

## How Cultural Imperialism has Hurt Hip-hop Culture

According to a *New York Times* article, a rap album which grosses \$17 million in sales would net the artist (take a deep breath) between 80 and 100 THOUSAND dollars! In looking at some of the better contracts in music, Michael Jackson earns about 40 points (cents on the dollar) and Janet Jackson rap artists fall on the very low end of this scale. The artists who create and promote the culture which drives the music have yet to gain economic (and thus full) control of their work. I am not talking about the founding fathers: Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grand Master Flash (God bless Chris Rock for showing him 'some' love), I'm talking 2003 . . . our present day emcees. On their independent release *Turn Off the Radio*, Dead Prez proclaim: "Power ain't money dawg/It's self determination." Well if the artists don't have the money, and we already know there is no self-determination in their music, WHAT ARE THEY LEFT WITH?

**ANSWER:** Opportunity . . . an opportunity to halt the blatant co-opting of rap music and Hip-hop culture. Once a powerful voice for the muted voices of disenfranchised people in urban America. Hip-hop<sup>1</sup>, and by relation, rap music, has been the victim of a racially motivated scheme to repress the revolutionary tone it once espoused. Before, one can fight an enemy, they must first understand them. This essay attempts to introduce the racist concept of empire (i.e. cultural imperialism) as it relates to Hip-hop, illuminating this racist practice in an attempt to impede its progress and more importantly its effectiveness.

### ***What is an Empire?***

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<sup>1</sup> Hip-hop culture consists of five elements: graffiti art, b-boying (Breakdancing), dee-jaying, emceeing, and knowledge. Hip-hop can be considered a culture as it satisfies the four hallmarks of culture: history, myth, motif, and ethos – as defined by Temple University's former head of Africana studies, Molefi Asante. Rap music is but 1/5 of the culture, too often rap music is considered Hip-hop, this is not the case.

An empire is best described as a large political body which rules over territories outside its original borders<sup>2</sup>. The Roman empire probably comes to mind as the most (in)famous example of a state expanding its boundaries and enveloping all of the territories within its reach. Performed under the guise of Christianity, the Romans were able to dominate cultures from thousands of miles away. As the land became more stable, and borders more defined, invading foreign land became more of a toil and simply not cost effective. However, in lands where resistance was low, a more indirect form of supremacy became vogue. Imperialism, a large political body which rules over territories outside its original borders<sup>3</sup>, allowed a 'mother' country to rule its colonies remotely and economically exploit its people. One need look no further than sub-Saharan Afrika, where the last of its countries gained independence in the early 1960s, to witness the devastating affect imperialism can have. In his book *Empire*<sup>i</sup>, Howe describes the characteristics of an empire:

1. Rulers expanding their power
2. Administrators moving from capital to province and money traveling in the other direction
3. The flow of commodities, ideas, beliefs, or cultural habits from place to place

In attempting to prove the analogy, let us look at each of these as they relate to Hip-hop.

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<sup>2</sup> P14

<sup>3</sup> 14 {Ahearn, 2002 #29}

## ***Hip-hop's Humble Beginnings***

Hip-hop started out in the park/ Now everybody's trying to chart. --- "Superstar",  
*The Mis-education of Lauryn Hill*

From the first break beat ever spun by Kool Herc, at its core, early participants of the movement, soon to be called Hip-hop, were just trying to have fun. Dee-jays would bring their equipment to the park or play out of their window and entertain the gathering crowds. Being an urban movement, early music relied on R&B, but mostly disco for their initial forays into 'making' music. As Afrika Bambaataa comments, "You had the Apollo Theater with all the MCs there . . . all these different people who was doing what we called jive-talking rap, and then we got into the disco era, it was the disco style of rappin'. We just took the different forms that was happening, what they was doing, but then started adding new rhymes, and Herc came in with the beats.<sup>ii</sup>" As time went on, elements of George Clinton's p-funk and even European electronica found their way into Afrika Bambaataa's amazing repertoire of break beats. Arguably, it was not until Grand Master Flash's *Adventures on the Wheels of Steel* that Hip-hop was able to claim a unique sound of their own. Occurring in near parallel with Grand Mixer DST's appearance on *American Bandstand* on Herbie Hancock's "RockIt," it took Hip-hop nearly 10 years to acquire a sound of its own.

