

**Back at Home:
Whatever happened to Hip Hop's Purest Art forms?**

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Many view Hip Hopⁱ as the heir-apparent to the throne of physically visual African American culture. The culture itself has, in its short time spanⁱⁱ, had its own tumultuous struggle to fill those lofty shoes. Tricia Rose provides a simple definition of Hip Hop when she states:

Hip hop gives voice to the tensions and contradictions in the public urban landscape during a period of substantial transformation in New York and attempts to seize the shifting urban terrain, to make it work on behalf of the dispossessed.ⁱⁱⁱ

Taking a close look at the origins and early development of Hip Hop, reveals what may be the seeds of disruption provided by a society which has frequently misunderstood specifically African American social movements. Arriving in the footsteps of the Black Power movement, it appears that particular long-standing stigmas came to bear on Hip Hop even before its inception. Ignorance-veiled attacks on the culture's most visual and, then, pervasive art forms may have crippled Hip Hop early on. These attacks, while aiding the culture in the short term, may have ultimately stifled the culture's expressive forms and their potential as the markers of a true social movement.

America is no stranger to cultural movements, yet those constructed from African American culture and heritage have always been met with resistance. More recently, the Civil Rights movement, though actually leading to a kind of racial equality,^{iv} ultimately suffered at the hands of American social ignorance. Coming out of the Civil Rights era, the Black Power movement further set a predominantly white America on edge. Taking nothing away from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent oriented push for equality, Black Power's poster child, the Black Panther Party, came across as a force to be

reckoned with. Not only were members of this group not afraid to physically reach out for their goals, they presented their own militant manifesto to America, 10 goals the African American community felt most important to their racial development.^v The Panthers came bearing a message, one backed by a hand that would not just lay dormant if provoked:

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense took steps towards ending police brutality in the black community from racist police oppression and brutality.”^{vi}

In response to the seeming “threat” of the Panthers, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI began a covert operation designed for and specifically aimed at their dismantling and utter destruction, something which became known popularly as CoIntelPro. Harris describes this counterintelligence program as:

Set up by Hoover to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, destroy, or otherwise neutralize the leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters of what it called “black hate groups”, with the Black Panther Party being number one on its list. Hoover referred to the Party as being “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country”^{vii}

Hoover’s words only work to demonstrate the overwhelming fear a predominantly white society felt of people it, for so long, controlled. Labeling human and civil rights groups as “hate groups” shows the misdirected mindset that has tried so long to rule with an iron fist. These efforts have not stopped entirely, either. The Black Panther Party serves as one extreme example and laid much of the ground work for programs that would cause the social disparity that would eventually come together and form Hip Hop.

Despite the concentrated efforts to destroy them, The Panthers survived into the mid-seventies, to a time that saw a continued government effort to silence countercultural forces. At this time, Globalization and a dwindling economy spurred a drastic social change, particularly in New York City. In The Hip Hop Generation, Bakari Kitwana describes this economic shift:

The mid-1970s to the mid-1980s were critical years in establishing the new economy. During these years, the corporate practice of exporting low-skilled manufacturing jobs became commonplace. National unemployment rates, particularly Black youth unemployment rates, skyrocketed.^{viii}

Obviously times were not so good for inner-city residents, especially those of a racial minority. The New York City government began moving low-income families and welfare recipients into the South Bronx, while at the same time attempting to mask their collective identity from the outside world. Tricia Rose elaborates on this:

For example, urban renewal relocation efforts not only dispersed central-city populations to the suburbs, but they also replaced the commerce of the street with the needs of the metropolitan market. Advertisers geared newspaper articles and television broadcasts toward the purchasing power of suburban buyers, creating a dual “ crisis of representation” in terms of whose lives and images were represented physically in the paper and whose interests got represented in the corridors of power.^{ix}

Relegating the underprivileged to a single geographical location only further solidified the horrible economic conditions, which, as detailed by many other critical authors of Hip Hop, sparked the need for people to find alternative work to survive, illegal activity like drug trafficking and theft.^x In this way, one can make the connection between crime and

Hip Hop, the culture having grown from such “mean streets.” This is exactly what New York was trying to contain. However, Hip Hop’s most pure and visual art forms came to defy that containment and their swift and ruthless removal may very well demonstrate signs of the fear which wrought programs like CoIntelPro, which afflicted numerous other African American movements.

