

The Signature of Hip Hop: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

Exploring the conditions and origins of Rap music and Hip Hop culture from a contextual standpoint facilitates a sociological perspective that is often missing. Who were some of the key players? What sort of agency and experiences informed their creativity under conditions that were marginal and wretchedly underdeveloped vis-à-vis the wider society in which they exist? Is it the structure of capitalism, race, or space that germinated the grounds for hip hop culture? This paper draws on various 'conversations' and consciousness to shape a narrative of early hip hop culture and its exponential growth to a global phenomenon. Hip hop remain an intriguing cultural enigma while still very profitable for many of those involved. It is often oversimplified in analysis, stereotyped in the wider society, criminalized by authorities, and receives lopsided coverage in the mass media. Yet, hip hop culture has managed to grow from the racial/spatial confines of the South Bronx, New York to touch almost every institution and ethnicity in the United States and across the globe, almost! There is a sociological obligation to examine this culture as this paper attempts to do.

Introduction

In the United States it has been possible in dominant discourse, without any difficulty, not to acknowledge the presence, contribution, and the condition of African-Americans immersed in major historical events that have been fundamental to the shaping of nationhood, identity, and citizenship (Wald: 1995). The American imaginary, embedded in the social construction of whiteness as official public discourse, and enmeshed within an aggressive capitalist ideology and technological maze, closes and opens various discursive moments on the meaning and presence of African-American identities, with and without acknowledgement of their embodiment as an integral part of nationhood (Wald: 1995). The purpose of this work is to engage this dual ontological strain by examining rap music staged in two particular periods—the 1970s to the late 1980s and the late 1980s thru the 1990s, and chronicled within three forms of textual representation in the literature—the mass/popular culture media, artist biography, and the academic researcher. Intent is to show a positive and creative contribution to American society by African-Americans as contributors/creative agents, not as victims.

It is possible, though not always necessary, to trace certain social and ideological current of African-American aesthetics from and to the period of slavery. Some scholars have given the moment of origin of rap music to an African tradition, especially in West Africa (Spencer 1991; Dyson 1993; Royster 1991; Harris 1993; Rose 1994). In this context Rap music and its Hip-Hop cultural settings are no exception. In this work hip hop linkages to Africa and slavery in the United States will not be dealt with in significant details nor receive an in-depth analysis, but the symbolic presence of Africa and slavery at interval will be central to the understanding and reading of certain lyrics and symbolism. Hip hop linkages to West Indian culture, especially with Jamaican

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musical influences in New York also will be referenced.

There are many ways to approach rap music and hip hop culture, and many disciplinary positions one can adopt for these approaches. Rap music is a form of communication with a distinct cultural narrative within the African American experience. It bears witness to many of the cultural, institutional, structural, economic, historical, social and political concerns of our time within the wider discourses of oppression and the particular position of negation for many Americans, especially Blacks and Hispanics in the urban regions now referred to as inner cities. It is an involved task to adopt a single theoretical position when studying social issues, especially in the Liberal Arts. A wholesome approach calls for not only economy and democracy but also integrity. Current literature on rap music and hip hop culture is growing at an exponential rate. At the level of African-American Studies, this has led to a disciplinary rethinking at the more particularized level of African-American aesthetics. Indeed writings on and about African-American aesthetics have been in existence since Africans were brought to America for slave labor. The Black Aesthetics movement of the 1960s, the Harlem Renaissance, and the continuing exploration of Slave Narratives are living testimonials of a viable cultural aesthetics.

Perhaps no other area of African-American aesthetics has received more academic and popular attention than music and literature. Interpretation and representation of this art form has seen many vicissitudes along racial, political, social, cultural, economic, and, religious positions. Thematic concerns ranging in scope and content dealing with colonialism, dispossession, oppression, disenfranchisement, violence, powerlessness, sex, gender and religion have been prominent in voluminous accounts. The academic representation of hip hop is steadily growing as well as more book length and researched publications from journalists and editors in the mainstream mass media and the hip hop magazines. Documentaries, television shows, Hollywood films, biographies and endless internet sites are dedicated to and or product of the hip hop genre. For hip hop culture, the central articulating principle relating these thematic concerns to the various positions of interpretation and representation has been located in the concept and discourse of Resistance. This concept has transcended both spatial and temporal limits as well as diverse genres. Several prominent theoretical positions have been built around the concept of resistance, especially when dealing with the cultures of the colonized oppress in the Americas.