In terms of lyricism, Boogie Down Production's 1987 release *Criminal Minded* is highly regarded as the album which revolutionized the way in which rhymes were delivered. Gone were the chanted lines of the Furious Five or Cold Crush Brothers and in were deftly delivered wordplay, faster cadence, and a premium on the message. KRS-One (Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone), the self-professed 'teacher, his dee-jay Scott La Rock, and emerging emcee, D-Nice made up the group which introduced explicit Black militancy to their music. Up until that point, there had been songs released which spread social consciousness, but no group used rap music to spread a message of

encouragement, prophecy of the future, and an action plan to get there, while still maintaining an urban validity <sup>4</sup> and without sermonizing.

Since Hip-hop emerged in the South Bronx, it remained relatively unnoticed. Public policy decisions in the early 1970s made the South Bronx a dumping ground for New York City's least wanted (see Kitwana). Hip-hop's introduction to the world occurred via the emergence of graffiti on New York's mass transit trains. While walls were the #1 target of graffiti writers, they lacked one thing – mobility. A piece on a subway car could be seen by thousands of people, as the car made its way through the mass transit system. The 2, 4, 5, and 6 trains all reside on train depots in the Bronx. This provided the perfect platform for writers to bomb trains at night and watch as they traveled through the Bronx and into Manhattan.

While considered art to those involved in the movement, the sentiment downtown was very different. While Robert Moses had been lauded for his actions in trying to clean up NY, graffiti was turning back the clock and (in most Yorker's eyes) ruining his efforts. This begins the imperialistic relationship between Hip-hop and the 'powers that be.'

### ***Cultural Imperialism and Hip-hop***

Similar to the law enforcement efforts employed to quell the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, cultural imperialism is societies' means to retard the growth of Hip-hop. As described above, Hip-hop was the only voice the inner city had. There was even a point in time where congressional zoning was drawn which left the South Bronx without any political representation. Much like the revolutionary voices of the Black Power movement: Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and others, Hip-hop culture presented a unified, resistive

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the term external validity, which describes how lab results can be generalized in the real world, urban validity measures how well one's message, recorded in a studio and constructed in the emcee's mind, reflects the reality of the milieu they speak of. Paradoxically, the maturation of rap has witnessed the message veer further away from its target audience.

message that not only announced their existence to the world, but also informed and rallied the community.

### ***Shutting Down the Culture, One Element at a Time -- Graffiti***

Early attempts to repress this movement failed. There are stories of graffiti writers being forced to perform community service as punishment, but these 'cleaning sessions' would actually allow writers from across the city to meet one another and form allegiances. However, New York City officials learned their lessons and began strict law enforcement against graffiti. Laws made it illegal to sell spray to a minor, and all paint cans had to be locked up at night, barbed wire was erected around train yards complete with three foot gaps which were patrolled by police with guard dogs. All of this while Blacks had a 60% unemployment rate and a 50% illiteracy rate.

It was clear that NYC officials did not want to hear the message early practitioners of Hip-hop were espousing. As emcee Ice T complains: "What a brother gotta do, to get a message to the red, white and blue?" Even when the message was patriotic, NYC officials banned it. Case in point was the Bicentennial train which was a full length, 10 car train which was spray painted on the night of July 3, 1976 in commemoration of the 200 year anniversary of America's founding. As it rolled out of the train yard, it was immediately pulled out of service before being viewed by the general public.<sup>iii</sup> Without a doubt, there was a fear that the message may be misinterpreted, therefore it was removed before any 'damage' could be done.

