent artist’s credibility. Thus, a major

component of remaining successful in the independent hip-hop scene lies in maintaining one's distance from the mainstream.

Despite the importance of the divide between mainstream and independent hip-hop, the bulk of scholarship on hip-hop deals almost exclusively with mainstream artists. One notable exception is Tricia Rose's *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why it Matters*. Rose explores the thematic differences which divide mainstream and independent hip-hop. She reveals various problematic trends in the genre's mainstream: "Commercial hip hop, as it has evolved since the mid-1990s, represents a new fascination with old and firmly rooted racial fantasies about sexual deviance (pimps and hoes) and crime and violence (gangstas, thugs, and hustlers)" (229). Rose argues that the rise of such themes is detrimental to the art form, asserting that it leads to a "dumbing down" of lyrics and artists in order to pander to the latest trends in commercial music in an effort to sell more units (220). Because of the commercial success of these themes, those largely unfamiliar with the genre pigeonhole it as misogynistic, hypermasculine, and violent. This, however, is a very narrow view of a vibrant culture which is far more diverse than its mainstream artists suggest. Rose also outlines the principles that divide the world of independent hip-hop from the mainstream: "Those considered 'underground' are generally progressively minded artists some of whom have not been signed to a major record label and tend to operate in local DIY (do it yourself) networks, online, or through local, marginally commercial distribution networks" (242).

Though Midwestern artists have been pejoratively labeled by critics and mainstream artists as "emo-hop" or "backpack rap"—in reference to the backpacks worn by their predominately white, college-age fan base—Midwestern artists tout their underground status

as a point of pride. On “Radio Inactive,” Columbus, Ohio’s Blueprint raps, “I made this in my basement when you wasn’t even there. / To express my feelings, not to be played on the air. So am I wrong or secure if I really don’t care / If this ever turns into something that anybody hears. / Man, I’m an artist...” (Blueprint “Radio”). Similarly, Kansas City’s Mac Lethal makes his disdain for the mainstream very plain: “Rap music is the new disco! / I kick flows down the stairs and laugh, / Astounding paragraphs’ll bee-sting the butts / Of these chumps and their bling-bling that sucks” (Mac Lethal “Jihad!”). Slug of Minneapolis’ Atmosphere rhymes about stagnation and copy-cat rappers in the mainstream: “And nowadays everybody’s bitin’ Tupac, / So, fuck it; I’m a stand over here and do the moonwalk” (Atmosphere “Watch Out”). The list of artists and songs voicing opposition to the current trends in mainstream hip-hop goes on and on. Adding fuel to the fire, recent advances in technology such as the Internet translate into easier access to the means of production and dissemination of hip-hop music. The increased ease of producing and distributing music led to a proliferation of independent artists that increased the visibility of the underground and its artists’ critiques of the mainstream.

Opposition to the mainstream is commonplace in much of independent hip-hop, regardless of region; however, the Midwest has become the focal point of independent hip-hop (The Company Man). As a result of the recent success of Minneapolis-based independent record label, Rhymesayers Entertainment, the Midwest has become the region most readily associated with independent hip-hop. Just as Rose notes the music industry’s tendency of marginalizing “conscious” hip-hop artists because of their lyrical subject matter, artists of the Midwest have been marginalized because of their remote location. Major metropolitan areas such as New York and Los Angeles house the majority of media outlets



and, as a result, the majority of mainstream artists. Thus, Midwestern artists have long been shoved to the periphery of all genres of music, including hip-hop. Brent “Siddiq” Sayers, CEO of Rhymesayers Entertainment, reveals how Minneapolis’ remote location has affected the label’s success: “Being from Minnesota, there’s not a huge industry here.... So, without kind of having those trails already blazed, we had to learn how to do everything on our own. In some sense, we attribute our longevity to the fact that we never had those things to lean on” (The Company Man). Though it initially presented challenges, the label’s modest start has begun to pay dividends as Rhymesayers slowly built a loyal, grassroots fan base. The label’s reputation for consistently drawing these fans to concerts and to purchase albums makes Rhymesayers Entertainment a major force in the independent music world.

As a result of this success, Rhymesayers and the Midwestern hip-hop scene serve as a ground through which independent hip-hop artists unite. The label has reached out to artists on the West coast such as Murs, The Living Legends, Evidence, and Grieves as well as artists on the East coast like Aesop Rock, El-P, Sage Francis, and Freeway. Whether they interact with Rhymesayers through recording contracts or artist collaborations, the common thread uniting these artists, regardless of region, is a desire to work outside the bounds of the mainstream. Though distinctions of regionalism in the mainstream are notorious for catalyzing violence such as the altercations in the 1990s between Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, independent artists are largely united—regardless of regional affiliation—because of their refusal to glorify violence. A particularly poignant example of this unity lies in East-coast rapper C-Rayz Walz’s 2011 song “Black Rosaries.” The song is a tribute to the late Minneapolis rapper Michael “Eyedea” Larson whom C-Rayz Walz met as a result of their time competing against one another in freestyle rap competitions like the world-famous

Scribble Jam. Though both artists' music reflects a strong sense of pride in their respective regions, their love for the art form, mutual respect for one another, and aversion to the mainstream transcend regional differences to unite the two.

Anchored in Minneapolis rather than New England, hip-hop artists in the Midwest are a discourse community working to right social wrongs just as the Transcendentalists did. In the preface to *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, Conrad Edick Wright describes the Transcendentalists as “reformers and intellectuals who challenged both spiritual and secular orthodoxies” (ix). Wright notes that though the philosophies of the various Transcendentalists differed from each other in many ways, social critique is a common thread they all shared: “[M]ost Transcendentalists were critical of important aspects of society.... Although their critiques and proposed solutions took many different shapes, most pursued reforms intended to liberate individual human potential” (x). Similarly, independent hip-hop artists in the Midwest constantly challenge the status quo of the genre's mainstream. Justin Schell writes of the Twin Cities hip-hop scene: “While the Twin Cities are certainly home to artists who rap about more stereotypical subjects... they seem far outweighed by artists who either do not partake in such subjects or turn these subjects around to make more subtle statements about themselves or the world around them” (371). Though Schell writes specifically about the Twin Cities, his statement rings true for the Midwestern hip-hop scene as a whole. Just as Capper notes the diversity of the Transcendentalists, the artists that comprise the independent hip-hop scene of the Midwest are quite diverse in their approaches to social critique, so any generalization of the scene as a whole can be problematic. Despite the thematic diversity of Midwestern hip-hop, opposition to mainstream hip-hop and the social practices it advocates pervades the music of the region.

Midwestern hip-hop artists' approach to social critique bears a striking resemblance to the Transcendentalists'. The similarities in critique raised by hip-hop artists in the Midwest and the Transcendentalists are many, but this thesis explores three of the most prominent: rejection of materialism, the redemptive powers of the natural world, and inclusion of women in the intellectual discourse.

Noticeably absent from this thesis is an in-depth discussion of the role of race in Midwestern hip-hop. Though Midwestern hip-hop is often pigeonholed as a white-washed version of the art form, Justin Schell notes the great diversity that exists within the Midwestern hip-hop scene (371). Admittedly, race does factor into the lyrics of Midwestern artists, although arguably less so than in the work of artists in other regions and those in the mainstream. Though a more prominent artist like Eminem seems unable to complete a song without noting his exceptionality as a white rapper, Midwestern artists of all races often ignore the subject of race in the majority of their work. Perhaps the work of Slug from Atmosphere serves as an apropos microcosm of my treatment of race in this thesis. Slug is an ostensibly white rapper of mixed-race parentage, purportedly part black, part Native American, and part white (Schell 373). Though thread after thread on internet discussion boards and the few critical articles chronicling his work find it necessary to explore the question of his race, he almost entirely ignores the topic in his own writing. Aside from one brief mention on 2003's *Seven's Travels* wherein he puns on his cracker-like appearance—"Lookin' at me like I'm just another square Saltine" (Atmosphere "Always")—his own race remains unexplored in Atmosphere's songs. Slug's racial identity has undoubtedly impacted his craft just as racial politics in Midwestern hip-hop impact the music originating from the scene. Similarly, given the political climate of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the debate over

the abolition of slavery, the Transcendentalists were impacted by and explored issues of race and class; however, this is not an avenue explored here. A discussion of race in Midwestern hip-hop is an important endeavor, but one I hope to take up later, rather than in this particular project. Additionally, countless critics have already explored the impacts of race on hip-hop music, so this subject may rest for the time being. Thus, this thesis focuses purely on what I view to be three of the strongest connections between independent hip-hop of the Midwest and the Transcendentalist movement.

Chapter I explores independent Midwestern hip-hop artists' advocacy of simplicity as it relates to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Thoreau calls for his audience to cast aside their quests for wealth and status as he believes these detract from the Transcendentalist practice of self-culture. After establishing extravagant homes, nonsensical fashion trends, and advances in technological convenience as "superfluities," Thoreau pleads with his audience, "Simplify, simplify" (*Walden* 136) in order to devote more time and energy to self-culture. Similarly, Midwestern hip-hop artists Blueprint and Heiruspecs critique their mainstream peers' affinity for cars, clothes, and other material possessions. Professing a belief that such materialism is detrimental to both individuals and hip-hop culture as a whole, they call for a return to the "golden days" of hip-hop when artists worked largely for the love of the music rather than for material wealth.

Chapter II explores the changes occurring in place-based writing as a result of the liminal space which Midwestern artists inhabit. Hip-hop music has always been deeply rooted in place, but the emergence of Midwestern artists such as Atmosphere has complicated the types of spaces artists explore in their songs. Until the mid-2000s, place-based writing in hip-hop dealt predominately with urban spaces. With the rise of Midwestern

artists, particularly Atmosphere, hip-hop witnessed a restructuring of the places explored. Urban spaces still figure prominently, but emcees like Slug choose to highlight the natural world as well—establishing it as a place of respite from the stressors of daily life as well as a space in which spiritual and physical healing take place. In comparing several of Atmosphere’s songs with Thoreau’s “Walking,” it becomes apparent that the Midwest injects a heretofore unseen “outdoorsy” element into the genre of hip-hop. Atmosphere, like Thoreau before them, establish the practice of exploring the natural world as a means of self-culture and spiritual healing.

Chapter III explores the feminist movement within Midwestern hip-hop as it relates to the works of Margaret Fuller. Hip-hop has long been a boys’ club of sorts and the mainstream is frequently pigeonholed as overtly misogynistic. Male artists in independent hip-hop, though they claim to hold progressive views regarding women’s role in the hip-hop community, reveal misogynistic tendencies in their own work (Harrison 165). As a result of the male dominance in hip-hop, female artists like Dessa of Minneapolis’ Doomtree crew operate in a self-proclaimed “progressive” community which betrays itself as unequivocally prejudiced in several ways against women. Dessa’s first full-length album, *A Badly Broken Code*, operates as a modern re-working of Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in which she works to re-position women’s role within the hip-hop community. She reveals the locus of women’s power is centered in the bodily sphere and must be shifted to the intellectual sphere in order for progress. In addition, she calls for a communal sense of self-reliance in which women work together to become more independent.

## Chapter 2

### Simplicity and Self Improvement: Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* Meets Midwestern

#### Hip-Hop

Hip-hop emerged from the boroughs of New York in the late 1970s as a peripheral subculture. In its relatively short history, it has since become an indispensable part of American culture. Hip-hop is ubiquitous in radio playlists, youth fashion trends, and American cinema. The culture has spread not only throughout America, but to the rest of the world as well. Dionne Bennett and Marcilyena Morgan highlight the widespread influence of hip-hop music:

It is nearly impossible to travel the world without encountering instances of hip-hop music and culture. Hip-hop is the distinctive graffiti lettering styles that have materialized on walls worldwide. It is the latest dance moves that young people perform on streets and dirt roads. It is the bass beats and styles of dress at dance clubs. It is local MCs on microphones with hands raised and moving to the beat as they "shout out to their crews." Hip-hop is everywhere!  
(176)

Hip-hop's influence extends beyond the musical world. One of the greatest indicators of hip-hop's power as a cultural movement which impacts our daily lives came in 2003 when "bling-bling" was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, concretizing hip-hop's influence on the American lexicon (Cooper 535). The entrance of "bling-bling" into everyday parlance highlights America's obsession with hip-hop music and culture. It demonstrates the power of hip-hop culture to change fundamental aspects of lifestyle such as speech patterns, but it also

exposes something else: modern hip-hop artists' obsession with material wealth. A cursory viewing of the most popular hip-hop music videos reveals artists driving Bentleys and Escalades with 24-inch chrome rims, indiscriminately spraying \$500 bottles of champagne, and "making it rain" stacks of hundred dollar bills from the rafters of VIP rooms in the world's most exclusive nightclubs. Like the art form itself, many hip-hop artists have clawed their way from the margins of culture to the upper echelon and are clearly enjoying the fruits of their labor, but what is the effect of all this extravagance on the music itself? Those in hip-hop's underground argue that such behavior degrades hip-hop as an art form. Independent hip-hop artists in the Midwest lead the charge against the mainstream's embrace of materialism. In critiques of hip-hop's recent fascination with material wealth, these artists echo Henry David Thoreau's cry of "Simplify, simplify," (*Walden* 136). Artists in the Midwest encourage their listeners and their peers in the mainstream to eschew the bonds of material wealth in favor of looking inward to improve themselves and the art form itself.

