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Final Paper

Hip Hop Music: The Conflict of the Dollar, Not the Color

Throughout the course of this class, I found myself at times inspired and in awe of the positive elements that hip hop infused into both black and white American culture. All of the elements are channels for self-expression, but MCing gives the artist a voice, a means by which to communicate to the masses, a vivid and precise medium for self-expression. The art of lyrical music has served to convey many messages that the other elements could not, such as autobiography, humor, and politics. At other times, I found myself frustrated with the opposing inner forces of hip hop and the black community that prevented the progress that is spoken of in many rhymes from becoming a reachable reality. In a white-dominated world, the hip hop culture developed as a means to unite and empower the Black-American community, but has confronted internal conflicts due to the stress of repression, resulting in a rift based more upon socio-economical lines than racial ones.

In this paper, I will discuss the stress of being a repressed minority in American society, how the black community is exploited both by itself and by whites, and the dichotomy of anarchy and activism in the black community manifested through hip hop. Finally, I will

examine the emergence of white artists in the black music scene as a sign that the recognition of authenticity is linked more to power than color.

Whites originally came to America as well-funded , well-armed Spaniards who took over and dominated the Native Americans who had been inhabiting the continent. Blacks, in contrast, were bought as slaves from Africa to serve the whites. The Dead Prez confront many of these issues head on in their album *Let's Get Free*. In the song, "Police State," they say that "the world is controlled by the white male," referring to whiteness as equated to power not only in America but in the world. Perhaps there is some truth, as first-world countries such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and France are all predominantly white countries, whereas African nations are among the world's poorest. As the Dead Prez state in their song "They Schools" blacks were considered to be sub-white even after emancipation, when their vote was counted as three-fifths of a white man's vote, "Claimin' Africans were only three-fifths a human being." Needless to say, the struggle for equality continues to the present day beyond legislation down to the streets.

In a capitalist society such as ours, power lies in the economy. According to Norman Kelley, who writes in his article, "The Political Economy of Black Music," blacks are a \$400 million segment of the U. S. economy. However, that money, spent by black consumers, is directed and circulated into the dominant economy, not into the black communities of America, and rap music itself generates \$1 billion. Preceded by soul, gospel, jazz, and reggae, hip hop is not the first black music to be popularized in America. It is, however, the most political tool, emerging at a time when issues and ideas can be directly asserted. Kelley asks, "Why is it that a people who have invented several genres of music don't have more control over their artistic creations?" The answer is that black artists have been exploited.

The question that must follow, is by who? As Me-shell Ndecello says, in "Dead Nigga Blvd." it was "The black man who helped enslave your ass." This refers to the Africans who sold the slaves to the white Americans 500 years ago, just as it refers to the common practice of black exploitation of black artists today. Kelley, in discussing the bankruptcy of TLC, a trio whose two albums had gone beyond platinum, talks about Pebbitone (the group's management) and La Face (the record company) which are both black-owned firms. He writes ". . . there is a fair amount of collusion between whites and blacks in exploiting black artists, especially those who are unaware about the business aspects of music: contracts, copyright, and music publishing. Motown was known for its below the board practices with some of its artists. Yet these are some of the sort of business practices that have gone on in a field of business and art that blacks have contributed their immense talents to. When the record industry is scrutinized, as the NAACP did roughly ten years ago in its report "The Discordant Sound of Music," it is usually done toward securing cushy management positions for arriviste blacks who are neither concerned about the industry's practices nor about the plight of rank and file black musicians. The exploitation of black artists by black record labels is known in some quarters as "black-on-black crime." Why does this happen? Why do blacks lack respect for their own people?

The black community shows more fragmentation than solidarity, more anarchy than activism when looking at the polarization of sub-cultures, rejection of representation (rather, misrepresentation), and the never-ending struggle for identification. Under the stress of repression, the black community is confused about both the definition and the method of achieving "progress." Is progress becoming educated and moving up the firmly established socio-economic ladder, to be accepted and respected by whites? Or is that just assimilating into

white culture? Is progress the rebellion from established white American culture to the point of independence? Is that possible in a capitalist world controlled by a white economy?

