

# HARD TO MAKE A SONG 'BOUT SOMETHING OTHER THAN THE MONEY\*



## A CULTURAL AUDIT ON POPULAR MUSIC AND POVERTY

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\* A lyric sung by Drake in Nicki Minaj's song "[Truffle Butter](#)"

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# INTRODUCTION

We started this research at the beginning of a new year and a new decade – an opportunity for change. We finish it embroiled in a global pandemic that has revealed the crushing inequity of our economic and health care systems. But this moment of upheaval and uncertainty is also an opportunity. Narratives are being re-written and new ways of life born. These new narratives and norms can either reinforce the good and just in this world, or not. We desperately hope that the findings of this cultural audit contribute to the former.

Popular culture can tell us a lot about how people perceive certain issues and narratives. Cultural research like this audit provides movements and campaigns with a deeper and more emotionally resonant understanding of audiences than traditional research practices alone, but they do not seek to be comprehensive representations. Rather, they capture important themes to help orient communications strategies to the lives of audiences, getting to the heart of their hopes, fears and joys.

This audit focuses exclusively on poverty narratives in popular music. Research has shown that music is critical to how we form our identity – a study in California showed that music is the single most important influencer of young people’s identity formation, more important than religion.<sup>1</sup> Scientists have determined that music activates the part of the brain that governs optimism.<sup>2</sup> These findings might help to explain the historical contributions of music and musicians to social justice from anti-war to human and civil rights movements, and point to how the music community can be a potent partner in other campaigns, including the potential eradication of poverty.

In order to understand what popular music is telling us about poverty, our work started with a review of existing research around lyrical analysis, inequity themes in music and other related subjects. From there, we analyzed the most popular songs from the past five years (2015-2019), looking for direct and indirect references to poverty and adjacent subjects like wealth. All told, we analyzed the lyrics of approximately 465 unique songs on the *Billboard* charts, including all of its Hot 100 and a subset of its R&B/Hip-Hop and Country charts from 2015-2019. We then coded them for specific content relevant to or in contrast to our subject matter. We also analyzed 174

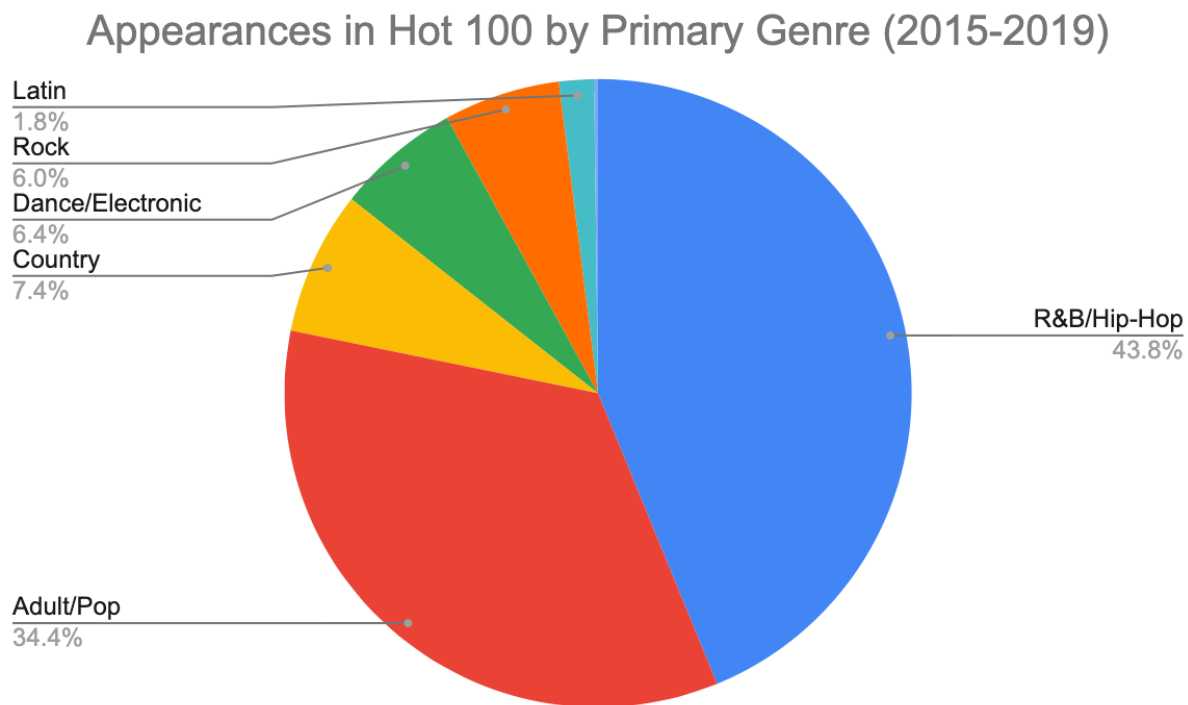
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<sup>1</sup> “California Dreamers: A public opinion portrait of the most diverse generation the nation has known,” *New America Media*, Poll, Apr 22, 2007. <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/california-dreamers-a-public-opinion-portrait-of-the-most-diverse-generation-the-nation-has-known.html>

<sup>2</sup> Levitin, D.J., *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of Human Obsession*. Penguin Group, 2006.

music videos from these charts, and the social media accounts of a select dozen Hot 100 artists. It is important to note that because our focus was on the most popular songs, as represented by these *Billboard* charts, it misses poverty themes in less popular songs. (Full methodological details are provided in the Appendix.)

To give context to what we studied, our analysis found that R&B/Hip-Hop dominated the Hot 100 (44%) during this five-year period. Adult/Pop was the next most popular genre (34%). Country only represented 7% of the most popular songs in the last five years.



Through qualitative methods, we found important narratives around wealth and poverty told repeatedly in a large portion of these songs:

- **There is constant reinforcement of the potential for class mobility through meritocracy in all genres of music we studied.**
- **Lyrics, videos and social media in hip-hop were dominated by celebrations of exorbitant wealth and the accompanying “hustle.”**
- **Portrayals of “the good life” differed greatly between country and hip-hop.**

- **Lyrical references to poverty are limited in all genres – only 8% of the total Hot 100 songs studied – but it was most prevalent in hip-hop where lyrics about poverty were often coupled with references to wealth and used to describe the artist’s personal history.**

Some exceptions to these themes, as well as our finding that some of the most successful artists on the Hot 100 are doing considerable philanthropic work to eradicate poverty out of the spotlight, offer opportunities for movements and campaigns to shift these and other dominant narratives about poverty. Some ideas for this can be found in the recommendations section. We also identified key players in the music sector – musicians as well as institutions – who are or could be partners in this important work. Finally, we identified key terms that can be used for ongoing tracking of these narratives.

# NARRATIVE THEMES IN POPULAR MUSIC

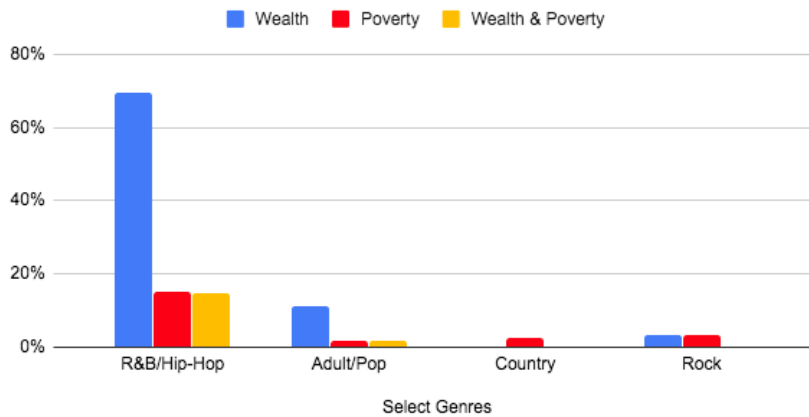
## **The dominant narrative is a celebration of wealth.**

Our review of past research on the lyrical content of popular songs indicates dramatic growth in lyrical content pertaining to wealth – in fact, a sixteen-fold increase from 1960 to 2010. Most of this shift has been since the 2000s (from 5% to 25.5%) and is specifically attributed to the rise of commercial hip-hop music that has dominated the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> In our five year sample, we found a similar pattern where 36% of the overall songs referenced wealth, but of the total songs classified as R&B/Hip-Hop, that number was 69%. We also found that lyrical references to poverty were limited in all genres – only 8% of the total songs. As the chart below illustrates, almost all references to poverty were also coupled with those of wealth, and almost all were in songs that were classified as R&B/Hip-Hop.