Graffiti, at its very essence, has always been about making one’s voice heard, visually, as if to abruptly and openly claim identity. “Getting up”, the original form of graffiti,^{xi} seems designed specifically for this purpose. Living in a society which tried to contain them, graf writers “got up” to announce their existence in a form of dual defiance. They were boldly claiming an identity the power structure did not want them to have and they did this in a purely illegal way, deliberately raising the ire of those in charge. These identities, scrawled on the sides of subway cars, penetrated into the far reaches of the city, well beyond the boundaries of the dilapidated South Bronx. As the graffiti became more elaborate, public response grew more frequent and was generally negative. Rose states:

Antigraffiti discourse and policy took a dramatic turn in the mid-to late 1970s. no longer merely “an infuriating type of juvenile delinquency,” as it was defined by municipal leaders in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the graffiti problem was reconstructed as a central reason for the decline in quality of life in a fiscally fragile and rusting New York. By the mid 1970s, graffiti emerged as a central example of the extent of urban decay and heightened already existing fears over a loss of control of the urban landscape.^{xii}

It’s this fear of a perceived loss of control which spurred such anti-graffiti solutions as razor wire fences and guard dogs, wall-washing sentences, and “the buff.” The extreme

lengths to which the city was willing to go in order to silence graf writers seems eerily similar to the sheer scope of CoIntel. Though not as extreme,^{xiii} the two efforts seem emphatically linked through a fear or paranoia of losing control. Newspaper articles and television reports continually referred to graffiti writers as criminals and goons only fanning the flames of misinformed public outcry. Yet it did not stop with graffiti, breaking suffered from these policy lashings as well. News reports on breaking seemed terminally caked in negative stigma, Rose explains such incidences:

Much like graffiti, breakdancing developed a contradictory relationship to dominant culture. In January 1980, one of the first published articles on breakdancing covered a group of breakdancers who were detained by police for fighting and causing a disturbance in a Washington Heights area subway station...As unsanctioned public dance and public occupation of space, particularly by black and Puerto Rican youths, breakdancing continued to draw the attention of the police. Over the following five years, articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* continued to cite examples of police arresting breakdancers for “disturbing the peace” and “attracting undesirable crowds” in the malls.^{xiv}

Two *New York Times* articles from 1984 reflect these negative reports. From the June 21st edition an article on the “dangers” of breaking appeared, pushing warnings of injuries ranging from paralysis to death if one was not properly “trained.”^{xv} The September 10th edition featured an article that talked about the city of Chicago attempting to pass legislation to break up breakdancing and other “street performances.”^{xvi} While not inherently negative, the article further points out breaking as a potential problem.

The effects of this fear-induced backlash were two-fold. The vast amount of negative press could only serve to make these two art forms even more pervasive among rebellion-minded teenagers. After the establishment’s onslaught, both graffiti and

breaking grew to national prominence. Those efforts designed to eliminate graffiti often backfired as Austin explains:

In fact, the “cleanup” sentence had served an important unifying function among writers and helped to consolidate the citywide culture of writing by offering a place for writers from one part of the city to meet those working in another.^{xvii}

However, the same popularity that fueled their rise drastically quickened these elements’ downfall. Mainstream, posh, art galleries embraced graffiti, luring graf writers from the streets as evidenced in the film *Wild Style* when Zoro takes a commission of the New York City skyline from a rich socialite.^{xviii} Spraying graffiti on canvas, in a way, castrated graffiti as a counter-cultural art form. It’s based in an illegal act aimed at defiance; to make it legal is to rob it of its heart and soul. Graffiti would eventually come to disappear from mainstream cultural radar. Similarly, breaking suffered at the hands of increased popularity. Katrina Hazzard-Donald states:

Breaking’s introduction to the general public by the mass media in April 1981 surely marked the beginning of its decline as a functional apparatus for competitive challenge among rival groups or individuals. Breakdancers began rehearsing in order to be discovered and appear in movies or for competitive street exhibition rather than practicing to compete with a rival. Far more acrobatic than either preceding or subsequent hip hop dance forms, without competition breaking loses its thrust, its *raison d’etre*. Movement in the mainstream negated its status as countercultural by redefining it from a subcultural form to one widely accepted and imitated, a move that inadvertently linked breakers with the society that had previously excluded them.^{xix}

Ultimately both forms can now only be found at their places of origin, the subways of New York, the streets of Philadelphia, the overpasses of New Jersey, or at a Hip Hop show by the likes of KRS-One and Public Enemy.