Braggadocio has always been an integral part of hip-hop culture. It began as a means of self-promotion for artists in the late 70s and early 80s to claim that they could "rock a party" better than others (Dimitriadis 24). As the genre evolved, however, so did the subjects of rappers' boasts. Bolstered by the increasingly material culture of America in the 1980s, hip-hop music became more commercially viable, its artists turned far greater profits, and the locus of their boasts shifted from lyrical prowess to more concrete measures such as their ability to procure symbols of social mobility (Price 71). As a result of the commercialization of hip-hop in the late 80s and early 90s, many hip-hop artists now highlight their material possessions in lyrics as indicative of their success. Materialism in hip-hop became even more prominent with the advent of bling-culture: "In 1999 B.G. (Christopher Dorsey) released his

hit song ‘Bling-Bling.’ The song had an immediate effect on American vernacular: ‘bling-bling’ virally invaded all facets of American culture to signify ‘doing it big’ and other lavish expressions of wealth” (Cooper 535). Money, extravagant homes, expensive cars, and—perhaps most notably—jewelry are now prominent lyrical themes for artists in hip-hop’s mainstream. With the emergence of songs like “Bling-Bling,” signifiers of success in hip-hop became firmly rooted in the material realm.

Ekow Eshun explains hip-hop’s increasingly strong connections to the corporate world: “With annual sales topping \$2bn, hip-hop is the second most popular music genre in America behind rock’n’roll. Yet where rock stars have tended to sneer at the commercialism of the music industry, hip-hop artists have no such qualms” (41). Artists like Jay-Z have demonstrate just how comfortable mainstream hip-hop artists have become with commercialism: “Aside from his music...he was instrumental in starting his own record label (Roc-A-Fella) and clothing line (Rocawear); he has served in various corporate roles...and he is part owner of the New Jersey Jets and owns various other companies and businesses” (Dimitriadis 42). Such connections between hip-hop artists and corporations have been lucrative for the artists, but some hip-hop critics think this indicates hip-hop is headed in the wrong direction. Eshun believes the proliferation of bling-culture in hip-hop represents, “...the erosion of art in favour of commerce. A decade ago, the greatest insult in the rap world was to be called a sell-out.... If hip-hop has a message for black people today, it is simply that questioning culture is bad and selling out is good” (41). Eshun and other critics of hip-hop’s materialism believe that bling-culture is destroying the genre from the inside out.

Though many mainstream artists readily embrace other lucrative opportunities hip-hop may provide, independent artists tend to shy away. Some even refuse to accept more



lucrative recording contracts with major record labels. In a 2012 interview, Rhymesayers Entertainment CEO Brent “Siddiq” Sayers, discusses Atmosphere’s decision to reject offers from major record labels: “Obviously all the majors came calling for Atmosphere once we got on everybody’s radar. Who knows, maybe we would’ve developed something if we’d went that way. We truly make independent music.... I believe [Atmosphere’s] real path in this is an independent one” (The Company Man). Though a contract with a major label most likely would have been more profitable for Atmosphere, they chose to remain on the independent label, Rhymesayers. Siddiq points out that remaining on an independent label, though less profitable, can have its advantages: “The advantage is that it really created the situation for us to really be self-sufficient which, in the long term, has meant more to our longevity than anything else...” (The Company Man). An artist’s choice to remain independent may decrease the amount of money they make, but it leads to greater artistic freedom and a self-sufficiency akin to the Transcendentalist practice of self-reliance.

Atmosphere and many other Midwestern hip-hop artists make a conscious choice to remain on an independent record label, eschewing money in favor of artistic freedom. In addition, many artists espouse minimalist lifestyles in their lyrics. On “Living Slightly Larger,” Minneapolis’ P.O.S. raps about eking out a living as an underground rapper and living a minimalist lifestyle: “If we get it, guaranteed to give it back.../ From the suburbs to the ghetto, don’t look back. / I got the skills to pay the bills, and that’s about it. / It don’t take mills to eat meals. My dollar doubts it” (P.O.S. “Living”). Some artists overtly decry the extravagance of their mainstream counterparts. Los Angeles-based independent rapper Murs—a rapper with many ties to the Midwest as part of the hip-hop duo Felt with Minneapolis-based rapper Slug—bemoans the proliferation of bling-culture. On “And This is

For...” he raps, “I remember diamonds used to be a girl’s best friend” (Murs). In calling bling-related songs and artists into question, Murs longs for a time when hip-hop was far-removed from material consumption. While artists in the mainstream regularly release singles promoting excess that are demonstrative of their constant quest for status, independent artists, particularly those in the Midwest, react by calling this status into question and reverting to Thoreauvian ideals of simplicity. In a genre which has been filled with materialism in recent years, the artists of the Midwest offer critiques of mainstream materialism akin to those found in *Walden*.

Despite its initial lack of success, *Walden* is now one of the most widely read texts in the history of American literature. The text’s initial run of 2,000 copies did not sell out until 1859, five years after its publication, but the text eventually became a classic piece of American literature (Meyer 21), but . As such, it still enjoys extensive critical attention over 150 years after its publication. As evidenced by critics’ continued exploration of the text, the major themes of *Walden* and the works of the Transcendentalist movement as a whole are quite diverse; however, Conrad Edick Wright notes that social critique is central to the work of the Transcendentalists (x). Wright explains, “[M]ost Transcendentalists were critical of important aspects of society. They believed that all too often common customs and practices constrained the individual” (x). One aspect of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American society the Transcendentalists were particularly critical of was their contemporaries’ quest for wealth and status. Revulsion against such materialism enters into several Transcendentalist texts, but one of the strongest examples comes in *Walden*’s first chapter, “Economy.”

At the core of *Walden* is Thoreau’s advocacy of simplicity and frugality as a means of allowing more time for personal spiritual development. Leonard N. Neufeldt asserts that

though Thoreau covers a broad range of topics in his text, “he was more unrelenting in his criticism of new and narrow conceptions of enterprise than he was of slavery, territorial expansion, political institutions and processes, reformers, and a threatened wilderness” (232). Thoreau believed his contemporaries held too narrow a view of the concept of enterprise. While his contemporaries viewed money and accumulation of material possessions as evidence of enterprise, Thoreau held a different view. John Patrick Diggins observes that while other 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers drew a distinction between capital and labor, Thoreau saw the two as inextricably linked (238). Diggins claims, “From his youth, Thoreau had denounced ‘the blind and unmanly love for wealth,’ which he saw as driving the compulsion to work” (238). Thus, while Thoreau’s contemporaries valued hard work as evidence of enterprise or a means of overcoming human alienation (238), he saw it as nothing more than a means to procure wealth and status.

Throughout “Economy,” Thoreau implores his audience to abandon their pursuits for material wealth in order to devote more time for personal spiritual development. Leo Stoller notes Thoreau was “convinced of an incompatibility between his own [ideas of] self-culture and a profit-centered civilization” (445). Thoreau believed, “The primary goal of life was to cultivate the inner person, but the quest for material possessions interfered with this effort. Materialism, Thoreau believed, enslaved” (Hankins 32). In *Walden*, Thoreau succinctly states his views on wealth and materialism when he claims, “Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul” (*Walden* 377). In the text, Thoreau demonstrates how one who lusts after various status symbols—extravagant homes, technology, and clothing—acquires nothing of real value and achieves little beyond the neglect of their own spiritual development. “Economy” serves as a critique of 19<sup>th</sup>-

century Americans' quest for status in which Thoreau implores his audience to reject material wealth in favor of personal and spiritual development.

In "Economy," Thoreau critiques society's obsession with the home. He notes the evolution of shelter: "From the cave we have advanced to roofs of palm leaves, of bark and boughs, of linen woven and stretched, of grass and straw, of boards and shingles, of stones and tiles. At last, we know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic in more senses than we think" (*Walden* 70-71). Though this is an important critique of society's increasingly sedentary habits and aversion to the natural world Thoreau was so fond of, it is also a critique of the extravagance of homes. Thoreau views homes as merely a shelter or "outside garment" (73). As such, a home need only provide protection from the elements; however, Thoreau's contemporaries lust after homes which are emblematic of wealth and status:

Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think they must have such a one as their neighbors have.... Shall we always study to obtain more of these things, and not sometimes to be content with less. (78)

Thoreau witnesses his contemporaries fighting an endless battle to match and overtake the extravagance of their neighbors' homes. He notes, "It is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow" (79). However, without the same means as the upper classes, the rest of society must work tirelessly in order to keep up with their wealthier counterparts. Even if one procures the wealth necessary to attain an extravagant home, they are left with merely "empty guest chambers for empty guests" (78). In labeling these guests as "empty," Thoreau discloses his belief that, though society venerates

individuals who attain wealth and status, such individuals neglect their spiritual cultivation. The wealthy are devoid of any true worth. Those who rent smaller apartments and rooms are just as ill-fated as the wealthy. Thoreau notes the large number of individuals who must rent their living space rather than owning them. Such individuals are stuck in a catch-22: “While the civilized man hires his [shelter] commonly because he cannot afford to own it; nor can he, in the long run, any better afford to hire” (73). Renting a home requires an individual to make payments throughout their lifetime. Thus, renting, like the quest to own an extravagant home, “helps to keep them poor as long as they live” (73).

Thoreau does not see the lavish trappings of the wealthy as problematic in and of themselves. Instead, he delves further into the issue as he highlights the means necessary to purchase such symbols of status: “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (*Walden* 73). Thoreau understands that money is required to purchase extravagant homes or to rent a space in which to live. Work and time are necessary in order to acquire this money. As a result, any item an individual purchases not only drains the individual’s wallet, but also their finite time. While individuals work to improve their surroundings, Thoreau sees them doing little to improve their inner selves: “While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them” (77). It is this abandonment of pursuits of personal development in order to devote money and, as a result, time to afford such superfluities with which Thoreau takes issue. Through devoting their money and lives to the attainment of extravagant homes, Thoreau sees his contemporaries as imprisoned by their own dwellings and the accompanying quest for status: “And when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him”

(76). In one of the most powerful moments of *Walden*, Thoreau observes that as individuals work to purchase more possessions, “[M]en have become the tools of their tools” (80). Through demonstrating the money, time, and self-culture one must sacrifice in order to obtain an extravagant shelter, Thoreau portrays his contemporaries as bound and controlled by their quest for wealth and status.

In stark contrast to the palatial houses and the rent payments he sees others struggling to afford, Thoreau provides his self-constructed cabin as an example of the benefits of simplicity. The cabin is described as “a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long” (*Walden* 91). It is simple, but it fulfills the function for which it is intended: “Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this” (72). Though Thoreau’s cabin is not particularly extravagant, it provides the shelter necessary to survive. Thoreau’s description of his cabin serves as more than a demonstration of how one may live cheaply and simply by rejecting the quest for the palatial homes of his contemporaries’. Channeling the ever-important Emersonian ideal of self-reliance, he demonstrates how owning his cabin rather than renting from someone else helps him lead a freer life. Because of his cabin, Thoreau boasts, “I will breathe freely and stretch myself in this respect, it is such a relief to both the moral and physical system” (93). As owner of his own cabin, Thoreau need not worry about noisy neighbors or a landlord harassing him to pay the rent. Unlike the students at Cambridge to which he alludes, Thoreau is free to pursue his spiritual development.