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<sup>3</sup> Christenson, P.G., de Haan-Rietdijk, S., Roberts, D.F., & ter Bogt, T.F.M. “What has America Been Singing About? Trends in Themes in the U.S. Top-40 Songs: 1960–2010,” *Psychology of Music* 47, no. 2 (January 23, 2018): 194–212. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0305735617748205>

### Lyrical References to Wealth & Poverty in Billboard's Hot 100 (2015-2019)



To explore why hip-hop might be so different from other genres, we have to consider its history. Born in poor communities in the Bronx, hip-hop is often mistakenly understood as only a style of music that combines heavy beats with spoken word and excerpts, or “samples,” from other well-known songs. But hip-hop culture from the beginning also included dance, fashion and art. Early hip-hop often contained overt lyrical references to racial and economic oppression. We hear this clearly in one of its earliest songs, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message,” from 1982:

*Broken glass everywhere  
People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care  
I can't take the smell, can't take the noise  
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice  
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back  
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat  
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far  
'Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car  
Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge  
I'm trying not to lose my head  
It's like a jungle sometimes  
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under <sup>4</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five. “The Message.” *The Message*, 1982, Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5DuTNKFEjJlySAYJH1yNDU?si=agy8DwEAQKuARngNUOa0Ag>

Today's hip-hop artists, even those who grew up in similar circumstances to those that birthed the genre – poor and in the Bronx – are singing about far different topics, and doing so with far more commercial success. As Cardi B says in her 2019 hit, "[Money](#)":

***I was born to flex (Yes)***

***Diamonds on my neck***

***I like boardin' jets, I like mornin' sex (Woo!)***

***But nothing in this world that I like more than checks (Money)<sup>5</sup>***

For artists of color to accumulate wealth – which has been systematically and historically denied particularly to Black Americans – is itself a political act. But clearly hip-hop moved from grassroots protest music to a commercial celebration of materialism. Interestingly, it did so around the turn of the century, the same time that

inequality became more

pronounced in the United States

(see chart).<sup>6</sup> Popular music has

multiple functions – one is to reflect

the conditions of our current

society, another is to provide an

escape. Keith Payne, author of *The*

*Broken Ladder: How Inequality*

*Affects The Way We Think, Live,*

*and Die*, gives us some indication

of how these narratives might both

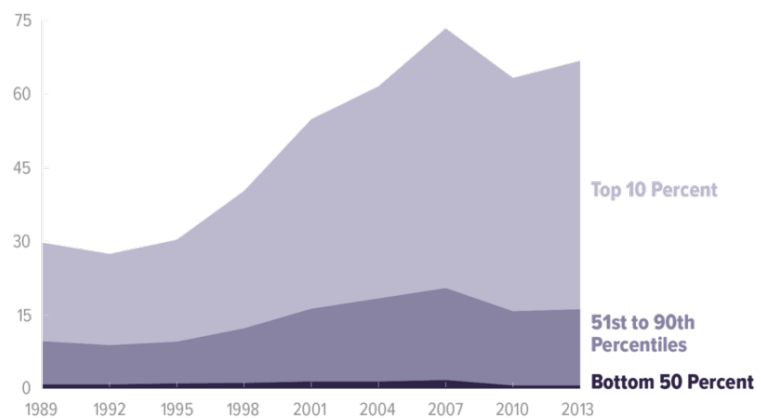
reflect and provide an escape

simultaneously. In an interview with Vox, he said, "When inequality is high, it's driven by the

superrich, because [the poor] can't go lower than zero. People feel poorer but aspire to higher

### Holdings of Family Wealth

Trillions of 2013 Dollars



<sup>5</sup> Cardi B. "Money." *Money*, Atlantic, 2018, Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6wa2NrIRRVmfrb9SRUNxek?si=R7hH91HRRse-kQXcCEnNJQ>

<sup>6</sup> "Trends in Family Wealth, 1989 to 2013". Congressional Budget Office. August 18, 2016. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/51846>

standards...It also orients people to the very wealthy as opposed to the poor.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps then, songs about wealth and the accumulation of it have broader appeal in this kind of moment.

Understanding the commercial success of hip-hop also requires looking at the phenomenon of the “hip-hop mogul,” a small cadre of Black male artists who were or are wildly successful as both musicians and as businessmen. The most commonly cited amongst this small group are Dr. Dre, Diddy, and of course, Jay Z, who famously rapped: “I’m not a businessman; I’m a business, man.”<sup>8</sup> Dre and Jay both grew up in poor communities and lived in housing projects. Today all three are, according to *Forbes Magazine*, which publishes an annual list of the world’s most wealthy individuals, “not only the wealthiest hip-hop acts on the planet, but the richest American musicians of any genre.”<sup>9</sup> The rags-to-riches story of these titans of hip-hop may have set the stage for music, like sports and other “super star” economies, to be seen as a pathway out of poverty,<sup>10</sup> despite the fact that according to a 2014 study only 1% of musicians have become “mainstream” or “mega” artists.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, **our analysis suggests that popular music in the last five years is specifically reinforcing neoliberal narratives about economic mobility and meritocracy.** As the Narrative Initiative describes in their research on neoliberalism, “These narratives are echoed in white papers and movie scripts, advertising and church sermons, and countless news stories about the downtrodden American who overcame obstacles through rugged persistence.”<sup>12</sup> We found that popular music of all genres tightly orbits core narratives of individual hard work and the uniqueness, divine intervention and/or luck that rewarded that hard work. While some media may promote false narratives that “poor people are lazy,” popular music tells us another story – that if I “hustle” hard enough, I will become a star. Furthermore, if I am successful, “I deserve it.” Ultimately, both of these are part of the core meritocracy narrative that if you work hard enough you will be successful and if

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<sup>7</sup> Timberg, S. “How Music Has Responded to a Decade of Economic Inequality.” *Vox*, 30 July 2018, [www.vox.com/culture/2018/7/30/17561470/music-of-inequality](http://www.vox.com/culture/2018/7/30/17561470/music-of-inequality)

<sup>8</sup> Kanye West, Jay Z. “Diamonds From Sierra Leone - Remix.” *Late Registration*, Roc-A-Fella Records, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/34KUIBslUiPV7oClzSdDAU?si=m3fycblBQG-31h1\\_e1zU8w](https://open.spotify.com/track/34KUIBslUiPV7oClzSdDAU?si=m3fycblBQG-31h1_e1zU8w)

<sup>9</sup> Greenburg, Z.O. “The Forbes Five: Hip-Hop's Wealthiest Artists 2018.” *Forbes*, 1 Mar. 2018, [www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2018/03/01/the-forbes-five-hip-hops-wealthiest-artists-2018/#2c262fea47c1](http://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2018/03/01/the-forbes-five-hip-hops-wealthiest-artists-2018/#2c262fea47c1)

<sup>10</sup> For more on how music is portrayed as a “super star economy” see “Land of Hope and Dreams: Rock and Roll, Economics and Rebuilding the Middle Class.” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/06/12/rock-and-roll-economics-and-rebuilding-middle-class>

<sup>11</sup> “Next Big Sound’s State Of The Industry 2013,” Next Big Sound, 2014. <https://blog.nextbigsound.com/next-big-sounds-state-of-the-industry-2013-e2edd4d0f897>

<sup>12</sup> “Neoliberalism Is Dying. What Narratives Can Replace It?” *Narrative Initiative*, 29 Oct. 2019, [narrativeinitiative.org/blog/neoliberalism-is-dying-what-narratives-can-replace-it/](http://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/neoliberalism-is-dying-what-narratives-can-replace-it/)



you're not successful, you must not be working hard enough (or have a character defect). These meritocracy narratives, among others, have been found to dominate the public's perceptions of poverty.<sup>13</sup>

Post Malone frequently talks about his hustle and his “me against the world” attitude in his music. On “Congratulations” he says, “Worked so hard, forgot how to vacation (uh-huh).”<sup>14</sup> Cardi B also references her work ethic and hustle consistently. On “Bodak Yellow” she sings, “Dropped two mixtapes in six months, what bitch working as hard as me? (yeah) I don't bother with these hoes, don't let these hoes bother me. They see pictures, they say, “Goals,” bitch, I'm who they tryna be.”<sup>15</sup> And on DJ Snake’s “Taki Taki” she sings, “I'm a whole rich bitch, and I work like I'm broke still.”<sup>16</sup>

All that hard work is supposed to end in “the good life.” As we explored the lyrical descriptions of this goal, we noted a difference between hip-hop, which represents almost 44% of the Hot 100 in the past five years, and country, which represents 7%.<sup>17</sup> Lyrical analysis done by others corroborates our findings:<sup>18</sup> In country songs on the Hot 100, both in its lyrics and its videos, nostalgia and tradition are common themes, and the good life is often portrayed as “the way things once were.” Of course, this idealized past was often violent and oppressive to many communities that are not well represented in country music like women and people of color, and nostalgia for it can be deeply unsettling. Tradition and nostalgia were most often seen in the form of monogamous romantic relationships and imagery used to describe the good life. Of the 37 country songs analyzed in the Hot 100, only two were *not* about interpersonal



