

Socioeconomic Woes That Created Hip Hop

Crystal Carte

Ryan: NCLC 275

September 30, 2002

The evaluation of the social and economic effects felt throughout Hip Hop culture's generation has been influenced by a number of different outside forces. As a result of such, a sort of "black sheep" attitude developed within urban Americas Black youth. Amongst these include the decisions made by officials both locally, nationwide, and eventually global. Before discussing these issues any further it may be serve the reader beneficial to know the definition of Hip Hop culture.

The Hip Hop culture has its own generation, which includes those Blacks that have been born between the 1964 and 1984.ⁱ This generation has grown into a culture which is multifaceted being defined by the art form or movement made up of emceeing/djing, graffiti and breakdancing. Heavily used in this culture is music, namely rap or hip-hop. Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of Urban America. Rap may also be defined as a musical style in which it is mono-toned, usually quasi-poetic or poetic narrative is delivered in a highly systemized fashion. All of this creates hip hop, which is a feeling, an awareness, and state of mind that should not be taken for literality or face value.ⁱⁱ

Throughout the past few decades, upon close examination, one can see from "black rates of unemployment and unequal pay..... that Blacks have been left out of America's thriving economy."ⁱⁱⁱ Two of the distinguishing characteristics Kitwana defines also serve urban youth as a double edged sword, ensuring their downfall. They conclude that most are low-skilled workers and most often are concentrated in urban communities with low job growth.^{iv} Several factors have caused this economic dilemma.

As factory jobs declined in the late 1960's and 1970's, because of suburban flight, young low-skilled black laborers secured jobs in government positions. This was also a result of new policy initiatives reverberation of the civil rights movement. However, even though there were jobs for such laborers within New York's urban areas, eight factors played into the demise of the Black urban youth. Due to the suburban flight the issue of institutional verses physical ghetto was raised. At least in an institutional ghetto money is still spent within the community, whether it be stores or otherwise. Now with the physical ghetto, literally nothing was available. One would have to go outside of the community to get essential things such as food.^v The cause of the flight is also influenced by Moses' plans for the Cross Bronx Expressway.^{vi}

Rent control served to be detrimental to poverty stricken families. Rather than securing a place to reside, they began to vacate. Rent control allowed the rich to live lavish in Manhattan and the upper West Side, whereas those in the South Bronx were doomed. Because the rent was set so low, the landlords could not make ends meet and allowed the buildings to fall into extreme disrepair. Eventually the slumlords and landlords realized that insurance money was better than the measly hundred dollars or so they got every month. The end result would be a landscape of burned down buildings and ruins being the everyday sights for youth growing up in the 70's and 80's. WildStyle graphically depicts this^{vii}, but later this landscape became the scene for movies such as *Fort Apache*^{viii}. As an end result those who had money left and those who could not afford to flee were forced to stay.^{ix}

Next was the culmination of Co-Op City, the largest apartment complex in the world. Those who could flee moved up to the North Bronx. Also influencing decisions to move, and becoming a major factor in relocation, the government supplemented money. That is they paid people to move

from the North Bronx to the South Bronx. The goal of the officials is obvious they wanted to concentrate the poor and poverty stricken in the South Bronx, offering only \$1000 to \$3500 per household.^x This resulted further in the relocation of the welfare recipients to the South Bronx. Further enhancing the physical ghetto. All of the money was leaving and all of the poor were coming. Hence what better for the economy than Reaganomics?

So with all of these factors coming into play and the advancing of technology in the late 70's and early 80's what was an urban youth to do?^{xi} Even the public policies that were created to curb unemployment were abandoned.^{xii} This also includes globalization, such as NAFTA, which began to widen the gap between "the haves and the have nots." There are a few options for employment, but they all seem to have one thing in common. Whether you are working in the factories or abroad with the military, the underground economy is what keeps one afloat. "Given the field of options for most unskilled hip-hop generation workers, the army is the best show in town."^{xiii} However with this being said the "Army estimates that there is less than 1 percent of its soldiers join drug-selling gangs,"^{xiv} this emphasizes the dire employment situation for both civilian and military persons in this Hip Hop generation.

Being bombarded by so many factors, it is obvious that the "black sheep" mentality dominates the youth of the culture. What exactly happens when the government and the hegemony of white upper class society have placed the "black sheep" in a central location? They begin to take on the characteristics of a community with culture specificity. To begin such a theory, think of an emcee, DJ or rapper as an urban griot. The Griot is a story teller who followed the Kings in Africa in order to keep their stories alive after death.^{xv} By the silencing of the youth at this time, moving them to urban ruins, their lacking the skills to excel within the

economic structure—someone needed to be their voice—to let them know that someone did understand their plight.

