"It's a Rap"

A sermon delivered by
the Rev. Elaine Gehrmann
January 20, 2019

Prelude—"Freedom" --theme from the 1995 movie "Panther"
https://youtu.be/3jwRHmN6iLI

Offertory—Beyonce's "Freedom" in honor of International Day of the Girl in October 2017
https://youtu.be/3BMgV8jj9IU

Postlude—"Glory" from the 2015 movie *Selma*
https://youtu.be/HUZOKvYcx_o

Guest Rapper Bar$ Marley:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36fl03tYWk8

Sermon: "It's a Rap" Rev. Elaine Gehrmann

Why have a Sunday service talking about Rap?

Well, the theme of the month is poetry.
And this particular Sunday, sandwiched in between the Women's March yesterday and the Martin Luther King march tomorrow…
seems like the perfect Sunday, to talk about an incredible poetic artform that has amazing power to communicate across cultures, to lift up society's ills, and inspire us to care enough to do something about them.

In 1957, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations in Nashville, his speech was entitled, "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma." In it he said, "I hope the churches of America will play a significant role in conquering segregation. It has always been the responsibility of the church to broaden horizons and challenge the status quo. The church must move out into the arena of social action. First, you must see that the church removes the yoke of segregation from its own body. Then you must seek

to make the church increasingly active in social action outside its doors. It must seek to keep channels of communication open between the races. It must take an active stand against the injustices that negroes confront in housing, education, police protection, and in the city and state courts. It must exert its influence in the area of economic justice. As guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community the church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils."

Axel and I have been going to the Monterey Jazz Festival since we moved here three years ago, and we love it. It's three days full of amazing music, longtime jazz musicians along with new emerging artists. It has great food, a great feeling, and is full of people of different colors, ages, and tastes. The big acts are showcased in the arena, and we have sat in the same reserved seats in the arena each year, about halfway back.

Two years ago, in 2017, was the 60th anniversary of the Monterey Jazz Festival, and one of the two big acts scheduled for Sunday was Chris Thile, the relatively new host of the radio program "A Prairie Home Companion," who is a short young white bluegrass musician, who plays the mandolin. He was playing along with Brad Mehldau, an excellent white jazz pianist.

The other big act scheduled for Sunday was Common, the rapper and actor, who is a 6 ft. tall, 46 year old
African American from Chicago.

You could argue that it was a stretch for the jazz festival to have either a rapper or a bluegrass musician, and they placed their sets back to back.

It was really interesting to see the differences in the crowd in the arena change for these two different acts. While the festival as a whole is very diverse, and integrated… we could very clearly notice the change in complexion for the majority of the audiences for each of these acts-- when Common performed in the afternoon, the crowd had far fewer white people than when Chris Thile performed in the early evening. This I guess is not really surprising but it was very noticeable, and I felt sorry for the people who missed seeing Common's amazing performance. (I loved his t-shirt which says, "We built this joint for free")

The roots of rap can be traced back centuries, to the griots of West Africa. Griots were traveling poets, musicians, and storytellers who maintained a tradition of oral history in parts of West Africa. They told rhythmic stories of the past to their villages over the simple beat of a drum.
Caribbean folk artists also told stories in rhymes, laying the foundation for the birth of rap music as we know it today. (Elana Orfield)

Rap originated in African American communities in New York City in the early 1970's, and gained national attention with the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1979—forty years ago.

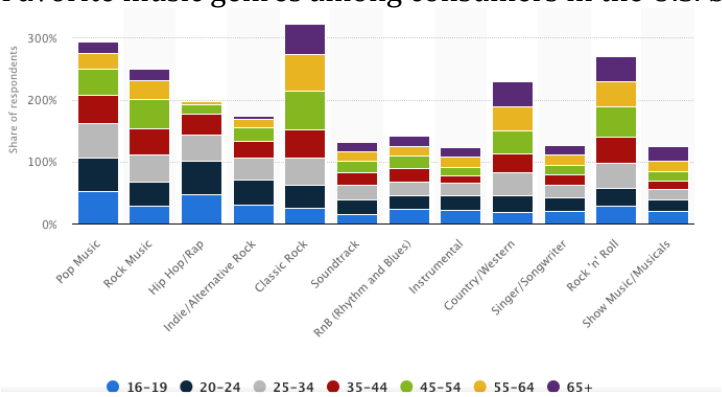
"I said, a hip hop the hippie to the hippie/ to the hip, hip a hop, a you don't stop the rock it/ to the bang, bang boogie, say up jump the boogie, to the rhythm of the boogie/the beat…"

Rap's early stars included Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, Public Enemy and the Beastie Boys. The late 1980s saw the advent of "gangsta rap," with lyrics that were often critiqued for being misogynistic or glamorizing violence and drug dealing. Later stars include Diddy, Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, OutKast, Eminem, Kanye West, and Lil Wayne. Female stars included Queen Latifah, Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu, and Missy Elliot.