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<sup>13</sup> “Public Perceptions & Narratives of Poverty,” GOOD, November 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Post Malone, Quavo. “Congratulations.” *Stoney*, Republic Records, 2016, *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3a1INhkSLSkpJE4MSHpDu9?si=abzP8nu7QwqC1p-CVnx8Qw>

<sup>15</sup> Cardi B. “Bodak Yellow.” *Invasion of Privacy*, Atlantic, 2018, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/6KBYefloo7Kydlmq1uUQIL?si=CqN572VgQzKlpPrmnD5\\_eg](https://open.spotify.com/track/6KBYefloo7Kydlmq1uUQIL?si=CqN572VgQzKlpPrmnD5_eg)

<sup>16</sup> DJ Snake, Selena Gomez, Ozuna. “Taki Taki.” *Taki Taki*, DJ Snake Music Productions, 2018, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/4w8niZpiMy6qz1mntFA5uM?si=tqKdV\\_mAT\\_mnTg62Ke5Dug](https://open.spotify.com/track/4w8niZpiMy6qz1mntFA5uM?si=tqKdV_mAT_mnTg62Ke5Dug)

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix A for details on *Billboard*’s Hot 100 breakdown by genre. One note, *Billboard* lumps hip-hop, rap and R&B together into a single genre.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, P. “What Happened to Country Music?” Medium,, 28 Mar. 2019, [medium.com/@plewis67/what-happened-to-country-music-300cf8303430](https://medium.com/@plewis67/what-happened-to-country-music-300cf8303430)

relationships or love – one was about God (“[God’s Country](#)” by Blake Shelton) and the other was about a dance (“[The Git Up](#)” by Blanco Brown). Interestingly, one of those songs about love portrayed a very different story in the video. Sam Hunt’s video for “[Take Your Time](#),” depicts domestic abuse in a working class community.

Country music in the Hot 100 and the Country charts is where we see the most quantity and range of working class signifiers – things like work boots, trucks, boats, fishing, beer, whiskey and small towns – used to describe “the good life.” There is a common joke that all country music boils down to some version of storytelling where your truck dies, your dog and woman run off, but you still have God, a guitar and your beer or whiskey to rely on. In fact, last year, one of the top country songs was called “[Beer Never Broke my Heart](#)”:

*I've had a largemouth bass bust my line  
A couple beautiful girls tell me goodbye  
Trucks break down, dogs run off  
Politicians lie, been fired by the boss  
It takes one hand  
To count the things I can count on  
No, there ain't much, man  
That ain't never let me down  
Longneck ice-cold beer never broke my heart<sup>19</sup>*

Chris Janson’s song “[Buy Me A Boat](#)” didn’t make it onto the Hot 100, but it did chart at number 8 on *Billboard*’s Country charts in 2015. In it he talks about what he would do if he was rich, a rare example in the country songs we examined of the desire to be wealthy:

*I know everybody says  
Money can't buy happiness  
But it could buy me a boat, it could buy me a truck to pull it  
It could buy me a Yeti 110 iced down with some silver bullets*

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<sup>19</sup> Luke Combs. “Beer Never Broke My Heart.” *What You See Is What You Get*, River House Artists, 2019, *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3RzcoFkZ0AOp2nH71jP504?si=v013AnBORdOc3IDCeQLzog>

In another country song from 2018, called “[Get Along](#),” Kenny Chesney encourages us to look past our differences while talking about the *material* and *non-material* aspects of a “good life”:

*Always give love the upper hand  
Paint a wall, learn to dance  
Call your mom, buy a boat  
Drink a beer, sing a song  
Make a friend, can't we all get along*

Hip-hop songs in the Hot 100 celebrate a very different version of “the good life.” In both lyrics and videos, there is an emphasis on making money, driving expensive cars, name dropping luxury brands,<sup>20</sup> being with beautiful and sexually active women, and possessing drugs, and to a lesser extent, guns. Because hip-hop is the largest genre of popular music, this message dominates popular music. There are notable exceptions, as we discuss below. In addition, artists like Kendrick Lamar, who appeared on the Hot 100 list eight times in the five years we studied, seem to be challenging this dominant narrative in much of their music. Take for instance “[King’s Dead](#)” from the *Black Panther* soundtrack, where Lamar questions “the good life” described by others:

*Red light, green light, red light, green light  
Red light, green light, they like  
We like fast cars, fast money, fast life, fast broads  
Egotistic, goin' ballistic, why God?  
Born warrior, lookin' for euphoria  
But I don't see it, I don't feel it, I'm paraplegic<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> A lot of wealth signaling in hip-hop music is through name dropping luxury brands in songs. An article found that in 2018, the three most-referenced fashion brands—Fendi, Balenciaga and Gucci—were called out 664 times in rap and R&B songs, up from 31 collective mentions in 2010. In our lyrical analysis, we also found Gucci as the top brand referenced.

<sup>21</sup> Jay Rock, Kendrick Lamar, Future. “King’s Dead.” *King’s Dead*, Aftermath Records, 2018, *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/51rXHuKN8Loc4sUIKPODgH?si=AM11g3XoRVWfL7F3oaBnaw>

Lamar’s song “[HUMBLE.](#)” continues to criticize the bravado of his counterparts. “Be Humble,” he says simply. “Sit down.”<sup>22</sup> What makes Lamar exceptional may not be that he raps about wealth and poverty unlike anyone else, but that he alone has made such content popular enough to make it in the Hot 100 repeatedly.

## So, did poverty show up in popular music at all? Yes, but in specific ways.

Our research revealed that some of the Hot 100 artists of the past five years experienced poverty themselves – in fact four out of the top 10 artists to frequent the charts as either primary or a featured artist grew up poor (as shown highlighted in pink in the chart below).

Table 1: Artist by Total Appearances in the Hot 100

PERFORMER	NUMBER OF APPEARANCES
Drake	30
Khalid	16
Nicki Minaj	15
Cardi B	15
Ariana Grande	13
The Weekend	13
Justin Bieber	12
Post Malone	12
Taylor Swift	11
Sia	10

Despite this, our study found references to poverty in the most popular songs were very limited. Only 8% (41) of the songs in the Hot 100 referenced poverty, while 36% (182) referenced wealth.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Kendrick Lamar. “HUMBLE.” *DAMN.*, Aftermath/Interscope (TDE), 2017, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/7KXjTSCq5nL1LoYtL7XAwS?si=NKRhAESbR\\_SctMYGNGn3Cw](https://open.spotify.com/track/7KXjTSCq5nL1LoYtL7XAwS?si=NKRhAESbR_SctMYGNGn3Cw)

<sup>23</sup> See more about the coding for this analysis in the Methodology section, Appendix A.

Out of those 41 songs that mentioned poverty, only three did not also talk about wealth. One of those songs was the 2015 hit “[Time of Our Lives](#)” by Pitbull & Ne-Yo. It is the rare example in our study of lyrics that celebrate the resilience and vitality of those who are struggling financially. The song’s refrain explains the cause for celebration:

*I knew my rent was gon' be late about a week ago  
I worked my ass off, but I still can't pay it though  
But I got just enough  
To get off in this club  
Have me a good time, before my time is up  
Hey, let's get it now<sup>24</sup>*

The video for the song depicts a family on New Year’s Eve in 1999. A man asks two women why they aren’t celebrating, and one responds, “Have you not seen? We haven’t paid the rent in two months!” The second woman then suggests throwing a house party to raise the money. As party-goers enter the house, they drop money into a jar, and then proceed to have the time of their lives. At a break in the party, Pitbull says, “This for everybody going through tough times. Believe me, been there, done that.”

More common in our study were lyrics about poverty side-by-side with those about wealth. Fetty Wap’s<sup>25</sup> “[Trap Queen](#)” is a great example. The song is a modern version of the bank robbing couple, Bonnie and Clyde, albeit the illegal activity the couple is doing is selling drugs in the “trap,” a slang term for “a ghetto place that if you stay too long you get trapped there.”<sup>26</sup>

*Married to the money, introduced her to my stove  
Showed her how to whip it, now she remixin' for low  
She my trap queen, let her hit the band  
We be countin' up, watch how far them bands go  
We just set a goal, talkin' matchin' Lambos*

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<sup>24</sup> Pitbull, Ne-Yo. “Time of Our Lives.” *Globalization*, RCA Records, 2014, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/2bJvI42r8EF3wxjOuDav4r?si=0S\\_o23MTQ2ueaUVX2QUROw](https://open.spotify.com/track/2bJvI42r8EF3wxjOuDav4r?si=0S_o23MTQ2ueaUVX2QUROw)

<sup>25</sup> Fetty is slang for money. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Fetty>

<sup>26</sup> To read more about this slang term, see <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=the%20trap>. This term is so common that there is a style of hip-hop music named trap, which started in poor communities in the South.