In addition to his critique of extravagant homes as superfluous status symbols in “Economy,” Thoreau also analyzes society’s unhealthy obsession with fashion trends. He claims society worships “not the Graces, nor the Parcae, but Fashion” (*Walden* 68). As with

extravagant homes, the masses strive to mimic the wealthy: “The head monkey in Paris puts on a traveller’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same.... Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new” (68). Thoreau’s highlights the triviality of fashion and its hindrance of the individual’s self-culture. He claims, “We know but few men, a great many coats and breeches,” (65). This claim highlights the shallowness of those who adhere to fashion’s strictures. By placing an inordinate emphasis on the status of their clothing, Thoreau’s peers ignore all aspects of worthwhile spiritual development in order to focus on accruing status symbols. Like the empty guests in the empty guest rooms of the extravagant homes, those overly concerned with fashion are nothing more than hollow shells of humanity. Thoreau again demonstrates the benefits of choosing to simplify one’s clothing: “Every day our garments become more assimilated to ourselves, receiving the impress of the wearer’s character” (64). As the clothing becomes more worn, the wearer becomes more comfortable in it and may focus on spiritual pursuits rather than pursuits of fashion. Through his critique of society’s obsession with the home and clothing as symbols of status, Thoreau reiterates the central message in *Walden*. “Simplify, simplify” (136) Thoreau tells his readers. Simplicity is the true path to self-culture.

Midwestern hip-hop artists have adopted Thoreau’s doctrine of simplicity in order to combat the problems they see stemming from mainstream hip-hop’s obsession with material wealth. In 2006, Soul Position, a hip-hop group from Columbus, Ohio, released the album *Things go Better with RJ and Al*. The song “Priceless” from that album offers a critique of material possessions reminiscent of Thoreau’s “Economy.” Whereas Thoreau focuses on overly extravagant homes and the pains one must go to in order to procure such symbols of status, on “Priceless,” Soul Position’s emcee, Blueprint, critiques a more modern symbol of

hip-hop status—the car. Like Thoreau, Blueprint sees mainstream rap’s obsession with extravagant cars as a hindrance to the progression of hip-hop. In true Thoreauvian style, Blueprint offers his own vehicle as a counterpoint to the expensive cars many mainstream rappers glorify in their work: “I got a 92 MPV; my radiator leaks, but at least it’s mine. / You got a brand new Range Rover, but it’s rented / So you gotta have it back Monday morning at nine” (Soul Position “Priceless”). The Range Rover mentioned in the song, like the students’ dorms Thoreau portrays, is rented. It is merely intended as a façade of hip-hop status and like the students portrayed in “Economy” who are inconvenienced by renting their rooms, the renter of the Range Rover must go to extra lengths to keep up appearances. He obviously must pay to rent the vehicle in addition to having to go to extra lengths in order to return it to the dealership on time. Like the renters Thoreau depicts who enslave themselves to the task of working to pay their rent, Blueprint highlights the extra work necessary to maintain hip-hop cultural capital. Much like Thoreau, who builds his own cabin and need not waste time working in order to pay his rent, Blueprint’s protagonist owns a relatively simple vehicle which is certainly not indicative of cultural capital or status within the hip-hop community. The vehicle merely fulfills its function as a means of transportation: “Get from point A to point B and enjoy the ride” (Soul Position “Priceless”). However, because of its simplicity, the owner need not devote large quantities of money, and thus time, towards making payments on the vehicle. Blueprint’s narrator may have a simple vehicle, but his time is his own to dedicate to more important endeavors than finding a means to pay for his car.

As in *Walden*, the simplicity advocated in “Priceless” leads to freedom from the bonds of status. This allows for self-exploration and knowledge of self. Blueprint contrasts the status symbols of mainstream hip-hop with the benefits of frugality: “Jesus piece with the



chain (Too much). / Pimped out ride on them thangs (Too much). / Feelin' good about who you really are (Priceless). / Knowin' you can be yourself and be a star (Priceless)" (Soul Position "Priceless"). While the necklace and vehicle mentioned are evocative of hip-hop cultural capital, they are labeled as "too much." Thoreau would perhaps call them superfluities, but would be hard-pressed to find a rhyme for the word. Despite the difference in semantics, the overarching concept is the same. For Thoreau, "[T]ruth is ultimate and should be valued above money, love, or fame" (Hankins 32). Blueprint advocates for "really" knowing one's self, which is the ultimate form of truth. He claims that while the trappings of status are "too much" the knowledge of self which comes as a result of frugality is priceless. Like Thoreau, he asks his listeners to trade the time spent in procuring status symbols in favor of self-culture.

St. Paul, Minnesota's Heiruspecs also appropriate Thoreau's doctrine of simplicity. The group is frequently noted for their refusal to incorporate samples into the production of their music in favor of the use of live instrumentation. In addition to eschewing the practice of sampling, the group's advocacy of simplicity extends into their lyrics as well. The song "Pay to Play" from their self-titled 2008 album finds the group's emcee, Felix, painting a vivid picture of various individuals' struggles with money. The first verse of the song features the story of a young man seeking to purchase more space (presumably a larger home) and a new car to impress those around him: "He wants a little more space to wil' out, and a little more cash to burn.../ He needs a new car so he can look fly. / So you can see him whenever he pass by" (Heiruspecs "Pay"). The young man depicted in the song seeks to acquire symbols of status in order to change people's perception of him. This quest for status, however, binds him to his bank account and his work: "On the phone with the bank, now

he's over-drafted. / He may buy the car, but he maxed the plastic. / You'll never catch him at home, no time. / He's got three jobs on the line" (Heiruspecs). Once again, the listener finds an individual who comes into trouble through his attempts to accrue material trappings. As with the renter of the Range Rover in "Priceless" and the students at Cambridge in Thoreau's "Economy," the figure in Felix's narrative becomes bound by his struggle to attain status. Just as Thoreau warned that one must exchange precious time in order to purchase superfluities, Felix paints a picture of an individual working multiple jobs in an attempt to live beyond his means. Though the income from these jobs is intended to provide a more luxurious lifestyle, the young man never sees these benefits. This character has no chance to enjoy the home which he is paying for because he is constantly working at one of his three jobs. His misuse of money to accrue status results in bondage to his work and a complete loss of his own free time.

Through his quest to attain status symbols, the protagonist's debt becomes too much to handle and in the end it controls every aspect of his life: "They say it's just money. / And money don't own you, / And yet you need money. / Finances control you. / Easy to hate money, / The bank never owes you" (Heiruspecs "Pay"). In this passage, a faceless "they" claims that money does not own anyone, but Felix negates the statement by asserting that in order to live to "their" standards, one "needs" money. The character in Felix's narrative lives in a world in which money is a necessity. One must have it in order to "play" the game of status. Thus, the money controls the protagonist. Additionally, the character exists in a world in which the odds are stacked against the consumer. While money is a necessary evil, "The bank never owes you." This implies that financial transactions are a one-way street. The consumer continually gives money to the bank, but gets nothing in return. Just as Thoreau

warned his readers against becoming imprisoned by their possessions, Felix warns his listeners of the dangers of financing extravagant tastes as his protagonist winds up in bankruptcy court.

In addition to their critique of their mainstream peers' obsession with expensive homes and cars, Midwestern hip-hop artists also critique their peers' predilection for expensive clothing. In recent years, mainstream artists have begun to show an increasing interest in the world of fashion. Artists promote everything from Bathing Ape hoodies to Air Force One sneakers and the ever-popular "bling-bling." Jacob Arabo, a New York City jeweler has even become colloquially known as "Jacob the Jeweler" because so many hip-hop artists name-drop Arabo and his jewelry store in songs (Walton E1). Additionally, various hip-hop moguls such as Jay-Z have launched their own clothing lines such as RocaWear which are iconic in their own right. In stark contrast, independent Midwestern artists once again react to this materialism by deriding mainstream artists for their obsession with fashion. As with their opposition to extravagant cars and homes, Midwestern hip-hop artists claim this obsession with fashion results in neglect of the true pursuit of the artist.

On the song "No Gimmicks" Soul Position's Blueprint once again adopts a Thoreauvian approach to his critique of mainstream hip hop fashion. In addition to dismissing such hip-hop staples as 20-inch rims and gold fronts as gimmicks, he echoes Thoreau's claim that it's not the clothing that makes the man. Blueprint raps, "No throwback jersey hangin' to my knees / No doorags, no white tees / Just the best producer and the best emcee" (Soul Position "No Gimmicks"). Through this line, he cuts to the core of the song's message—the clothing which creates the image of an artist is inconsequential. The work produced by the artist is what is truly important and leaves a lasting impression. The clothing

items Blueprint chooses (a throwback jersey, doorag, and white tee shirt) allude to popular mainstream hip-hop fashion of the mid-2000s when the song was originally released.

Blueprint points to these particular emblems of hip-hop fashion as mere pieces of clothing rather than an integral part of the art form. He claims he is not the clothing he wears, but the art which he puts forth. Thus, he is simply the “best emcee” without the superfluous fashion emblems. At the end of the song, he encourages his fellow artists to “do it for the love” (Soul Position “No Gimmicks”) rather than the wealth the art may produce.

Heiruspecs also critiques the fashion and general state of hip-hop music on the appropriately titled “The Pushback.” The song serves as a response to hip-hop’s mainstream materialism as Felix raps, “And now I’m motivated like your favorite rapper, / Except gettin’ paper ain’t the shit that matters” and “No label wants a real backpacker to death, / And if they do, then they ain’t a fuckin’ factor” (Heiruspecs “The Pushback”). Felix establishes himself as existing on the margins of hip-hop culture—an emcee that cares less about the money than the art form. He bemoans the fact that rap has become formulaic because major record labels choose artists that fit the stereotype of what a rapper should be and refuse to sign “backpackers” or “conscious” rappers. He then claims that such rappers essentially wear a uniform:

And maybe I missed the point so I ain’t makin’ it.

I should just be takin’ it.

Get money money,

Wear a white tee that’s like six sizes funny

Drive a car that make the whole ‘hood wanna gun me.

Nah, too late, you wonder what I must be smokin’ if

I like my shoes a little broken in. (Heiruspecs “The Pushback”)

Felix again demonstrates that with ownership of extravagant vehicles comes the potential for violent theft which he believes is simply not worth it. Thoreau saw fashion as problematic because of the simple cost and the never-ending practice of sewing (65). For Felix and others in inner-city environments, ownership of extravagant items may put one directly in danger due to rampant gang violence of which Midwestern emcees are often critical (Schell). When discussing his contemporaries’ obsession with fashion, Felix not only shares Thoreau’s mocking tone when he calls baggy clothes “funny,” but also shares his penchant for well-worn clothing. Though mainstream hip-hop artists place a high value on new and fashionable clothing, Felix likes his “broken in.”

In the true “rapping about rap” style that is a staple for many Midwestern hip-hop groups, Felix takes the concept of fashion a step further and criticizes the conversion of hip-hop culture and music into a mere fashion trend:

Remember back in the day—your favorite Wu Joint?  
 Think about it for a second while I bring up two points  
 You didn’t have to know the dance to dance,  
 You just danced to dance, so move your hands, and  
 You didn’t have to claim you was a dealer to rap.

Before The TV show, The Fresh Prince proved that. (Heiruspecs “Pay”)

In these lines, Felix addresses not only consumers’ mindless obedience of hip-hop trends such as songs with coordinating dance moves, but also the glamorization of drugs and violence in recent years in hip-hop. Felix believes what was once a vibrant form of self-expression has been sullied by the creation of formulaic hip-hop music and artists. By

invoking hip-hop classics such as the Wu Tang Clan and The Fresh Prince, Felix hopes for a dismissal of modern hip-hop's materialism.

Soul Position's Blueprint and Heiruspecs' Felix are just two emcees that find fault in mainstream hip-hop's obsession with materialism. Others in the Midwest frequently broach the subject with similar complaints. Just as Thoreau believed his contemporaries were not fulfilling their potential (Meyer 9), these Midwestern artists believe that their peers sell themselves and hip-hop culture short by making songs that sound more like sneaker commercials than self-expression. These artists, like Thoreau before them, demonstrate that the quest for status is simply not worth the repercussions. Not only does it require a substantial amount of money and effort to maintain a façade of hip-hop cultural status, but in a culture plagued by gang violence, it can even lead to death as Felix demonstrates on "The Pushback." Felix and Blueprint argue that the focus should be on understanding and improving one's inner self rather than improving outward status. Thus, Midwestern hip-hop artists adopt Thoreau's doctrine of simplicity as a solution for the problem of stagnant and formulaic hip-hop music. These artists assert is only through returning to the basics of the culture that we may see a return to the golden days of hip-hop.