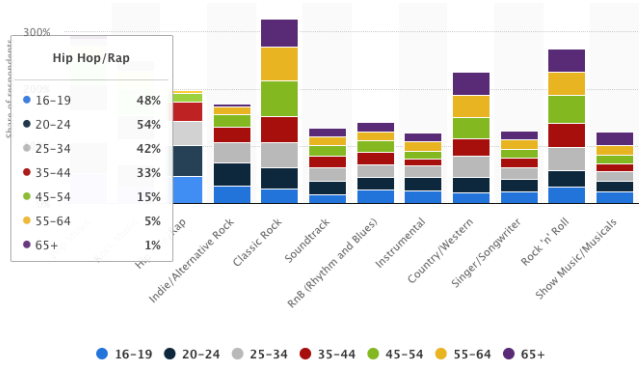
So what is the difference between rap and hiphop? Rap is a subset of the wider hiphop culture-- "Rap is a delivery style that includes rhyme, rhythm, and spoken language, usually delivered over a beat. Hip hop also includes the spoken word (the MC), the beats (the DJ), break-dancing, and graffiti art. Rap consists of content, flow, and delivery. Content refers to what's being said; flow is how it rhymes and its rhythm; delivery is the tone and speed in which it's spoken."
(http://www.fouroverfour.jukely.com/culture/history-of-rap-hip-hop/)

Rap or hiphop is an art form that certainly has its roots in African American culture, but is not just for African Americans.
For the first time ever, in 2017 hip-hop surpassed rock as the most popular music genre in the US, with 7 of the top ten albums and 8 of the top ten artists being hip hop or rap.

Look at this chart--
Favorite music genres among consumers in the U.S. by age group, in 2018…



The music genre that has the biggest age discrepancy is rap/hiphop…



Many of you who think rap isn't for you, might, if you had the chance, be willing to shell out some big bucks for a certain rap act, … called "Hamilton." What just a few years ago might have seemed absurd, a Broadway musical about Alexander Hamilton performed by a racially diverse cast with all the dialogue and songs in rap form, has become an amazingly successful surprise hit, grossing millions every year. Many people who thought they didn't like rap, love it.

Most rap and hiphop is not focused on 18th century historical figures, in fact, it's greatest appeal seems to be it's focus on current issues and perspectives…

In his introduction to the anthology The Breakbeat Poets, Kevin Coval says, "When I was in high school, and still in many highschools now, poetry… is taught through the lens of a eurocentric, white supremacist, boring-ass canon. Poetry, perhaps more than any other art, is not taught as a practice but only as a site of pseudo-criticism and reading comprehension. It seemed dead white dudes who got lost in the forest were the only ones to pick up a pen, and what they wrote had to be about horses or beechwood. I also thought all the poetry had already been written. All the books closed, all the poets dead (and white)." He says, "Perhaps it was when DJs put their hands on the records, something you were *never* supposed to do as a kid, that the idea of writing and contributing to a public rhythmic, civic discourse became so prevalent in the minds of a generation."

Kevin Coval says, "Hiphop made poetry an everyday thing well before Billy Collins. We recited poetry out loud on trains and buses, on our walks to school, bumped poetry in the jeeps of our imaginations. We knew anthologies of new american letters by heart. Poems readable, listenable, relatable… descriptions of neighborhoods like or unlike our own were an invitation to record, to look out the window, into the streets and put our surroundings down on paper."

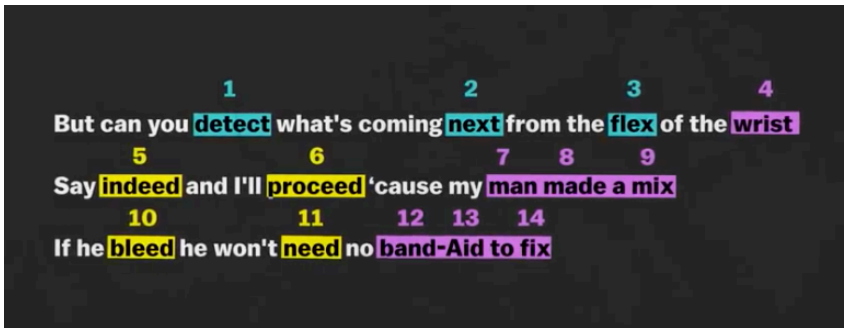
"Hip-hop made poetry relevant… hip hop wrote poetry about the block and aspirant, working-class hopes. It is a culture made by latchkey kids … left to their own devices to experiment wildly and make language and art new and meaningful. A poetics designed to move the crowd…relate to the crowd, to save the crowd. Hip-

