

Does Hip-Hop Have To Be So Exclusive: Race, Class and Gender Issues in Hip-Hop

Jamie Dyke

[Jdyke@gmu.edu]

New Century College

Currently, one of the most popular forms of music in America is hip-hopⁱ. For a form of music born in the downtrodden neighborhoods of the South Bronx, New York City, rap has come a long way. People from the poorest communities to the richest enjoy listening to the fantastic beats and catchy lyrics of rap. Rap can be heard virtually everywhere from the shortest commercials to the most lucrative Hollywood movies. Some disagree with the commercial turn rap has taken within the last decade. Today, rap reaches many more people than when it first showed up in the mid 1970's. Even so, those both inside and outside of the industry constantly view rap as black music. Tricia Rose, an assistant professor of history and African studies at New York University defines rap as a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margin of urban America. Bakari Kitwana, an author on rap music and black culture, defines the hip-hop generation as any black person born between 1965 and 1984. These thoughts exclude the many non-black people who listen to the genre. Rap may have begun black and poor, but now it definitely should see no color or class.

Not Just Black and White: Race Issues in Rap

As mentioned before, rap began in the South Bronx of New York City. The conditions surrounding the originators of the genre were bleak and dismal. While the area was poor and mostly black, was it only blacks that helped in the creation of hip-hop? Was it only blacks who spray painted graffiti on subway cars or who break danced to the music of early deejays? Was it only blacks that enjoyed the music, not only in its very early stages, but also beyond? According to Nelson George, a black music critic, author, screenplay producer, writer and hip-hop enthusiast, the answer to all of these questions is no. The thought that hip-hop is solely for blacks by blacks is a myth with no evidence to support itⁱⁱ. Many of the original breakers, or b-boys, were Latino, and break dancing is seen as an integral part in the spawning of rap music.

Also according to George, who has extensive experience with the hip-hop industry, the early executive supporters of rap were white, "The truth is, during 1981-1985, hip hop's developmental period, African-American executives at black music departments and at black urban radio were not supportive...[Kurtis

Blow] was signed by a white English A&R executive."ⁱⁱⁱ

Not only were Latinos involved in break dancing, they were also involved in rapping and graffiti when hip-hop first started, especially Puerto Ricans.^{iv} As a matter of fact, many of the key early graffiti writers were Puerto Rican and white.^v There was a mixture of races living within the South Bronx at the time of hip-hop's emergence. Rap, graffiti and breaking were ways for youth of the community to get their voices and feelings heard and also a way to relate to those around them going through the same daily troubles. Color was not the issue, prevailing in spite of oppression was.

If blacks, whites, and Latinos all had a hand in the creation of hip-hop, why then does Rose claim that rap is a black cultural expression^{vi} or Kitwana imply that one must be black to be part of the hip-hop generation?^{vii} According to Andrew Ryan, a professor of hip-hop culture at George Mason University, rap music speaks to a certain class of people, those that live in urban areas, and because statistics show that urban areas are populated mostly by blacks, rap music is therefore supposed to be for blacks. Does this mean then that non-blacks living in urban areas can't understand fully what it means to live urban life or that all marketable rap has to be about living in urban areas?

In his book *The Hip Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana writes that most black Americans born between 1965 and 1984 would be

able to tell you exactly where they were when they heard of the death of rapper Tupac Shakur.^{viii} He goes on to liken the rapper's death to that of Martin Luther King, Jr. or President John F. Kennedy. Kitwana believes that being born between those years and being black automatically includes one into the hip-hop culture. Where is the room for individual differences in that? To say that every black American person born between 1965 and 1984 is a member of the hip-hop generation is a huge stereotype. Kitwana is overlooking every other aspect of where each black American may come from. It is possible that there is a subset within the larger group of young black Americans that represents hip-hop culture, but to say that all young black American adults do is highly presumptuous and exclusionary, especially since there has never been a time when the consumers of rap music were solely black.^{ix} Without the support rap had from whites, on the production side and the consumer side, the thought that rap was just a fad might have been correct. An interesting point made by NyceStylez in an article printed in "Da Killa B's Hip Hop Newsletter" #6^x is that maybe hip-hop is its own culture; maybe because the very beginning consisted of a mix of cultures and because so many people continue to enjoy it, maybe there is no color at all to hip-hop. Maybe hip-hop is a subset of American culture, as opposed to a subset of black culture, since it envelops so many Americans of many different races.

