

Standing on the Agenda of African Ancestors: Hip-Hop Music's Opposing Revolution

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Abstract

The purpose of this think-piece is to initiate dialogue on how are the hip-hop artists' messages distinguishable from White slave owners. Conscious hip-hop music focuses on the experiences Blacks and Latinos are faced with such as police brutality, poverty, disease, among others. In contrast, much of unconscious hip-hop music focus on the objectification of women, degradation of Black people, celebration of criminality, among others. Such hip-hop is driven to validate preconceptions about Black people.

Keywords: Hip-hop, slavery, minstrel show, urban youth, Blacks, Whites, Women as objects, criminality

Do we seek to produce any more generations of African Americans who, regardless of any achievements they can personally claim, go on to produce more people who hate who they are?— Katherine Bankole, 2001

The alchemic ingredients of the recipe *Jim Crow's Hip-Hop Surprise* is quite simple. The objective of baking this recipe is to make a socially *unconscious*¹ hip-hop song or video. For starters, it must include several packages of breasts, hips, thighs, b---s, hos, and tricks, preferably well beaten physically, mentally, or spiritually; several cups of finely chopped n---s, and lightly beaten chickenheads; mix in slabs of sex, baggy pants, prisons, bling blings; then add blunts, ghettos, fine cars, and spinners; then finally sprinkle it with a computer-generated beat. This recipe—unbeknownst to those White and Black youth who deem it a culinary experience to treasure—is filled with all-purpose dour specifically designed to enslave them psychologically.

Jim Crow's Hip-Hop Surprise is now the blueprint by which hip hop is a job made to order for its Black hip-hop artists. These artists are given the recipe to keep the Benjamins heavily flowing in the pockets of the record companies they pay obeisance to. Part of the Black male hip-hop artist's servitude includes exuding lyrically and attitudinally patriarchal ways of thinking, through lyrics and attitude, that which contradicts his history. He takes on the role of the oppressor by objectifying women; he forgets how his ancestors were falsely imprisoned for trumped-up crimes, yet he celebrates prison culture in style, attitude, and nuance. His insouciant attitude helps him to disregard the inner-city youth who may mimic him by adopting his fashions and acting out scenes from his lyrics, not realizing it may land them in prison.

Many of these artists often have fans, whether they are 3 or 33 years of age, eating out of their hands, reciting their in-your-face lyrics and imitating their styles and persona without knowing how to critique what they hear. This naiveté contributes to the mis-education of Whites and Blacks about the Black experience.

¹ Socially unconscious hip-hop music is the opposite of conscious hip-hop music. Socially unconscious hip-hop music has themes of misogyny, oppression, drugs, pimping, and other false portrayals of Black manhood and womanhood. Such music perpetuates stereotypes and distortions of Black people and does not uplift the masses. It does not focus on social consciousness and justice for all people. Socially conscious hip-hop music, much like rap music, has themes related to the social injustices among Blacks and Latinos, while still appealing to the masses and incorporating, fun, romance, and unity.

But while the sauciness of socially unconscious hip hop appears to leave a savory taste in the mouths of White and Black listeners who eat greedily from *Jim Crow's Hip-Hop Surprise*, these youth—with every swallow—intensify stereotypic perceptions and self-hatred of all things Black.

The challenges faced by our African ancestors and their triumphs over various forms of oppression are forgotten or unacknowledged in unconscious hip-hop music. For without the African ancestors fight for equality, we would not enjoy the privileges of recording music, enhancing better race relations, voting, reading, having a family, obtaining an education, and exploring opportunities for achieving wealth legally.

Despite those advances, some of hip-hop acts as the antithesis of everything our African ancestors fought for. Stereotypes about Blacks abound in the genre (i.e. ignorant, ostentatious, irresponsible, drug users, misogynistic, ghetto dwellers, sex driven, and so on). Hip-hop acts portray this monolithic image of the Black experience just to make a quick buck, forgetting the lessons we should have learned from our ancestors. It seems like the only time we want to exhibit that we have some semblance of home training is when we “get up at the MTV awards and *thank and praise my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” for all the b---s, hos, blunts, drugs, and alcoholic beverages we got during the making of the hip-hop video and for getting an award (Rux 2003, p. 28). But hip hop's beginnings did not start out this way. Before it became known as *hip hop*, socially conscious *rap* music addressed the social injustices faced by Blacks and other ethnic minority groups;—for *rap* music's themes focused more on the injustices of Blacks and Latinos while *hip-hop* music's themes focus more on shooting, killing, oppression, objectification of women, sex, and degradation of all things Black (D. C. 1997). Much of hip-hop music has become so commercialized that it's it is no longer about social equality, but about selling sex, drugs, and money to youth, propelling them into their mis-education about Black culture. It does not take a virtuoso of hip hop to articulate this message; hip-hop videos demonstrate it at every turn. A lifestyle of sex, drugs, big money and crime is inculcated in the minds of many youth who grew up listening to hip hop but not necessarily to those who grew up listening only to rap.

1.1 I'm Just Keepin' It Real: Celebrities and Hip-Hop Music

There seems to be a growing and prescient concern about hip-hop culture. Years ago, Don Imus drew the ire of some in the hip-hop industry when he suggested that his reference to the Rutgers Women as *nappy headed hos* is no worse than how hip-hop artists treat Black women. Michael Richards, aka “Kramer” of *Seinfeld* fame, went into a tirade using the *n-word* as a means of attacking a comedy club's Black hecklers. Their comments drew more attention to the sad state of affairs of hip-hop artists who degrade African Americans. The April 16, 2007 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* served as a catalyst to a discussion about the ways in which hip-hop is shaping the world's perceptions of Blacks. The women from Spelman College—a private, independent, liberal arts, historically Black college for women, founded in 1881—who were guest panelists on the show, charged that they are tired of the misogynist images in hip hop. Nelly, a hip-hop artist, has been under fire by the women at Spelman College for his *Tip Drill* lyrics and video where he swiped a credit card down the derriere of a Black woman. Even Oprah's guest panelist, Stanley Crouch, stated that hip-hop may have become a minstrel show.