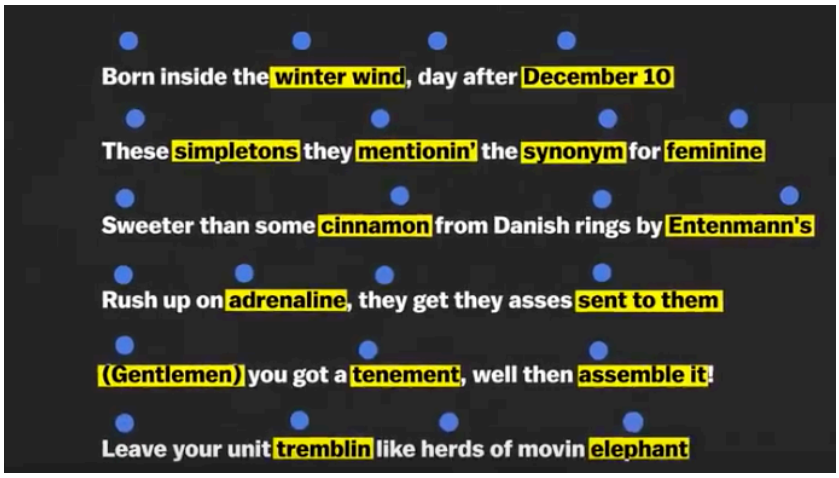
hop is participatory, radically democratic culture. Everyone is invited and asked to contribute, to get down, in their own way and on their own terms."

Michael Mlekoday said, "hiphop is intertextual, built of allusions and echoes that call back and forth through history. It is also a tradition that refuses to sacrifice substance for style or style for substance—it is always both sonics and politics, flash and prayer."

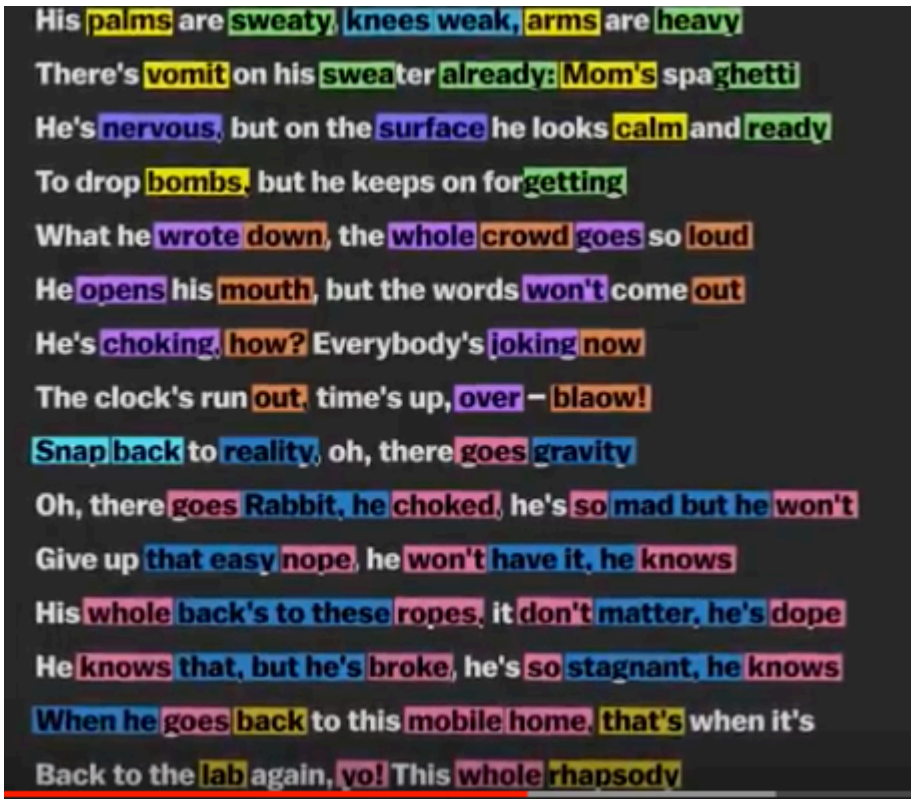
And it's not simple either, having evolved into some incredibly complex rhyming schemes…

