Imprisoned Realities

Jean Choi

You can check my track record, I'm highly respected
I'ma gangsta in the game, go ask Lil' Wayne
Ask Judge Johnson, how many times he saw my face
For, "pistol here, pistol there," "violation here, violation here"
Betta ask Rank, I ran the jail when I was there
I held it down, where-ever I go

--B.G. in T.I.'s song, "I'm Straight"

Gangsta rap began its ascent in the commercial mainstream in the 1980s. Situated in the backdrop of the West Coast and its notorious gang wars, it became a point of monetary exploitation and misinterpretation. Consequences of institutional racism such as poverty, crimes, and incarceration, became, through the lens of commodification, essential elements of the "hood." These unexplained stereotypes sold bold, exciting and dangerous stories that were appealing to the mainstream public that historically has been intrigued by ideas of the exotic "other" (Hall 24) and hypermasculine characteristics. Thus, today's hip hop artists seem to gain street credibility and possibly record sales by having, for example, a criminal record. To the voyeur, a criminal record implies rebellion and a tough stamina that is needed to endure the streets. Such portrayals in the media of rappers having gone from prison to riches are marketable yet ignorant because they hardly touch on the deep issues ingrained in our country's extensive incarceration system.

During the approximate 50 years before the 1970s, the incarceration rate in the U.S. had been pretty stable at about 110 state and federal inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents (Blumstein and Beck 17). However, with radical changes in the penal system around the 1970s, the prison complex began to increase rapidly. Incarceration became a crucial strategy for politicians to "control" crime but, moreover, garner support especially from white suburbia through an idea of "tough on crime" to protect the "good" citizens

(Donohue and Siegelman 6) from seemingly encroaching "hoodlums." Thus, from the 1970s until the 1990s there was an annual prison growth rate of about 6.3% (Blumstein 18) so that according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1980 the total number of prisoners was 315,974 (at a rate of 139 prisoners per 100,000 residents) and by 1996 the number escalated to 1,138,984 (423 prisoners per 100,000 residents). Almost a decade later the rise continued steadfast, so at the close of 2005 the prison population was measured at 2,193,798 (491 prisoners per 100,000 residents).

Throughout the growth of the prison system the male and female Black and Latino incarcerated population has always been in the majority despite the fact that their respective races are of the minority among the full U.S. population. In the 2000 U.S. census, 69.1% of the population was calculated to be white, while 12.1% were projected as Black, and 12.5% Latino. Looking only at the male prison system (because the male population dominates the prison population over the equally increasing female and juvenile populations) at the close of 2005, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that there were 3,145 black imprisoned males per 100,000 black residents, 1,244 Latino imprisoned males per 100,000 Latino residents, and 471 white imprisoned males per 100,000 white residents; it is estimated that 28% of Black males will go to jail or prison at some point during their lives.

There is a focus on younger males in the prison system because historically incarceration rates have been known to decrease with age. Black men in the 20s-30s age group have the highest rates of incarceration in relation to other racial groups. In the summer of 2004, when the incarcerated population was around 2.1 million, Black men in that age group represented the majority, numbering at 576,000 (Drug War Facts);

beginning in the 1990s, there have been more Black men between the ages of 20-29 institutionalized in the criminal justice system than in college (Haney and Zimbardo 716). Further examination of a smaller age gap shows that the Bureau of Justice reported from 2004, that Black men between 25-29 years old continued to hold the highest rates. 12.6% of this Black age group was in jail or prison while the numbers were 3.6% for Latino men and 1.7% for white men in the same age bracket. Statistically in all age groups Black men make up the majority. Thus, in the mainstream view the hip hop stereotype that mostly Black men go to jail/prison and live criminal lifestyles seems on the outside to be fitting. But before assuming that every crime committed is individualistic and that our justice system in fact is just, one must look further to discover how in many different ways our society implements tactics to maintain white supremacy.

There are several steps that lead to the imprisonment of people: "commission of crime…arrest, conviction, commitment, and time served in prison, including time served as a result of a parole violation" (Blumstein 26). When changes have occurred in any of these areas, they have led more often to incarceration growth. During the 1970s, "tough-on-crime sentencing" (as in the three strikes rule) increased focus on drug related crimes among other things, causing greater chances of prison sentences—and longer ones at that (Blumstein 54 & Western and Pettit 559). While police effectiveness in solving crimes stayed the same during this time, 40% of prison population growth was from decisions (by judges or sometimes prosecutors) to imprison, and 60% of population rise was from increases in time served for specific crimes (Blumstein 54). In essence it wasn't a rise in crime that caused growing incarceration rates but the choice to imprison and for longer—the U.S. can't be called "safer" only because more people are imprisoned. In fact, though

numbers from the year 1996 confirmed that nationally crime was decreasing in different categories of offense, the number of people in prison continued to rise (Blumstein 55). If one tries to link this decline to increased incarceration, it proves faulty because in the 1970s and late 1980s, the number of those incarcerated grew at the same rate as in the 1990s, but in those specific times the crime rate actually was increasing (Blumstein 56). The one connection then that can be made is that increasingly Blacks and Latinos are targeted and being taken from civil society. How can it be proved though that the penal system targets minorities?