Theorizing on rap music and its related hip hop culture from an epistemological position based on a narrative of resistance has led to a dual ontological strain. On one hand, there is the genealogical presence of an African past that is instrumental in both the cognitive and performance aspects of a transplanted American subject from an objectified Africa (Royster 1991; Spencer 1996; Gates, Jr. 1989; Curtin 1964). On the other hand, there is an absorbing and daunting presence of an American imaginary that mitigates in both alienating and subjugating a tripartite relationship between Africa, America, and Blackness. This relationship has had varying results in different epochs with different hegemonic deployment and consequences within the United States,

In the first period of the emergence of the rap genre as a recorded experience in the mid to late 1970s, very little was said, written, or read about Africa as an external or genealogical force. Some commentators interpreted the music and its lyrics in this first period as representing a happier time, with more concerns and reflections on the immediacy of material conditions of survival for blacks in America, especially in the urban ghettos (Gonzales and Nelson 1991; George 1992; Spencer 1996; Darden 1981; Webster 1992; Dear and Wolch 1987; Katz 1993; Souljah 1994; Campbell and Miller 1993). In the South Bronx material conditions were linked to immigration with a large West Indian influx. More specifically, Jamaican cultural transplantations, and particularly music, had an impact on the temporal-spatial setting of the South Bronx. In the second period, from the mid 1980s to the 1990s, rap music presented a more directly politicized consciousness of an African presence and dilemma in America.

The second period brought in Latinos (mainly from the Caribbean region) as a more integral part of the hip hop fabric. Latinos have been part of hip hop from the beginning, but were left out as the genre unfolded from a communal to a commercial identity. The current period from the late '90s to the present has seen an increasingly globalized hip hop as well as a vulgar materialism. Global hip hop has gained a political edge while local (American) representation is overly commodified with the culture of 'Bling' (Oh, 2005; Mitchell, 2003). There is a cry for a return to the real (Ice-T, 1994) with pioneering radical groups such as Public Enemy (2005)

reuniting. There is still a cultural, though less 'revolutionary' lyrics in current hip hop rhetoric. Current lyrics are more individualistic and formulaic as opposed to the more communal past. There is, however, a more lateral presence of politicization from hip hop culture leaders such as Russell Simmons, Sean "P-Diddy" Combs, Ice-T, Jay-Z, Ice Cube, Naz, KRS-1, Chuck D and others. Most of these prophets of hip hop politics are also some of the most successful entrepreneurs in the industry.

Popular culture artists in both periods were critical of the conditions within the United States that has affected the lives of Black people in both personal and political terms. Contemporary rap lyrics reflect the personal, national, and international relations affecting the lived experience of Blackness in America. In the lyrics from a song title "Black to the Future" by Def Jef, we are told to take a stand by waking up to make a plan and band together to find a better form of unity (Stanley 1992:74). In a similar vein the group Public Enemy gives us a sample from a recurrent theme in rap music that serves almost as a denominator for hip hop culture. In one of their most quoted and influential songs "Fight the Power," we are reminded of the role of knowledge and awareness for community and selfhood, especially for African-Americans. Hence we are encouraged to get down to business by turning in to mental self-defensive fitness (Stanley 1992:258-59). Other versions of rap in the African Diaspora extend the art form though often without the specificity of the hip hop cultural elements as a structure of experience and everyday life in the United States. Thus imitation has led to complication that, in turn, has contributed to various levels of interpretation and naming.

The first period of hip hop witnessed little in terms of printed textual representation beyond rap's own creations. However, the second period has witnessed a textual explosion outside of the immediate domain of the rap artist lyrics and music. Three major areas of representation emerged from the second and current periods. The mass/popular media, artist biography, and the academic researcher have given new territories to rap music beyond its own creations. There is also a growing slang base from artist and fans alike that is vital to the identity of the culture. Indeed some of the slang has migrated to the lexicon of the mainstream with a range of usage among professionals, academics, media personalities, celebrities and even the Oxford Dictionary. There are several online (electronic) and printed dictionaries specific to the vocabulary of hip hop.

Since the 1970s rap music has moved from reflexive entertainment to cultural rearrangement with greater spatial potency. Many scholars and commentators are treating these territorial renegotiations as a single shift from the mild social commentary of the 1970s to the violent cacophony of the late 1980s and 1990s. However, in the words and worlds of the rappers and their followers, the journey is a continuum of the historical-material conditions of the majority of African-Americans. In their representation through music, this continuum is treated both as progress and as degradation of progress, even when there is visibly obscene excess of materiality as demonstrated in hip hop videos and shows on the artists' lifestyle (Chuck, D and Jah, 1997). There is, arguably, a conjunctive role for parody between poverty and profit. Rags-to-riches stories are as much a part of American popular culture as these are for the ideology of a national culture (Sexton, 1995).

Customarily, progress is regarded as a declaration of all that is positive in the public culture representation, whereas degradation of progress often is viewed as being lodged in the silence and disinformation of that same culture. In the silence of the public culture, the official space of the national imaginary, the rappers are disturbing and disrupting with what Tricia Rose (1994) calls their Noise. They are making the contradictions of public culture more pronounced than any other current art form. The articulation of African-American aesthetics inside and outside of this space, as a legitimate or illegitimate voice is the main plateau of confrontation. Part of the consequence for rap music has been appropriation, cooptation, misuse, and decontextualization, leading to a great deal of misunderstanding. The 'rough-cut', 'rude-boy' or 'bad-boy' thug image, while criticized by conservatives is insatiably consumed by a younger generation needing the presence of an 'original gangsta' (OG) in their increasingly complex cultural taste (Ro, 1998,1996).