## Chapter 3

### New Spaces: The “Urban Pastoral” in Midwestern Hip-Hop

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado held the first outdoor winter concert in the venue’s history. Outdoor concerts are fairly commonplace; summer festivals such as The Vans Warped Tour have drawn thousands of music fans to outdoor venues for decades, and the Woodstock concerts in 1969, 1994, and 1999 drew some of the largest crowds ever to outdoor venues. However, outdoor concerts in January, particularly in states like Colorado, are something of a rarity. Despite the event’s unconventional setting and the strong possibility of snow, the event organizers easily sold all 9,000 tickets (Dean). What band could be crazy enough to make their way to the stage of an outdoor winter concert in Colorado? The answer may be surprising for some, but for those familiar with the Midwestern music scene it may represent the world’s most logical choice of headliners—Minneapolis’ Atmosphere. In interviews leading up to the event, the group’s emcee, Slug, seemed particularly excited about the possibility of playing a venue exposed to the elements. He told a reporter for the *Colorado Daily*:

I'm really impressed that people will come and watch a show outdoors. I've played outdoors enough times, because I'm an outdoorsy kind of guy, and I like when people come outdoors, because I like what the elements force you to do. If it rains, it doesn't matter what kind of cars you drive. You're all fucking wet. All of you. It puts everybody on the same page. (Dean)

A native Minnesotan claiming to be “outdoorsy” and professing a love for the elements seems perfectly natural, but this is complicated somewhat by the fact that Atmosphere is a

hip-hop group. Additionally, the group is not particularly starved for gigs to play; they are one of the most successful independent hip-hop acts of the past decade (Harrison 84).

Hip-hop music and the natural world are typically considered mutually exclusive entities. Though hip-hop music and culture have spread to every corner of the globe over the past 30 years, the majority of hip-hop artists lay claim to urban roots and maintain a death-grip on their urban identities. How, then, did a self-proclaimed “outdoorsy” emcee like Slug cultivate such a strong cult following in an art form dominated by urban imagery and identity? It may very well be that this “outdoorsy” aspect of the emcee is the very thing that struck a chord with listeners. Slug’s professed love of the outdoors extends beyond interviews and into the group’s songs. Atmosphere has had a highly prolific career thus far. Since 1997, the group has released seven full-length albums, seven EPs, and over a dozen *Sad Clown Bad Dub* mixtapes in addition to appearing on scores of cameos for other artists’ projects. Critics often note Slug’s tendency to stray from the typical lyrical themes of mainstream artists—braggadocio, violence, misogyny—in favor of introspection and even self-deprecation (Schell 371). Another trait which sets Slug apart from his mainstream counterparts lies in his lyrical exploration of space. Place-based writing in hip-hop is predominately urban, focusing on man-made structures, densely populated areas, etc., and though Slug certainly explores such spaces in many of his songs, he also has written an extensive catalog of songs which focus on the natural world. His lyrical exploration of the natural world hearkens back to the American Transcendentalists. Transcendentalist authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau championed the natural world as the optimal location for self-culture and spiritual healing. A closer look at the nature-based songs in Atmosphere’s catalog unearths a modern reworking of Henry David Thoreau’s



“Walking” wherein Slug, like Thoreau before him, advocates the exploration of the outdoors and the healing properties of nature.

Place-based writing is a well-established practice in hip-hop music. Asserting one’s connection to a particular place or region was of the utmost importance during hip-hop’s inception and remains so today:

The roles of place and region are central to hip hop culture.... The competitive nature of hip hop, seen in MC and DJ battles, b-boy competitions, and the inherent territorialism of graffiti writing and tagging... lends itself to a local pride that sees rappers name-check the regions, cities, boroughs, streets, and neighborhoods that they call home. American rap artists emphasize representing the places they come from, whether the broad regions of East Coast, West Coast, Midwest, and Dirty South, or any one of New York City’s five boroughs, or even a specific neighborhood. (Hess vii-viii)

Place and origin figure so prominently into hip-hop culture that they not only enter into the lyrics of artists’ songs, but also titles of entire albums. Albums like N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton*, Outkast’s *ATLiens*, and others highlight hip-hop artists’ strong connections to place. Hess asserts that this predilection for regional identification establishes a connection with a particular area and often serves to help rappers establish credibility through familiarity with local landmarks (viii).

The places an artist engages in their own life and in their lyrics are important, but just as important are the spaces in which the art form is consumed. Greg Dimitriadis analyzes the importance of the spaces in which hip-hop consumptive “events” such as concerts take place. He argues that as the spaces in which hip-hop consumption or listening change, so too does

the content of the music. For example, the earliest recorded hip-hop singles evinced a great deal of call-and-response chants because these were so prominent at hip-hop “events” in the boroughs of New York. With the rise of commercially popular artists like Run-D.M.C., recording of singles and albums became more commonplace, shifting the space in which hip-hop fans interacted with the music. Rather than encountering hip-hop solely at a concert, consumers could now listen to the music in their cars and on home stereos. This change in place of consumption meant that the lyrical content changed as well. The call-and-response chants so commonplace on the first recorded hip-hop singles became less and less prominent as the means of consumption became more “privatized.” Rappers began crafting narratives in their music rather than simply creating call-and-response chants (Dimitriadis 23-26). The shift in place of consumption from small nightclubs to cars and homes in the early 1980s signaled a major shift in lyrical content. It stands to reason that if shifts in the place of consumption have a major impact on lyrical content, Atmosphere’s choice to perform in outdoor venues like Red Rocks Amphitheatre may be indicative of a lyrical shift towards more natural topics in hip-hop music.

When discussions of regionalism in hip-hop music turn to the Midwest, people are often surprised to discover that hip-hop is even created in the region. A common joke among those unfamiliar with hip-hop’s presence in the region goes something like this: What do Midwesterners even rap about? The weather? Although the truth is hip-hop artists of the region explore a range of topics as diverse as their coastal counterparts, the shortest and most appropriate answer to this question might as well be, yes, and proudly so. Like their East and West Coast counterparts, Midwestern hip-hop artists often explore their surroundings through their lyrics. Exploration of place is certainly nothing new in hip-hop, but exploration

of natural spaces in hip-hop music is. With the exception of a few Southern hip-hop artists—Nappy Roots, Bubba Sparxxx, and most recently Yelawolf—the spaces explored in the lyrics of mainstream hip-hop artists have been predominately urban. Nature and environmental issues are rarely explored. The reasons for this are many, but David Ingram offers a glimpse into one important factor. He notes that hip-hop has always had a metaphorical connection to the environmentalist movement because the common practices of sampling and scratching can be viewed as “forms of musical recycling” (Ingram 177). On a more concrete level, songs like Mos Def’s “New World Water” attempt to address important environmental issues such as the global water crisis. Ingram asserts, however, that the majority of environmental protest music, particularly in hip-hop, is incorporated by MTV and other media outlets only if it is “vague, non-specific, and entertaining” (182). Songs like “New World Water” are often seen as overly political or “preachy” and are passed over by major media outlets because “socially conscious” artists are often shoved to the margins (Rose 243). As such, few mainstream artists concern themselves with serious environmental themes because such subject matter remains unmarketable.

Despite and perhaps, in part, because of the unmarketable nature of environmental themes, independent Midwestern hip-hop has seen an emergence of an urban pastoral theme. An important part of maintaining credibility as an independent artist hinges on preserving some semblance of unmarketability (Harrison 34). This makes addressing unpopular issues such as the natural world a perfect fit for Midwestern hip-hop artists. In the mid-2000s, the Midwest began to gain more national attention as a culturally relevant part of the hip-hop world. Midwestern hip-hop, spurred by the success of Minneapolis-based record label Rhymesayers Entertainment, began injecting a more rural feel into the mix. Though it has

only recently risen to the national scene, hip-hop in the Midwest, particularly in the Twin Cities, actually has an extensive history. It was popularized in Minneapolis in the early 1980s by a college radio show fronted by DJ Travitron, a Brooklyn native who migrated to the area to matriculate at the University of Minnesota, and the culture's four elements—Djing, breakdancing, graffiti writing, and rapping—have long been prominent in the local music scene (Schell 364). Midwestern hip-hop artists, most of whom actually live in urban areas, share the same affinity for exploring and representing these urban spaces as their counterparts in larger, more stereotypically “hip-hop-friendly” cities. However, thematically, the Midwest is a unique region in its artists' willingness to explore the natural spaces within and around these urban areas. Schell explains, “Many artists in the Twin Cities also incorporate, play with, and subvert various stereotypes of Minnesota and, more generally, the Midwest” (369). This willingness to explore stereotypes of the region as a desolate wasteland expands beyond the Twin Cities to the rest of the region. Though Midwestern artists may rap about the sparseness of the Midwest as a tongue-in-cheek response to various stereotypes, there is a palpable love of the outdoors that exists amongst the region's artists. Only in the Midwest could one rap, “I got a five-point buck in a big white truck.” (Soulcrate Music “All Day”). Seemingly emulating the work of early nature writers like Thoreau, independent hip-hop artists of the Midwest have taken to analyzing and re-analyzing the natural spaces around them.

Perhaps the strongest examples of analyzing and re-analyzing such spaces come from the most prominent of the Midwest's independent hip-hop artists—Minneapolis' Atmosphere. While they are only one group in a long-established scene, Schell rightfully asserts, “If you've heard of only one hip hop artist out of the Twin Cities, it's probably

Atmosphere” (372). Atmosphere is the group that catapulted Minneapolis and, by extension, the Midwest, onto the national hip-hop stage (372). True to the Midwest style of hip-hop, the group’s emcee, Slug, prefers to inject introspective narratives into his songs rather than gangsta-rap stories or more commercial party anthems. Often, these narratives follow their characters through inner-city environments in Minneapolis and St. Paul; however, they repeatedly turn to an exploration of the green spaces within these urban centers. While the more urban-centered songs are sometimes used to profess a deep love for the Twin Cities, they are just as frequently used to explore the social ills such as violent crime, the drug trade, and poverty that plague urban centers (see “Scalp,” “Not Another Day,” and “Less One”). Atmosphere’s nature-centered songs, on the other hand, tend to focus on the positive aspects of the natural spaces that exist in these environments as well as the redemptive powers these spaces possess.

The use of the natural world in Atmosphere’s songs hearkens back to the Transcendentalist view of nature as a place for healing. There are particularly strong connections with Henry David Thoreau’s “Walking.” The constraints of time on hip-hop songs necessitate concision on Atmosphere’s part. As such, one song does not provide a clear picture of their connection to the place-based writing inherent in complex works of environmental literature like Thoreau’s “Walking.” The essay form of Thoreau’s text allows him greater freedom for expansion of ideas; however, three songs which most readily exemplify Atmosphere’s connection to urban green spaces—“Always Coming Back Home to You,” “Say Shh...,” and “Sunshine”—demonstrate the group’s clear connection to the practice of environmental writing. “Always Coming Back to You” establishes Atmosphere’s link with Minneapolis, which acts as their Midwestern version of Concord. Its companion

track, “Say Shh...,” develops a sense of pride that stems from this connection as well as promoting Minneapolis as a prime location for self-culture. Lastly, “Sunshine” reveals the redemptive impacts of communing with the natural world in and around Minneapolis. Atmosphere’s interaction with natural spaces in their lyrics demonstrates their strong relationship to environmental writing.

Lawrence Buell highlights the importance of place in environmental writing: “Perhaps the commonest attraction of environmental writing is that it increases our feel for both places previously unknown and places known but never so deeply felt.... Environmental literature launches itself from the presumption that we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to” (261). Additionally, Buell asserts that, “The best environmental writers continually recalibrate familiar landscapes (sometimes familiar to reader as well as writer) in such ways, so as to keep alive the sense of the ‘undiscovered country of the nearby,’ as John Hanson Mitchell calls it” (261-62). The works of Henry David Thoreau are prime examples of environmental literature’s desire to analyze and re-analyze familiar landscapes. Though Thoreau notably loved to explore the wilderness, he had a particular affinity for his familiar surroundings at Concord. Thoreau was not only born and died in Concord, but the area also features prominently in the bulk of his writing. John Gatta writes, “Few classic works of American literature are so intensely identified with a particular geographic site as Thoreau’s *Walden*” (127). Many think of *Walden* as a text chronicling Thoreau’s excursion into the unknown. Nina Baym counters, “...*Walden* is no excursion at all” and could be read as, “...a work about living from and as a product of New England Soil” (169). Such critiques highlight the extent of Thoreau’s attachment to Concord. Though *Walden* is his most popular text, Thoreau’s other works center around Concord as

well. To say that Concord held a special place in Thoreau's heart would be a gross understatement, but his willingness to analyze and re-analyze the natural spaces around Concord fits perfectly into Buell's model of effective environmental writing. Though geographically far-removed from Thoreau's birthplace, Atmosphere's attachment to the Twin Cities recalls Thoreau's love of Concord. Given Atmosphere's propensity for exploring natural spaces in the Twin Cities and Buell's definition of effective environmental, the group's body of work represents a form of environmental writing not that different from Thoreau's. Occasionally, Atmosphere explores unfamiliar landscapes in songs about touring ("Catsvanbags" and "Lost and Found"), but the bulk of their work visits and revisits their hometown of Minneapolis just as Thoreau did with Concord.

