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PROPHETS OF THE HOOD

Politics

and

Poetics

in

Hip Hop



Bling Bling ... and Going Pop

Consumerism and Co-optation in Hip Hop

When I began to write this book, several friends urged me to do it quickly because in their opinion hip hop was dying. The late 1990s witnessed the success of a plethora of MCS with mediocre skills, rhyming primarily about consumerism or murder with mild, watered-down beats and weak production. And yet hip hop also became the most popular musical form in the United States. Even if one were to be more generous about this newer popular rap music, some of which proves aesthetically pleasing even if it does not seem especially good within the standards of evaluation for hip hop heads, there can be no doubt that it constitutes a more simplistic, less innovative, and softened version of original hip hop, meant to cater to a broader listening population, driven and shaped by markets as described in Mark Anthony Neal's work.¹ Yet this still does not signal the death of hip hop. Rather, I believe that hip hop is in the process of reformulating itself in the face of mainstream co-optation of many of its elements and widespread separation from its ideological and cultural context. Co-optation is designated by a repetition of these softened versions until hip hop becomes defined for many (if not most) by those versions instead of by the underground or by those maintaining underground sensibilities. Those of us who love hip hop fear its disintegration into pop, or that it might be "Elvisized," assimilated and recorded in history as its most watered-down and "acceptable" iterations. In anticipation of that demise, many of us have begun to push it away, to separate out "true" hip hop from "fake" simply on the basis of degree of mainstream popularity. But hip hop cannot be defined by that which fails to achieve commercial success. That seems a counterintuitive argument when speaking about popular music. Even those who stay true to the underground want to become popular. De La Soul rhymes about such aspiration to mass appeal:

Now this goes out to all area cliques
 Centralized to way out in the sticks
 Remember to keep the De La in the mix,
 Just like log cabin syrup my style is game thick ...
 Now this goes out to all area cliques
 From manicured lawns to project bricks
 Remember to keep the native tongues in the mix

In this final chapter, I want to discuss the moral panic within the music, specifically the moral panic created by anxieties about mass production and capitalism and the threat to quality among avid listeners, or hip hop heads. This panic began in part as a coastal anxiety, as a desire for New York to continue to own the music, because the city was constructed as the location where artistry proved more important than the accumulation of wealth. A false construction it was. But more even than that, the panic wanted to assert a kind of progressive politics, and a kind of aesthetic politics too, not unlike the efforts to exert conservative politics through other moral panics the United States has witnessed in recent times. I will argue that while the anxieties about mass production and its threat to quality and the heart of the music are very legitimate, they also prove dangerous for potentially leading to categorizations of hip hop that mimic other divides in American music, and that ultimately do even more to serve the interests of power structures over communities. As David Bry has noted, “New York Hip Hop artists and intelligentsia, ever faithful to the essence of the form—the belief in the purity of hard, non-melodic arrangement and complex, punch-line laden word-play—had developed a level of snobbery about the subject to match that of the black-turtleneck-and-beret-clad film critics congregating at cafes around NYU.”³

This phenomenon lends evidence to yet another strand of the tension between living organic cultural roots and the new and interesting shapes they might take on. The following questions arise: How can the aesthetic requirements of and an allegiance to the hip hop community withstand the necessary aspiration of popular artists to have commercial success and make a name for themselves in music? How are the artists to attain mass appeal without sacrificing their cultural or ideological foundations? Lauryn Hill’s solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, provided enormous hope in that direction. She, at the tender age of twenty-four, was the first woman to win four Grammy awards in one year. In 1999, she graced the covers of countless magazines, including the highbrow *Harper’s Bazaar* and British *GQ*. And she did this while dreadlocked, singing and rapping socially conscious and emotionally provocative lyrics, and visibly active in public service. Her compositions make use of the black English of the Northeast and include references to soul and reggae, as well as to black female heroines. She announced the neo-black pride movement for the hip hop generation both in substance and style. Amid a tide of watered-down, ultramaterialistic hip hop in the public eye, she achieved success as a singer and a masterful MC. As she rhymes: “It’s funny how money change a situation / miscommunication lead to complication / my emancipation don’t fit your equation / I was on the humble you on every station.”⁴ But she wound up being on as many stations as those who sold out for wealth and fame, and she stood as a testimony to the potential for fluid movement in hip hop, even as numerous die-hard fans anticipated the death of hip hop. And yet the same question emerges for Lauryn as for the others: As hip hop progresses fast and furious, with enormously steep ascents for its stars, how will the artists’ skills continue to be cultivated in the way previous generations of African American musicians’ have been, a process fundamental to the development of African American music as the most profound modern musico-cultural influence in the world?