The rising tide of urban-black aesthetics no longer contained by the ghettos and traditional policing of boundary lines, kept afloat simultaneously its opposition and converts. Moving from the ghettos of inner city urban areas to the outer city limits, the urban working class of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics adopted and accommodated rap music and hip hop in their geo-cultural space. Most of the white working class converts remained a buying and listening audience, while many Blacks and Hispanics, along with buying and listening,

provided the critical requirement for a devoted clientele.

The rapper Eminem who is white with 'adequate' ghetto and street credibility from Detroit has become one of the most successful artists in the genre. He served his early apprenticeship with the legendary rapper and producer, Dr. Dre. Some saw Dre as giving a 'cultural passport' to his protégé. Other white rappers had limited success though they were instrumental in opening the fan and consumer base of hip hop. Vanilla Ice and Bubba Sparks are noted white rappers, and to a lesser extent the Canadian artist Snow (reggae). Vanilla Ice had a short but successful run with sales and fan base before his rapid decline. Following in this context is not a passive behavior, but indeed to live by and practice the code of hip hop culture that speaks to one's experience in both positive and negative ways, hitherto unspoken of by the Public/Official Culture representatives. The dynamics of this following had its own internal (private) and external (public) obstacles to deal with within and without the city limits (Forman, 2002).

Beyond the city limits into the suburbs opposition to the hip hop genre emerged as a more ostensibly pronounced force. Both space and time, buffer within more intrinsic claims to morality, security and respect for the national status quo by suburban residents disavowed the unfolding of a general hip hop culture. Nonetheless, America's preoccupation with material gain, things new, and the consumer ethic paved the way for endorsement from the more conservative sectors of the population. The resistance did not form a single united bloc, but existed in enclaves ranging from weak to strong. Hip hop culture and rap music continued to invade the suburbs at a slower rate of dissemination and conversion. Conversion among suburban residents, especially teenagers, was facilitated by transportation links to the urban centers, increasingly sophisticated home entertainment technologies, various retail music outlets and readily available promotional (hip hop influenced design) apparel.

New captains and conductors aided the locomotive of predominantly black-urban ghetto culture, with an increasing and crucial Hispanic participation and alliance. Rap content specific urban radio and mixed content suburban stations enormously increased the genre's audience. Television did the same with a similar programming pattern. Hollywood did the same to a lesser extent as well. Rural and suburban malls and flea markets as well as continuing urban-suburban college and university students pollinated non-traditional 'black areas' around the country with the appeals of hip hop culture. White solo rappers and racially mixed groups emerged and quickly were signed on by the big labels and distributors to reach the new market.

The presence of racial and ethnic disputes within the suburbs seems to have withdrawn in the moment of crisis erupting from the threatening urban taste of hip hop. Media and public-official observations and comments reinforced the crudity of rap music as lacking any aesthetic value or moral turpitude, and proffered it should not be treated as art by the American people regardless of race, colour, creed, class, or religion. Opponents dubbed this form of music as a contradiction to many of the claims of the rappers concerning race, history and the treatment of Black people in America. For public officials, the belief that rap music and hip hop culture is purely marginal and fringe mentality that will 'pass over' was positively reinforced from suburban resistance. Negative coverage paved the way for discourse on race relations. Nevertheless, the rap invasion of the suburbs continued. Consistent effort in the criminalization of hip hop was to ensure a continuing marginalization of the 'movement.' This is not to understate the violence and victimization within hip hop culture.

The signature of Hip Hop

Although one may be led to believe that hip hop music is a recent evolution, it relates back to the Griots of West Africa. The Griots were, and in some rural areas still are, storytellers, poets and traveling singers who played an important role in pre-colonial African societies. They used poetry and rhythm as pillars of an oral tradition to teach the people about their history, as written language was rarely used (Toop, 1991). One could even argue that hip hop music began even earlier than Griots culture, stemming from the ancient societies of Egypt. It is part of the Black rhetorical continuum, as it borrows from and expands a tradition of creative use of language styles and strategies. It was created as rhetoric of resistance primarily to racial discrimination and oppression (Kopano, 2002; Spencer, 1996, 1991; Royster, 1991). Hip hop emerged in direct response to ruling class power. It is an

evolutionary form of the cultural resistance through language and music that Blacks have been using for generations. Blacks have used sounds different from their oppressors and often tap into a Black rhetorical and cultural tradition to effectuate this resistance (Kopano, 2002; Rose, 1998).

The advent of the modern sound system was one of the key components to the development of what would become hip hop. In the 1940s, 'Tom the Great' Sabastien began to use loud sound system and American records to steal crowds away from local bands, in Jamaica. Competitions began to spring up in Jamaica, to see which DJ was the best. In 1956, Vaughn Bode created the 'Cheech Wizard Character' that would not only signify the start of one of the pillars of hip hop, graffiti, but would become famous with graffiti artists all over the world (Ross, 1994; Perkins, 1996). Some of the Griot traditions had arrived and survived in the New World, via African enslavement. These would, in turn, impact upon and influence one of the most direct forces that concern the creation of hip hop, the Jamaican style of music called Dub. Dub was inaugurated in the 1960s. Musicians, such as King Tubby, would isolate percussion breaks because they found that dancers enjoyed the energetic rhythms of these short breaks. Not long after, performers began speaking in sync with these rhythms (Toop, 1991; George, 1998).