During the 70's the South Bronx, amongst other ghettos in New York, began to lose federal funding for social services resulting in open-air community centers. Then one is confronted with President Ford's veto to requests to prevent New York from declaring bankruptcy in 1975.^{xvi} Now New York, namely those in the South Bronx and other poverty stricken areas, became a national symbol of devastation. A reverberation of this is seen in the public policies towards drug use and sales. The difference in penalties for powder verses rock cocaine was geared towards Black urban males verses White suburban males/females. This was largely influenced as well by the media representation, because one can film anywhere in the South Bronx and see a drug deal, but one cannot go into the country club bathrooms and see what is going on.

So why face reality? Now youth in the South Bronx began to forge ahead creating local identities. This can be seen in the roots which hip hop is specific to the local experience, and one's attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family.^{xvii} Hence the formation of crews was specific to the culture because of the support and insulation it provided as the basis for a new social movement.^{xviii} Not only did crews form but many of the early artists' within hip hop had become educated only to find their professions obsolete. Hence they turned to their communities for support.

The characteristics of Hip Hop culture include graffiti, emceeing/djing and breakdancing. Each of these began to manifest themselves with significant meaning. The youth began to express themselves through graffiti art. Because of limited access to supplies and space, they used the urban transit as their canvas. The budget cuts taking place in

school music programs drastically reduced access to traditional forms of instrumentation and composition, thus youth began to rely on recorded sound. Lastly, breakdancers used their bodies to mimic “transformers” and other futuristic robots in symbolic battle. Interestingly enough the styles were encouraged and “sustained by cross-fertilization between rapping, breakdancing, and graffiti writing.”^{xix} As Arthur Jafa points out breaking, graffiti and rapping all center around three concepts: flow, layering and ruptures in line.

This is where America has taken a turn for the worst. Now that popular culture has embraced this Black rooted culture known as Hip Hop, what is left? Fab Five Freddy^{xx} says, “What’s at stake is honor and position on the street. That’s what makes it so important, that’s what makes it feel so good—that pressure on you to be the best. To develop a style that nobody can deal with.”^{xxi} Today the rap industry has been taken hold of and raped by those in power. Whether *Sprite*, or maybe MTV, or any of the record labels today--it is commercialized. It is no longer something that the people have taken and internalize because of the *meaning*. *There is no meaning today*, within the popular songs.^{xxii} In order to find meaning you would have to listen to the Roots, or other older rooted hip-hop artists. No one has skills from this new generation of Hip Pop.^{xxiii}

However the only benefit that can be seen from this embracing of Hip Hop culture, is the African-Americanization of contemporary commercial culture.^{xxiv} “The irony in our present moment is that just as young black men are murdered, maimed and imprisoned in record numbers, their styles have become disproportionately influential in shaping popular culture.”^{xxv} Thus the fascination that we have had throughout the century with the African mystique has been satiated so the only thing left to do is exploit something that was once pure and good for inner-city youth as an outlet--a way for them to relate and feel good about

themselves. I feel that if the outside “powers that be” had not isolated the Hip Hop generation in the South Bronx it would not have flourished as it did within the city, then the nation and globally today.

ⁱ Kitwana, B. (2002). *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Basic Books: New York; p. 29.

ⁱⁱ This definition has been created out of my notes taken on 09-16-02. They have been slightly modified to accommodate my theories, however now I have presented a clear and concise definition of everything that Hip Hop, hip-hop, hip hop covers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kitwana, B. (2002). *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Basic Books: New York; page 26.

^{iv} Kitwana, B. (2002). *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Basic Books: New York; p. 27.

^v Taken from notes on 09-23-02.

^{vi} Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England: Hanover; p. 31-34.

^{vii} *WildStyle*, produced in the late seventies, very low budget film. Tells the story of the changing South Bronx during the time when no one wanted to deal with urban youth.

^{viii} *Fort Apache* was a movie in which the S Bronx was the last stop before hell, which was put out in the mid-eighties.

^{ix} Taken from notes on 09-23-02

^x Taken from notes on 09-23-02.

^{xi} Not to mention the budget cuts, which always seem to adversely affect the children in school.

^{xii} Kitwana, B. (2002). *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Basic Books: New York; p. 29.

^{xiii} Kitwana, B. (2002). *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Basic Books: New York; p.32

^{xiv} Kitwana, B. (2002). *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Basic Books: New York; p. 32

^{xv} Notes 09-23-02

^{xvi} Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England: Hanover; p. 28

^{xvii} Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England: Hanover; p. 34

^{xviii} Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England: Hanover; p. 34

^{xix} Quote from Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England: Hanover; p. 35; everything summarized out of pp. 34-35.

^{xx} An early rapper and graffiti artist.

^{xxi} Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England: Hanover; p.38.

^{xxii} Like Professor Ryan pointed out in class, how can we listen to music talking about bling-bling when we are in a recession? It is all commercialized honky. It makes no sense.

^{xxiii} Hip Pop coined by fellow classmate Phil. Refers to the “bling-bling” rappers and all the other faux emcees out today.

^{xxiv} Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England: Hanover; p. 40

^{xxv} Kitwana, B. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. Basic Books: New York; p. 10.