The moral panic does not simply respond to forces from without but also to the sensibilities from within hip hop. The threats to hip hop appear both in the form of the dangers of mass production and co-optation by the mainstream and in that of a vapid consumerism fueling and supporting other consumer markets, themselves fueled by artists and video producers. It is fundamental to discuss both when considering what is happening to hip hop. On one level, the moral panic marks an attempt to excise a difficult part of the hip hop self.

Hip hop is a subculture of American music, of American culture, and of black America. And as much as it resists the philosophical and aesthetic pressures of mainstream America, it finds itself in constant conversation with, response to, and a part of Americana. Television, film, lingo, and fashion that one can consider more generally American appear throughout hip hop. The duo Das EFX, for example, continuously integrated popular cultural influences from white America into its lyrics, as well as ones more specific to black America. In hip hop, the use of television images proves important, as does fashion, and both of them stand as symbols of American consumer culture. The designers and labels that young black urban people have tended to favor since the 1970s have been highbrow or distinctly American ones, such as Polo, Tommy Hilfiger, Fila, or Gloria Vanderbilt. In Grand Puba's words, "Girbauds hangin' baggy, Tommy Hilfiger top gear."⁵ There were also the odes to sneakers, including "My Adidas" by Run-DMC and "Nike" by Heavy D. Run-DMC rhymed, "The Adidas I possess to one man is rare / Myself homeboy got fifty pair / Got blue and black 'cause I likes to chill / and yellow and green when it's time to get ill / Got a pair that I wear when I'm playin' ball / Put the heel inside, make me ten feet tall."⁶ But Heavy D. preferred another brand:

Nikes I sport 'em
Out the store I bought 'em
And on the b-b-b basketball court is where I sport 'em ...
They have red ones, yellow ones, green ones too
White on white, blue on white, just to name a few
My crew's fully equipped from top to bottom
Everything Nike makes Heavy D. and the Boyz got 'em.⁷

The acquisition of these stylish status symbols by rappers who created casual chic was matched by the telling of so-called big lies. In traditional black English, this refers to the telling of good bragging stories. The tales of wealth and riches were imaginative, even as heavy "trunk" jewelry hung around the necks of early MCS. Hip hop heads did not fail to recognize that the flow between high fashion and the hood worked in both directions, and that couture designers began copying their styles. I believe it is safe to say that young black people of the early to mid-1990s were responsible for the success of Tommy Hilfiger's clothing label, which was languishing before black youth took up the red, white, and blue loose-fitting preppy styles. But then a transition occurred, subtle perhaps, but quite real. As hip hop became more successful in the mainstream and the artists began to grow very wealthy, conspicuous consumption took on a new meaning for hip hop artists, so that more

sophisticated styles became popular, along with more expensive designers. In Mase's words, "I went from Helly Hansen to many mansions."⁸