In the beginning, hip hop started as a creative outlet for inner-city youth. It was an escape from the financial crisis that had overtaken their neighbourhoods and eliminated so many of the social programs upon which they had come to depend on. To cope with their oppressive conditions youthful creativity especially Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and West Indians, held parties on their blocks, in basements and recreation halls, parks and even in some clubs. They used subway trains, buildings, dumpsters, and other platforms as canvases for their artwork. And, local crews like the Zulu Nation led by Afrika Bambaataa replaced some of the City's gang activity. Hip hop and its interwoven cultural facets quickly spread from the Bronx to uptown Manhattan (most notably Harlem), Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Long Island, and across the river to northern New Jersey (Waite, 2001; Toop, 1991; Rose, 1994; George, 1998).

DJ Kool Herc, was one of several Jamaican immigrants who brought dub in the late 1960s to New York City. In Jamaica, dub music evolved into several different genres, including reggae and dancehall. However, in New York City, it would evolve into what eventually would be known as hip hop (Toop, 1991; George, 1998). Here (for Hercules) and his massive mobile speakers (The Herculords) along with his crew The Herculoids was one of many popular DJs during this time (early-mid 1970s), but found that his American audience did not care for or understood the reggae he was accustomed to using. Instead, he switched to using funk, rock and even disco to more suit the American tastes and South Bronx audience. In addition to this switch, DJs began extending the percussive breaks by using an audio mixer and two records, as well as other mixing techniques that were being developed (Toop, 1991; Rose, 1994).

Performers who spoke in sync with the music were originally called emcee or MCs, for Master of Ceremonies or Mic Controller. Later, with increasing rhythm, they would be called rappers. Early on, rappers focused on introducing themselves and other members of the audience. There was some improvisation and a simple four-count beat, which was accented with a simple chorus. It would not be until introduction of the latter that more complex themes would be added to their repertoire (George, 1992, www.oldschoolhiphop.com "artists/emcees"). By the late 1970s, hip hop music was quickly becoming a major commercial force and artistic outlet, as it spread across the United States. The music began to change, becoming more intricate and multifaceted. Songs now involved metaphoric lyrics and complex multi-layered beats. Hip hop was evolving. (George, 1994; Toop, 1992).

The first rap records were created by Fatback Band's King Tim III, Grandmaster Flash's *Super Rappin'* and The Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* (1979). The latter is known as the anthem of hip hop and is credited for the beginning of recorded and commercial rap. Rap and hip hop predated the recording date of *Rappers Delight*. Rap music has been around long before being recorded by Sylvia Robinson in New Jersey and the Sugarhill Gang from Harlem in 1979 (Kool Herc; VH1, 2004; Toop, 1991). *The Message* by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five marked the serious anthem of message or conscious rap. Live musicians first recorded these records, and then the MCs added their vocals afterwards. This technique changed, however, with Grandmaster Flash's *Adventures on the Wheels of Steel*, which helped to pioneer the use of scratching, originally

invented by Grandwizard Theodore in 1977. Other early innovators included Afrika Bambaataa and Run DMC, both out of New York City and founded the style that became known as East Coast hip hop (George, 1998; Perkins, 1996). According to Cornel West rap music can be considered "the most important development in Afro-American popular music since 1979" (West; 1992, 292).

The mid-1980s saw hip hop artists finally achieving mainstream success. Artists such as Kurtis Blow, LL Cool J and Run DMC began to place quite well on the charts. LL Cool J *I Can Give you More* earned a respectable #21 position on the dance charts. And, in 1986, Run DMC's collaboration with Aerosmith entitled *Walk This Way* as well as the Beastie Boys (*You Gotta Fight for Your Right (To Party!)*) both placed on Billboard's Top Ten (Ibid). It interesting to note that Rap music did not achieve mainstream acceptance at this early stage in its development. Many radio stations ignored to play rap music. Many that played the music did so after their prime time play list. Play space and time were limited even after being increasingly 'waxed' (recorded). Black-content defined stations gave more play with *their* audience in mind. The disregard and disrespect for rap and at times its audience, did not stop with radio, MTV refused to play Rap music at one time. Billboard did not have a category and refused to define one for listing of Rap music/Artist. It was the 'cassette culture' of ghetto life made possible with new portable audio technology that helped to disseminate the early 'black noize' (Rose, 1994) of hip hop. Selling rap tapes first and records later out of car trunks, street corners and block and house parties in 1979 was a common economic endeavor of many rap pioneers. 'Going Vinyl or getting 'waxed' or 'pressed' was a multiplying factor of the exponential rise in the commercialization of the music and concomitant culture. The street corner / car-trunk hustle also followed rap to the west coast and did not altogether disappeared until well into the early-mid 1980s. I did not achieve mainstream acceptance at this early stage in its development. Many radio stations ignored to play rap music.

