Dr. Jeffreyy O. G. Ogbar: My name is Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar. I’m a professor of history at the University of Connecticut and associate dean for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and I’ve been doing scholarship on hip hop now for a little over 10 years. And my research has been centered on the culture and politics of hip hop primarily the looking at the cultural landscape of hip hop, the move of hip hop from its origins in the South Bronx. So it’s a historical analysis, but also looking at the way hip hop has been a part of the contentious debates about pop culture in the United States and its effect on the people who consume hip hop. So, there are a lot of people who argue that hip hop itself has been dangerous to the consumers, particular African American youth. They say is anti-intellectual. That it’s particularly violent, misogynistic, and celebrates all sorts of criminal activities and drug dealing among them. So, one of the things that I’ve done is to look at some of the critics of hip hop and see how their arguments might be substantiated, proven or not proven, by scientific data. So, actually looking at homicide rates, looking at rates of people graduating from high school, and college, and professional schools. So, looking at how young people have performed academically, also on like standardized test scores looking at African-American teenage birth rates. And so, I’m looking at all these data, homicide rates among them, to see if there’s any kind of argument to that hip hop itself is in fact quite dangerous to those people consuming. Because there’s no way to get around the fact that hip hop commercially, since the mid 90s, has been dominated by narratives that are gangster in that nature. So, all artists who have gone platinum since 1999 now, have employed misogynistic language. So, there has been no one, no adult male rapper, gone platinum since 1999 without calling women Bs and Hs. The vast majority have, you can actually point by on finger, the ones who have not talked about selling drugs and just killing people. So, there’s a point when someone like Rakim can be celebrated as a best rapper, and no one consider Rakim bubble gum or corny, but he didn’t call women Bs and Hs. He didn’t talk about how many N words he was going to kill or about selling crack. And in fact, if you look at the narratives about drug dealing in the late 1980s or early 1990s, those narratives were about how dangerous and how destructive drug dealing was to the black community. So, people weren’t saying “Yo! I slang crack; I’m a snowman. I have duffle bags of money. Go getcha money!” And just you know a celebration, a conspicuous celebration of selling poison that ultimately leads to not just the death, destruction, and addiction of black people, but also the rap and imprisonment of African-Americans. There’s no way you can get around that hip hop in the last several years has been centered on, so much commercial hip hop, on dope boy rap. So you have a whole list of commercial rappers from Young Jezzy to Jay-Z who have in fact celebrated and valorized drug dealing. But if you look at the late 1980s early 1990s’
even gangster rappers like Ice Cube and NWA, you will hear Ice Cube do a song where his protagonist is selling drugs, but at the end he ends up in jail. He might end up dead, “Bird in the hand,” or “Alive on Arrival,” and so you have, or “My Summer Vacation,” he ends up in prison with 57 years. So, you see these cautionary tales about drug dealing and not this sort of the grandeur and wealth that comes from it. Also, if you listening to song like Public Enemy’s “Night of the Living Baseheads” you get a perspective on the destruction of it and what it does to those people who are addicts. So, all those sort of narratives have gone to the wayside and become increasingly marginal. So, when I talk about, and we’ll just go back to Rakim, or PMD, or Big Daddy Kane and some of these old, old school rappers they has a coolness, a swagger, a confidence, a lyrical dexterity, that all these things were celebrated. Their artistry was celebrated. They seemed to be in the center where it was cool to hip hop without celebrating the death, destruction, and suffering of black people and their larger communities. And it may not always be political. IT could be about how you were an ill MC or had all the women or something like that. So, hip hop itself has changed. It doesn’t mean that hip hop was devoid of short coming or these artists were all pure and what we have now is impure. I don’t want to argue the sense of sense of hip hop purity, but the content has in fact fundamentally changed. So to go back to the cultural wars, I kind of look at these cultural wars a part of a large continuum, a historical continuum, that goes back to the modification of African-American culture in music and the response to that. So, you can begin with the first popular music in the United States, jazz. But even if you look at the sort of beginnings of ragtime in the turn of the century although we don’t have radios stations and records and all these things, but when ragtime emerges and spreads across the county, there are people African-Americans included, who argue that ragtime is dangerous. That the young people who danced to this music danced in sexually suggestive ways and that this is problematic. Certainly with jazz you have a wide base of opposition to jazz arguing that it’s jungle music. They call it, excuse the vulgarity here (N word) music. They call it crude, unsophisticated, and many people have argued that we have a box here that defines music. And these of course European aesthetic standards and that since jazz is outside of that, that it’s therefore, illegitimate music. So, people attacked jazz for all sorts of ways. Of course it came from margins. It came among African-Americans moving to the mainstream, but became widely accepted. And we find that those folks who were consumers of jazz ended up graduating from high school at rates higher than their predecessors. They went on to become titans of the industry in education, the military, some became activists and you know society moved on and it just happen to be a sonic backdrop of their generation. When we look at rock n’ roll we found that same