In an article written by Dave Cook, also known as Davey D., a San Francisco radio personality, he addresses the thought of rap being directly related to African culture.^{xi} Cook writes about how in African culture, stories were spread by word of mouth. He also writes about the griots, or members of a tribe who knew the history of the tribe's members and stories. Using this information, he links American rapping to African traditions of word of mouth and says rap has its roots in African culture. While there is an African oral tradition, the tradition is not exclusively African. Many stories and traditions from all over the world have been kept alive by word of mouth. It is human to communicate and create language for that reason. For instance, during the Holocaust of World War II, one of the things that kept the spirits of the Jews alive in the concentration camps was telling stories of their former lives and lives they wished to return to.^{xii} In the ghettos, there were certain people in charge of visually and artistically chronicling the horrifying state of real ghettos, much like the graffiti artists of the South Bronx. Histories were made anyway possible from writing on walls to smuggling writing utensils to word of mouth. Oral tradition is not strictly African.

Another, more broad example of the word of mouth tradition is fairy tales. Fairy tales have been told all over the world and were passed down orally until someone finally began writing them down, that is what accounts for many different versions of the same story.^{xiii} The

whole reason humans are built for acquiring language is to communicate with others, which would facilitate the passing of stories, traditions, and histories orally in every culture imaginable. Not taking away from the African oral tradition, but it is not the only one and the plethora of people who practice oral traditions cannot be overlooked.

Anthems of Ghetto Life: Can Rap Cross Class Lines?

Rap's place of birth was the lower class South Bronx. Many businesses were leaving the area in the mid-seventies looking for more money in the suburbs, which lead to suburban flight. The government tried to get all welfare recipients to live in the South Bronx as a way to have them all in one place, out of everyone else's way. The Cross-Bronx Expressway tore right through the Bronx, creating a physical separation between the South Bronx and the higher classed North Bronx. Because landlords weren't making any money due to caps on rent rates, they were demolishing buildings and heading out. All these aspects added together equaled the perfect setting for a creative expression of those left behind- rap, graffiti and break dancing.^{xiv}

Today, more than twenty years later, does rap still have to be the voice of the lower class or can it evolve along with everything else? Ever since rap went mainstream with the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight", there have been a string of

hip-hop hits that range in topic from social messages to liking women with "big butts". They mostly have to do with things that people of any class can relate to, for instance, Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince's 1988 hit "Parents Just Don't Understand" or Tone Loc's 1989 hit "Wild Thing."^{xv}

With the advent of gangsta rap in the late eighties, "ghetto life" became glorified and profited on. Gangsta rap is supposed to give the audience a glimpse into the life of the criminal minded, also the title of one of the first gangsta rap records released in 1987 by Boogie Down Productions, with KRS-One rapping the lyrics.^{xvi}

When Ice Cube, or O'Shea Jackson, came out with "It Was A Good Day", released by Priority Records, Inc. in 1994 he let America into the experiences of one black man living in an urban setting. While the lyrics of the song consisted of Cube using "I", who really knows if the lyrics were an exact replica of a day in *his* life or if they were just a story of what might happen, really, to anyone. While there might be some innuendos that people might not get, that does not mean that all rap is exclusive. Each song is different and to say that rap is the voice of urban lower class blacks is to, once again, forget the individuals, not only those listening to the music but also the individuals putting the songs out. Every single rap lyric does not have to be taken so literally, sometimes it is just entertainment.

It's a difficult task to separate the arguments concerning class and race

within hip-hop. So many seem to use black and urban interchangeably, which is saddening, or think that rap has to be about lower class life. Why wouldn't there be a market for a middle class rapper with lyrics about his or her life when there is a huge market for pop music, which is about just that? The same consumers who are buying the mainstream pop music are also buying the mainstream rap music. Whether the audience is black or not, lower class or not, there is definitely the market for rap about middle class life, or anything other than so-called "ghetto life."

Of course each class has people who represent them best and advocate the loudest, but this does not mean that what has worked for one group of people cannot work for another. Everything has a starting point and either grows from there or disappears, such as with hip-hop. For instance, the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's worked when it came to getting equal rights for blacks in America. Following this was the women's rights and gay pride movements. In these instances, what worked for one minority group worked for others as well.