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Although the first female solo rap recording was done by Lady B in 1980, and The Sequencers were the first group to record, it was not until several years later that females would gain mainstream success in the industry. Roxanne Shante today revered as one of the original battling MCs paved the way, or at the least set the stage for a certain female lyricism that would define women rappers. The battle with (mainly against) male rappers, as Roxanne did with the Fat Boys, for respect and legitimacy is ongoing today with rappers such as Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown and Missy Elliot. It was, however, in the mid-1980s that we witnessed the advent of the first major black female group to top the charts. Salt-N-Pepa's *The Show Stoppa* was an immediate success in 1985. Their female DJ 'Spindrilla' elevated, if not invented a new role for women in the rap genre. Though many female rappers have emerged since the early 1980s, Female DJs on the other hand are significantly limited. Using the body and sexuality instead of the turntable has grown to become the dominant tropes with female rappers. Using sexuality, not technology, has proven to be the lucrative node for female rappers. Male rappers use a combination of 'sex n' tech' as their formulae (Rose, 1994; Ross 1994, Toop, 1991).

The following year, Ice-T's influential *6n' Da Mornin'* hit the scenes introducing the country to West Coast hip hop, as well as beginning the diversification of the genre known as gangsta' hip hop. The Bay Area with Tone Loc and the South Central (Krenshaw and Compton) area with Ice-T and Ice Cube / NWA, set a new pace not only with OGs (original gansta') but also with a new type of lyrical rawness. The narrative of nothingness so mundane to a life of hyper-dependency as existed in the ghetto reached an orchestrated cacophony of symphonic violence with the lyrics and images from West Coast rappers (Ice-T, 1994). The Death

Row label of Dr. Dre, 2-Pac, and Snoop Dog with the imposing presence of Sugh Nite, echoed the Crime Syndicate/ Africa Islam holla' of Ice-T and Niggers With an Attitude (NWA) noize' of Ice Cube. By the end of the 1980s, hip hop began to turn to more hard-edged themes, on both coasts. Success came suddenly and surprisingly to some rappers and groups in this period of conscious rap. Radical groups such as Public Enemy saw their album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* 'multi-charting' appearing at #17 on the club chart and #11 on the rap chart (Rose, 1994; George, 1992; Toop, 1991).

By the 1990s, hip hop began to cater to the youth market's basic instincts. The industry realized this marketing demographic had significant disposable income, and appealing to them has paid off quite handsomely. During this timeframe, hip hop achieved a commercial breakthrough, into the mainstream market (Waite, 2001). During this same time frame, hip hop began to spread outside of the United States. Dozens of countries began to see hip hop make its way onto their local music scene. Breakdancing (capoeira) was one facet that often broke the geographic doors open for new cultures, especially Germany, Japan and South Africa (Toop, 1991; George, 1992; www.wikipedia.org, "breakdancing").

Hip hop music began to be sold almost everywhere. Native artists were recording hip hop fusing it with an assortment of other local styles of music, such as cumbia and samba. Even the Senegalese mbalax rhythm has been infused in hip hop. And, in the United Kingdom, trip hop was created by infusing electronic music into hip hop (wikipedia.org "Hip hop history"). The hip hop movement spread to countries such as Greece and Spain and Italy throughout the '80s. Nehanda Abiodun, a self-exiled African American activist that was aided by Fidel Castro's government, introduced Cuba to the music of hip hop. Latin America and the Caribbean also endorsed and welcomed the new vibe from America. Such a welcome was not without some concerns and caution for the more organic Reggae and Calypso. A successful fusion with Rap the Dancehall subtext of Reggae eventually became known as Rap-Reggae. It had limited success. The Toronto based female rapper; Mischee Mee has been one of the better representatives of this fusion. And, even though the Japanese language was not well suited to rapping, artists including Ito Seiko, Chikado Haruo, Tinnie Puirx, and Takagi Kan popularized the music style in Japan (wikipedia.org "Hip Hop Music"). By 1992, hip hop had made the full transition into a mainstream music genre in America, and to some extent globally as well (Toop, 1991). In early post-Soviet elections, various candidates attempted to use American rappers, or a hybrid version of American-Russian 'rap' on their platforms to attract the youth generation towards democracy. MC Hammer was one of the notable and at that time popular American rappers invited to the former Soviet Union for 'entertainment and electoral' services.

The 1990s saw a further evolution of hip hop music with gangsta' rap entering the mainstream. Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* was one of the first albums that would establish the style known as G Funk, which would grow to dominate the West Coast hip hop style. During this time, other metropolitan areas as the Mecca of hip hop began to emerge including Atlanta St. Louis and New Orleans. By the end of the decade, most of American pop songs and new artist would have a hip hop component. This would be a trend followed by many advertisers, organizations, institutions and governmental agencies. Hip hop went mainstream. As the decade progressed, hip hop continued to infiltrate into other genres of popular music. Nu soul, as an example, combined hip hop with soul music. 'Merenrap' fused hip hop with meringue, offering a new and hybrid Latin rhythm and tempo. All over the world, hip hop emerged from the underground music scene and ghetto to reach mainstream audiences, creating unique music styles such as Tanzanian Bongo Flava (wikipedia.org "Hip Hop Music").