Not surprisingly, in "Walking," Thoreau's sauntering takes place in the area adjacent Concord. He begins the text by championing the significance of nature. "I wish to speak a word for Nature," he writes, "for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,--to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society" (Thoreau "Walking" 260). Many environmental writers set society and nature in opposition to one another. Thoreau instead positions society's existence within the larger context of the natural world. Thoreau's concept of the world, Ashton Nichols claims, is similar to the concept of "urbanature," wherein, "...all human and nonhuman lives, as well as all animate and inanimate objects around those lives, are linked in a complex web of interdependent relatedness" (xiii). Though both provide a means for self-culture, the culture which one procures from life as part of society pales in comparison to the freedom for self-exploration one experiences through communing with nature. Thoreau believes himself in the minority as most of his contemporaries champion

society over nature: “[T]here are enough champions of civilization: the minister, and the school-committee, and every one of you will take care of that” (“Walking” 260). He chooses to break with his contemporaries and advocate for the possibilities for self-culture which exist in nature. Such possibilities, Thoreau believes are best reached by walking. For Thoreau, the act of walking is more than a means of recreation: “But the walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called [...] but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day” (263). Instead, Thoreau views walking as a means of self-culture: “For every walk,” he asserts, “is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the infidels” (260). The “Holy Land” Thoreau speaks of is not any tangible space, but in fact the human soul. The practice of walking represents a means by which individuals may cultivate their spiritual lives.

However, Thoreau refuses to recognize just any walk as an acceptable one; one must choose to saunter in the proper environment. Thoreau presents several characteristics of an effective walking environment. True to his love of Concord, Thoreau can think of no better place for one to walk. He praises the landscape of New England by contrasting it with the “Old World” of Europe. He cites the words of Sir Francis Head, “The heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the sky is bluer, the air is fresher, the cold is intenser, the moon looks larger, the stars are brighter, the thunder is louder, the lightning is vividder, the wind is stronger, the rain is heavier, the mountains are higher, the rivers longer, the forests bigger, the plains broader” (Thoreau “Walking” 271). Thoreau also notes the relative safety of the “new” world: “I think that in this country there are no, or at most very few, *Africanæ Bestiæ*, African Beasts, as the Romans called them, and that in this respect also it is peculiarly fitted for the habitation of man” (271). America is full of natural spaces, but in



contrast to other “wild” countries, one may “lie down in the woods at night almost anywhere in North America without fear of wild beasts” (271). Thoreau goes so far as to link America with Eden: “As a true patriot, I should be ashamed to think that Adam in paradise was more favorably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman of this country” (272). If Thoreau purports nature to be the greatest place of self-culture, one could logically assume that the more “natural” a place is, the better it is for sauntering, and by extension, self-culture. Thus, he establishes natural spaces such as those around Concord as the optimal location for walking.

Thoreau believes there exists a natural inclination within humans to venture into nature:

I believe that there is a subtile magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright....When I go out of the house for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps, and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me, I find... that I finally and inevitably settle southwest, toward some particular wood or meadow or deserted pasture or hill in that direction. (“Walking” 267-68)

For Thoreau there is a distinct pull to the West: “Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down. He appears to migrate westward daily, and tempt us to follow him” (269). It may seem at first glance that Thoreau makes an argument for the legitimacy of Manifest Destiny. As David Robinson stresses, however, that through invoking a westward pull, Thoreau merely “hopes to link the dynamics of the larger social movement to the more individual and internalized

process of self-renewal” (155). Thus, the West is purely emblematic of the natural world and the potential for self-culture in nature.

If, as Thoreau claims, there are truly few who “[understand] the art of Walking” (260), he may have found a slew of kindred spirits had he lived to hear the music of modern Midwestern hip-hop artists. Walking and, by extension, exploring one’s surroundings figure prominently as themes in Midwestern hip-hop. St. Paul-based emcee Felix of Heiruspecs may have been able to keep up with Thoreau as he himself claims, “I walk 10 miles a day. / Each to feel the pavement” (Heiruspecs “Ten”). One reason for this penchant for exploration may be that artists from the Midwest exist in a liminal space between urban and rural. Thoreau saw himself as existing in such a liminal state. John Gatta writes, “[Thoreau] is at once well rooted to place, or... ‘attached... to the earth,’ and the unencumbered sojourner” (128). Though he boasts of his great ability to journey far from home, in “Walking,” Henry David Thoreau concedes his own existence in a space betwixt nature and civilization: “For my part, I feel that with regard to Nature I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only” (284). Like Thoreau, Midwestern hip-hop artists acknowledge the unique space they inhabit between the urban and rural world. Despite their own urban origins, Atmosphere and other Midwestern hip-hop artists choose to explore both urban and rural spaces in their music.

Atmosphere is particularly quick to acknowledge the existence of both urban and pastoral elements in their hometown of Minneapolis. “Always Coming Back Home to You” and “Say Shh...” from the group’s 2003 album, *Seven’s Travels* work to establish their adoration of the Twin Cities and the reasons behind this love. The two songs are separate entities; however, because of their configuration they can easily be connected. “Always

Coming Back Home to You” serves as the last official track on the album. “Say Shh...,” the album’s hidden track, follows a scant 20 seconds after the close of “Always Coming Back Home to You.” Additionally, the two share similar subject matter. In “Always Coming Back Home to You,” the listener encounters the song’s narrator, presumably Slug, walking through the city of Minneapolis on a cold winter’s night. True to the extreme specificity of place inherent in hip-hop music, Slug name-drops various locales important to the hip-hop community of the Twin Cities, such as South Minneapolis, Lyndale Avenue, and Lake Street (Atmosphere “Always”). The song ends with the narrator communing with the natural world: “The clouds ran away, opened up the sky / And one by one I watched every constellation die. / And there I was frozen, standing in my back yard / Face-to-face, eye-to-eye, staring at the last star” (Atmosphere “Always”). Slug concludes by making a promise to himself and his city: “Southside is my resting place.... / No matter where I am, no matter what I do, / I’m always coming back home to you” (Atmosphere “Always”). Like Thoreau’s love for Concord, Slug’s love for Minneapolis runs so deep that he wishes to die in his birthplace.

“Say Shh...” picks up where “Always Coming Back Home to You” leaves off. While “Always” professes his unwavering love for his hometown, “Say Shh...” establishes the reasons for this connection. The majority of hip-hop songs rooted in place profess love for major metropolitan areas (e.g. Jay-Z’s “Empire State of Mind”), but Slug decides to take Thoreau’s road less traveled and advocate for less-recognized Midwestern cities. Just as Thoreau acknowledges that others advocate for society over nature, Slug recognizes that many of his hip-hop peers already tout the benefits of living in a major metropolitan area, and he must demonstrate the benefits of the Midwest. The song as a whole acts as a rebuttal to those who would mock the stereotypical lack of civilization and culture in the Midwest.

He claims, “I love New York and Cali, but I ain’t movin’ / Too overpopulated, saturated with humans. / And I’m not big on rappers, actors, or models. / If I had to dip, I’d probably skip to Chicago” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). Like Thoreau with Concord, Slug praises the Midwest’s relatively lower population density. Compared to other densely-populated cities, the Twin Cities are the perfect place for one to engage in self-culture.

Slug confesses that finding points of pride in the Midwest can be difficult: “I wanted to make a song about where I’m from. You know? / Big up my hometown, my territory, my state / But I couldn’t figure out much to brag about. / Well, Prince lives here. We’ve got 10,000 lakes” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). He touts features of the natural world such as the abundance of natural bodies of water within Minnesota as a point of pride. Though Slug professes an initial difficulty in finding aspects of Minnesota to “brag about,” he uncovers many of them as the song unfolds. He points to other natural features of Minneapolis: “Got trees and vegetation in the city I stay. / The rent’s in the mail, and I can always find a parking space” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). Again, access to nature is pushed to the fore with the mention of “trees and vegetation” as a perk of living in the area. The Twin Cities, with a metro-area population of well over three million people (United States) is certainly larger than Thoreau’s Concord, but Slug remains adamant about the lack of overcrowding in the area and the benefits that accompany it as he cites the cities’ ample parking vacancies. However, the Twin Cities aren’t merely empty space; Slug asserts that they have “parks and zoos and things to do with my son” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). Access to these natural spaces, for Slug, represents a means of cultivating his relationship with family members. Though Thoreau may call such spaces “imported” (263), they are far-removed from the

confines of steel and concrete which appear in the vast majority of hip-hop songs pertaining to place.

As in “Walking,” access to natural spaces—imported or not—aids Slug in his quest for self-culture. For Slug, Minnesota is not a great place to call home simply because of its lower population density, but because of the various benefits that accompany the lower population. The chorus of “Say Shh...” features Slug detailing and defending the finer points of living in a Midwestern city. He begins the chorus, “If the people laugh and giggle when you tell them where you live, say, ‘Shh’” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). Through the chorus, Slug bemoans some of the minor setbacks of the Midwest: “If there’s only one store in your town that sells 12-inches, say, ‘Shh’” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). Though he is troubled by the lack of access to record stores, he concedes it’s a fair trade-off for other positive aspects of the Midwest such as lower crime: “If the playground is clear of stems and syringes, say, ‘Shh’... / If no one in your crew walks around with a gun, say, ‘Shh’” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). Drugs and violence are often used as a source of “street cred” by many mainstream hip-hop artists, but Slug establishes them as a flaw inherent in larger population centers. This praise of the Midwest’s safety hearkens back to Thoreau’s claims about the safety of America relative to other countries. If Minnesota, like Concord, is safer than places like New York and Los Angeles, it holds more opportunities for self-culture.

Slug establishes the Twin Cities as safer than other hip-hop hotbeds; additionally, he claims they harbor fewer distractions. While Jay-Z establishes New York as a “city of sin” (Jay-Z “Empire”), Slug depicts Minneapolis as comparatively innocent. Not surprisingly, the Twin City club scene lacks the reputation of its larger metropolitan counterparts, but Slug doesn’t mind: “The nightlife ain’t all that, but that’s okay. / I don’t need to be distracted by

the devil every day” (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). Establishing a prominent nightlife as a distraction and going so far as to relate it to the devil sends a clear message. Slug sees bars, nightclubs, etc., as little more than a distraction from the true meaning of life. He explores the debilitating effects of such distractions and the redemptive qualities of Thoreau’s practice of sauntering in great detail on the song “Sunshine.” The track opens with a narrator recovering from a rough night out: “Ain’t no way to explain or say / how painful the hangover was today. / In front of the toilet on my hands and knees, / Trying to breathe in between the dry heaves” (Atmosphere “Sunshine”). The devilish distractions of society have taken their toll on Slug’s narrator. There seems to be no cure for his illness: “My baby made me some coffee. / Afraid that if I drink some, it’s comin’ right back out me. / A couple of Advil, relax and chill / At a standstill with how bad I feel” (Atmosphere “Sunshine”). Try as he may, the narrator is unable to shake his hangover through conventional means. He quickly realizes that a journey into the outside world may be the only cure for his ails: “I think I need to smell fresh air, / So I stepped out the back door and fell down the stairs. / The sunlight hit me dead in the eye / like it’s mad that I gave half the day to last night” (Atmosphere “Sunshine”). Immediately upon setting foot outdoors, the narrator begins communing with the natural world realizes the error of his ways and feels remorse for wasting valuable time on self-destructive practices.

Though the outdoors are initially cruel to our narrator, he soon discovers their redemptive qualities and feels Thoreau’s desire to saunter:

All of a sudden, I realize somethin’.

The weather is amazing; even the birds are bumpin’.

Stood up and took a look and a breath,

And there's that bike that I forgot that I possessed.  
 Never really seen exercise as friendly,  
 But I think somethin's telling me to ride that ten-speed.  
 The brakes are broken. It's all right.  
 The tires got air, and the chain seems tight.  
 Hopped on and felt the summertime....  
 Sunshine, sunshine is fine.  
 Feel it in my skin, warming up my mind.  
 Sometimes you gotta give in to win  
 I love the days when it shines. (Atmosphere "Sunshine")

An intangible "something" compels the narrator to hop on his bike and explore his surroundings. The narrator's inexplicable desire to explore his surroundings calls to mind Thoreau's "subtle magnetism [of] Nature" (267). Granted, the narrator elects to ride a bike rather than walk, but the importance here lies in his communion with the natural world around him. He feels the physical effects of the sun's warmth on his skin as well as the mental benefits which "warm up" his mind. Our narrator's decision to follow his impulse pays off as he further realizes the redemptive qualities of nature. Just as Thoreau envisions humanity experiencing a time when the sun shall "shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light" (287), the narrator comes to know this feeling first-hand.