To be sure, the hip hop version of the Horatio Alger story gives evidence to the music's deep Americanism. Yet some tension arises when a neo-double consciousness, built on identifications with poverty and black Otherness, begins to battle with having "made it" in a big way. The "big lies" now no longer stood as such because the prospect of enormous wealth became a distinct possibility for the hip hop artist. Hip hop artists began to acquire some of the high style and expense of 1960s and 1970s R & B and funk performers. Recall Sly Stone's Halston-designed garments. Biggie's celebration of designers falls right into line: "I put hoes in NY onto DKNY / Miami DC prefer Versace / All Philly hoes down wit Moschino / Every cutie with a booty bought a coogi / Now who's the real Dukey? / Meanin' who's really the shit?"⁹ As one critic describes it, "If there is a dominant perception about today's rap superstars among hip-hop's purists, it is that they have squandered the franchise by being obsessed with shaking derrieres, platinum jewelry, fine alcohol, premium weed, pimp culture, gangster rituals, and thug life. Although hip-hop has succeeded far beyond the Bronx of its birth, it has, in the minds of some of its most ardent guardians, lost its soul."¹⁰ Ellis Cashmore even argues that the presence of these elements in hip hop serve white images of black America, racist images that constitute much of the way that what is called black culture enters the mainstream.¹¹ But we cannot fail to acknowledge here that style has always played a large role in black American culture. Even as their white counterpart hippies engaged in anti-aestheticism, black power followers donned stylish fatigues and combat boots, along with neatly tended afros. Each epoch in black music has had distinct style, from jazz to bebop to blues to doo-wop. And style, particularly that acquired at great expense, has always made for an in-your-face challenge to the powers that be. Let us not forget the Louisiana women of color who, forced to cover their hair, responded with gorgeous tignons, or newly emancipated women throughout the South who purchased parasols and ladies' hats, prompting legislation against such "uppityness." Style is a sign of black humanity and pride, as well as a development within black cultural practice. And an element of that style has always been excess. Think about the women on talk shows today with three-inch airbrushed nails and sculptural hair. Or hearken back to the flamboyance of a Jimi Hendrix, a Patti LaBelle and the Blue Belles, or a Little Richard. Such flamboyance might manifest itself in an extremely unusual sartorial style, as in OutKast's Andre 3000's late 1990s costuming in a blond wig and Mad Max clothing. Or it might manifest itself in capitalistic excess à la boxer Jack Johnson, who in the early twentieth century spent enormous amounts of money on cars, clothes, and white women. Puffy's flashy costumes, parties, and odes to material goods are expressions of both sorts of excessiveness. Despite the badass aspect of Jack Johnsonism, the integration of hip hop into the mainstream means that such ideas become virtually indistinguishable from celebrations of the American capitalist practices integral to the economic devastation of black communities and the enormous wealth disparities in US society that disproportionately affect black people.

B.I.G.P.O.P.P.A.

No info for the D.E.A.

Federal agent mad 'cause I'm flagrant
Tap my cell and the phone in the basement
My team supreme stay clean
Triple beam lyrical dream I be that
Cat you see at all events bent
Gats in holsters girls on shoulders
Playboy I told ya.¹²

Consumerism and conspicuous consumption have become fundamental elements in hip hop. But rather than simply critique them as crass materialism, I want to consider the pleasures of shopping and dressing and using consumer goods. Consumerism touches on the pleasure derived from the beauty of things, from the adornment of the self. Hip hop consumerism is in part about the use of luxury to express black style. Gadgets also enhance the public self; they declare an importance in being reached. These ideas are rooted in a long tradition of black sartorial expression, where style proves important, and creativity even more so. Status is attached to the goods, not in mimicry of white privilege, but rather in an effort to recast status. Status linked to the body subverts the image of low status associated with black bodies. To adorn oneself marks one as a subject rather than commodity, yet the sartorial or jewel commodity becomes deeply associated with the wearer. The pervasive classism, including the internalized kind, demonstrated by disparaging references to certain aesthetics, sartorial stylistic excesses, and behaviors as “ghetto” lends testimony to this. The kind of excess celebrated elsewhere in American life is deemed disgraceful when associated with poor black people. Insofar as hip hop embraces ghetto sensibilities and ghetto people, it continues to have an important counter-hegemonic force. Much as the crochet cap-wearing and dreadlocked populist Afrocentrist sensibility operates as an affirmation of the black body, those who celebrate the “around the way” people and styles affirm the cultural spaces of the black poor.