*At 56 a gram, 5 a hundred grams though  
Man, I swear I love her, how she work the damn pole  
Hit the strip club, we be lettin' bands go  
Everybody hatin', we just call them fans, though  
In love with the money, I ain't never lettin' go<sup>27</sup>*

The video shows scenes of an expensive car pulling up to an apartment in a poor community. Scenes inside the apartment – counting cash, cooking and a couple interacting – ensue before transitioning to fancy cars, more counting cash and what seems like a block party.

Often the references to poverty described an artist's personal history, but were coupled with displays of current wealth. Take for instance the Hot 100 songs of Cardi B, who was an erotic dancer before becoming an Instagram star and then a musician.<sup>28</sup> The song that put her on the Hot 100 charts first, "[Bodak Yellow](#)," describes how she no longer needs to strip to make money: "I used to live in the P's (ooh, ooh), now it's a crib with a gate (ah)."<sup>29</sup> ("The P's" is a reference to housing projects.) The video for the song does not have a single visual reference to poverty. Rather, it is entirely a celebration of wealth – it is set in Dubai, a city that is often a symbol of extreme wealth, and shows her riding a camel in designer shoes, dancing next to an expensive car, and sitting next to a cheetah.<sup>30</sup> Exotic pets are also a form of wealth signaling.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fetty Wap. "Trap Queen." *Fetty Wap*, 300 Entertainment, 2015, *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2d8JP84HNLKhmd6lYOoupQ?si=YYfwX7FPRSSCpeKY2-S64Q>

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Cardi B, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-V3XN8AaMD0>

<sup>29</sup> Cardi B. "Bodak Yellow." *Invasion of Privacy*, Atlantic, 2018, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/6KBYefloo7Kydlmq1uUQIL?si=CqN572VgQzKlpPrmnD5\\_eg](https://open.spotify.com/track/6KBYefloo7Kydlmq1uUQIL?si=CqN572VgQzKlpPrmnD5_eg)

<sup>30</sup> According to reports, the cheetah attacked Cardi B during filming. See <https://www.nme.com/news/cheetah-attacked-cardi-b-set-bodak-yellow-video-2239622>

<sup>31</sup> Emerson, S. "Why Rich People Are Obsessed With Owning Exotic Animals." *Vice*, 26 Sept. 2016, [www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/qkix93/rich-people-are-obsessed-with-owning-exotic-animals](http://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qkix93/rich-people-are-obsessed-with-owning-exotic-animals)

## Other examples of artists' history of poverty in lyrics:

*From food stamps to a whole 'nother domain, ya.  
Out the bottom (Ye), I'm the livin' proof (Super).*

- "Mask Off," Future

*Used to have no money for a crib,  
Now my room service bill cost your whole life*

- "Low Life," Future ft. The Weeknd

*When I was 9, on cell, motel, we didn't have nowhere to stay.  
At 29, I've done so well, hit cartwheel in my estate*

- "DNA," Kendrick Lamar

*I'm gon' win a Grammy, move my family out the projects  
We went from chillin' in the projects to makin' projects*

- "Drowning," A Boogie Wit da Hoodie ft. Kodak Black

*Sleepin' on the palette turned me to a savage.  
I'm a project baby, now I stay in Calabasas*

- "ZEZE," Kodak Black ft. Travis Scott & Offset

## More rarely, poverty lyrics were used to show animosity:

*They want me by the road holding up cardboard  
So I go extra hard on the hard floor*

- "Blessings" by Big Sean ft. Drake

*How dare that n\*\* run his mouth  
When his pockets in a drought?*

- "My Way," Fetty Wap ft. Monty

*Your momma still live in a tent, yuh (Brr)  
Still slangin' dope in the 'jects, huh? (Yeah)*

- "Gucci Gang," Lil Pump

As we studied lyrics in the Hot 100, we noticed a pattern – a brief reference to the struggles of poverty, then an in-depth celebration of earning and displays of wealth, sometimes with a line or two about artists sharing success or wealth with their inner circle. To continue the example with “Bodak Yellow,” Cardi goes on to sing:

*Got a bag and fixed my teeth  
Hope you hoes know it ain't cheap  
And I pay my mama bills  
I ain't got no time to chill*<sup>32</sup>

Cardi B is known for being very outspoken on almost any topic. This is especially on display through her Instagram account where she has an audience of over 61 million. The majority of her posts are promotion of her music and brand, but she also posts on wide ranging subjects like her struggles with lactose intolerance,<sup>33</sup> pitches for civic engagement<sup>34</sup> and even discussions on the minimum wage with Bernie Sanders.<sup>35</sup> Like Cardi B, Selena Gomez grew up poor, the daughter of a teen mom.<sup>36</sup> While none of her songs in the Hot 100 from 2015-2019 reference this past, she did recently post a picture of her childhood house on social media, as part of a series of photos from her youth to show where she came from.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, country star Sam Hunt is using a lot of imagery from working class and poor communities in the social media posts for his new album release (*SouthSide*, released on April 3). These were the only three instances of working class visuals in the social media accounts that we studied, mirroring the rare references to poverty and near constant celebration of wealth and “the good life” in lyrics and videos.

We saw more visibility of poverty in the videos of Latinx and artists outside of the U.S. on the Hot 100, though they are also clear in their celebration of wealth. Rihanna, who grew up in Barbados, often shows glimpses of a poor Caribbean community in her videos (like the motorcycle driving through a neighborhood in “[Needed Me](#)” or the dance party scene in “[Work](#)”). Neither of these

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<sup>32</sup> Cardi B. “Bodak Yellow.” *Invasion of Privacy*, Atlantic, 2018, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/6KBYefloo7Kydlmq1uUQIL?si=CqN572VgQzKlpPrmnD5\\_eg](https://open.spotify.com/track/6KBYefloo7Kydlmq1uUQIL?si=CqN572VgQzKlpPrmnD5_eg)

<sup>33</sup> See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuKYIV8l6M6/>

<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.instagram.com/p/BoUqCAphGHP/>

<sup>35</sup> See [https://www.instagram.com/tv/B1HhZREgAl5/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/tv/B1HhZREgAl5/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>36</sup> Ryan, A. “Selena Gomez Slammed by Fans over Latest Instagram Post.” *Celebrity.nine.com*, 9 Jan. 2018, [celebrity.nine.com.au/latest/selena-gomez-slammed-for-suggesting-life-would-be-better-if-she-were-still-poor-and-in-texas/a4b0ce6d-e684-4ecb-8cbe-cbbf7b25ad49](http://celebrity.nine.com.au/latest/selena-gomez-slammed-for-suggesting-life-would-be-better-if-she-were-still-poor-and-in-texas/a4b0ce6d-e684-4ecb-8cbe-cbbf7b25ad49)

<sup>37</sup> See <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdow71PAxDZ/>



songs have anything to do with poverty lyrically, though. Similarly, the video for “[Despacito](#),” the 2017 song by Luis Fonsi featuring Daddy Yankee, takes place in La Perla, a poor neighborhood in Puerto Rico, without directly addressing its poverty. According to an *NPR* article, “Residents point with pride to the street corner where Fonsi and Daddy Yankee sang in the video, surrounded by neighborhood kids. Over here they danced and played dominoes. And over there, sultry former Miss Universe Zuleyka Rivera sauntered around the neighborhood...With the success of ‘Despacito,’ there were great hopes that this long-neglected barrio might turn a corner.”<sup>38</sup> That never happened – unfortunately just a few months later, the neighborhood was devastated by two hurricanes that battered Puerto Rico.<sup>39</sup>

We also found a few instances where Hot 100 songs or videos (or both) offered a complex exploration of an artists’ concept of being wealthy but also staying true to the poor communities where they came from. The most significant and intricate example of this is the rap group Migos’ highly talked about “Bad & Boujee,” which declares from the beginning, “We ain’t really never had no old money...We got a whole lotta new money though.” “Boujee” is an intentional misspelling of “bougie,” which is slang for bourgeois. One of the definitions of bourgeois is a person who is “dominated or characterized by materialistic pursuits or concerns.”<sup>40</sup> The song reflects the artists’ ideas of being both “bad” and “boujee” in its descriptions of selling drugs, being “strapped” with guns and spending time with materialistic women.