In examining one offense, drug crime, racial prejudice proves to be the prime culprit in incarcerating more minorities versus white people. Between 1980 to 1996, prisoners on drug charges went from constituting the smallest portion of the prison population to the largest (Blumstein 20). In the 1998 federal Household Survery, whites made up the largest group of "illicit drug users," constituting 72% of all users, while Blacks measured at 15%, and Latinos at 10%. However, for the same year, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that Blacks made up 36.8% of those arrested for drug crimes and 58% of those incarcerated for drug felonies. Such a disproportion between actual drug crime rates and actual incarceration promotes the hyperreal image that Blacks commit drug violations the most. This happens essentially because the police choose to enforce their watch most heavily in inner cities. Although in urban areas drug use and sales are more likely to be more out in the open and treatment sources less available than in suburbia, white Americans dominate drug use and most manage to elude arrest (Drug Policy Alliance).

The criminal justice system is also prejudiced against Blacks through its means of sentencing. One prime example is the discrepancy between sentences for crack cocaine and powder cocaine which both have the same chemical reagents. Crack is typically found in communities of color because it is sold in smaller, less expensive quantities than powder cocaine, which is often associated with richer, white communities and Hollywood. But drug laws state that selling five grams of crack begets a mandatory five year minimum federal sentence while selling one hundred times that amount in powder cocaine, 500 grams, will also warrant the same sentence (Drug Policy Alliance). Therefore, it is extremely erroneous to assume that drug-related incarceration accurately reflect criminal activity; drug incarceration practices reflect the prejudice of the system to criminalize people of color.

Another hidden avenue of the prison system that obscures national conceptions of racial equality happens within projections of wage differences. Disparity between white men and men of color oftentimes is represented through wage inequality (Western and Pettit 553). Traditionally, wage differences between the two races were explained by components of institutionalized racism, for example, as caused by lack of quality of education and equal employment opportunities for Blacks (Western and Pettit 554). Thus, after the Civil Rights movement, it seemed fitting that wage inequality would decrease. However, because the U.S. market remained highly unregulated (for example with weak unions in comparison to Europe) and welfare for the unemployed remained minimal compared to funds spent on incarceration (in the early 1990s, the ratio of national funds for unemployment benefits to the prison system were 41:91) changes have been minimal in respect to what the media portrays (Western and Beckett 1031). Moreover, the penal

system exaggerates a decline in wage inequality between Blacks and whites because jobless people are not included in the calculation of average wages. With an increasing population of young, low-skilled Blacks being incarcerated and rendered jobless, two optimistic options are portrayed to the public: increasing unemployment is seemingly lessened because incarcerated men aren't considered "jobless" but merely invisible, and the many men that would have otherwise earned low wages are statistically hidden so that suspected wage inequalities are underestimated (Western & Pettit 555). Futhermore, in the end, incarcerated men who later re-enter civilian life are stigmatized so that finding a job is more difficult. It is ironic how the U.S. uses statistics manipulated by the penal system to paint of picture of growing racial equality when in fact the truth is quite simply the opposite.

Historically, Black Americans have always been oppressed institutionally from the moment they were brought through the Middle Passage to create the foundation of the U.S. economy. Policies on housing, property value, education, and other basic civil rights have systemically been cultivated to stabilize white power. Accordingly, it is no wonder that despite outwards applauding of the Civil Rights movement by the U.S. government, in fact it was a time of trepidation for white power.

In 1967, right before the climate of prison escalation, the government expressed extra concern for "uprisings"/"riots" in the U.S. in response to the Vietnam War. They brought together the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder (the Kerner Commission) and decided that such disorder was caused by white supremacy and its consequences of unemployment and racism (Day and Whitehorn 288). To remedy the situation, the committee decided that more complicated police forces needed to be

employed to stifle the attempts of the oppressed to seek equality, instead of handling the root of the evil that they themselves even acknowledged: racism (Day and Whitehorn 288). In such an environment so adverse to social change, the government implemented the F.B.I.'s Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO).