Hip hop's extreme consumerism, and the dominance of hip hop in mainstream music culture, can mark a form of subversion. But at what cost does the celebration of those stick-it-to-you “I'm black, from the hood, *and* I wear Versace” values come? Perhaps the critic should just appreciate the achievements of young black people with global popular culture in their hands and understand that hip hop will never simply embrace one set of progressive politics. Numerous talented artists with progressive values remain local, while the excessive and consumerist ones go global. Even if we recognize that hip hop has the potential to revolutionize, it also has the potential to suffer co-optation. It constitutes a community too flexible and too fluid to imagine that it might have one sort of political or social influence. De La Soul rhymes:

Like the alcohol scenario rap be on the rocks
Authenticities that missin' and fee they paid to join the flock
Of MC these niggas stand lower than these
Dramatized in they eyes as the one to please
When rap kids apply violent pressure

To father, brother, and son for fun say they inflict pain.
R & B niggas lie to mother, sister and daughter to have sex disguised as lovin' in the
rain
Their words are more hollow than October 31st
What's worse, to see the females switch to sexual mentality that doesn't match with
their given anatomy
Man they'd rather be hoes like that male MC
And walk around like they got nuts
Or use their tits and ass as a crutch
Man the underground's about not bein' exposed
So you better take your naked ass and put on some clothes.¹³

The demise of the community here is read through glamorized violence and sexual immorality, both acclaimed in music. Although I hesitate to align myself with the prescriptive morality assigned to female sexuality, I would agree that the trends De La Soul critiques are disappointing, although on some level it is apropos of American culture. Isn't it to be expected that a national culture that reifies mediocrity, sensation, and flashiness over skill and excellence in everything from movies to television to literature and music generally would integrate hip hop on less-than-ideal terms? Heads want hip hop to be more than this, but the music is of this American culture. No one should read my words as an indictment of those hip hop artists who have achieved celebrity, because quite a few of them are good lyricists and DJs. But they do acknowledge that the bar for skill is much lower in the popular recording industry context than in the compositional setting. The door remains open for those who maintain an ethos of staying true to their origins, without that meaning a celebration of hardness or a denial of the transformation undergone. As Lauryn Hill reminds us:

Now I'ma get mozzarella like a Rockefeller
Still be in the Church of Lalibela
Sing hymns a capella
Whether posin' in Maribella couture or collectin' residuals from off *The Score*
Get diplomatic immunity in every ghetto community Had opportunity
Went from hood shock to hood chic
But it ain't what you cop it's what you keep.¹⁴

Here is where the double voice of hip hop becomes not merely important but imperative if it wishes to maintain its constructive uses and possibilities.

Cognizance of the threat of co-optation, matched with continued adherence to its original aesthetics, ethos, and composition, will assure the survival of hip hop despite increasing "acceptability." Black language, style, and dance coming from black communities and traditions continue to manifest themselves in all varieties of hip hop. And the ambivalence of middle America persists as well. As long as young black hip hop artists continue to contest

the boundaries and definitions set forth by race and class, even in politically unhealthy ways, hip hop will never achieve complete acceptance in American society. Counter-hegemonic forces are not always ideologically sound, but they are nonetheless noteworthy. And as long as hip hop remains by and large counter-hegemonic, there is room within the discourse to battle over ideas, values, and beliefs while maintaining an internal integrity and, albeit more fragile the larger it gets, a community.

Nelson George notes that “in its third decade of existence, hip hop’s influence is pervasive. While there are signs of weakness—its overwhelming dependence on major corporations for funding, its occasionally gleeful celebrations of anti-social tendencies—it shows no signs of heading for the respirator any time soon.”¹⁵ George Lipsitz adds that “whatever role they serve in the profit making calculations of the music industry, these expressions also serve as exemplars of post-colonial culture with direct relevance to the rise of new social movements emerging in response to the imperatives of global capital and its attendant austerity and oppression.”¹⁶ While Lipsitz at times seems too optimistic about the subaltern potential or stances that hip hop actually takes, at least with regard to its presence in the United States, he does understand the political significance of the double voice, the signifying that occurs in hip hop with regard to the capitalist production of the music. Lipsitz groups hip hop with postcolonial literature and third world cinema, arguing that all of them “protest against conditions created by the oligopolies who distribute them as commodities for profit. They express painful recognition of cultural displacements, displacements that their very existence accelerates. Yet it is exactly their desire to work through rather than outside of existing structures that defines their utility as a model for contemporary global politics.”¹⁷ I agree with this argument to the extent that at worst, hip hop stars appear to engage in what Robin Kelley has called conservative black nationalisms of the production of black wealth, and at best they demonstrate a powerful articulation of the experience of those socioeconomically and politically alienated.¹⁸