The video opens with a rapper standing in housing projects with several beautiful, well-dressed women in the background. When the music starts, he uses a slang-metaphor “Raindrop, (drip),” which implies dripping with diamonds or expensive jewelry, before saying “we came from nothin’ to somethin.” The video then shows activities that very specifically mix wealthy and low-income signifiers, such as shopping at a corner store with a credit card, eating out of Chanel-branded Chinese take-out containers and drinking champagne while eating fried chicken out of paper buckets at a diner. The video ends with a dozen motorcycles driving around the streets of the rappers’ community. We also found another Hot 100 artist named Lil Baby referencing this idea of

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<sup>38</sup> Del Barco, M. “‘We Feel Forgotten’: In Storm-Battered Home of Musical Hit, Help Comes ‘Despacito’” *NPR News*, October 3, 2017 <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/03/555147455/in-puerto-ricos-storm-battered-la-perla-help-comes-despacito-slowly>

<sup>39</sup> The music community did respond to the crisis in Puerto Rico by raising money for the island, though not specifically this community. Artists who donated include J-Lo, Ricky Martin and Fonsi himself. More on those efforts can be found online at <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/7973756/jennifer-lopez-ricky-martin-donations-puerto-rico-hurricane>

<sup>40</sup> See <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/bourgeois>

being both rich and living in his poor community: "I'm really a millionaire, still in the projects."<sup>41</sup> (Notably, Lil Baby is on the same label as Migos, Quality Control.)

These examples may highlight attempts by artists to hold on to where they are from to distance themselves from those who have inherited their wealth. YG makes this clear in his Hot 100 hit "[Big Bank](#)": "I'm a first generation millionaire (here) I broke the curse in my family not having shit." He goes on to describe his unique talent that earned him those millions by saying:

*I'm rare as affordable health care (oh God)  
Or going to wealth from welfare (Goddamn)*<sup>42</sup>

These lyrics are fascinating because not only do they reiterate the exceptionalism that so many hip-hop stars repeatedly proclaim, they further define that exception against systems that are set up to keep poor people poor by denying them adequate healthcare and offering no opportunities for economic betterment. Interestingly, the video for this song shows none of this visually, but rather focuses, as many hip-hop videos in the Hot 100 do, on the artists surrounded by money, cars and women.

The video for "[Unforgettable](#)," French Montana's biggest hit, is devoid of this typical wealth signaling. Born in Morocco, French Montana's family immigrated to New York City when he was young. His father returned to Morocco a year later, forcing his mother onto welfare to support her three children. French Montana turned to selling drugs and eventually making music to support his mother and brothers.<sup>43</sup> Despite the song lyrics describing a woman who is unforgettable and wanting to spend time with her, French Montana described the original inspiration of the song in an Instagram post: "I promised my mother that I would hustle and make my accomplishments unforgettable once I found my opportunity. I want other people who might be struggling to know that the sky is not the limit... You can do unforgettable things, so I present to you my single 'Unforgettable' feat Swae Lee."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Quality Control, Lil Baby, DaBaby. "Baby." *Quality Control: Control The Streets* Volume 2, Quality Control Music, 2019, *Spotify*, [https://open.spotify.com/track/5MPpttjGap2C6j6eKcO6J?si=PA\\_Svv\\_cQkWaBNQnOfpixA](https://open.spotify.com/track/5MPpttjGap2C6j6eKcO6J?si=PA_Svv_cQkWaBNQnOfpixA)

<sup>42</sup> "YG (Ft. 2 Chainz, Big Sean & Nicki Minaj) – BIG BANK." *Genius*, 25 May 2018, [genius.com/Yg-big-bank-lyrics](https://genius.com/Yg-big-bank-lyrics)

<sup>43</sup> Ani, I. "French Montana On What It Means to Be African and American." *The Village Voice*, 24 Oct. 2017, [www.villagevoice.com/2017/10/04/french-montana-on-what-it-means-to-be-african-and-american/](http://www.villagevoice.com/2017/10/04/french-montana-on-what-it-means-to-be-african-and-american/)

<sup>44</sup> The post has since been deleted, along with all of his Instagram posts prior to November 2019, but can be read about in [this article](#).

The video for the song takes this sentiment, infused with a sense of joy and giving back, to the streets of Kampala, Uganda. The video focuses on the two rappers and a group of nine young Ugandans as they dance, often barefoot, in dirt streets and alleys, on bags of what looks like coal, and in front of a crowd at the junction of several winding streets in a shantytown. Throughout the video, there is clearly both joy and mutual admiration between French Montana and the dancers, a respect that he expressed in many interviews by saying he saw himself in them. The experience inspired French Montana to raise money for a nearby hospital.<sup>45</sup> The video ends with a somewhat disconnected scene that makes it seem like French Montana was kidnapped by African militias and may have been forced to pan for gold or other precious metals, leaving us wondering if perhaps it is a criticism of the love of jewelry made of these metals that is part of commercial hip-hop music and culture.

In 2018, Drake released a video that is a similarly rare display of “giving back.” Drake is one of the most prolific artists in the Hot 100 over the past few years. He grew up middle class with a single mom in Toronto and has become one of the wealthiest artists. Drake’s “[God’s Plan](#)” is lyrically about his (divine-given) greatness and all of the ways that his haters hate him. But one line references his charitable actions in his own community, the North Side of Toronto: “I make sure that North-Side eat.”<sup>46</sup>

The video for “God’s Plan” starts with a message about the money that the record label gave Drake’s team to make the song’s video: “The budget for this video was \$996,631.90. We gave it all away.” Before the music even begins, the video shows scenes of poor people on the streets and we hear one of their voices. The video proceeds to show Drake distributing the million-dollar video budget around the city of Miami. He tells a grocery store full of people that whatever they want is on him, he joins several families sitting in parks to give them stacks of cash, and he gives away toys, fancy shopping sprees and college tuition. The video shows the emotional response of the recipients of each of these gifts, making it hard for a viewer not to have a similar reaction. When the video was released, Drake asked his fans to do something similar via Instagram stories: “I am going to challenge everyone to just go out and do something for someone, anything, the smallest thing just to bring another human being some joy...Just go be kind in any way you can and let’s all watch the world be nice to each other even if it’s for 24 hours...Thank You.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Lyle, A.. “French Montana Donates \$100K to Mama Hope Organization.” *Billboard*, 19 May 2017, [www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7776950/french-montana-mama-hope-uganda-charity-donation](http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7776950/french-montana-mama-hope-uganda-charity-donation)

<sup>46</sup> Drake. “God’s Plan”. *Scorpion*, Young Money/Cash Money Records, 2018, *Spotify*, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6DCZcSspjsKoFjzrWoCdn?si=RO6Jg4j3RzmhgL5WjoUYHg>

<sup>47</sup> Zidel, A. “Drake Starts ‘God’s Plan’ Challenge.” *HotNewHipHop*, 16 Feb. 2018, [www.hotnewhiphop.com/drake-starts-gods-plan-challenge-news.43981.html](http://www.hotnewhiphop.com/drake-starts-gods-plan-challenge-news.43981.html)

# POTENTIAL MUSIC COMMUNITY ALLIES

While giving back to the community is not a common narrative in pop music's lyrics or videos, it is actually a constant but quiet part of its culture. Many successful artists are involved in philanthropic efforts that specifically support poor communities. For instance, Rihanna has a foundation<sup>48</sup> with over \$5M in assets as of last year. It grants over \$1M annually to poor communities for health care and education.<sup>49</sup> Kane Brown, the biracial country singer who grew up homeless at times, has teamed up with the Make Room campaign to help raise awareness and money to change policy for the millions of Americans struggling to pay rent.<sup>50</sup> This campaign included going to Congress to talk to elected officials about his own experience and that of his fans, who he'd encouraged to send videos telling their stories about economic struggles.<sup>51</sup>

Eminem has his own foundation that helps poor communities in Detroit.<sup>52</sup> Justin Bieber, who also grew up poor, recently announced he is creating a foundation.<sup>53</sup> Florida Georgia Line, Kendrick Lamar, Drake, Ariana Grande, Taylor Swift, Cardi B and many other artists on the Hot 100 over the past five years all have histories of donations to their communities to alleviate or eradicate poverty. Indeed, Cardi B recently gave a speech about wealth inequality at her performance for Global Citizen, an international organization working to end extreme poverty by 2030,<sup>54</sup> and appeared in an interview with Bernie Sanders where they discussed the need for structural economic change.