This fundamental disagreement is the basis of much of the conflict that prevents progress from happening. In Norman Kelley's words, "There is a problem with black music: it is created by black people, particularly the rural and urban lower classes, and the black middle class has always disdained those of their own race who are considered too Negroid, too black and too ignorant. Black musical forms have been "the juice" that has driven American musical expressions and whites have grown rich off of it. The problem has been that the black middle class has been too incompetent to champion . . . its own folk culture and develop the geniuses that have produced black music. Instead, black music has never had an enlightened middle class leadership to give it a proper business footing. The contempt for black artists is so palpable that even blacks have resorted to the same kind of rank exploitation that whites engage in." Robin D. G. Kelley says in her article, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics" from Droppin' Science, "because of its power to distinguish the black urban poor from upwardly mobile middle-class blacks, "nigger" made a huge comeback at the height of the Black Power movement." Robert DeCoy's infamous book, The Nigger Bible, published in 1967, he distinguishes "Nigger" from "Negroes" -- the latter a derogatory term for sell-outs. DeCoy defined "Negro" as a "vulgar but accepted description of the Nigrite or Nigger. Referring to an American Nigger of decency and status. A White-Nigger. Or a brainwashed Black who would be Caucasian if possible." Additionally, the word "bourgeois" has experienced a resurgence among black musicians, according to Robin D. G. Kelley. It has become common lingo among hip hop artists to refer to black-owned radio stations and, more generally, middle-class African Americans who exhibit disgust or indifference toward young working-class blacks.

Because of polarization of blacks on the spectrum of socio-economical status -- the middle-class's tendency to be ashamed of the underclass, and attempt to break the stereotypes of blacks in America, the underclass's challenge of the middle-class's authenticity -- the black progressive movement is greatly handicapped. This injury is a result of the stress of repression that occurs to a sub-population amidst a greater society. Blacks, raised under certain stereotypes and stigmas tied to their ethnicity, generally have one of two severe reactions: to deny it, or to defy it. When placed under the pressured of inequity, extreme responses may burst out.

Hip hop created a great deal of unity and hope in the black community when it first emerged, because it was an opportunity for those with no material wealths to express themselves. This expression included political movements ("message rap") and propelled concepts such as "Black Pride," "Brotherhood and Sisterhood" and made it cool to not have anything. It made people comfortable with their social position by giving some sort of glamour and pride to living through hardships. Now with the commodification and mainstream commercialization of hip hop, hip hop culture needs to answer to this, and either reject this aspect of the hip hop industry, or restructure the identity and foundation of hip hop. The black community is divided: some reject prosperous mainstream artists who "sold-out," while others view this prosperity as a sign that hip hop is succeeding in making its mark in the music industry. Meanwhile, major labels respond to a young white audience that purchases 66% of rap music, according to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), as reported by the Daily News. It is not surprising that the majority of hip hop sales go to white youths, and Robin D. G. Kelley notes, "Whereas verbal skills and creativity are the main attraction for the communities that created toasting, for some outsiders -- middle-class white males, for instance -- gangsta rap unintentionally plays the same role as the blaxploitation films of the 1970's or, for that matter, the gangster films of any

generation. It attracts listeners for whom the ghetto is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, and erotic fantasy, or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom... This kind of voyeurism partly explains NWA's (Niggas With Attitude) huge white following." While gangsta rap represents different things to different people, both blacks and whites recognize that it represents rebellion.

It is noteworthy that while socio-economic status conflicts often push their way to the forefront, there are a number of other issues causing turmoil inside the black community, exposed by hip hop. Anarchy comes in all forms. For instance, there is "sisterhood" and the ideal of the strong black woman versus the "bitches and ho's" discussed in gangsta rap, and now even in mainstream hip hop. Ernest Allen Jr. says in "Making the Strong Survive: the Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap," from Droppin' Science, " Misogyny and homophobia, though always present to some degree in African American life, became principal vehicles in the formation of youthful black male identity." With respect to political movements there is peace versus violence, Martin versus Malcolm, brotherhood versus gang wars. There is the indecision of whether education is the road to empowerment, with some advocating education as a means to lift out of the ghetto, versus lines of thought such as the Dead Prez declare in "They Schools." They say, "They schools can't teach us shit / My people need freedom, we tryin to get all we can get / All my high school teachers can suck my dick / Tellin' me white man lies straight bullshit." Not only are there conflicts between those who view themselves as different, but there are conflicts between those who are very similar. For example, the confrontations and highly-publicized animosity between New York rappers Jay-Z and Nas, who are both within the same genre, share the same audience, and are very successful.