thing. Congressional hearings on rock n’ roll, public service announcements on rock n’ roll being dangerous. People calling it (N word) music. People calling it crude, lasciviousness, an illegitimate loud art form. But you know those people who listened to rock n’ roll went on to led society and everything else, and it was a sonic backdrop to a generation. So, we see hip hop out of that same continuum of people who are surprised and shocked at a new aesthetic attacking it as illegitimate, as crude, as threatening. And the undertone, although you don’t have the explicit sort of racism that you found with jazz and rock n’ roll, you can’t get away from the intonations that hip hop is inextricably connected to black pathology. So, when you can hear DMX or Biggie or a lot of gangster rappers from the early mid 90s talk about a lot of talk about homophobia, killing folks and other things when Eminem does it as, Eminem even says in his own song “White America” there’s a particular response from the white community. Although he’s not the first in his words to say B, H, or the F word referring to gays, although
he’s not the first, they act as if he’s the first because he has a certain appeal among white young people and that his behavior seems even more pathological that sort of thuggish behavior seems more advert for a white rapper than it does someone like Biggie. That it’s almost expected if you come from Brooklyn, the inner city and you’re black, you’re working class that you engaged these sorts of tropes of vulgarity, misogyny, homophobia, and celebrating criminal activity. But if you’re a white person from the suburbs or not from the suburbs, but certainly appeal to whites in the suburbs, that somehow this is even more unacceptable. And at least this is the perspective of Eminem, and I agree. I think that there was something there in terms of why you had this unprecedented outcry against Eminem when he wasn’t the first nor was he the one who did the most but you certainly had an unprecedented outcry about Eminem’s vulgarity and other things certainly in the late 1990s early 2000s.

But to go back to the cultural wars. There are a lot of people, Bill Cosby, Clarence Page, John McWhorter, Bob Herbert, these are writers, syndicated columnists, public intellectuals, of course famous comedian, and actor, and philanthropist Bill Cosby. There are a number of people who’ve argued that hip hop has been dangerous to young people. So, I decided to look at this. So, in my book Hip-hop Revolution I devoted a chapter to the cultural wars. And to my surprise when I began this research, I found that while there are great disparities between African-Americans and whites in terms of wealth, in terms of education, homicide rates, there are far more mortality rates, teenage birth rates, and all these different indices. Despite the fact that there is this chasms, and this is a chasms that Bill Cosby, and John McWhorter, and everyone else talks always about. So there’s no denying the fact that whites lead black in every positive index, virtually every positive index. And blacks lead whites in virtually every negative index. There’s no doubt. There’s no disagreement with those people who are attacking hip hop. The fact is that those people who attack hip hop never provided a historical baseline. So we’re led to believe that when they give us these data and their talking about early 2000s that somehow hip hop has caused these disparities. And it’s implied that as Bill Cosby would say you couldn’t skip school back in the 1950s because people in your neighborhood would catch you playing hooky and your mama would find out. Your daddy would find out. And that people didn’t get pregnant before they got married. They’d get sent down south. These sorts of things didn’t happen. We had respect in our communities. So, you have this sort of romantic image of that past. But when we look at the data we find in fact that going back to the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s we looking at all those decades and I ask someone which of those decades do we find the black homicides rates to be the lowest? And from the Post War period up when you look at these data, the black homicide rate most people killed by black folks and this has been the case. So, if I ask people which decade do we find the lowest black homicide rate the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, or the 2000s, the first decade from the 2000s, most people say the 1950s. We kind of assume the 1950s. You know we have this you know noble black community of hard working folks. This well-dressed, doing their thing, challenging white supremacy, but in fact it was the 2000s. The black homicide rates was lower in 2004 than it was in any point going all the way back to the 1940s. And so this is actually a surprise to people. When I tell people these data they actually get upset. They think that somehow it’s untrue, or this can’t be true. That black folks must be doing worse, and that we’re always in the process of losing ground and that we’re worse off than we were before. And people blame different sources for this perceived backpedaling and hip hop often times becomes that whooping board they way jazz and rock n’ roll was. So, I also look at the teenage birth rate.
I look at the rate in which teenage girls give birth. And in 2005, is the lowest since they’ve ever had data. So, the rate in which black girls have had babies is the lowest that’s been on record and not just the lowest going back to the 1940s, but in fact the lowest of infant mortality, the lowest on record around this time. The rate of which African-Americans graduate from college professional schools, like med, law school, business school, have gotten doctorate degrees not just the raw numbers have increased, but in 2000s we have all time highs. So, we’re looking at a generation of African-Americans, despite all the problems, a generation of African-Americans that have in fact enjoyed a standard of living higher, and they’ve achieved academically more than any generation of African-Americans ever. So, we look at hip hop generationers who their sonic backdrop is hip hop. There’s no way to get around it. And their performing academically in other ways and advanced in ways better than any other African-American generation.