

Cultural Resistance Through Bri's Rap In Angie Thomas On The Come Up

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ABSTRACT

This study examines cultural resistance through Bri's rap in *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas. Using Stephen Duncombe's framework, this qualitative research explores how Bri's rap serves as a free space for self-expression, a tool for challenging oppression, and a catalyst for political awareness. The findings indicate that Bri's rap creates free spaces where marginalized voices can reclaim agency, reject stereotypes, and resist systemic control, and a stepping stone to political action. Additionally, her lyrics highlight racial profiling, media misrepresentation, and the exploitation of Black artists, reinforcing rap's role as a medium of activism. Ultimately, this study concludes that Bri's rap is not just a form of entertainment but a means of identity negotiation, empowerment, and collective resistance.

Keywords: Rap, Cultural Resistance, free space, stepping stone to political action, *On the Come Up*.

INTRODUCTION

Rap has long been a tool of expression and resistance for marginalized communities, particularly Black urban youth. Tricia Rose (1994) describes rap as a cultural voice for Black urban life, using rhythmic storytelling to highlight struggles and injustices. More than entertainment, rap critiques systemic inequality, racial injustice, and economic hardship. Stuart Hall and Jefferson (1976) argue that subcultures, including rap, challenge dominant ideologies by creating alternative spaces for marginalized voices. Hall (1978) critiques media narratives that shape public perception, often reinforcing political agendas. While the media frames social issues to serve power structures, rap provides a counter-narrative, exposing oppression and amplifying unheard voices.

Cultural resistance is a significant concept in understanding how individuals and communities challenge dominant systems of power through creative and expressive means (Duncombe, 2002). It represents the intersection of culture and activism, where artistic forms, traditions, and practices are utilized to question, critique, or oppose prevailing political, economic, and social structures. By transforming everyday cultural expressions into tools of dissent, cultural resistance serves as a powerful mechanism for marginalized voices to reclaim agency and foster change.

Beyond personal expression, Bri's rap unites her community, voicing shared struggles and fostering solidarity. As a young Black woman in a male-dominated industry, she also challenges gender norms, proving rap as a broader tool for empowerment. *On the Come Up* highlights rap's role in cultural resistance, allowing marginalized voices to reclaim their narratives and fight injustice. Bri's story exemplifies how hip-hop challenges power structures and drives social change, making her character a significant focus for analysis.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design (Neuman, 2014) to analyze cultural resistance through Bri's rap in *On the Come Up*. A qualitative approach is used to explore meanings, patterns, and social

contexts without relying on numerical data. The primary data source is the novel *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas, focusing on Bri's rap lyrics, dialogues, and narrative descriptions. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, and academic discussions on cultural resistance, rap music, and marginalized identities.

Data Collection

Data is collected through textual analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) by:

1. Identifying rap lyrics, dialogues, and passages that reflect Bri's resistance
2. Categorizing data based on Stephen Duncombe's (2002) framework of cultural resistance, including identity negotiation, free space creation, and political action
3. Cross-referencing findings with theoretical perspectives on rap as a form of resistance.

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative analysis model, consisting of:

1. Data Reduction – Selecting and categorizing text that illustrates cultural resistance.
2. Data Presentation – Organizing findings to highlight patterns in Bri's rap as a tool for resistance.
3. Conclusion Drawing – Interpreting the significance of Bri's rap in challenging oppression and asserting identity.

This structured approach ensures a systematic exploration of how Bri's rap functions as a means of empowerment and defiance against dominant power structures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Findings

This chapter analyzes Bri's cultural resistance in *On the Come Up* by focusing on how her rap reflects cultural resistance through Bri's rap in Angie Thomas *On The Come Up*, using Stephen Duncombe's framework. Bri's rap serves as both a free space for self-expression and a stepping stone to political action.

a. Creation of a Free Space

Data 1

"Tonight may be the perfect time, and the Ring is the perfect place. It's one of the most sacred spots in Garden Heights, second only to Christ Temple. You can't call yourself a rapper until you've battled in the Ring." (Thomas, 2019:9)

The Ring is a symbolic free space where Bri and other marginalized artists can express themselves without societal restrictions. It offers a platform for validation based on talent rather than external biases. The comparison of the Ring to a church highlights its role as a sacred place for empowerment and resistance.

Data 2

"I win tonight, I'll get a spot in the Ring's lineup, and if I get a spot in the lineup, I can do more battles, and if I do more battles, I'll make a name for myself." (Thomas, 2019:9)

Bri sees the Ring as a pathway to recognition and self-determination. This aligns with Duncombe's idea that free spaces challenge the status quo by allowing marginalized individuals to redefine their futures. The Ring represents a haven where her voice is heard, offering an escape from societal limitations.

Data 3

"I refuse to be their laugh, I refuse to be their pet, I refuse to be the reason some kid now claims a set. I refuse to stand up here and say words that aren't my own." (Thomas, 2019:9)

Bri's lyrics reject stereotypes and forced conformity. She refuses to be exploited or silenced, reinforcing Duncombe's view that cultural resistance allows individuals to construct their own identities. Her rap becomes a tool for authenticity, resisting external pressures that attempt to dictate her narrative.

b. A Stepping Stone to Political Action

Data 4

"The hell is she talking about? There's not shit in that song that says anything against police. Just 'cause I'm tired of them patrolling my neighborhood like we're all criminals, I'm in the wrong?"