What mainstream culture now sees as Hip Hop is defined solely in terms of rapping,^{xx} only a single cog in the cultural machine of Hip Hop and even that cog is suffering at the hands of its own mega-popularity.^{xxi} The disappearance of graffiti and breaking from mainstream culture's view of Hip Hop may be somewhat crippling, no longer visually backed by Hip Hop's purest art forms, rapping can be seen as being left to drift on a sea of commercial corruption. Other African American cultural movements maintained their art. The Harlem Renaissance was based almost entirely on creative expression in the form of essays, poetry, paintings, etc., and its political and social points were clear. Can Hip Hop say the same? Scantly three decades into its existence, Hip Hop has outlasted all other black cultural movements, but where is it going? The mainstream deaths of graffiti and breaking may hold the answer.^{xxii}

Notes

- ⁱ In this essay Hip Hop refers to the culture, the four elements (rapping, dee-jaying, graffiti, and breaking).
- ⁱⁱ Hip Hop culture is only now reaching the three decade mark, so it is still relatively young
- ⁱⁱⁱ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 22.
- ^{iv} Most would agree that the Civil Rights movement did yield integration and some racial equality, it was not completely successful and actual equality has still not been entirely reached.
- ^v You can still find the Black Panther manifesto or their 10-point platform at www.blackpanther.org, the group's official website.
- ^{vi} Jessica Christina Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party." *The Journal of Negro History*. Summer 2000 v85 i3, 165.
- ^{vii} Jessica Christina Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party." *The Journal of Negro History*. Summer 2000 v85 i3, 167.
- ^{viii} Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), 33.
- ^{ix} Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 29.
- ^x This is a fact laid out by other authors like Kitwana, Rose, and Joe Austin, who actually goes into some detail in *Taking the Train*, pg. 180.
- ^{xi} A detailed history of the evolution of graffiti is provided by Joe Austin's *Taking the Train* starting on pg. 38.
- ^{xii} Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 44.
- ^{xiii} NYC officials were not attempting to set up any graffiti writers for death as the FBI did in the Black Panther's case.
- ^{xiv} Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 50.
- ^{xv} "Breakdancing Fad Held to Risk Serious Injury." *The New York Times*. June 21, 1984. v 133 p A16 col 6.
- ^{xvi} Steven Greenhouse, "Chicago Trying to Restrict Street Performers." *The New York Times*. September 10, 1984. v 133 p A19 col 4.
- ^{xvii} Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 99. These meetings at the washing sentences also led not only to fresh writing surfaces, but also newly planned bombing raids among the new acquaintances. This is given through interviews from page 99 of Austin.
- ^{xviii} *Wild Style*. Dir. Charlie Ahearn. Perf. Patti Astor, "Lee" Georges Quinones. 1983.
- ^{xix} Katrina Hazzard-Donald, "Dance in hip hop Culture." *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. William Eric Perkins. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press) 227.
- ^{xx} Now the most pervasive element of Hip Hop is rapping (emceeing) and maybe the comeback of dee-jaying just within the past five years.
- ^{xxi} It can certainly be argued that rapping's rampant commercialization has had a long-term affect on it's potential as a cultural device. Nelson George states on pg. 20 of *Hip Hop America* that the three originators of Hip Hop were never in it for the money and they have received no royalties over the years for their innovations and creations. The monetary issue seems to be the true perpetrator behind rap's lack of political and social-minded focus.
- ^{xxii} Without the pure art forms to work beside it out in the open, rapping has become little more than another hot type of music to outsiders. People who missed the original Hip Hop boom in the late seventies and early eighties are missing out on some very important parts of the culture, those which may help them to better understand Hip Hop as a movement rather than simply a musical genre. To see the Douala mural, I had to see pictures as I've never been to the Bronx. Rooted in place, the pure Hip Hop art forms are only alive for the people immersed in the culture, but shouldn't they be alive for everyone? If rap continues to slide into a pit of commercial hell, it may very well come to outlive its mainstream usefulness, much like graffiti and breaking, then where will Hip Hop culture be?