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<sup>48</sup> See <https://claralionelfoundation.org/>

<sup>49</sup> The Clara Lionel Foundation 990 Tax Return for 2018, accessed on March 16, 2020. Available at <https://www.guidestar.org/profile/45-5620521>

<sup>50</sup> Make Room is a project of the National Low Income Housing Coalition: <https://nlihc.org/>

<sup>51</sup> "Kane Brown Teams Up with Make Room to Raise Awareness of 25 Million Struggling to Make Rent." *Country Music Tattle Tale - Your Country Music News Source*, 18 Aug. 2017, [countrymusicattletale.com/2017/08/20/kane-brown-teams-up-with-make-room-to-raise-awareness-of-25-million-struggling-to-make-rent/](http://countrymusicattletale.com/2017/08/20/kane-brown-teams-up-with-make-room-to-raise-awareness-of-25-million-struggling-to-make-rent/)

<sup>52</sup> Welch, S. "Eminem Prefers His Philanthropy to Be Done Quietly and Privately." *Crain's Detroit Business*, 26 Oct. 2015, [www.crainsdetroit.com/article/20151026/NEWS/310259977/eminem-prefers-his-philanthropy-to-be-done-quietly-and-privately](http://www.crainsdetroit.com/article/20151026/NEWS/310259977/eminem-prefers-his-philanthropy-to-be-done-quietly-and-privately)

<sup>53</sup> Friedman, R. "Justin Bieber Will Donate One Dollar from Every Concert Ticket to Charity That Doesn't Yet Exist, Also He Has a New Album Coming." *Showbiz411*, 28 Jan. 2020, [www.showbiz411.com/2020/01/28/justin-bieber-will-donate-one-dollar-from-every-concert-ticket-to-charity-that-doesnt-yet-exist-also-he-has-a-new-album-coming](http://www.showbiz411.com/2020/01/28/justin-bieber-will-donate-one-dollar-from-every-concert-ticket-to-charity-that-doesnt-yet-exist-also-he-has-a-new-album-coming)

<sup>54</sup> See <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/>

While artists on the Hot 100 are taking action and speaking about poverty, they don't often sing about or publicize it. And, perhaps more importantly, when they do write songs that are more critical of wealth or that talk about poverty at more length, these songs are less likely to make it to the Hot 100. In an article about music and economic inequality, Vox interviewed Margo Price, a country singer-songwriter who has been outspoken about economic structures. She said, "Most people in the mainstream music world — whether it's pop, indie, or country — don't want to offend any of their fans. Their big labels don't want them to, either."<sup>55</sup> While this might not be true for all genres or all artists, it is clear that most artists and labels want to make music that sells. And, the genre that celebrates wealth the most is also the one that sells the most: R&B/Hip-Hop represents 27.7% of all recorded music sales according to Nielsen's 2019 Year in Review.<sup>56</sup>

The artists named above and throughout this report could be potential allies for any future campaigns. We have included these and others whom we identified in this research as having a personal connection to poverty in the Appendix. There are also several organizations that have worked with musicians on poverty issues for decades. Global Citizen is focused on engaging citizens in actions to end extreme poverty. They produce an annual music festival<sup>57</sup> in which many artists on the Hot 100 have participated and their board includes several music industry executives. WHY Hunger was started by a musician, Harry Chapin, and works with rock bands like Bruce Springsteen towards solutions to hunger.<sup>58</sup> Oxfam US works with a large roster of younger and diverse artists, including Alicia Keys, to end the injustice of poverty.<sup>59</sup> All of these institutions may be allies for future work on poverty narratives.

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<sup>55</sup> Timberg, S. "How Music Has Responded to a Decade of Economic Inequality." Vox, 30 July 2018, [www.vox.com/culture/2018/7/30/17561470/music-of-inequality](http://www.vox.com/culture/2018/7/30/17561470/music-of-inequality)

<sup>56</sup> "Year-End Music Report US 2019." Nielsen Music, 2019. Available at <https://www.billboard.com/p/nielsen-music-mrc-datas-us-year-end-2019-report-us>

<sup>57</sup> See <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/festival/>

<sup>58</sup> See <https://whyhunger.org/artists/about-aahp/>

<sup>59</sup> See <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/about/ambassadors/musicians/>

# KEY TERMS ANALYSIS

A final task of this audit was to identify keywords that can be used to identify poverty-related content in music for ongoing algorithmic and human analysis of narratives. As hip-hop, the dominant genre in popular music, relies heavily on the use of slang and metaphor in its lyrics, this should be done with care. Language changes frequently, especially in music (one of the quicker-to-produce narrative mediums compared to, say, television or film). Keywords and the use of slang will have to be monitored frequently to ensure that they are still culturally relevant.

Having said that, we reviewed the most frequently used words in all songs across the five years. Because repetition of words in song lyrics has been on the rise,<sup>60</sup> we looked at words that appeared more than 20 times over the past five years – a list of 1,500 words – and then reviewed each of them for references to wealth or poverty. Research assistants, several of whom grew up in poor communities, created a list of slang pertaining to wealth, poverty and money such as “bands,” “guac” and “cheddar,” (all other terms for money) and we searched for those terms as well. We also looked for words like “inequality,” “welfare,” “poverty,” “poor,” “health care,” “taxes,” etc.

Once we had a shorter list of relevant terms, we then reviewed their use in the actual songs to ensure that they were relevant to the topic. For instance, the word “broke” could be a reference to poverty (“Member I was broke yeah, now I’m gettin’ rich yeah”), but we also found it used in other contexts (“When you broke down I didn’t leave ya, I was by your side”). This didn’t rule out inclusion in our list, but rather is a sign to proceed with caution using keywords to understand narratives. Finally, we compared the frequency of these relevant keywords to other commonly used words for context. For instance, “love” is one of the most frequent words used in the past five years, and it is used almost four times as frequently as “money.” We also wanted to see the frequency of the word “god” and other terms of interest, like “dream/s.”

What we found was that direct terms like “money” and “diamonds” are probably the most relevant terms to continue to monitor. Brand names like “Gucci” seem to also be consistent in their appearance, and less likely to be translated into slang. “Broke” may also be useful to monitor, though with the caveat around multiple meanings mentioned above.

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<sup>60</sup> “Modern Music Sentiment Analysis.” *Modern Music Sentiment Analysis* by Team Lyrics Lab, [michaeljohns.github.io/lyrics-lab/#](https://michaeljohns.github.io/lyrics-lab/#)

Table 2: Frequency of Key Terms

KEYWORD	FREQUENCY	COMPARISON KEYWORD	FREQUENCY
Money	388	Love	1273
Whip	114	God	125
Diamond/s	102	Dream/s	93
Check/s	101		
Ice	96		
Broke	96		
Bag	93		
Bank	84		
Gucci	81		
Drip / drippin / dripping	81		
Rich	79		
Worth	78		
Cash	67		
Dollar/s	57		
Million	55		
Gold	54		
Buy	53		
Bands	43		
Racks	40		

- **Whip** is slang for an expensive car. It is also a dance move. About 1/3 of the frequencies of this term are from a single song about the dance move.
- **Check /s**, while an outdated financial mechanism, **checks** are how musicians get paid (e.g., royalty checks) so it is specific to their economy.
- **Ice** means expensive jewelry.
- A literal **bag** that you carry things in or a goal, usually to make money.
- **Bank** can refer to a place where money is kept or the act of having a lot of money.
- **Drip / drippin / dripping / dripped** means dripping in diamonds or expensive jewelry.
- **Bands** refers to \$1,000 (the bands that hold them together).
- **Racks** also refers to \$1,000.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Narratives about wealth and meritocracy have dominated the popular music charts in the past five years, with limited references to poverty. However, our research did find opportunities for narrative shifts that organizers can utilize in their campaigns. Below we outline some recommendations for how.

- 1. Map and Convene the Field of Music, Poverty and Narrative Work:** A lot of work has been done in the past two decades to engage musicians in social justice causes, including around poverty. As previously mentioned, two nonprofit organizations exist solely for this reason and there are several others that seek to help musicians participate more effectively in *any* social justice issue. One of these organizations is Revolutions Per Minute (RPM),<sup>61</sup> which was founded by the author of this report. RPM is now a project of the Center for Cultural Power,<sup>62</sup> a new nonprofit where a lot of work on music and narrative shift is being planned for the coming years. In addition, there are several organizations working with cohorts of musicians on narrative shifts around immigration, gender justice, white supremacy/hate and other issues. Talking with each of these organizations, and any others doing similar work, to gauge what they have learned around engaging musicians in narrative strategy, what they are doing in the coming 12-24 months and whether there is interest in working together on poverty narratives would be critical and enable other recommendations here, as well as future organizing of artists and others in the music industry.
- 2. Ongoing Monitoring to Understand Progress and Opportunities:** Ongoing monitoring of the most popular songs in the Hot 100 to observe how poverty and wealth narratives move, and to look for anomalies, will enable timely response from organizers. But as we conducted this research, we bumped into examples of songs (like Charles Bradley's "[Why Is It So Hard](#)") and artists (like Rage Against the Machine who recently reformed) outside of the Hot 100 who might also be engaged in campaigns fighting poverty. These less commercially popular artists and songs should be studied as well.