Bri's frustration exposes racial profiling and systemic oppression. Her lyrics highlight how marginalized communities are over-policed and misrepresented, which aligns with Duncombe's assertion that cultural resistance can spark political awareness and mobilization.

Data 5

"You can only spell 'brilliant' by first spelling Bri. You see, naturally, I do my shit with perfection." (Thomas, 2019:40)

Bri reclaims her intelligence and worth in a society that often overlooks people like her. This act of self-affirmation challenges dominant narratives, fostering collective empowerment among her listeners.

Data 6

"I've been rapping since I was ten, but I've never really put myself out there with it. I mean yeah, Sonny and Malik know, my family knows. But let's be real: Your mom saying you're a good rapper is like your mom saying you're cute when you look a hot mess." (Thomas, 2019:9)

Bri's transition from private to public self-expression reflects the evolution of cultural resistance. Initially, her rap is personal, but as she gains visibility, it transforms into a collective act of defiance, uniting her community through shared struggles.

Data 7

"On my corner, they call me coroner, I'm warning ya. Tell the truth, this dude is borin' ya. You're just a casualty in the reality of the madness of Bri." (Thomas, 2019:41)

Bri's rap battles demonstrate cultural defiance, allowing her to assert dominance over societal expectations. By controlling her narrative through rap, she reclaims agency and resists imposed limitations.

B. Discussion

The findings indicate that Bri's rap functions as a form of cultural resistance by creating a free space for self-expression and acting as a stepping stone to political action.

Cultural Resistance Through Free Spaces

Bri's participation in the Ring demonstrates how marginalized communities establish free spaces for self-expression and validation. The Ring serves as a counter-narrative to mainstream spaces that often silence or exploit Black culture, offering Bri a platform where her voice is recognized based on talent rather than societal biases. As described in the findings, the Ring is compared to a church, reinforcing its role as a sacred space for empowerment and resistance.

Through her rap battles, Bri actively resists imposed limitations, challenging stereotypes and refusing to conform to mainstream expectations. Her rejection of being a "laugh" or a "pet" reflects her defiance against external control over her artistic expression. This aligns with Duncombe's concept that cultural resistance flourishes in spaces where marginalized individuals can redefine their identities on their own terms.

From Cultural Expression to Political Resistance

Bri's rap not only provides personal empowerment but also serves as a platform for political resistance, addressing issues such as systemic racism, racial profiling, and media exploitation. Her lyrics highlight how Black artists are expected to conform to violent stereotypes, which are commodified for profit while their communities suffer from negative stigmatization.

Bri's frustration with police surveillance in her neighborhood mirrors real-world concerns about racial injustice. Her lyrics critique how marginalized communities are over-policed and criminalized, reflecting hip-hop's historical role as a voice for resistance. This aligns with the experiences of artists like Public Enemy and Kendrick Lamar, whose politically charged music has similarly faced scrutiny from dominant institutions.

Moreover, the backlash against Bri's music underscores how cultural resistance is often met with attempts to suppress or discredit it. Just as N.W.A and Tupac were criticized for their lyrical content, Bri's music is misinterpreted as promoting violence, rather than being recognized as a critique of systemic

oppression. This reflects how dominant power structures seek to control narratives by labeling resistance as “dangerous” or “anti-police.”

The Impact of Bri’s Cultural Resistance

Bri’s journey illustrates how rap fosters community solidarity and empowerment. By using her platform to challenge oppressive narratives, she encourages others to question societal injustices and reclaim their identities. Her refusal to conform demonstrates how cultural resistance is not just about personal defiance but also about inspiring collective action.

Ultimately, Bri’s rap transcends mere self-expression—it becomes a tool for activism, identity formation, and cultural defiance. Through free spaces like the Ring and the political themes in her lyrics, Bri embodies Duncombe’s idea that cultural resistance is a powerful means for marginalized communities to assert their agency and challenge systemic oppression.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that Bri’s rap in *On the Come Up* functions as a form of cultural resistance, creating free spaces for self-expression and serving as a stepping stone to political action (Duncombe, 2002). The Ring provides Bri with a space to challenge societal oppression, gain recognition, and assert her identity. Through her lyrics, she rejects stereotypes, critiques systemic racism, and exposes the exploitation of Black artists.

Beyond personal expression, Bri’s rap sparks political awareness, addressing issues like racial profiling and media misrepresentation. The backlash against her music reflects real-world attempts to silence politically conscious rap. Despite this, Bri’s persistence highlights how cultural resistance fosters empowerment and collective action.

In conclusion, Bri’s rap is not just music—it is a tool for reclaiming identity, challenging oppression, and mobilizing resistance. Her story reaffirms that rap is a powerful medium for marginalized communities to assert their agency and fight systemic injustice.

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