1986 "Eric B. is President," by Eric B. & Rakim





Mos Def, 1998 Redefinition



Eminem, Lose Yourself, 2004 (won the Oscar for best song)

Kevin Coval says, "Hip hop saved American poetry. Made it new, fresh, made it something people cared about… Black and brown and asian writers made poetry a tool to communicate with an internationally large audience, and also went out in the streets and clubs and community centers to organize and build and find that audience. …Hiphop saved poetry from becoming classical music. It dusted it off, brought it out of the closet, put some Js on its feet, told it to speak with the people, *all the people.* Have a conversation, tell a story, rouse the spirit, spit the truth. Hip hop is making poetry cool in schools across the country, changing the culture of literature and thereby the culture of education. Poets now walk highschool hallways like star athletes. Hip hop [and rap] did this."

"Hip-hop invited us to write. …to tell the story, as Gwendolyn Brooks said, that's in front of your nose. We began to document, to represent, to re-present the physical, metaphysical and emotional spaces we inhabited and hoped to create."

"Hiphop is open and comprised of every culture and music, though it is rooted in and part of the African diaspora and its histories and practices. Hip-hop is black, and is created in part as a response to the historic and currently maintained legacies and realities of white supremacy and institutional racism, the war of drugs… and the prison industrial complex."

Axel and I are big fans of Trevor Noah and the Daily Show, and he has quite a few rappers as guests. Several weeks ago he had an extended interview with rapper Meek Mill— (The Daily Show, Dec. 11, 2018) who said this—

"I always want to explain on platforms like this—
A lot of people hear rap music and sometimes you hear people talk about violence, drugs and things like that.
We actually grew up in these environments our whole lives.
I'm 31 years old. From the age of one year old to 22 years old, maybe, until I got a record deal, I grew up in a ruthless environment.
A lot of people—some people grew up in love, some people grew up in hate.
I grew up in, like, the hate-survival area, where we seen a lot of bad.
So now uh, I still know people, I have family members who live in that.
And you know, we speak on things, It's like a social forecaster.
And I just want to deliver my message in a way where all America can view
And see what we go through coming from where I come from.
And, uh, I think I'm a good representative. 'cause I changed my life around.
Even growing up in hate and survival mode.
And I speak on a lot of things. Like I talk about the opioid addiction in my city. …
And I talk about guys getting caught up and being influenced by other guys
And going to jail and losing their freedom. By making bad decisions.
And I also talk about the fun side of my life,
Actually having money, making money and living,
Cause sometimes that inspires people too, coming from where I come from, right.
We never had anything
You got to remember.
The first person I seen was Allen Iverson, he was the first African American I seen, like, with a real nice car.
And where I was at, nobody really had nothing.
And that inspired me to be bigger in life.
So you know if you see me on instagram or something
And I'm flaunting it a little bit, don't take it personal.
I'm just trying to inspire."

Nate Marshall says, in the American conversation between power and the disempowered, “black folks respond artistically and politically by asserting the importance of their lives. This assertion of life is present in every major Black artistic movement from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts movement to the current movement of hiphop and rap. This assertion of life is maybe best-articulated in Lucille Clifton’s masterwork, ‘won’t you celebrate with me,’ in which she says, ‘come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to kill me/ and has failed.’ For Lucille Clifton, celebration is central as a nonwhite, nonmale person who defies the odds by continuing to draw breath. This declaration of living and the resolve to celebrate that life is in direct opposition to the dominant American agenda.”

Being able to shield ourselves from violence, police brutality, mass incarceration, drugs, gangs, etc, is a privilege that many of us in this room have. Because of our religious belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, because of our religious commitment to justice, equity and compasson in human relations, we might want to make sure we hear and understand the experiences of those in our communities who have different realities, different experiences… as Rev. Dr. King said, “As guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community the church cannot look with indifference upon these glaring evils.”

Rap and hiphop culture can help us to understand many of these realities… can help us broaden our horizons and deepen our compassion…
Clearly these rhymes speak to the younger generation who are inheriting this messy world…

The challenge Rev. Dr. King gave us is this-- "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? … Where are their voices of support when bruised and weary men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

I encourage us all to become more familiar with the lively beats and bars of rap and hiphop poetry, and realities they represent, and to offer our voices of support to these creative forms of protest.
Amen.