The problem created by mass production and consumerism, both through the lenses of artistic development and community, is that mainstream popularity has led to both a sacrifice of artistry and a limited range of expressions present within the musical community as it is experienced by the majority of hip hop’s audience. Braggadocio in visual materialism has displaced impressive literariness. But such a result could easily be anticipated as soon as hip hop obviously warranted profit. The process of late capitalist consumerism includes the creation of formulaic templates that become subject to mass production. The theories of Jacques Attali appropriately describe this phenomenon.¹⁹ One of the first and most influential hip hop scholars, Tricia Rose, criticized Attali for not having the imaginative capacity to understand how repetition could exist outside of capitalist production and commodification.²⁰ While I agree that on an aesthetic level, hip hop has demonstrated how recorded music, a function of repetition, could in fact display an anticapitalist aesthetic, Attali got it right on a polito-theoretical level: the repetition of mass production, with the exclusion of the local, has had a destructive impact on hip hop. Bell hooks has demonstrated the danger of repetition for black music.

All African-American engagement in the performing arts, whether through the staged

*performance of poetry and plays, or through rap, risks losing its power to disrupt and engage with the specific locations from which it emerges via a process of commodification that requires reproduction in a marketable package. As mass product, live performance can rarely address the local in a meaningful way, because the primacy of addressing the local is sacrificed to the desire to engage a wider audience of paying consumers.*²¹

I would alternatively read Attali with an understanding of his appreciation of the local as having primary significance for hip hop because the recorded music comes alive in local public and private space. It is music to be danced to, smoked to, the music of cars and streets, but most powerfully, I would argue, it is music to be deejayed, thereby reinstating the local relationship between the music and the artist. Attali refers to composition as a stage within the political economy of music that follows capitalist replication and repetition. He uses the term *composition* to refer to the act of putting oneself and one's community back into music locally after it has been mass-produced. He uses the classical black American music, improvisational jazz, as his primary example: "Composition does not prohibit communication. It changes the rules. It makes it a collective creation rather than an exchange of coded messages. To express oneself is to create a code or to plug into a code in the process of being elaborated by the other."²²

This practice of collective, local creation proved central to the foundation of hip hop. In the initial years, when DJs scratched rhythms over vinyl records, and/or repeatedly played the break beats of already recorded songs, and MCS rhymed over them, hip hop artists were transforming mass-produced recorded music into a vehicle for local participation. Fast-forward to the late 1990s: hip hop has become a several-billion-dollar industry; the majority of hip hop records played no longer exist within a "compositional" framework. Nevertheless, an aesthetic has developed embracing that framework. In the midst of reproduction, the primary level of production and composition is brought into the listener's consciousness. Oftentimes, as part of the recorded music, the MC does microphone checks or engages in a conversational introduction, or the music will contain the sounds of a party or street noise. The prevalence of remixed versions of the same songs—using different beats or additional rhymes, sped up, slowed down, or marked by any number of variations—also forms part of the compositional aesthetic. The audience is constantly aware of the song being worked on and put together over and over again. The ideal of being witness, and hence part of the live production of the reproduction, is aesthetically valued. Sadly, on some level, this simply constitutes an insidious form of capitalism's repetition. It may sound as though we, as listeners, are there, forming part of the production, but by and large, we consume studio music. The imperative of local participation in hip hop has diminished as the sounds of the party are sold to far corners of the globe. An independent MC, Fudge, articulates the following critique of the mainstream consumption of hip hop: "At this point in time hip hop is at its most dismal state of existence / At the place they say hip hop lives²³ they play 2cent rap and the priority of hip hop is called underground / but to me it's simply called hip hop because truthfully that's the only hip hop there is / George Bernard Shaw said in his piece 'Man and Superman' / Hell is full of musical amateurs / Yo Fudge, bring 'em to heaven."²⁴