More significantly, we have to examine the two most severe types of black-on-black crimes. First, 94% of all African American homicides are committed by other African Americans (according to the Joint Center: Data Bank, "Victimization of African-Americans"). Second, the issue of substance-related deaths, particularly alcohol and crack is the instance of internal conflict within not only the black community, but also the black individual. Kelley and Freeman agree that when the crack economy made its presence felt in inner-city black communities, violence intensified as various gangs and groups of peddlers battled for control over the markets. Yet, in spite of the violence and financial vulnerability that went along with peddling crack, for many black youngsters it was the most viable sector of the economy. Robin D. G. Kelley notes that CPO's album, *To Hell and Back*, wages frontal attacks on all pushers, whom Lil Nation accuses of committing genocide against black people; he advocates a social movement to wipe pushers out. In Ice Cube's album, *Death Certificate*, he calls drug dealers "killers" and insists that they exploit black people "like the caucasians did." But on the same album he has a song called, "A Bird in the Hand," which offers an explanation of why the drug trade is so appealing to inner-city youths. Kelley's analysis of another track from the album, "My Summer Vacation," is that Cube draws a parallel between legitimate corporate struggles for power and the crack economy.

By "reversing" dominant discourses legitimating entrepreneurship, hostile takeovers, and a global corporate culture more concerned with profits than committed to a national community, Cube and other gangsta rappers hold up the illicit economy as a mirror image of American capitalism. Coolio and W.C. of the MAAD Circle insist that the *powerful*, not the *powerless* ghetto dwellers are the real gangsters. In Kelley's interpretation, the *real* ganstas are in the White House. It is not uncommon that rap artists point their fingers at "America" for stealing

land, facilitating the drug trade either through inaction or active participation, and practicing hypocrisy. Satire of the white-dominated American culture is one of the most common political messages in hip hop music. So what is the significance of whiteness in hip hop?

The number of white artists that have been successful in hip hop have been few. They have hurdles, they are faced with a double challenge to authenticate themselves. Vanilla Ice's efforts to authenticate himself were meager to say the least, and his career in hip hop was about as real as he was. The Beastie Boys succeeded in authenticating themselves by presenting themselves as white middle-class suburban rebels, which they genuinely were. They earned a special niche in the hip hop ecosystem, filling a place that had not been filled before. The explosion of an artist like Eminem, however, changed the landscape of hip hop forever. For the first time, a white rapper, under the wing of Dr. Dre, was accepted by both black and white audiences. The controversy of Eminem was much of the force that propelled him to the top, being the white emblem to which white culture could relate, yet still representing the anti-societal, rebellious attitude that characterizes hip hop. Eminem visited the cover of Rolling Stones Magazine twice this year. With the release of his film, 8 mile, Eminem has earned his respect from the masses as "real" and authentic by following the etiquette of hip hop and telling his story of hardship. What makes this effort successful, is that he freely calls himself "white trash" and does not pretend he is black. He is very cognizant of the fact that he is white, very aware of the ways in which he is criticized, and very conscious of the significance of his skin color to his difficult beginnings and his current record sales. He addresses much of this in his song, "White America" wherein he addresses his own popularity with sarcasm, which was banned from MTV due to its extreme political and anti-American message:

"Who woulda thought; standin in this mirror bleachin my hair / with some peroxide, reachin for a t-shirt to wear / that I would catapult to the forefront of rap like this? / How could I predict my words would have an impact like this? / I must've struck a chord with somebody up in the office / Cause Congress keep tellin me, I ain't causin nuthin but problems / And now they're sayin I'm in trouble with the government - I'm lovin it! / I shoveled shit all my life, and now I'm dumpin it on ... Look at my sales / Let's do the math - if I was black, I woulda sold half...When I was underground, no one gave a fuck I was white / No labels wanted to sign me, almost gave up I was like / Fuck it - until I met Dre, the only one to look past / Gave me a chance and I lit a FIRE up under his ass / Helped him get back to the top, every fan black that I got / was probably his in exchange for every white fan that he's got / Like damn; we just swapped - sittin back lookin at shit, wow / I'm like my skin is it startin to work to my benefit now? "

Eminem addresses the reality that there are many poverty-stricken whites in America as well. Regardless of many Eminem's many critics, Eminem's influence and presence in the hip hop world is relatively secured. His existence and success is a sign that the major line of conflict is not drawn by race, but by power and socio-economic origins. Those who are on the disadvantageous end of the spectrum will always be caught in the dichotomy of splintering apart as individuals trying to disassociate themselves from their undesirable roots and banding together to work towards a common cause. This sign combined with the signs of black on black exploitation, and the black community's tendency towards self-destruction through conflict between community fragments strongly supports the idea that it is less about color and more about power.