In the year 2000, Eminem's album, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, was the most popular hip hop album in the United States, going platinum nine times. No other rapper had ever achieved such success. Yet, pop music took a turn towards R&B crossover, with acts like Destiny's Child and Ja Rule dominating the top spots of the chart. However, with the arrival of 50 Cent and his G-Unit on the scene, hip hop music made a comeback, returning to its hardcore roots. Today many hip hop artists have achieved platinum level success, and they are not simply artists originating from New York City. Bones Thugs-N-Harmony is from Cleveland. Outkast is from Atlanta. And, Master P hails from New Orleans, to name a few (Waite, 2001).

Not only do successful hip hop artists not have to be from New York City, but they also do not have to be black. White rapper, Eminem, and Latino rappers, Big Pun and Fat Joe, have demonstrated this fact. The great

cultural unifier, hip-hop has bridged racial, ethnic, class, and regional gaps as no music has since the infant years of rock and roll. Not coincidentally, many of today's leading rock bands, like Limp Bizkit, Korn, and Rage Against the Machine, are heavily influenced by hip-hop (Waite; 2001,6). There are a multitude of reasons why hip hop has risen to the top of the music industry, one more complex than the next. One of the more obvious is the relatively low capital expense needed to purchase the equipment. In the beginning, as the original rhymes were simple and less challenging, almost anyone could MC alongside the popular music of the day and then move on to performing at block parties. In addition, MCing allowed for the artist to express their creativity, often teasing the crowd, both friends and enemies alike, in a form similar to the Jamaican practice of toasting at parties and dances (Rose, 1994; Ross, 1994, George, 1992). Public and private spaces were crossing certain established boundaries, as the MCs became more 'embolden' by the crowd.

Hip hop's rise was assisted by the decline of disco, funk and even rock in the mid to late 1970s and early '80s. White teens were not the only music lovers who declared disco as pre-packed and soulless; inner city Blacks were also rejecting Disco. Instead of simply rejecting disco, hip hop took advantage of the one positive aspect of the genre, the danceable beats, for the first decade of its existence, making it not only acceptable but enjoyable for the masses that hated disco. Social and political factors also facilitated the rise of hip hop. The Cross-Bronx Expressway was built in 1959, through the heart of the Bronx, which displaced many of the middle-class white communities. The Expressway caused stores and factories to close, and widespread unemployment ensued, especially among the Black population. The 15,000 + apartment Co-op City was built in 1968, on the northern edge of the Bronx, sending the last of the middle-class citizens scurrying. By 1970 poverty in the community was rampant, and Black and Latino gangs began to grow in power (Toop, 1991; www.b-boys.com "hip hop timeline and history").

The 1970s ushered in a flight of manufacturing jobs and investments concomitant with a steady increase in unemployment and decrease in tax-based returns. Persistent poverty bred the new 'underclass' (Wilson, 1987; Katz, 1993; Denton, 1993; Massey, 1993, 1991). This was the national urban condition in the United States under which the majority of Blacks, Latinos and newly arriving immigrants existed. Persistent poverty, declining and consistently dilapidated social and cultural organizations, conservative fiscal policies and retract rive governmental support bred an environment that was hazardous to the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. African American youth unemployment skyrocketed to 40 percent. To make the situation worse, middle-class Blacks left the inner cities and headed for the suburbs (Wilson, 1987). Out-migration from the city had several effects. First of all, the youth that remained no longer had successful role models or guidance to and emulate. Secondly, the out-migration reduced the tax revenues of the local governments, which led to a decline in public services. Strips of abandoned property, liquor stores, corner deli, Chinese food, (mainly as take out service with no place to sit and eat) became intermittent decoration. The reality of the 'crack-house' and 'crack-heads' emerged as almost normal to this altered environment. In addition, conservative government, at both the state and federal levels, reduced school and welfare funding, causing further destitution in the ghetto (Wilson, 1987; Pinckney, 1999). This disenfranchisement gave hip hop the social angst from which commentary is derived.

There have been many research papers, books and articles written regarding the cultural phenomenon that is hip hop. Halifu Osumare investigated the connectivity that hip hop has not only with Black culture, but also with cultures around the globe. Osumare deems this "connective marginalities," (2001, 1999). Although hip hop, as a genre, is based on specific Black expressive culture, due to a unique political history, there are similar dynamics in other nations, and as such these similarities constitute connections. Osumare sees hip hop music as an in-your-face rebellious youth style that challenges the adult status quo. The generational dynamic of this subculture remains; even as hip hop 'heads' them self grows older. However, rap music and the entire expressive culture of hip hop resonate not only with the anxiety of youthful social rebellion, but extant global socio-political inequalities (Osumare; 1999, 4). Osumare conceptual frame of connective marginalities includes the full range of culture, class, historical oppression, and generational dissatisfaction. Osumare sees hip hop culture as an export of a modern and global culture of 'cool'. Hip hop is at the center of a global social narrative. It represents the meanings of blackness in a multifaceted historic context, dealing with the social issues of race and power and transcending geographical and social boundaries. In her "Connective Marginalities of American Hip Hop Music

and Other Countries" Osumare theorizes on alignment of hip hop to the culture itself in Jamaica and Cuba, class struggle to North African Arabs in France, historical oppression to Native Hawaiians in Hawaii, and youth as a peripheral social status in Japan (1999, 4).