Upon beginning his journey, our narrator enters into a pastoral scene more at home in the work of a Romantic poet than a 21<sup>st</sup>-century hip-hop artist. He notes the shining sun, the singing birds, the rustling of the leaves in the trees, the nearby lakes, and even some

butterflies (Atmosphere “Sunshine”). His sojourn into the outside world provides the redemption and peace of mind Thoreau promises in “Walking”:

Ridin’ my bike around these lakes, man.  
 Feelin’ like I finally figured out my escape plan.  
 Take it all in. The day started off all wrong,  
 But somehow now the hangover’s all gone.  
 Ain’t nothin’ like the sound of the leaves  
 When the breeze penetrates these Southside trees.  
 Leanin’ up against one, watchin’ the vibe.  
 Forgettin’ all about the stress, thankin’ God I’m alive. (Atmosphere  
 “Sunshine”)

The journey into the natural world rids the narrator of his physical ills and also removes him from the stressors of everyday life. David Robinson’s claim that “[Thoreau’s] saunterer must regard a daily walk less as a temporary escape from social pressure and responsibility than as a complete restructuring of values and priorities” (152) holds true for our narrator here. The narrator receives a temporary respite from daily stressors by engaging in his walk, but he also “finally” discovers an “escape plan.” The wording of this passage implies this means of escape is a long-sought treasure for the narrator. Thus, venturing into the natural world for Slug means a thirst for discovery rather than a mere removal from society.

The nature-themed work of Atmosphere represents not only a shift in the places explored in hip-hop music, but also a new type of environmental literature akin to Thoreau. Though Thoreau had a strong, personal connection to Concord, he recognized that other natural spaces are just as ripe for self-culture through immersion in nature. Gatta notes,



“...Thoreau likewise reminds his audience that the experience of discovering God’s presence in nature cannot be geographically restricted to Walden—or, for that matter, to any other single location” (141). Thoreau believed that as long as an individual can find a place to commune with nature, he or she can practice self-culture. Additionally, Thoreau did not believe that the advancement of civilization meant the demise of the natural world. Gatta writes, “...[P]resent day wilderness advocates inspired by Thoreau typically fail to recognize that wilderness is always a cultural construct and that the ideal of recovering a pristine, sanctified face of nature is always illusory. Nature is, by its very nature, ever-changing” (131). Thoreau understood the natural world and civilization as entities that must coexist rather than exist separately. Rather than asserting that we need to “get back to nature,” Thoreau believed that the real environmental challenge lies in “learning how to make our home wisely in this physical world” (131) Thus, society and nature must not exist in opposition to one another, but society must find a way in which to exist in harmony with the natural world.

Similarly, Slug recognizes that places outside of Minneapolis possess the same positive qualities. At the end of “Say Shh...,” he provides an extensive list of places wherein the natural world is not overshadowed by the presence of humanity. He notes Ann Arbor, Michigan; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Duluth, “Minnesnowta;” and others as prime examples (Atmosphere “Say Shh...”). In giving “shout-outs” to cities which resemble the Twin Cities’ ability to coexist with nature, Slug is simply providing model cities which represent ways of making our home “wisely in this physical world.” Though this may seem inconsequential, as David Schlosberg notes, the first step in creating positive environmental changes lies in recognition of the changes that must be made (28). Thus, in

eschewing the mainstream's portrayal of urban supercenters such as New York and Los Angeles as the ideal, Slug presents a new ideal. He envisions a world in which society and the natural world may coexist and mutually prosper. Such environmentally-linked hip-hop artists in the Midwest may very well usher in a new era in which hip-hop works in conjunction with like-minded individuals in the environmental justice movement to help preserve green spaces in urban places.

## Chapter 4

### I Need Just a Minute With Me: Dessa and the Feminist Movement in Hip-Hop

As hip-hop moved from the streets of New York City into living rooms across America, it brought with it a problematic set of gender politics. The genre has long had a troubled relationship with women. Though many women are fans of hip-hop, it is largely dominated by male artists. The lyrical content of male-authored hip-hop songs is often exploitative of and, in many cases, expresses explicitly violent messages about women. Additionally, hip-hop music videos further complicate the artists' relationships with female fans by sexually objectifying women and presenting the female body as the sole locus of women's worth. The few women who succeed in the hip-hop mainstream do little better than their male counterparts as they also promote problematic images of women, often subjecting themselves and other women to sexual objectification in both lyrics and videos. These narrow-minded representations of women in a major cultural movement such as hip-hop have negative implications for the genre's young female fans.

Just as Midwestern hip-hop artists are changing the ways in which extravagance and the natural world are portrayed in hip-hop, they are also changing the ways in which women are portrayed. This should perhaps come as no surprise as ecofeminist theorist Carol J. Adams wrote that man's domination of the environment and women are inexorably linked (85). Many artists within independent hip-hop circles oppose the misogynistic tendencies of mainstream hip-hop artists. Just as they counter the mainstream's advocacy of drugs, violence, and "bling" culture, many male independent hip-hop artists express disdain for the

hyper-sexualized portrayal of women in the mainstream. However, as Anthony Kwame Harrison points out, oftentimes independent artists are just as culpable as their mainstream counterparts in the genre's negative portrayal of women (165). Dessa, a female emcee who is part of Minneapolis' Doomtree collective represents the potential for a brighter future for women in hip-hop and the possibility of dislodging the genre from its misogynistic tendencies. Her lyrics recall the work of Transcendentalist writer and feminist Margaret Fuller. As a woman emerging from a male-dominated discourse community, Dessa asserts that women in hip-hop must shift their locus of worth from the bodily sphere to the mental sphere, and must adopt Fuller's brand of communal self-reliance.

Terri Adams and Douglas Fuller write about the negative portrayal of women in mainstream hip-hop:

In this genre of rap music, women (specifically African American women) are reduced to mere objects—objects that are only good for sex and abuse and are ultimately a burden to men. In rap, this ideology reveals itself in many ways, from mild innuendoes to blatant stereotypical characterizations and defamations. Whatever form the characterizations take—whether mild or extreme—provides the listener with derogatory views of women. These views ultimately support, justify, instill, and perpetuate ideas, values, beliefs, and stereotypes that debase women. (940)

Hip-hop music clearly presents problematic images of women, but as Adams and Douglas point out, hip-hop is not alone in its negative portrayals of women. Misogyny has a long history in music that pre-dates hip-hop: “[F]rom country musicians lamenting about how some ‘no good woman kicked him out, sold his truck, took his money, and slept with his best

friend' to rock-n-rollers screaming about their latest groupie sexual conquest" (940). Despite its existence in all genres of music, Adams and Fuller argue that this pattern of misogynistic behavior in hip-hop is important because it "does not exist in a vacuum but is instead a part of a larger social, cultural, and economic system that sustains and perpetuates the ideology" (941). Misogyny in hip-hop is problematic not simply because it exists, but because it is indicative of larger societal problems and because it serves to further these problems. Because hip-hop is a major cultural force in America and the rest of the world, misogynistic representations of women in hip-hop music can easily bleed over into larger society.

Kate Conrad enumerates the limited roles which hip-hop music videos allow women: "While male characters are significantly more likely to be associated with a variety of themes, female characters are more likely to be placed in positions of objectification" (150). This depiction of men in a variety of roles represents a greater amount of agency for males in hip-hop. Meanwhile, women are permitted notably fewer possibilities. They are often portrayed as "inferior to men, victims, and typically dressed in provocative clothing" (138-39). Such representations of women in music videos reinforce the body as the locus of all female worth. Additionally, as women are portrayed as sexual objects and rarely the central figure, this positioning limits their contributions to the hip-hop world to sexual rather than artistic ones.

Though the roles of women in lyrics and videos are often strictly limited by sexual objectification, women have participated in hip-hop culture in one form or another since its inception. Greg Dimitriadis comments on hip-hop's shift to an overtly masculine art form: "Rap's oft-noted move to masculinist ideals and values came as a parallel phenomenon to the proliferation of producer-based technologies. With the means of producing rap becoming

increasingly consolidated, questions of access (or lack thereof) became crucial” (29). In the early days of hip-hop, few individuals could access producer-based technologies, and those that did were largely male. As such, “[r]ap began to be constructed as a more masculinist art form... one that both largely denied opportunities for female access and opened a space for the proliferation of existing deeply misogynistic cultural discourses” (30). As the means for production and dissemination were largely male-dominated, only men made hip-hop records. Because there were no female voices to counteract the misogynistic themes of these recordings, they were allowed to thrive. Similarly, Dimitriadis notes that the few women who were able to gain access to the technology necessary for production of hip-hop music, such as Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown, were often “paternalistically” linked to male figures already well established in hip-hop (30). Such inextricable links to male dominance ensured that hip-hop became a boys’ club with little wiggle room for feminist thought.

Lack of access to the means of production of hip-hop music led to the genre becoming male-dominated. This allowed misogyny to flourish in hip-hop; however, when women successfully procure access to the necessary means to create their own music they often perpetuate the same misogynistic themes of their male counterparts. Thus, the verbal objectification of women in hip-hop is not purely male-on-female; women within the hip-hop community take part as well. Matthew Oware finds that the lyrics of many female artists, “include the trademarks of rap—exaggerated braggadocio, consumption of drugs and alcohol, and “dissin” of fellow female and male rap artists” (786). Understandably, female emcees share many of the same lyrical themes as their counterparts, but Oware asserts that female emcees are unique in that they produce, “songs that are ostensibly empowering to women and that illustrate female agency” (786). Such characteristics would seem to suggest

a move in the right direction towards eliminating the gender gap in hip-hop music, but Oware finds that many female emcees, while attempting to empower women, often deconstruct their own messages:

[T]here exist contradictions in the music; for example, there are high numbers of female self-objection, self-exploitation, and derogatory and demeaning lyrics about women in general. In some cases the same artists who empower women through their music also have lyrics that objectify and demean them.... [T]hese contradictory lyrics nullify the positive messages that are conveyed by female rap artists, consequently reproducing and upholding hegemonic, sexist notions of femininity, and serving to undermine and disempower women. (786)

While women who gain access to the hip-hop mainstream have an opportunity to better the genre's portrayal of women, their attempts are largely ineffectual. Though they may provide a much-needed feminist perspective on various issues, their use of sexually demeaning and oppressive lyrics undercuts progress they make. Admittedly, such contradictions may be caused by factors outside of the artists' control such as label pressure to sell records. Tricia Rose observes, "Creativity is governed by profits and sales.... Once a style or technique or rapper is seen as 'hot' or highly profitable, then the goal is to find a way to reproduce it" (220). It is a given that sex sells, and record labels notoriously pressure female artists in all genres to appear or sound more sexually provocative in order to increase profits. Since the corporate model for hip-hop has always hyper-sexualized women, and misogynist songs and albums have sold well, record companies support such negative portrayals of women because they are profitable. Whether the fault lies with the artists or with the record labels, the fact

remains that female artists in the mainstream have accomplished little in terms of lessening hip-hop's objectification of women.

Minneapolis' Dessa is one female emcee making great strides towards combating hip-hop's inherent misogyny and one of the strongest indicators of the possibility for a healthier future for women in independent hip-hop. The only female member of the Doomtree collective, Dessa brings a much-needed feminist perspective to the groups' recordings. Through her lyrics, she explores feminist issues such as sexual objectification of women in hip-hop and domestic violence. She recognizes that her role as a female emcee greatly impacts how listeners initially perceive her, but wishes to partially divorce herself from gender labels. In an interview with the Twin Cities' *Star Tribune*, she comments, "I feel like the first response a lot of times to my music does have to do with my gender. But I'm eager to be evaluated on my talent and less on my gender. I'd rather be your 10th favorite rapper than your favorite female MC" (Horgen 3F). Dessa prefers acknowledgement for her accomplishments as an emcee than for her accomplishments as a female. In adopting such a view, Dessa attempts to place herself on a level playing field with her male contemporaries. She also expresses an aversion to the status quo of hate speech in mainstream hip-hop. In a 2011 interview with National Public Radio, she reveals her distaste for the lyrical content of her peers. The interviewer asks about the relative lack of "adult language" in her work to which she replies:

I don't want to appear on songs that use the six-letter F-word and the C-word for women. And the N-word, to be honest, is not a word I use. So I'm real conscientious about those, not necessarily because they're profane but because



I think they forward a really regressive world view that I have no interest in participating in. (“Dessa: A Twin”)

While other female artists in hip-hop are willing to use various pejorative terms for women which undercut otherwise pro-feminist messages, Dessa makes a conscious effort to avoid them. By refusing to emulate common lyrical tropes of mainstream hip-hop, she hopes to reverse patterns of racism, homophobia, and sexism in the genre.