The compositional aesthetic has allowed members of the hip hop nation to lose sight of the

damaging effects of capitalist repetition. However, efforts to maintain live composition continue. The DJ remains an important element of parties in young black communities. Whether he or she is adept at mixing records still matters, even if the DJ is not mixing for MCS to rhyme a live performance. And then small venues continue to exist where noncelebrities rhyme, rap, or recite poetry. Often recordings that emerge from these compositional venues reveal a higher level of sophistication in rhyming and deejaying than the average hip hop album. Moreover, local venues that feature spoken word inflected with hip hop, hip hop theater, dance, and other sorts of local production continue to exist and flourish. Community supports the development of art. Attali acknowledged composition's constant threat of co-optation, and to some extent, the assimilation of hip hop has occurred. However, hip hop heads have been unwilling to relinquish the art form to the bosses of capitalist repetition. In the afterword to the English translation of Attali's work, Susan McClary writes the following about this dynamic, speaking with regard to another music form, punk rock: "Even among the most disenfranchised, the values of capitalism are strong and many groups have become absorbed by the recording industry.... But while there exists a powerful tendency for industry to contain the noise of some of these groups by packaging it, converting it into style commodity, the strength of the movements is manifested by the seeming spontaneous generation of even more local groups."²⁵

That spontaneous generation is the underground in hip hop. Underground artists are those not defined by the co-opting force of mass production, but who see as their primary frame of reference the hip hop community. Primarily, this group consists of artists not signed by major record labels or not receiving much mainstream radio play. A number of artists who have achieved mainstream success still have underground sensibilities about love for the art form and commitment to the hip hop community; they desire material success only while respecting those two principles. On his album *New York Reality Check 101*, constructed as a musical education in "real" hip hop, DJ Premier proclaims, "The underground started hip hop and the underground what's gon' hold the fort down if it ever tried to crumble."²⁶ The underground maintains the compositional space as hip hop becomes increasingly popular with global communities. As rap has become a staple for advertisement, it provides the artistic and cultural foundation for even the most popularized forms of hip hop. Innovations in style, rhyming, mixing, and production all come out of local compositional spaces. The underground remains firmly rooted within a cultural context that includes interaction, live performance, the art of deejaying, clothing, language, and one that rejects (in practice) the preference of capital over community. (I say in practice because one might be ideologically or artistically bent on the acquisition of capital, rhyme about getting paid and buying commodities, but not be willing to "sell out" the community for it.)

Hip hop has ample opportunity to sustain itself in the face of repetition. It is an art form that has always used repetition for the production of the specific. Attali distinguishes composition from repetition by saying that the network in which knowledge is inscribed in composition is "cartography, local knowledge, the insertion of culture into production and general availability of new tools and instruments."²⁷ In repetitions, he says on the other hand, it is genealogy, the study of replication, rather than cartography. In contrast, hip hop engages in the insertion of local knowledge and culture into production and yet also uses replication. It reuses commodities, records on wax, and makes them local and new by putting them into a

musical collage via sampling or riffing. If any art form is able to sustain a compositional framework, it should be hip hop because its very roots lie in the use of commodity to dislocate commodity. The philosophical democracy at the participatory heart of the art form will continue in the underground, in live venues, people rhyiming on the street, in parties, clubs, and dances, in the newer forms of music that constitute variations of hip hop, and even in folks leaning to the side while driving and bopping their heads. What hip hop needs is an appreciation of the local and the popular combined. But the popular space appealed to must remain the space from which hip hop production organically emerged—poor urban black and Latino communities. Places where the arts of dance and deejaying are appreciated, where the underlying aesthetics of black music to which hip hop owes its roots are understood and appreciated. Rather than becoming café music, for hip hop to sustain itself, it must continue to reinvent itself as local music.