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<sup>61</sup> See <http://revolutionsperminute.net/>

<sup>62</sup> See <https://www.culturalpower.org/>



- 3. Lean into Narratives Already in Popular Music:** Certain existing narratives in popular music, while not related to or even adjacent to wealth or poverty, may also contribute to narrative shifts on poverty. For instance, throughout this research, we noticed a recurring theme of depictions – both lyrically and visually – of house parties, block parties and hanging out with friends in bars, on boats, in cars, on bikes, and beyond. This trend was frequent in both hip-hop and country, and present in other genres as well. Given the dominance of the individual in popular music narratives,<sup>63</sup> encouraging these celebrations of community may provide better on-ramps to narratives of “we.” In turn, that focus may be better positioned to counter the “greed” and “meritocracy” narratives found to dominate the public’s perceptions of poverty than “me” oriented narratives.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, there may also be an opportunity to transition some symbols of wealth into a metaphor for community resilience. For instance, “[Adventure of a Lifetime](#),” by Coldplay, refers to the strength of diamonds to describe resilience, “Under this pressure, under this weight. We are diamonds.”<sup>65</sup>
- 4. Strategically Lean into the Moment:** As we finalize this report in April 2020, it is unclear what the post-COVID-19 future may look like. Musicians, currently unable to tour because of social distancing and stay-at-home orders, are streaming live performances from their living rooms and backyards. Working class musicians are setting up virtual tip jars to pay their rent, while more successful artists are performing for free to encourage fans to stay home. The detrimental economic effects of this cannot be overstated – the music industry alone stands to lose \$5 billion in the next twelve months.<sup>66</sup> Massive layoffs have already started.<sup>67</sup> During this time of great upheaval, those structural challenges that determine which artists and songs succeed in the marketplace could deepen. Or, they could get thrown aside, making room for more equitable structures to emerge. Efforts to encourage the latter should, of course, be studied and supported.

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<sup>63</sup> Boam, E. “Decoding Songwriting With Data: A recap of a talk given by Eric Boam and Paul Jacobsen at SXSW 2017,” *Medium*, April 12, 2017. At <https://medium.com/@ericboam/decoding-songwriting-with-data-9d06117eed93>

<sup>64</sup> “Public Perceptions & Narratives of Poverty,” GOOD, November 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Coldplay. “Adventure of a Lifetime,” *A Head Full of Dreams*, Parlophone, 2015. <https://genius.com/Coldplay-adventure-of-a-lifetime-lyrics>

<sup>66</sup> Beech, M. “BTS, Green Day Cancellations Highlight \$5 Billion Coronavirus Threat To Music,” *Forbes*, March 5, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markbeech/2020/03/05/bts-green-day-cancellations-highlight-5-billion-coronavirus-threat-to-music/#7f143f7d20cb>

<sup>67</sup> Yoo, N., “Paradigm Talent Agency Lays Off Hundreds of Staffers in Music and Other Divisions,” *Pitchfork*, March 25, 2020. <https://pitchfork.com/news/paradigm-talent-agency-lays-off-hundreds-of-staffers-in-music-and-other-divisions/amp/>

There also may be a backlash to the combination of celebrity and wealth that is so pervasive in popular music, in part due to controversies and criminal acts associated with the likes of the Fyre Festival,<sup>68</sup> the Kendall Jenner Pepsi ad debacle,<sup>69</sup> the recent college admissions scandals<sup>70</sup> and, unfortunately, the well intentioned but poorly implemented celebrity response to the global pandemic itself. As Amanda Hess says in her recent *New York Times* article “Celebrity Culture is Burning”:

*Among the social impacts of the coronavirus is its swift dismantling of the cult of celebrity. The famous are ambassadors of the meritocracy; they represent the American pursuit of wealth through talent, charm and hard work. But the dream of class mobility dissipates when society locks down, the economy stalls, the death count mounts and everyone’s future is frozen inside their own crowded apartment or palatial mansion. The difference between the two has never been more obvious. The #guillotine2020 hashtag is jumping. As grocery aisles turn bare, some have suggested that perhaps they ought to eat the rich.<sup>71</sup>*

As this anti-wealth and celebrity sentiment continues and grows, the opportunity to shift away from the dominance of wealth through some of the above-mentioned activities will likely become easier.

At the beginning of this report we described how a moment of upheaval like the world is experiencing now, as frightening and new as it is, can also be a moment of opportunity for restructuring and rebirth. Right now, when the status quo is no longer the dominant operating system, new narratives and a new normal are most possible. This moment holds incredible potential for change. Culture, and particularly popular music, is one of the most important pathways to creating that change. As William S. Burroughs once said, “Artists are the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact.”

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<sup>68</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyre\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyre_Festival)

<sup>69</sup> See <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/pepsi-commercial-kendall-jenner-reaction>

<sup>70</sup> See <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/is-college-admissions-scandal-a-tipping-point-influencer-culture-1196457>

<sup>71</sup> Hess, A., “Celebrity Culture Is Burning,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/arts/virus-celebrities.html>

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Methodology

The practice of cultural strategy springs from the notion that politics and social justice movements are where some of the people are some of the time, but culture is where most of the people are most of the time.<sup>72</sup> Cultural audits—a key component to cultural and narrative strategy—provide movements and campaigns with a deeper and more emotionally resonant understanding of their audience, helping orient campaigns’ communications strategies to the cultural lives of their audience, getting to the heart of the audience’s hopes and fears (and joys) as expressed in the culture they consume and make. They can also help campaigns discover pathways that truly inspire and can unite otherwise disparate groups. Because a cultural audit attempts to look at a very broad subject through the lens of culture, narrative, and story,<sup>73</sup> it is not a comprehensive understanding of the narrative concepts but rather a study of specific themes. As such, it should be a part of a campaign or organization’s analysis and not the whole.

Cultural audits follow a methodology that uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative research and cultural and narrative analysis.<sup>74</sup> Cultural audits follow three phases of work:

1. Data collection through surveys, content scans, existing studies, and/or interviews
2. Analysis of this data to identify themes and trends
3. Delivery of the cultural audit in a summary document (like this document)

For this audit, our content scan focused exclusively on popular music over the past five years.<sup>75</sup> Our work started with a review of existing research around lyrical analysis of the most popular songs, inequity themes in music and other related subjects. From there, we analyzed the most

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<sup>72</sup> The Culture Group. *Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy*, 2014, <http://revolutionsperminute.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Making-Waves-The-Culture-Group.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> For an explanation of the difference between culture, narrative and strategy, see “A Conversation about Cultural Strategy” available online here: <https://medium.com/a-more-perfect-story/a-conversation-about-cultural-strategy-9e2a28802160>

<sup>74</sup> See <https://medium.com/a-more-perfect-story/how-and-why-to-do-a-cultural-audit-89681c5deabc>

<sup>75</sup> A list of the specific content, keywords and social media accounts analyzed can be found at [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1iXpiZl0FVdIB\\_oFf3l-Ks3uZourUIQ0FEeL-V99ajh4/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1iXpiZl0FVdIB_oFf3l-Ks3uZourUIQ0FEeL-V99ajh4/edit?usp=sharing)

popular songs from the past five years (2015-2019) looking for direct and indirect references to poverty and adjacent subjects like wealth.

### SAMPLE FOR ANALYSIS

The sample was constructed from songs on the Hot 100 for each of the five years, supplemented by the top 10 from each of the *Billboard* R&B/Hip-Hop and Country charts for the same timeframe in order to have a bigger sample of country songs for the narrative study. This resulted in a total of 465 unique songs. There were 53 songs that appeared on the Hot 100 for more than one year, leaving 447 unique songs from the Hot 100. An additional 18 songs that did not appear on the Hot 100 were derived from the Country charts across all five years. There were no additional R&B/Hip-Hop songs that did not already appear on the Hot 100.

To understand the visuals being used, we analyzed the official videos (where they existed) for the top 25 songs each year from the Hot 100, plus all of the top 10 R&B/Hip-Hop and Country songs, plus two additional songs from elsewhere on the Hot 100 that were identified through our narrative investigations. This resulted in a total of 174 unique videos.