By engaging in the hip-hop discourse without indulging in the retroactive practices of many of her female contemporaries, Dessa represents a progressive shift in the discourse of feminism in hip-hop. Her lyrics contain a message of empowerment for women without the contradictory messages of sexual objectification. As with any feminist thinker, her beliefs are indebted to her predecessors. Her unique approach to feminism in hip-hop closely mirrors Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller’s feminism in several ways. First, Dessa, like Fuller, operates in a discourse community which professes progressive beliefs while exhibiting oppressive behavior towards women. Second, Dessa works to shift the locus of worth in women from the bodily sphere to the intellectual. Third, Dessa establishes the Fullerian concept of communal self-reliance as an essential component of feminist empowerment. Like Fuller, Dessa hopes to establish a discourse community in which women may not only access the conversation, but participate in it as well.

Though they may seem worlds apart, the women of 21<sup>st</sup>-century hip-hop occupy a space similar to that of Margaret Fuller and other women of the American Transcendentalist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are granted far more agency than their 19<sup>th</sup>-century counterparts. They have basic rights such as suffrage, possess far more vocational options, and are slowly closing the wage gap, but the world of hip-hop is

incredibly exclusionary when it comes to female participants (Harrison 165). Not surprisingly, women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were even further excluded from intellectual discourse. Susan Gorsky depicts the astonishing lack of women's rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “[Women] had almost no opportunity for education, no chance to develop special interests or choose a career other than wife and mother. . . . Symbolically and actually, women were seen as less than fully human” (2). Gorsky attests, “[W]omen were essentially men's property” (2). As beings seen as “less than fully human” (2), women had little hope of accessing the intellectual discourse, let alone participating in it.

As a female participant in intellectual circles, Fuller was an extreme rarity. This left her vulnerable to frequent attacks from male critics. Because of the backlash from men in academia, critics refused to acknowledge Fuller's influence as an integral participant in the Transcendentalist discourse. Tiffany K. Wayne notes critics' long-held male-centric view of the Transcendentalists: “A few key figures, such as Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, have represented, for critics especially, the prevailing image of the Transcendentalist as an aloof white male philosopher” (44). Additionally, Carlin Romano points to V.L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* which praises the works of male Transcendentalists, but dismisses Fuller as a woman out of her element (Romano B13). Romano cites Parrington's work as one of the texts most responsible for the academy's long history of ignoring Fuller's contributions to the Transcendentalists. Fuller's work reflects a brilliant and talented writer, but because of sexist critics like Parrington, she long went unrecognized: “Decades past second-wave feminism, it can shock to confront again the prejudices of faded sexist scholars. Such derision made it easy, though, for even better-intentioned sorts to reject Fuller as a thinker” (B13). This prejudice against Fuller lasted until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when

critics began to acknowledge her important contributions to Transcendentalism. Despite seemingly insurmountable odds, Romano declares that Fuller is finally receiving credit as an integral Transcendentalist writer, and her place in the canon seems secure. He concludes, “‘We accept Margaret Fuller!’ historians of Transcendentalism have finally declared. Now philosophy scholars had better” (B13).

Despite opposition from patriarchal critics and even within the Transcendentalist community, Margaret Fuller is now considered as one of the “big three” American Transcendentalists alongside Emerson and Thoreau (Wayne 42). As a woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Fuller lived in a culture that privileged the work of men above women. The male Transcendentalists with whom Fuller associated, however, believed themselves to be more progressive than the larger society within which they operated. Jamie S. Crouse highlights the transcendentalists’ relatively progressive view of women: “[O]n the whole, though in varying degrees, [Transcendentalism] was supportive of women’s rights” (269). Although the male Transcendentalists were “supportive” of women, they had strict beliefs about the innateness gender roles: “Nevertheless, they never questioned the traditional belief that men and women have separate, distinct, and essential natures, and that women are, by nature, more intuitive, emotional, and moral” (269). The male transcendentalists held fairly progressive views of women’s rights by 19<sup>th</sup>-century standards, but their clear views about the distinct natures of the sexes demonstrate a view of women as inferior to men.

The men of the Transcendentalist movement, like the men of independent hip-hop to follow, condemned the supposedly regressive beliefs of mainstream society as constraining the individual (Wright x). Despite their eagerness to critique the racism and sexism of others, the men of the Transcendentalist movement often failed to recognize their own inherent

prejudices against women. In “Woman,” which Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered at a woman’s rights convention in 1855, he states, “[Women] have an unquestionable right to their own property. And if a woman demand votes, offices, and political equality with men...it must not be refused” (253). He further expresses a desire to “Educate and refine society to the highest point,--bring together a cultivated society of both sexes...” (253). The beliefs Emerson expresses here are notably progressive for his time and certainly rare for a male writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They suggest a sense of equality between the sexes; however, Emerson was not as progressive in his views on women’s rights as these passages from “Woman” appear. In fact, his views regarding women’s contribution to intellectual discourse were anything but.

Scholars frequently address the prominent relationship between Emerson and Fuller. Emerson’s influence on Fuller’s writing has received extensive critical attention, but Judith Mattson Bean readily asserts the importance of Fuller’s role in influencing Emerson: “Through dialogue and conversation, Fuller evolved from active audience into stimulating interlocutor providing inspiration, a resource for topics, and an enlivening dialogic voice” (239). Thus, Margaret Fuller was not only influenced by Emerson, but also served as an influence for him. Given Fuller’s influence, her views on feminism helped inform Emerson’s as their conversations frequently turned to the topic. Tiffany K. Wayne writes that Fuller and Emerson often “engaged in an on-going conversation... about the nature of female *genius*, if not yet about women’s claims to particular rights” (18). Though Emerson held Fuller’s opinion in high regard and was clearly impacted by her thoughts, he refused to recognize the women’s true circumstances: “He rejected her arguments that women were in a subordinated, oppressed condition, but agreed with her view that the finished soul had elements of the

masculine as well as feminine” (Bean 238). Emerson accepted Fuller’s argument that souls are somewhat androgynous, harbored particularly rigid ideas about the role of women in intellectual discourse:

[D]espite direct personal relationships with at least two very powerful self-taught women he crafted an idea of the thinking woman as a personal muse rather than as a public intellectual. In fact, his inability to imagine any social contribution from women at all beyond the domestic role led him to categorize all women as either “wives” or, if freed from the particular duties of marriage (and, presumably, motherhood) to pursue the life of the mind, as “muses.”

(Wayne 19)

Emerson’s views on women’s suffrage in “Woman” paint him as progressive for his time, but his interactions with Fuller and his labeling of women as “wives” and “muses” reveal a belief that women, by nature, do not belong in the intellectual sphere. Women, in Emerson’s view, are intellectually inferior. Emerson’s positioning of women removes them entirely from the sphere of the mind and places them wholly within the bodily sphere as “muses,” stereotypically sexual sources of creative inspiration.

The sexism inherent in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America as well as the views of the male Transcendentalists necessitated a complex and multifaceted approach to feminism. Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* offers such an approach. The text outlines the problems facing women of Fuller’s time and prescribes the changes necessary for them to flourish. C. Michael Hurst examines Fuller’s treatment of the human form as central to Fuller’s argument. Hurst asserts, “Fuller’s primary focus... is on the harm caused by an overemphasis on female embodiment. She demonstrates that the body is the index of female worth for men

and highlights the intellectual enervation that results when women are reduced to mere bodies” (14). Fuller portrays women as valuable contributors to the intellectual discourse rather than domestic servants and sexual objects. She achieves this by immediately placing men and women on an equal plane and in a symbiotic relationship. She then shifts the locus of worth from the bodily sphere to the mental sphere.

In the preface to her text, Fuller makes it clear that all souls are inextricably linked: “By Man I mean both man and woman: these are two halves of one thought. I lay no especial stress on the welfare of either. I believe that the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other” (300). If the welfare of all souls are inextricably linked, what benefits one sex, benefits the other. The practice of self-culture for women, then, is to be seen as beneficial not only for women, but for all individuals. This incentivizes men’s allowance of female self-culture. If men oppress women, they in turn oppress themselves. Hurst claims, “Fuller portrays the male tendency to traffic in women’s bodies, whether directly through prostitution or more indirectly through the pervasive flattery that links worth with physical appearance, as one that harms both men and women” (13). In accordance with Fuller’s belief in the interconnectedness of all souls, relegating women to the bodily sphere, in turn, relegates men to the bodily sphere. Throughout *Woman*, Fuller revisits the equality of souls. In reaffirming that, “There is but one law for souls,” (315) she once again places men and women on an equal plane. Individuals are not to be judged by their sex, but by their souls. Given that sex is a bodily trait, Fuller separates one’s inherent value from the bodily realm. After setting men and women on an equal plane, Fuller is free to shift individuals’ locus of worth to the mental sphere.

In distancing women's locus of worth from the bodily sphere, Fuller chooses instead to declare the need for women to develop their mental capacities. She stresses that education is of the utmost importance in helping women practice self-culture: "A house is no home unless it contain food and fire for the mind as well as for the body.... For human beings are not so constituted that they can live without expansion. If they do not get it one way, they must another, or perish" (314) "Food and fire for the mind" are central to Fuller's model of self-culture; however, intellectual stimulation is incomplete without a means for self-expression. Fuller outlines the conditions necessary for women to practice optimal self-culture: "What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home" (315). Fuller acknowledges that all beings are endowed with individual talents and must be allowed a means of exercising these talents for optimal growth. The reference to a "common home" again relates to the interconnectedness of all souls, ensuring that if women are allowed a means of self-expression, it will improve not only their station, but also the world around them.

Tiffany K. Wayne claims that *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and other feminist works of Fuller's time are "linked with Transcendentalism particularly through the project of self-culture" (3). By shifting the locus of women's worth from the body to the mind, Margaret Fuller embeds her feminism in the Transcendentalist practices of self-reliance and self-culture. In *Woman*, Fuller asserts that in order for women to practice the art of self-culture, they must be free and unrestrained by men: "As the friend of the negro assumes that one man cannot by right, hold another in bondage, so should the friend of the woman assume that man cannot, by right, lay even well-meant restrictions on woman.... [I]f the woman be a

soul, appeared in flesh, to one Master only are they accountable” (315). Recalling Fuller’s belief in the interconnectedness of soul’s, by imprisoning women, men also imprison themselves. Self-reliance, then, is a concern not only for the individual, but also for the community.

Fuller’s doctrine of self-reliance, though heavily influenced by Emerson’s, is noticeably different. Hurst writes, “[T]he self-reliant individual in Emerson’s terms is unable to commit to *any* human relationship because he or she is always already absolutely committed to a sphere of self-law whose very unpredictability makes such sustained commitment impossible” (5). In Emersonian self-culture, an unwavering commitment to better the individual takes precedence over all else. Thus, personal relationships represent an impediment to self-culture: “At best, relationships remain neutral non-factors; at worst, they act as hindrances that must be cast off in order to allow the individual to achieve a state of self-reliance” (5). The Fullerian view of self-reliance, on the other hand, allows for the possibility of cultivating human relationships. Fuller, as a member of a marginalized population, knew that, “an individual’s spiritual progress is not completely within his or her control” (8). Given the interconnectedness of souls and the factors both internal and external that govern an individual’s progress, Hurst argues that for Fuller, “self-reliance becomes, in a sense, a communal concern” (8). Women, as a marginalized group must help one another become self-reliant.

Like the male Transcendentalists, a substantial portion of the male contingent of independent hip-hop artists derides the misogynist views of larger society. These artists also profess progressive views about women relative to the mainstream hip-hop community, but, as Harrison observes, often blatantly contradict these views (165). Truthfully, male artists in



the independent hip-hop scene appear to have made attempts to combat the misogyny so prevalent in the mainstream. The hyper-sexualized “video girls” so prominent in mainstream music videos are notably absent from independent hip-hop videos. Independent artists also replace the one-dimensional hyper-sexualized female characters so prominent in mainstream rap with multi-dimensional, enriched female characters. Rather than portraying female characters as sex objects, independent hip-hop artists portray women with more human qualities. Rappers like Slug of Atmosphere also attempt to portray women with a greater amount of agency. In taking this to the extreme, Slug repeatedly refers to God as a woman (Atmosphere “Don’t Stop”, “God’s Bathroom Floor”). This dethrones the conventional image of God as an old, bearded, white man and places a woman in the ultimate position of power. Though they critique the mainstream’s problematic relationship with women and profess feminist beliefs, male independent hip-hop artists ignore their own inherent biases.

