In its broadest sense, hip-hop is understood to mean the culture taken as a whole; the MC, the deejay, the graffiti artist, the breakdancer, and the encompassing knowledge that bring these elements into a cohesive whole. Rap is just one of these elements, something the MC does. It is the verbal element of hip-hop. Commercial rap and conscious rap become relevant terms when the young culture began to germinate. As both community and art form began to take shape in the early 1970s, a palpably distinct, shared, and lived experience resonated within the culture. Stylistic differences separated artists, but the antiauthoritarian content of the music, the self-consciousness of the poetry, and the tangible sense of community could be felt throughout the movement. As the 1980s approached, the community began to be pulled in new directions by forces that had once been kept at bay by hip-hop’s fierce sense of independence. As Greg Tate points out in his important editorial, “Hiphop Turns 30,” the moment that “Rapper’s Delight” went platinum, hip-hop as a holistically coherent cultural movement began its decline. An unholy alliance, “the marriage of heaven and hell, of New World African ingenuity and that trick of the devil known as global hyper-capitalism,” brought hip-hop culture, hardly kicking and screaming, into the toxic waters of the mainstream.¹ The offspring of this “marriage of heaven and hell” is commercial rap. In lieu of substantive discussions about or legitimate protest against the predicaments of the social, economic, and political consequences of life in the ghetto, the trappings of success (a success defined almost exclusively in financial
terms) became the ubiquitous hallmarks of the genre. Sprawling mansions, exotic cars, women, designer labels, expensive liquor, such were not merely the rewards of commercially viable rap, they were the subject of its poetry. The form changed little, but the content was radically altered. Sincere representations of inner-city life rapidly gave way to a self-apotheosis that was little more than an extreme exaggeration of the bravado and posturing that had been an undeniable element of hip-hop culture since its birth.

The magnetism of the mainstream, especially in terms of financial rewards, has profoundly influenced the direction that the stream of hip-hop culture has taken over the last two and a half decades. The mainstream has swelled into a raging current of corporate interests that are in the business of marketing violence, misogyny, and rampant consumerism. And business is booming. However, running alongside the mainstream are much quieter, more dignified flows that take their cues, not from the market and what it devours, but rather, from the early hip-hop pioneers who forcefully expressed profound truths about life on the margins of society. These are the conscious hip-hop artists, who have carried on the proud traditions of musicians like Afrika Bambaataa, thinkers like Angela Davis, and the countless street poets and urban philosophers who birthed and nurtured hip-hop’s nascent poetic through the 1970s and 1980s. Hip-hop is a movement so young that its founders can be seen actively participating in its shaping and reshaping from its beginning all the way through to its more recent incarnations. Conscious hip-hop artists focus intently on the fifth pillar of hip-hop culture: knowledge. They have been the inspiration for a movement that is the antithesis of the popular form of commercial rap.

In terms of content, even the most cursory of comparisons between commercial rap and conscious hip-hop reveals a massive gulf between their respective productions. Lil Wayne’s “Got Money,” the third single from his Grammy-Award-winning album *The Carter III*, contains the following stanza: “I make it snow, I make it flurry / I make it out alright tomorrow don’t worry / Yeah, Young Wayne on them hoes / A.K.A. Mr. Make It Rain On Them Hoes.” The song is entirely devoted, not to the getting of money (a common theme in all branches of hip-hop), but to the having of it. The anxiety that comes with attempting to eke out a living in marginalized communities is a deeply felt concern residing at the