Table 3: Sample Construction

SOURCE	SONGS (FOR LYRICS ANALYSIS)	VIDEOS
<i>Billboard</i> Hot 100	<p>Top 100 x 5 years: <b>447</b></p> <p><i>53 out of the 500 songs appear in multiple years' charts.</i></p>	<p>Top 25 x 5 years: <b>125</b></p> <p><i>2 out of the 125 songs appear in multiple years' charts.</i></p> <p><b>2</b> additional videos from outside the top 25 were included based on lyrical analysis.</p>
<i>Billboard</i> R&B/Hip-Hop Chart	<p>Top 10 x 5 years: <b>0</b></p> <p><i>All 50 songs also appear on the Hot 100.</i></p>	<p>Top 10 x 5 years: <b>4</b></p> <p><i>45 out of the 50 songs appear in the Top 25 above and 1 had no official video.</i></p>

<i>Billboard</i> Country Chart	Top 10 x 5 years: <b>18</b>  <i>32 out of the 50 songs also appear on the Hot 100.</i>	Top 10 x 5 years: <b>45</b>  <i>4 out of the 50 songs appear in the Top 25 above and 1 had no official video.</i>
<b>TOTAL UNIQUE</b>	<b>465</b>	<b>174</b>

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LYRICS

We used Genius.com and AZLyrics.com to collect the lyrics. While both sites have licensing deals with music publishers, Genius has an annotation feature which was particularly helpful in providing some context gathered from interviews with the artist or other references. For instance, Cardi B’s “Bodak Yellow” contains a line “Look, I might just chill in some BAPE.” The annotation describes that “BAPE” is a Japanese clothing line called Bathing Ape.<sup>76</sup>

As we read through all of the lyrics the first time, we looked for any narrative themes with a particular focus on poverty. We found a lot of references to relationships and wealth, and a few about poverty, and proceeded to conduct a second close reading of the lyrics of each song to mark any reference to:

- Relationships, defined as any relationship between two people, including friendship, romantic relationships, sex, break-ups, etc.,
- Wealth, including luxury brand names, expensive items or experiences (like flying in private jets), making money, etc., and
- Poverty and being poor like references to living in housing projects, housing insecurity, having struggled financially, etc.

Because there was no predetermined definition of poverty in pop culture narratives (in fact this work is intended to help create one) there were a couple of cases where we had to make interpretive decisions. For instance, we determined that a reference to being “young, dumb and broke” in a song about teenage love was not about being poor.

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<sup>76</sup> See <https://bape.com/index/>

## **QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LYRICS**

While the majority of our focus was on qualitative aspects of the most popular songs, we also did some quantitative analysis on 500 Hot 100 songs by artist, lyrical references to relationships, wealth, and poverty, and genre, using *Billboard's* definitions. *Billboard's* primary genre categories are R&B/Hip-Hop, Adult/Pop, Country, Rock, Dance, Latin, Christian, Jazz and Holiday. Within those categories are sub-categories. For instance, under R&B/Hip-Hop is Rap. Under Rock is Alternative Rock. *Billboard* also assigns more than one genre to a song. For instance, Post Malone's "Better Now" is labeled as R&B/Hip-Hop, Rap, and Pop. For our purposes, we used only the primary genre identified by *Billboard*.

We also conducted word frequency analysis on all of the lyrics. We looked closer at the entire songs where wealth and poverty were referenced to understand the context and narratives surrounding them, the findings of which make up the bulk of the narrative report above. For the Hot 100 songs, we also looked at 1,500 words that were used more than 20 times in context to help narrow the number of keywords that could be used in narrative monitoring to measure references to wealth and poverty.

## **QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF VIDEOS**

In the videos, we looked for signals such as quality and quantity of cars, clothes, cash, jewelry, homes and neighborhoods, as well as other working class visuals like diners and small town/neighborhood bars or dance clubs.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS**

Finally, we also studied the social media accounts of a dozen artists who, through the course of this research, were identified because of references to poverty in their lyrics or videos, frequency of topping the charts, personal history with poverty and diversity (gender, ethnicity, genre, etc). Once these artists were identified, we looked at their most recent 100 posts (approximately) on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. We looked to see how each artist used their social media accounts – some repeated the same content and some used the channels for different things. For instance, Twitter was often more sharing the content of others; Instagram was a lot of pictures that showed displays of wealth such as flying on private jets. We also used tools like Facebook Insights to understand the demographics of the artist's audience on that platform. This information could be helpful in the next phases of work to change poverty narratives.

## Appendix B: Potential Artist Allies

As mentioned above, there are a number of artists who, because of their personal histories and/or charitable activity, could be potent allies in developing new poverty narratives. Below is a list of artists that were identified in the process of conducting this research. More potential allies can be researched, particularly in the course of implementing the first recommendation to map and convene artists on this subject.

Table 4: Potential Allies

ARTIST NAME	ROLE, HOW THEY CAME TO THIS WORK, ETC.	SOURCE LINK
Florida Georgia Line	Have participated in a number of philanthropic endeavors, but mostly focus on feeding the hungry. In 2014, the band was the face of the General Mills "Outnumber Hunger" campaign, which raised \$1.2M for Feeding America.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida_Georgia_Line">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida_Georgia_Line</a>
Kane Brown	Grew up homeless at times. Worked with Making Room, an initiative to support housing security for the millions of people who rent in the US.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kane_Brown">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kane_Brown</a>
Daddy Yankee	Grew up in a project in Puerto Rico.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daddy_Yankee">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daddy_Yankee</a>
French Montana	Grew up in Morocco, but moved to the US. His mom was on welfare. Has done charity work, primarily in Uganda.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Montana">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Montana</a>
Rae Sremmurd	Grew up in the projects.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rae_Sremmurd">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rae_Sremmurd</a>
Desiigner	Grew up in Bed-Stuy projects of Brooklyn.	<a href="https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/magazine-feature/7400285/desiigner-on-panda-difficult-past-kanye-west-advice">https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/magazine-feature/7400285/desiigner-on-panda-difficult-past-kanye-west-advice</a>
Lil Nas X	Lived in the projects for a while.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lil_Nas_X">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lil_Nas_X</a>

Travis Scott	Lived for a time with his grandmother in a very poor neighborhood of Houston.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Travis_Scott">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Travis_Scott</a>
Selena Gomez	Was born to a single mother when the mother was 16. They struggled financially throughout her childhood.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selena_Gomez">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selena_Gomez</a>
Cardi B	Grew up poor in the Highbridge neighborhood in the South Bronx. Has done a lot of charitable work for poor communities.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardi_B">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardi_B</a>
Eminem	Grew up in Detroit on 8 Mile. Lived in poverty and talks about it a lot in his art. Also has a foundation that supports Detroit's poor communities.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eminem">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eminem</a>
Jay Z	Grew up in the Marcy Housing Projects in the Bed-Stuy neighborhood of Brooklyn. His foundation supports education and other opportunities for poor communities and individuals.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay-Z">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay-Z</a>
Jay Electronica	Grew up in the Magnolia Housing Projects of NOLA. Converted to Islam, his practice of which includes a lot of charitable work.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_Electronica">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_Electronica</a>
J Lo	Her family was "relatively poor."	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jennifer_Lopez">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jennifer_Lopez</a>
Justin Beiber	He grew up in low-income housing. Has recently started a foundation.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Bieber">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Bieber</a>
Mariah Carey	Raised by a single mother who worked multiple jobs.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariah_Carey">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariah_Carey</a>
Snoop Dogg	Grew up in poverty in Long Beach, California.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lil%27_Kim">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lil%27_Kim</a>
Lil Kim	Grew up in the Bed-Stuy neighborhood of Brooklyn, and was kicked out of the house in high school.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lil%27_Kim">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lil%27_Kim</a>
Mary J Blidge	Grew up in housing projects in Yonkers, NY.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_J._Blige">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_J._Blige</a>



Marc Anthony	Raised in Spanish Harlem, NYC in poverty.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Anthony">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Anthony</a>
Kendrick Lamar	Grew up on welfare and in Section 8 housing in Los Angeles. Has done a lot of charitable work around his community.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kendrick_Lamar">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kendrick_Lamar</a>
Rihanna	Grew up in Barbados with a lot of poverty and addiction around her. Has a foundation that supports these communities.	<a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rihanna">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rihanna</a>

## **Appendix C: About the Author**

Erin Potts is a pioneer of several innovative social change strategies and research techniques, a producer of award-winning cultural events and products, and an organizer of unusual—but potent—groups of changemakers. Over her twenty-five year career, Erin has been a leader in the emerging field of cultural and narrative strategies and has developed revenue strategies that have earned tens of millions of dollars for social justice. You can learn more about her work at [jumpslide.com](http://jumpslide.com).