Murs is another independent rapper well-known for his “conscious” lyrics which decry the negative aspects of mainstream hip-hop. His songs depict the advocacy of gang violence and materialism prevalent in mainstream hip-hop as detrimental to the art form. In addition, several of his songs feature strong female characters. One such song, “D.S.W.G” (Dark-Skinned White Girls) explores the difficulties that face biracial women as individuals doubly oppressed because of race and gender. The song’s chorus features Murs rapping, “Whether chocolate or vanilla or you’re somewhere in between / Like a cappuccino, mocha, or a caramel cream. / Rejected by the black, not accepted by the white world. / And this is dedicated to them dark-skinned white girls” (Murs “D.S.W.G.”). Murs demonstrates an acute knowledge of race relations, male privilege, and female oppression. The close of the song features Murs offering consolation to his female listeners: “So much attention. So many

haters. / But don't be bitter; you'll be better for it later" (Murs "D.S.W.G."). Murs understands and ostensibly empathizes with the hardship women face and recognizes the power it takes to overcome such difficulties.

Despite his pro-feminist stance on "D.S.W.G.," Murs' lyrics in other songs do much to marginalize women in hip-hop. On "And This is For..." he attacks hip-hop's obsession with fashion while simultaneously attacking women: "I don't care what it cost; I'm not impressed, my nigga. / That throwback jersey is a dress, my nigga. / I remember diamonds used to be a girl's best friend. / Enslaving black children with them third world gems" (Murs "And"). While Murs employs tropes of "conscious" hip-hop here—deriding the mainstream's obsession with fashion and highlighting the exploitative nature of the diamond trade—he does so at the expense of his female listeners. Adams and Fuller denote six of the problematic lyrical themes in misogynistic hip-hop songs:

Much of what is considered to be misogynistic rap usually has one or more of the following six themes: (a) derogatory statements about women in relation to sex; (b) statements involving violent actions toward women, particularly in relation to sex; (c) references of women causing "trouble" for men; (d) characterization of women as "users" of men; (e) references of women being beneath men; and (f) references of women as usable and discardable beings.

(940)

Though Murs avoids these pitfalls in the majority of his songs, his lyrics on "And This is For..." are certainly indicative of a belief (conscious or otherwise) that women are "beneath" men in some fundamental way. Murs attacks his hypothetical opponent by claiming that he's wearing a throwback jersey reminiscent of a dress and diamond jewelry. He posits that these

are problematic not because they are emblematic of the quest for fashion, but because they are representative of femininity. He professes nostalgia for a time in which diamonds were “a girl’s best friend.” In doing so, he echoes Emerson’s fondness for static gender roles. Murs essentially declares that everything has its place—men are allowed to rap while women are expected to partake in more feminine activities such as wearing dresses and jewelry. By employing femininity as a sign of weakness, Murs undercuts his empathetic view of women put forth in other songs and does a great disservice to the women he purportedly hopes to empower. Emerson excludes women from the intellectual discourse by limiting women to the bodily sphere and labeling them as “wives” and “muses.” Murs excludes women from the discourse of hip-hop music by depicting them as concerned solely with bodily pursuits such as extravagant clothing and jewelry. Thus, he portrays women as intellectually inferior to men. Murs and other male independent hip-hop artists may have the best intentions when portraying the struggle of women in their music, but their use of feminine signifiers as insults undercuts their otherwise progressive views.

Given the inability of seemingly well-intentioned male artists like Murs to recognize and combat their own misogyny, the hip-hop community must turn to a woman for an effective means of feminist empowerment. Minneapolis’ Dessa of the Doomtree collective promises to be an important voice in hip-hop feminism in the years to come. Her brand of feminism eschews her mainstream female peers’ tendency to perpetuate the sexual objectification of women in hip-hop. Instead, she recalls Fuller’s desire to shift the locus of women’s worth from the body to the mind. Her first full-length album, *A Badly Broken Code*, operates as a modern re-working of Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. The album details the various problems facing women in hip-hop and society at large and proposes

solutions to these problems. On “The Bullpen,” Dessa explores her own experiences as a woman participating in the hip-hop discourse. The title of the song appropriately represents hip-hop as an area occupied solely by males. The song’s subject matter follows this thread with Dessa repeating “Forget the bull in the china shop. / There’s a china doll in the bullpen” as the chorus (Dessa “Bullpen”). The “china doll” here is assumed to be Dessa who has entered into the “bullpen” of rap music to try her hand at emceeing. Dessa echoes Fuller’s concerns that the men of her field refuse to take her seriously: “It’s been assumed I’m soft or irrelevant / ‘Cause I refuse to downplay my intelligence” (Dessa “Bullpen”). In refusing to “downplay” her intelligence, Dessa parts ways with female emcees who opt to sexually objectify themselves in their songs. She opts to showcase her intellectual and lyrical prowess rather than her physical attributes. This proves to pay off as she breaks through the impediments of her gender: “I hope that your battery’s charged, ‘cause I found this here ladder. / Now your ceilings don’t matter. / Check me out; now I got glass floors” (Dessa “The Bullpen”). Dessa invokes the infamous “glass ceiling” as she climbs through it to overcome the adversities facing female emcees.

On “The Bullpen,” she addresses sexual objectification head-on: “And I love this job, / but ah, good God, / sometimes I hate this business. / It’s all love backstage, / But then the boys get brave. / I gotta say I hope your mother doesn’t listen” (Dessa “The Bullpen”) Dessa wishes to be seen as an emcee on an equal playing field with her male counterparts, but recognizes the hazards of being a female emcee. Whether these “boys” are fans or other rappers is unimportant. Their behavior represents the expectations of women in hip-hop. As a woman, Dessa represents a potential sexual conquest for the “boys” she alludes to. She could choose to lyrically acquiesce to these sexual advances, or even reverse the situation so that

she becomes the conqueror rather than the conquered. These are common practices in songs written by other women in hip-hop. Instead, she chooses to simply dismiss the advances as juvenile behavior. She refuses to depict herself as a sexual object to be conquered or to conquer others. Dessa, like Fuller, shifts the locus of women's power from the bodily to the intellectual sphere as she refuses to objectify herself and opts instead to participate in the discourse of hip-hop.

In addition to shifting the locus of women's power to the intellectual sphere, Dessa advises women to become self-reliant. The song "Mineshaft II" reveals Dessa debunking the misconception that a woman needs a man to make her complete. The song opens with a female character receiving a call from an ex-lover: "Fifteen years from tonight you'll have to make a decision. / The greatest love of your life is gonna call during dinner / From the home of a girl that he's living with now" (Dessa "Mineshaft"). The "decision" Dessa describes is the choice of whether or not to return to this ex-lover, or remain independent. The ex-lover proceeds to apologize for the troubles the two had in the past and informs the protagonist that, "He's been workin' real hard. He's been tryin' to make a new start. / An honest-to-God fresh beginning. / So maybe you could finally find it in your heart / To forgive him" (Dessa "Mineshaft"). Through this forgiveness, the ex-lover insinuates that the two should get back together. He professes concern that the protagonist cannot make it on her own: "He heard it on the street that / You moved back in with your dad, / And that you've been drinkin' somethin' awful. / And that makes him sad" (Dessa "Mineshaft"). The ex-lover implies that he can fix her problems. The protagonist, however, proves that she doesn't need a relationship with this man in order to be complete. The chorus of the song hints at this idea: "You've already been here before. / You already know where it goes. / You chose this. You

know it's supposed to be over" (Dessa "Mineshaft"). Knowing the relationship is doomed for failure, the protagonist decides her best move is to simply rely on herself: "And now I'm too big to forgive him. / I need just a moment with me" (Dessa "Mineshaft"). The song ends with an illustration of the two trading hearts. The protagonist trades hers which is "tattered" and "battle-scarred" with a promise, "I'll be back for it tomorrow. / I only need it for tonight. / So I can call an old friend, / And I can tell him that we're finally even" (Dessa "Mineshaft"). The protagonist takes the ex-lover's heart and his offer to rekindle the romance and breaks them, leaving the two even. She realizes that her ex-lover is unreliable, and the only one she can truly rely on is herself. Dessa's protagonist chooses the Fullerian path of self-reliance rather than relying on a man to make her "complete."

Dessa rejects that a woman must have a man in order to be complete on "Mineshaft II," but her approach to self-reliance is more in line with Fuller's "communal" sense of self-reliance than Emerson's solitary one. The song "Alibi" is a particularly effective example of this. "Alibi" addresses the topic of domestic violence. A narrator, ostensibly Dessa, engages in a conversation with a female friend stuck in an abusive relationship. The narrator attempts to convince the abused individual that she should leave her abuser. The abuser appears to provide for himself and his victim through the drug trade: "Your man's in something heavy. / It already looks bad. / Be careful what you carry / On his behalf... / Think of the moments you've got left to lose. / Like how much time are you really down to do?" (Dessa "Alibi"). Dessa asserts that the relationship is detrimental to the individual. The abuser provides financial stability, but little else. Dessa again debunks the myth that women need a man to make them complete. She writes, "There's a lot of good women / With a lot of bad backs" (Dessa "Alibi") This implies that while men are stereotypically seen as providers, the truth is

that many women are crushed by their oppressive actions. The narrator offers a safety net into which her loved one can escape: “And I don’t need to know, / But there’s a set of my keys left under your door. / And if you need a place to sleep tonight, / Well, that’s what family’s for” (Dessa “Alibi”). Regardless of whether or not the narrator’s loved one is truly a family member or not, this passage indicates a desire to help the abused individual out of a dangerous situation. By furnishing an avenue for escape from this bad relationship, the narrator also provides a means for the abused individual to become more self-reliant. In accordance with Margaret Fuller’s concept of the symbiotic relationship that exists among all souls, by helping an individual become more self-reliant, the narrator herself becomes more self-reliant.

Dessa, like many independent hip-hop artists in the Midwest is an incredibly well-read individual. In her songs, she name-drops such literary heavyweights as William Blake, Dave Eggers, and Dorothy Parker. She has yet to note Margaret Fuller as a direct influence, but given Fuller’s impact on feminism in America and Dessa’s own feminist leanings which echo so much of Fuller’s doctrine, one can only imagine Dessa owes at least part of her belief system to Fuller. Margaret Fuller is seen as the primary feminist presence in American Transcendentalism. However, Ednah Cheney, considered one of the last Transcendentalists, warned of the dangers of viewing Fuller as the sole marker of feminist thought in the Transcendentalist movement. In a lecture on the advancement of women in America in 1895, Cheney stated, “The first mistake...is considering her, not as a typical woman, but as an exceptional one, whose powers were masculine, and who wielded some magic sword which she alone had strength to grasp” (193). To give all the credit for early feminist Transcendentalist thought to Fuller detracts not only from other feminist Transcendentalist

thinkers, but also from women as a whole. Such an act places Fuller on a pedestal as the only woman with tremendous intellect and transformative ideas as opposed to one woman among many with such ideas. Bearing Cheney's warning in mind and recognizing that feminist writing in the Transcendentalist movement came from multiple sources, it would be impossible to discount the great impact Fuller has had on feminist thought. As Cheney herself indicates, Fuller planted the "seeds of thought" that helped to inspire those feminists who came after her (192). Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* left a lasting impact on feminist thought after her untimely death (Wayne 32).

In attempting to break down the gender barriers of hip-hop, Dessa reconfigures Fuller's feminist teachings. She shifts the locus of feminine power from the body to the mind by establishing the need for self-culture and self-expression. In accordance with Fuller's belief that women must be "unimpeded" (315), Dessa casts off the impediments represented by mainstream hip-hop's expectations of women to fill roles as sexual objects rather than intellectuals. Just as Ednah Cheney warned against crediting Fuller with developing the entirety of Transcendentalist feminist thought, all credit for the feminist movement in hip-hop cannot be given to Dessa. Many women have contributed and continue to contribute to the discourse of hip-hop and work to improve women's position within the art form. At the same time, one cannot deny the important steps which Dessa takes towards creating a model for female emcees to follow. In accordance with Fuller's belief in the interconnectedness of all beings, this "china doll in the bullpen" is making waves in the hip-hop community which will help improve the future of hip-hop for all who engage with its discourse.



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