### ***Shutting Down the Culture, One Element at a Time -- Breakdancing***

In terms of breakdancing, the battle was a bit more implicit. America was fascinated by the aesthetic beauty of the dance. Hollywood was the first to jump on board as they included Breakdancing in the box-office hit *Flashdance*, thus introducing the dance to a mainstream audience. From there, the race to commercialization was set in high gear. Movies like *Breakin*, *Breakin 2*, *Electric*

*Bugalo*, raked in millions of dollars, while the dancers received as little as \$50 a day for their participation in the films.

While graffiti originally started out as an urban movement where crews would use dance as an outlet to hone their energy in a positive way and settle disputes with rival crews, commercialization usurps any cultural significance and makes it a budding fad. Dick Hedbig's work on culture in the British punk rock movement fully describes the social shift which took place in Hip-hop. He describes a two-step 'process of recuperation;' which takes place when the dominant culture identifies a threat from a sub-culture. Hedbig argues: " [the process] takes two characteristic forms . . . one of conversion of sub-cultural signs (dress, music etc.) into mass-produced objects and the 'labeling' and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups – the police, media, and judiciary.<sup>iv</sup>" The conversion of sub-cultural signs, demonstrates the force at work in graffiti. Once the culture is taken out of the movement, you cease to have a movement. Whereas graffiti was retarded by the bourgeoisie and the art world moving their work from wall and trains and into galleries and canvas and breakdancers were made into 20<sup>th</sup> century blackface dancers who amused wholly white audiences, the next card Hip-hop played would be immune to such external forces. Rap music made its debut in 1979 with Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" and introduced a new musical force to the world.

### ***Rap Music – The Seemingly Indestructible Force***

The spoken word has been the medium used in all of the past movements in African-American history. Slaves employed the Bible and slave hymns and the Black church to keep their hopes alive and pass messages to one another. The Harlem Renaissance featured the printed word as Alain Locke gathered the greatest writers of that time to broadcast the best of Black culture to the masses. The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements used the spoken word to inform the masses of the inequities that were still going on and empower people to do something about it. Finally Hip-hop has used rhythmic words, or as emcee

Rakim says 'rhythm and poetry' to get their message across. Moreover, unlike the past movements, rap music can be employed by anyone, you don't need to be a professional, just someone with a voice and a message.<sup>5</sup>

COINTELPRO would not work on rap music as emcees were on average 16 years old and all from the inner city. Censorship, which did come into play in 1989 when Broward County Florida attempted to ban Luke Skywalker and 2 Live Crew and again when Tipper Gore singled out rap music for the reason parental advisory sticker needed to be placed on rap albums, but in the late 1970s, the music was spread via parties and tapes, there was no way to stop that.

With not many options left, cultural imperialism became the battle cry. 'Water down the music and dilute the message, usurp the cultural significance and make it a popular culture phenomenon' a powerful plan which could stop, or at least slow down, the movement. While many look at the materialistic and nihilistic attitude of emcees as the reason for this, there is definitely a systematic process in place to make sure Hip-hop does not ignite a mass movement. In my opinion, this started in the early 1990s.

### ***How Rap got Linked with Violence***

1991 was a historic year for music in America. It was then that Soundscan, the electronic service for tracking music sales was unveiled. Up until that point, there was no way for corporations to know the sales of their products (outside of a few large (read non-urban) stores). Soundscan immediately propelled rap as the third largest selling genre in America, behind country and rock and roll.<sup>6</sup> All of a sudden, rap music became a problem, especially since the music was being consumed outside of urban areas.

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<sup>5</sup> While we will discuss music in Cuba later in this paper, there is a great independent movie entitled Amandla < <http://www.amandla.com> > which describes the powerful role music played in South Africa's fight against apartheid. It is playing in DC at the Visions theater.

<sup>6</sup> It is now number 2 behind rock and roll. Interestingly, many industry insiders believe as much as 70% of all rap sales are purchased by whites.