Watkins focuses on the economic opportunities that hip hop music and culture have provided for impoverished Black American youth. His reoccurring focus on this point seems to imply that he believes this to be a feasible means of lifting many of the struggling and oppressed youth out of the ghettos and setting them on the path of self-sufficiency and social success. However, this is implausible at best. For every hip hop artist who reaches a level of success that could propel him/her out of the ghetto, there are tens of thousands that will continue to suffer the oppressive conditions of the ghetto without hope for reprieve. Watkins does finally admit, though, "participation on the popular cultural field cannot, alone, produce substantive change in the material lives of Black Americans" (Watkins, 1998; 231).

Greg Ward's article, "*I Fought the Law (and I cold Won!)*"; *Hip-Hop in the Mainstream*" (1999), explores the continuing debate regarding the appropriateness of the lyrical content of hip hop music. Wahl notes that groups such as the Parents' Music Resource Center find the reference to crime, violent, misogyny and greed objectionable and a condoning of anti-social values. This is exacerbated by the violent deaths of hip hop stars Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. However, Wahl also notes that proponents of hip hop can argue that the lyrics are merely a "reflection of unequal American race relations and socioeconomic" (1999, 1). Wahl concludes that the primary challenge is that hip hop artists do not attempt to solve the socioeconomic, racial prejudice or violence they flow about. Instead they simply acknowledge and link issues to their own personal circumstances in the hip hop industry. Yet, to deem developments positive or negative, Wahl believes that this would be a missed opportunity to learn about these circumstances impact a consumer society, according to Wahl (1999).

C.H. Smith's (1997) text explores the boundaries of identity in hip hop music. Smith notes that hip hop music is based on identity construction and the dynamic performance of that identity. As such, hip hop has evolved over the previous decades. In the 1970s, artists such as Sugar Hill Gang and the Fat Boys portrayed relatively happy-go-lucky images of Black culture in hip hop music. The 1980s saw a more Afrocentric focus on the music, with artists such as X-Clan and Queen Latifah. By the late 1980s and beyond, hip hop saw "the hyper-violent 'gangsta' image so pervasive today" (Smith; 1997, 3). No matter what personification, Smith finds hip hop has been used as an expressive outlet for a marginalized and demonized segment of society. Smith sees the disparate messages issued by hip hop artists as schizophrenic. He notes that these "schizophrenic lyrical utterances go about the complicated process of merging the market-savvy rhetoric of individualism with an identity that "travels with a communal African-American sensibility - an identity that stays home" (1997, 2). This is a delicate balancing act between the consensual and the conflicting cultural relationships.

Jason D. Haugen (2003) explores the issue of female gangsta' rappers in his research entitled, *Unladylike Divas: Language, Gender, and Female Gangsta Rappers*. He notes that a plethora of contemporary research has been performed on the male rappers in this sub-genre and even some has been performed regarding positive feminine images in hip hop music. However, little research has been devoted to gangsta' rap narratives performed by women, and how this affects and reflects on femininity. Limiting his discussion to three female rap artists, Mia X, Lil' Kim and the Lady of Rage, Haugen bills alternative femininities that are counter to the mainstream perception of femininity in American society. Although each artist has a unique style, Haugen assumes that all three are at least aware of conventional 'lady-ness' behaviors. These include "volume, pitch and discourse-level factors as mitigation, cooperation, and accommodation, as well as a prohibition on the use of taboo lexical items and topics for discussion" (Haugen; 2003, 2). Breaking of hegemonic norms, relative to femininity, not only highlights those norms, but also can serve to create new ones. Conforming to American mainstream ideals of 'ladylike' behavior is impossible in the sub-genre of gangsta rap, which has opened the doors of acceptability for women in the hip hop world. Gangsta rap has imposed its own control over the ways that it is acceptable for women to act and express themselves, which in this instance includes profanity, sex, violence, drugs, and more taboo topics for traditional feminine behavior (Haugen, 2003).

In 1996, Don Davy explored the East Coast/West Coast rap conflict that has become plague and power in the hip hop genre, and has culminated in multiple deaths. He explains how the two sides were formed, and

what the tension encompasses. He explains how the controversy is not only a control issue, but also an issue of respect and fair play. For an art form that often is the outcry of those who demand that intolerance cease, Davy surmises that it is the intolerance of those on the East Coast that has held back those on the West Coast. This intolerance has fuelled the fire of hatred, despite several attempts to bring the rappers from the two coasts together. Where differences have allowed an artistic diversity within the genre, it has also caused it to result into lethal consequences. The gansta' imperative – mainly Bloods versus Crips with their various Sets - is not to be underestimated in the rappers lyrics, attitudes and affiliations, including their fans.