So, while rap may have started in a lower class area as the voice of an ignored group of people, it does not have to stay there. Hip-hop has the right to grow, as does everything else, into something that can positively affect people in all areas of life.

“No Disrespect”: Gender Issues in Hip-Hop

In rap, as in almost everything else in our culture, women are objectified. In advertising, the female body is broken down into parts and objectified to sell products, for instance in a commercial, one might only see the legs of a woman, the belly of a woman, the hands of a woman, and on and on. Women of every race and age are constantly being told that we can and should use products to improve our physical appearance, scent and even the silkiness of our skin. The message sent to women in this country is that we can always be better than what we are, never that we're fine the way we are. Hip-hop is no different.

Found in Kitwana's book *The Hip Hop Generation* is a quote taken from an interview of Tupac Shakur for *Vibe* magazine. The rapper was talking about incidents that happened on the night of November 18, 1993 when he and two members of his entourage allegedly sexually assaulted a young black female. Shakur said his friends “were looking at her like a chicken, like she’s, like, food.”^{xvii} This coming from the mouth of not only one of hip-hop’s biggest icons, but also the same artist who came out with a song geared towards women entitled “Keep Ya Head UP”^{xviii} only nine months earlier. On this track, Shakur asked black men why they mistreat black women and preached how black men should “heal our

women, be real to our women”. One has to ask, was Shakur “being real”?

Also from this interview, Shakur stated why he did not do anything to stop his friends from assaulting the young woman:

“If she would have said anything, I would have said ‘Hold on. Let me finish.’ But I can’t say nothing cause she’s not saying nothing...How do I look saying ‘hold on?’ That would be like I’m making her my girl.” According to Shakur, when his friends began the assault, he left the room.^{xix}

Also disturbing is an account of a Redman concert attended by Dave Cook. He wrote about how disturbing it was to see the way young black males were treating young black females. According to Cook, while he was talking to two young women the women were constantly grazed, touched, approached, and disrespected.^{xx} Cook goes on to mention incidents where young women he knows have been assaulted or demeaned because they turned down the advances of young black men. I have gone through similar experiences while attending clubs with friends. For example, one time when I turned down a dance with a young man at a Washington, D.C. nightclub, he tried to put a cigarette out on my cheek.

One has to ask why these incidents occur in hip-hop. Why are rappers like Vanilla Ice condemned as not being real but rappers like Shakur are praised for keeping it real even if they don’t? Kitwana writes that, among other things, this is due to the fact that hip-hop generationers are willing to overlook

the dark side of their heroes when it comes to gender issues.^{xxi} He writes that because many young black men and women still hail icons such as Shakur it shows that we think these incidents to be "business as usual". But that does not make it okay. Is racism looked at as just "business as usual" when a white person calls a black person the 'n' word?

This debate cannot be excluded to hip-hop, though. For instance, when former President Bill Clinton came clean about his relations with Monica Lewinsky, it was Lewinsky who was made out to look like the bad person. There have been various cases when women who were raped were then criticized for putting themselves in that situation. Women are constantly told not to do things alone, go places or wear certain types of clothes. Not only is this all ludicrous, it's detrimental to men because it says that men are animals who cannot control themselves and therefore the public should expect them to act like untamed beasts. I for one know plenty of young men who resent this stigma.

Kitwana also states that black male group loyalty is extremely important to young black males. He writes about how many black churches supported Mike Tyson when he was charged with sexual assault against Desiree Washington in July 1991:

"As the charges against Tyson unfolded and the case played itself out, many Black male church leaders openly defended Tyson, conducting their own form of damage control and spinning the case as a racist

attempt by the system to destroy another prominent Black man."^{xxii}

In other words, no matter what a young black man has done, he should expect to be supported by other black men, even if race really has nothing to do with it, or at least that's the perception. What message does this give to young black men? Does it say that they don't have to have morals or respect because no matter what they do, they'll be supported?