“Hip hop's recent love affair with dance friendly tunes, light-hearted lyrics and questionable imagery have many wondering—have we become a minstrel show?” asks Demetria Lucas from *The Source*, a hip-hop magazine. She raises a good point as some hip-hop tunes and video have beats and images that originate from minstrel shows.

Minstrel shows—performed heavily during the 19th century by Whites in blackface—consisted of comedic skits, music, and dancing that portrayed the Black person as ignorant, misogynistic, lazy, greedy, and buffoonish. It may be for this reason that Nas, a rap artist, suggests that the hip-hop industry should be destroyed. Lucas and Nas' viewpoints to the community-at-large represent the need for a book that addresses how much of hip-hop music has become minstrelsy in nature and what we need to do about it.

Unconscious hip hop has become markedly minstrelsy in nature. Minstrel shows—performed heavily during the 19th century by Whites in blackface—consisted of comedic skits, music, and dancing that portrayed the Black person as ignorant, misogynistic, lazy, greedy, and buffoonish. The minstrel show entertained Whites who watched actors in blackface portray stereotypic notions of Black culture. The actors earned hefty bucks for *keepin' it real* on what's going on among enslaved Black folks. Many black male hip-hop artists follow the same prescriptive misogynistic, misanthropic formula that keeps White suburbanites youth begging for more.

Unconscious hip hop has become markedly minstrelsy in nature. I guess that's the meaning of the adage "The more things change, the more they remain the same". There appears to be few differences between the Black man and woman portrayed during the minstrel show's heyday and the bitches, niggas, hos, lazy, juvenile, and ignorant asses portrayed in hip-hop music today. Songs peppered with such formulations should remind us of the old proverb: Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

The derogatory language used by Imus and *Kramer* used mirrors the language used in much of hip-hop in the past 15 years. Does it take a White person—by however means necessary—to bring heavy media attention to what Black hip-hop male artists are saying about Black women to get Black people to become incendiary about it? The universe is inside every woman that ever lived, is living, or will live. The African queen has been dethroned and the Black b---h has become nomenclature for Black women that come after her.

The chorus of Blacks who called for the immediate dismissal of Imus should ask what is the difference between a White male who earns a good living from degrading Black women and calls it *shock radio* and a Black male who earns a good living from degrading Black women and calls it *hip hop*? Does Black America have a patent on taking liberties to demonstrate hatred towards itself while getting vehemently pissed off when White America take the same liberties? For instance, the term *n---a* is used among Blacks within Black communities. If White persons used the same term, many Blacks would scream, holler, protest, whine, cry, put sugar in their gas tanks, picket, and demand an apology.

This complacency is a blatant backpedaling against the Civil Rights Movement. Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, and Paul Robeson—seminal figures in the fight for Black equality—were not *n----s* and *b----s*, and for hip-hop music to embrace this term shows how much we have yet to learn about our true selves in Black history. For the very people rap music once sought to heal have now become in part a hip hop target, and therefore, a source of the hurt African-Americans are experiencing today. Further, major record labels, owned and controlled by Whites—the same labels that once ignored hip hop completely—now control the direction of hip-hop. Record companies have learned what the White masses want to hear—stories of Blacks killing Blacks, or occasionally Latinos killing Latinos; gangster artists who rap about ghetto violence are being signed by the thousands, with no regard for the effects on Black youth while the biggest consumers of it are suburban Whites (D. C. and Jah, 1997).

Hip-hop music can empower youth to make a positive difference. This text does not advocate for the censorship of hip-hop music; every person has a constitutional right to free speech. Neither is this text an attack on Blacks, Whites, women, men, teens, or youth. Black is beautiful; but so is White, Asian, Mexican, Latino, and any other race. We have failed Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream if we do not recognize that brothers and sisters come in different colors. This text is meant to challenge all readers to consider assessing how *unconscious* hip-hop music negatively affects the healing of race relations in North America and how it exacerbates racial hatred in other parts of the world. Further, those of us who are socially conscious cannot make the mistake of trying to coerce consciousness upon others we consider naïve. Today, we cannot look to comedians, hip-hop artists, or ball players for political direction since their *role* is to entertain. However, this text endeavors to begin a dialogue that may act as a springboard to get entertainers, leaders, school teachers, preachers, *thugs*, *gangstas*, *wankstas*, and the general public meaningfully engaged in analyzing the images shown via hip hop. And it asks the community to wield their resources to serve the masses. The job is not hip-hop artists alone; it is yours and mine. Black youth are a rock's throw from destroying everything our ancestors have taught us as White youth are being mis-educated about Black culture. I do not blame the youth; the adults who are instrumentalities in creating the music share the culpability. It takes a village to raise a child. We must become the village that raises our Black and White youth as representatives of the royal lineage to which they are successors. This text, *Standing on the Agenda of African Ancestors: Hip-Hop Music's Opposing Revolution* is just a small part of my contribution to this effort to initiate dialogue on what the implications of *unconscious* hip-hop music on the mindset of youth around the world.

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