To actually define hip hop culture is a difficult task. It is not simply because of the classical subjectivist view that labels hip hop culture as 'beyond definition', but more because hip hop culture is so broad in scope. By defining something so comprehensive, one runs the risk of alienating a participant, on accident (Noble, 2004; www.hiphopcongress.com). People can typically identify hip hop, but how? "Defining hip hop culture will cause one to remove their hair or pull someone else's out ... Hip hop is so broad in scope at this point that any definition of the word and the culture seem to threaten the well being of many of those who find themselves having participated in the culture" (Noble 2004, 1-2). According to Noble defining hip hop is at times analogous to the problematic of Devine definitions. Defining what is and is not hip hop sometimes requires a leap of faith. Although hip hop is not a religion, it holds certain similarities. Individuals often see others as being false followers of hip hop culture. Idols rise up within the culture. Even sects, such as gangstas', have emerged. And even though there is faith in the idea that 'it' exists, and 'it' can be seen, heard and felt, one is still hard pressed to determine what 'it' really is (Noble, Ibid).

Agreements on definitions or a definition could be more of a problem than any *actual* definition. Given points of view in the above quotes, Noble suggests a very simple 'definition' of hip hop culture. She defines it "as the mode of consciousness, interaction and understanding that flows forth from its four most developed and basic elements: Emceeing, B-Boying (Breakdancing, Popping, and Locking), Graff Art, and DJing / Turntablism" (ibid). Anything more simply would be an unneeded expansion on the above definition, while anything less would be delineating. This is undoubtedly a contentious claim. Perhaps it would be best to describe the structure of hip hop than to define it with major limitations (www.oldschoolhiphop.com). In the United States, hip hop culture is comprised of four basic elements or pillars: MCing, DJing, Graffiti, and Breakdancing. These pillars or elements could vary in other parts of the world. As the music has evolved, other facets have become important components of the hip hop culture, and as such, should be acknowledged. These include political activism, hip hop fashion, and hip hop slang.

Hip Hop fashion is also an integral part of hip hop culture. Fashion has transformed hip hop, from a simply auditory art form to a more visual one. The impact and influence of fashion on African American culture and the creativity and cultural influence African Americans have had and continue to have predates hip hop, back to the earliest period of enslavement in the Americas (Caponi, 1999; White, 1998; McRobbie, 1988). Hip hop lovers realize that their unique fashion style allows them to not only express emotion and creativity, but also to show solidarity with others (Toop, 1991; George 1992). These fashion statements have included a wide variety of clothing styles over the lifetime of hip hop. "Some clothing styles fashionable in hip hop culture (such as loose, baggy garments) allegedly derive from uniforms issued to prison inmates, from hand me downs, or because they are useful when shoplifting" (George, 1994 wikipedia.org "Hip Hop Fashion"). Although predominant in the African American urban communities, in the 1970s and 1980s, hip hop fashion has spread to mainstream music lovers around the globe. By the 1990s hip hop fashion was a major part of fashion branding. Rappers became models, advertisers, designers and owners in this fifth pillar of hip hop. This once cottage economy of rap music; grew into a major economic boom for rappers and corporation with interest in the hip hop nation and culture. Hip hop fans and followers as consumers wore their excitement and obedience with the branded prided of an American-capitalist imagination, regardless of its marginality. Language or 'slanging' as a linguistic axis is also a major part of the hip hop cultural foundation. However, the space for a linguistic investigation into rap music and its relation to hip hop culture is not permitted herein, but will be the topic of further research.

Conclusion

Hip Hop has moved beyond its humble beginnings in the South Bronx and throughout street corners and negotiated spaces in American society and culture. It has moved from marginal lyrics and basement parties to issues in presidential debates and opinions, as well as, in every level of the judiciary. It is the subject matter of children story books as it is for doctoral dissertations. Hip hop holdings and collections are in museums at Harvard University to almost every community library in the nation. The culture of Hip Hop is still alive on the streets and in the 'hood as much as it is in the academy. From its denial to being on MTV to becoming one of the largest mass media and marketing 'product', hip hop is strong and weak in different ways. It is embedded in American culture on all coasts and from mean-street to main-street. As much as it is grounded it is extraterrestrial - compliments of NASA. Hip Hop as a global phenomenon, is undeniable, and as a cultural and corporate force, it is a raging Bull. It is one of the major sociological events and topics of the last generation and it deserves increasing attention in the theories and analyses of the social sciences and humanities. The signatures have increased as the texts have developed. Hip Hop is certainly not conventional but it has garnered an apostolic aura of having a covenant for the cultures of the dispossessed. A sociology of hip hop as much as a sociological perspective on hip hop culture might not be obvious, but it is necessary for both.

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