In the words of the F.B.I.: "the purpose of this new counterintelligence endeavor [code name COINTELPRO] is to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist organizations and groupings and their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters…[because] an effective coalition of black nationalist groups might be the first step toward a real Mau Mau in America" (Day and Whitehorn 286). Though during the 1970s a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence deemed COINTELPRO illegal, COINTELPRO succeeded in initiating 295 operations aimed at "neutralizing" (a war term) Black nationalist movements (Day and Whitehorn 287). They managed to neutralize many groups through violent force, unjust imprisonment, murder, etc. Famous political prisoners include Assata Shakur, Mumia Abu-Jamal (both Black Panthers), and Leonard Peltier (Native Indian activist) among scores of others who have mostly remained in prison wrongfully despite the fact that many have publicly recognized that there are beyond reasonable amounts of doubt that these prisoners were guilty in F.B.I. fabricated crimes. By discouraging Black movements for civil rights (including the Southern Christian Leadership Council which was led by the seemingly government applauded figure, Martin Luther King Jr.) through intimidation, murder, and incarceration, the U.S. continued to preach "all men are created equal," while implementing strategies to prevent the consummation of this ideal.

The U.S. government typically evokes visual images of old white men who don't relate to the youth. Pop culture on the other hand appeals to and is consumed by youth culture. There is a tendency to imagine that pop culture is inherently separate from high cultured, patriarchal structures. It hardly seems logical to imagine the president enjoying gangsta rap the same way in which the typical pop cultured adolescent would. The visual images of commercial hip hop: scantily clad women, baggy jeans, ostentatious jewelry, cars, and aggressive Black rebellion don't seem to cross the same channels as the staunch, business attired white conservatism of the U.S. government. Mainstream hip hop, accordingly, has been snubbed by many politicians and upper class members. However, there is a strong connection between commercial hip hop and the political system that seems to be from the opposite pole.

The incarceration of Black men versus white men happens in different spaces which are "produced and reproduced by statesmen, corporate leaders, architects, planners, and critically each of us…" (Forman 22). The cycle of oppression is calculated from so many different angles by those in power to prevent social change. In one possible example, a young Black male is caught selling drugs. Chances are that he will serve more time in prison than a white male caught selling drugs not because he is more in the wrong but because police are more likely to patrol neighborhoods that are predominantly of color. And that neighborhood, simply because of the racial demographics already plummets in property price, which lowers property taxes, which leads to less public funding for schools. With less sufficient schools, the children are more likely to be at risk for being arrested for crimes than in a predominantly white neighborhood that would be less monitored by police first off, have more money to provide engaging schooling, afterschool programs,

counseling etc. Moreover, when family members are incarcerated, the remaining family members often suffer from the loss of income and familial support. It is a vicious, variable, yet predictable outcome-cycle for families of color. And the government through F.B.I. surveillance has decided that changing such structures would disrupt white supremacy and the America we know today.

Hip hop was created originally in its marginalized space that could afford to critique the system because nobody "high-up" would bother to listen. Today, however, because mainstream hip hop reaches such a vast array of people, including the white youth, hip hop must be shaved down to a size that the government actually can "approve" of. Commercial hip hop has become another obedient puppet of the U.S.; it might illuminate some realities of the marginalized, but in a way that doesn't inspire change, education, or understanding amongst listeners. Rappers like Rick Ross might blatantly create an appeal over drugs (as in his song "Hustlin'") or portray a truthful account of the struggle involved, while others like T.I. might occasionally put drug-dealing in a negative light because he puts out a story which ties it to poverty. However, these stories tend to paint crime and incarceration in individualistic tones, as if poverty could be inherent in Black communities (not planted by higher powers) and committing crimes could be a choice. Without more explanation, without the truth of the matter that the basis of the problem is the U.S. who implements tactics such as the prison complex to hold communities of color down, personal stories of rappers having struggled through the system become stereotypes in which the idea of drama holds the interest of the listener and not the fact that these communities suffer without a choice because of conscious decisions from the government.

Complicated methods of the U.S. to uphold white supremacy becomes masked by

false politics and sadly by commodified hip hop as well. By promoting stereotypes and discouraging real knowledge in lyrics, mainstream rap becomes just another tool of the country to patronize the marginalized. But real hip hop is resilient because by nature it was conceived in a condition of oppression. It is not something that needs police force, violations of human rights, or lies just to get by.

"This is the State -- it is a repressive organization
But the state -- and gee, well, you know,
You've got to have the police, cause…
If there were no police, look at what you'd be doing to
Yourselves!
You'd be killing each other if there were no police!
But the reality is…
The police become necessary in human society
Only at that junction in human society
Where it is split between those who have and those who ain't
Got…"

--Chairman Omali Yeshitela as quoted by Dead Prez in their song "Police State"

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