The most compelling case of rap music changing public opinion occurred in 1993 when the state of Arizona refused to acknowledge Martin Luther King's birthday as a holiday, the only state to do so. Public Enemy recorded and performed a song called "By the Time I Get to Arizona" which criticized the state of Arizona, and the US government as a whole, during a concert in Preston, Arizona. They also released a video which showed Public Enemy painting the White House black, showing that they were taking over. Due to public pressure, Arizona reversed its opinion and acknowledged King's birthday as a holiday.

To my recollection, this was the last time revolutionary rap music found its way to mainstream radio and video. Case in point, last year, Public Enemy recorded a song which included the name of ex-Black Panther Mumia abu-Jamal in the hook. MTV, as well as BET (now owned by Viacom which owns MTV and VH1) refused to play the song unless Mumia's name was removed from the song. After a threat to boycott, the song was played, but only irregularly and was soon dropped from rotation. This is just one of the ways to suppress the revolutionary voice of rap music and only display the drugs, women, jewelry – everything physical about the music.

### ***The Global Effect of US Cultural Imperialism***

Interestingly, as Hip-hop spreads worldwide, other countries have used the same plan. In Cuba, the government has remained cautious about allowing rap music to be recorded, as they fear it will become a medium for political opposition. Often found in poorer areas of the island, Cuban rap focuses on the struggle which common people in Cuba go through. As writer Sam Krinsky comments: "[Rap] music is by nature political and by circumstance not always on line with the official government accounts,"<sup>v</sup> therefore making it a threat to the Cuban government.

Furthermore, the media representation of rap music has hurt it. Quoting Krinsky at length, he writes:

Hip hop in the United States, although quite diverse at the grassroots level, is represented in the mass media predominantly by artists that glorify violence, drugs, misogyny, and above all, an unrestrained materialism. Not surprisingly, the Cuban government has been hesitant to allocate its scarce resources to the promotion and distribution of a music that, in at least its most well known form, appears to espouse such an ideology. In addition, according to several supporters of Cuban hip hop, the Cuban government was pre-disposed to see the arrival of a new U.S. art form in Cuba as a function of U.S. cultural imperialism.

While Cuba simply tries to keep rap music out of its culture, the US simply waters it down. It is no coincidence that acts like MC Hammer, Vanilla Ice and even Deion Sanders became rap stars in the mid 1990s. Groups like Public Enemy, X-Clan, Bran Nubian, and Jungle Brothers became after thoughts as party music and the glitz and glamour took center stage. Moreover, the financial gains are still not there, while rap music is a billion dollar industry, as noted above, the money is not even going to the artists.

### ***Conclusion***

While the scope of this paper only allows for a cursory glance at cultural imperialism, there is no doubt that rap music has succumb to this devastating, racially, motivated tactic. Rap music and Hip-hop culture began in the downtrodden areas of the South Bronx as a response to the oppressive conditions they were forced to live in. As the movement gained momentum, its message was snatched from its core audience and watered down to become a piece of popular culture. While the idea of urban voyeurism, is central to this argument, as without an audience imperialism could not work, the watering down of the music is a deliberate attempt to stop the movement.

As a result, a growing underground rap movement has popped up. Now there is a schism between mainstream and underground rap. Unfortunately, the world only gets to see the mainstream, which is the byproduct of cultural imperialism forces. Therefore, rap music, as the main window to Black culture shows a skewed subset of the culture, a subset definitely uninterested in bringing about change. While Gil Scott Heron proclaimed 'the Revolution will not be televised,' it is safe to add radio and any other form of popular media to that list. Revolution is never easy, but change is necessary. Rap music still has a chance to make a difference, the next few years will be very interesting!

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<sup>i</sup> Howe, Stephen, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> Spady, James, et al., *Street Conscious Rap*, Philadelphia, Umum Press, 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> Austin, Joe, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2001.

<sup>iv</sup> Rose, Tricia, *Black Noise*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1994.

<sup>v</sup> Krinsky, Sam, *Hip-hop in Cuba*, [www.cubaupdate.org/cubaudate.htm](http://www.cubaupdate.org/cubaudate.htm), Accessed 26-03-04.