When it comes to male versus female rap artists, there is also a parallel with the bigger culture. The same way that American history overlooks the females involved so does hip-hop. Women have been involved in hip-hop since the beginning, writing graffiti and break dancing along with the men, yet those that are looked at as icons of rap music are consistently male. In Rose's *Black Noise*, she recalls a ten-year anniversary tribute to rap written by Nelson George and how he wrote about rap's growth from 1979-1989. In this tribute, George mentions major shifts in rap, artists, and producers but does not once mention a female rapper.^{xxiii} It is also interesting that George chose Mike Tyson as the figure whom best embodies hip-hop.^{xxiv} That should make us all think twice about what hip-hop is supposed to embody.

When watching P. Diddy try to create a new music group on MTV's *Making the Band*^{xxv} I was appalled by something that P. Diddy said. A young, black woman, who was slightly overweight, was trying out for the band. When P. Diddy was

discussing her with his entourage, he mentioned that he thought she was very talented but needed to lose weight if she was to make it in the business. I wonder if anyone told Biggie, Fat Joe, Big Pun, or Heavy D. to lose weight. As a matter of fact, all these men, regardless of their weight, can be seen cavorting with beautiful, scantily clad young women in their videos. This is reminiscent of the point that women are constantly being told how to improve. (I though Missy Elliot was fine the way she was, before she lost so much weight that she now looks sick.)

When it comes down to it, young black men, or any man at that, who demean women in order to appear more masculine are actually appearing less and less secure in their manhood.

What Does It All Mean?

Overall, these issues not only exist within hip-hop but also within America. When are we supposed to draw a line and say that race, class and gender shouldn't matter? As long as people look at others as members as a group and not individuals, there will be these problems. Until someone can be allowed to like what he or she wants to like because they like it and not because of the color of their skin, class or gender then these debates will continue. When men realize that they want the same things women do, the ability for women to be with men and not be afraid, having shared responsibilities, feeling safe, and showing respect, then men will

realize that feminist issues are really adult issues.

Maybe this is an idealistic attitude, but it is better to spread these thoughts and hope people realize their pettiness and hypocrisy than to sit back and watch our mistakes being made all over again.

Author's Biography

I, Jamie Dyke, am a senior psychology major at George Mason University who will graduate in December 2002. I chose this topic to write on because I am saddened at how big a role color, class, and gender play within hip-hop. I would like to see people appreciated for who they are, not what they are. I feel that even with all the advances made in America when it comes to physical equality, we are really not much farther than from where we started mentally.

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- ⁱ Within this paper, hip-hop refers to lyrics rapped over any number of beats, a form of music.
- ⁱⁱ George, Nelson. *Hip Hop America*. Penguin Books, 1999. Pg. 57.
- ⁱⁱⁱ George, pg. 59.
- ^{iv} Flores, Juan. "Puerto Rocks: New York Ricans Stake Their Claim". *Droppin' Science*. Perkins, William Eric [Ed.]. Temple University Press, 1996. Chapter 4.
- ^v George, pg. 11
- ^{vi} Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise*. Wesleyan University Press, 1994. Pg. 2.
- ^{vii} Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip Hop Generation*. Basic Civitas Books, 2002. Pg. 3.
- ^{viii} Kitwana, pp. 3-4.
- ^{ix} George, pg. 60.
- ^x NyceStylez. "Black Culture and Hip-Hop: One and the Same?" *Da Killa Bs Hip Hop Newsletter* #6. Accessed: 29 November 2002. DaveyD.com
- ^{xi} Cook, Dave. "Is Hip Hop Culture Black Culture?" 1996. Accessed 29 November 2002. DaveyD.com
- ^{xii} Berenbaum, Michael. *The World Must Know*. Little, Brown and Company, 1993.
- ^{xiii} Cashdan, Sheldon. *The Witch Must Die: The Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales*. Basic Books, 1999.
- ^{xiv} Rose, pp. 31-33.
- ^{xv} George, pp. 60-64.
- ^{xvi} Kelley, Robin. "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles". *Droppin' Science*. Chapter 5.
- ^{xvii} Kitwana, pg. 103.
- ^{xviii} Tupac Shakur, "Keep Ya Head Up" *Strictly For My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (Atlantic, 1993).
- ^{xix} Kitwana, pg. 99.
- ^{xx} Cook, Dave. "How Do We Treat Our Women Within Hip Hop?" Accessed 29 November 2002. DaveyD.com
- ^{xxi} Kitwana, pg. 105
- ^{xxii} Kitwana, pg. 101.
- ^{xxiii} Rose, pg. 152.
- ^{xxiv} George, pg. 53.