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This study explores how the media, in particular the print media of New York City, portrayed hip hop culture and hip hoppers from the 1970s through the early 1990s. Through examining various newspaper sources it is apparent that the media, since hip hop began to culminate as a culture, has created a misunderstood, simple, and stereotypical image of hip hop.

Before graffiti art, emceeing, DJing, and break dancing were fully linked as the pillars of hip hop, the print media of New York City ignored the rise of the culture. When hip hop's pillars finally merged and became one meshed counter culture, the newspaper editors of New York City still chose to ignore ploys by journalists to include hip hop in their headlines. The editors, like many Americans who found themselves outside the cultural boundaries of hip hop thought they understood hip hop and believed the young culture would die out and be replaced by another fad. Little did they know that hip hop culture, in particular the music, would become a major pop culture genre. When hip hop was covered by New York City journalists the image portrayed was rarely, if ever, a wholly positive one despite efforts on the part of hip hoppers to create a socially conscious movement.

In the late twentieth century journalists in New York City did not always intentionally create a biased and negative image of hip hop. Rather, their interpretations of the culture often were ill-informed, and at times their articles were coded in language

that coincided with racial and class-based stereotypes concerning working-class African Americans. By the twenty-first century, hip hop became the scapegoat for various social problems in American society, including racism and sexism.

THIS IS MY MIC: HIP HOP AND THE MEDIA, 1970S-1990S

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study looks at how a variety of New York print media sources portrayed hip hop from its early beginnings through its rise to pop culture fame, arguing that since hip hop culture was created by young New Yorkers in the 1970s the media has tended to ignore the culture's positive or socially conscious tendencies. When violence emerged in rap music in the seventies and eighties the print media of New York City often misunderstood the complexities surrounding the creation of hip hop. While rappers most certainly used violence in their rhymes and creative images, they also claimed that there was a political purpose in doing so that reached far beyond the glorification of gang lifestyles, yet this political message was rarely given a voice in the New York City print media.

Cultural production is directly related to the lived experiences of those who produce it. Whether it be music, film, theatre, sporting events, radio, or fashion, cultural products are reflections of social realities. The cultural products of the 1970s were no exception. When most Americans reflect on the 1970s they reminisce about rock and roll and the many sub-categories of rock that emerged including punk rock. They think about leisure suits and disco. Some will reminisce about reggae music, in particular the contributions of Bob Marley and the Wailers. However, very few Americans will talk about the rise of hip hop culture. Hip hop culture has for the most part been left out of

the narrative of the seventies.[1] Perhaps this is because it was not until the eighties that the general public became aware of the cultural movement. The lack of historiography concerning hip hop culture makes a statement about the historians' willingness to consider it a legitimate reflection of black and working class life.

Hip hop, like other cultural products of the seventies, emerged as a result of the social conditions and creative minds of young African Americans who dwelled in the inner cities, particularly New York City. Though it is difficult to pinpoint one of the five boroughs as the single neighborhood responsible for the first productions of hip hop, New York City in general can definitely be labeled as the birthplace of the culture. The four pillars of hip hop include: graffiti writing, break dancing, emceeing, and DJing. The first pillar to emerge was graffiti writing. To most New Yorkers, and Americans in general, graffiti writing was nothing more than an eyesore that made them feel uncomfortable and unsafe in the subways and streets of the city. Graffiti artistry was not viewed as an art form and was a criminalized act that caused thousands of young African Americans and Puerto Ricans to be arrested in the city. It even cost some their lives. Pinpointing the time period in which graffiti emerged is nearly impossible. People have always scribbled messages of rage, love, passion, and hate on walls, bathroom stalls, train carts, and any

[1] For example: Beth Bailey and David Farber's edited volume *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), takes in depth looks at the cultures of erotica, skate, and punk in the 1970s, as well as the celebration of the nation's bicentennial, yet does not include an essay that examines the emergence of hip hop culture. Edward D. Berkowitz's work *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), also excludes any conversation concerning the rise of hip hop culture in the 1970s. Both the Bailey/Farber and Berkowitz works are cultural studies that examine the American working class and consider racial politics and sentiments, but both leave out hip hop in their evaluations even though the rise of hip hop was directly connected to all of these subjects.

other public space. This trend did not emerge in the seventies with those who would claim to be hip hoppers in the decade to come. However, those who lived and tagged in New York City created a new soul behind graffiti. Those who worked the subways, train stations, and alleys in the late seventies and into the eighties often tagged their gang affiliations in order to claim territory around the city. As hip hop music began to plant its roots, break dancing also emerged. The music and the dance often drew in the same young black and brown New Yorkers who tagged their neighborhoods, trains, and subway cars.

From the very beginning, hip hop was a means for young people who experienced the harsh realities of the inner cities to express their outrage. Yet, it was also simply a way for these young people to be entertained, and the culture pre-occupied their time, often keeping them from the dangers of the streets. Over the years many, if not all, hip hop artists have struggled with balancing this dual agenda. Combining socially and politically conscious messages in their art with elements that simply entertain is often a very difficult balancing act to perform. This duality obviously became even more difficult as hip hop rose up the charts and became pop culture and big business. Because hip hop music was created by young black and brown artists, the expectations of the culture have often been held to a higher standard than other genres.

African American entertainers in particular are often criticized for not making their acts politically motivated. Just as Zora Neale Hurston was criticized for not writing novels that dealt entirely with racism and racial uplift, hip hop artists were and are still

criticized for making music that simply entertains.[2] Because African Americans are disproportionally poor and racism is definitely still a huge social problem in America, African Americans who entertain are expected to use their talents as agents of social change. While many hip hop artists took on a political agenda from the very start in the seventies and early eighties, the music has developed into a genre that has several sub-genres including politically conscious music.

Few academics have considered hip hop in their studies of American culture. Perhaps academics are not particularly fond of researching and writing about hip hop because of the controversy that surrounds it presently. Conceivably historians in particular are hesitant to study hip hop because the culture is still alive and the historical distance is not present. I hope that my study squelches some of these fears. The fact remains that hip hop is significant because of the immense cultural impact it has had on our population and the wider world. It is directly connected to pertinent discussions of race, sexuality, gender, and class.

Though hip hop historiography is small when compared to that of other cultural topics, there are a handful of works dedicated to hip hop culture that have influenced this study. Two in particular have significantly influenced how I envision hip hop culture and the responses the media and the general public generated concerning hip hop. Probably the most well-known *historical* work concentrated on hip hop is "Kickin' Reality, Kickin'

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[2] Examples of Zora Neale Hurston's work that touch on, but are not consumed with the subject of racism include: *Jonah's Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Moses, Man of the Mountain, Seraph on the Suwanee.*

Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and postindustrial Los Angeles" by Robin Kelley.[3] Kelley's work encourages academics to consider rap music, in particular gangsta rap, as a true reflection of the political climate of urban America. While many academics are turned away from rap music because of the portrayals of violence and misogyny, Kelley focuses on rap and hip hop culture because it is the one outlet that black and brown youth have been able to utilize to vocally express their concerns and experiences as young people of color. This particular article is a part of Kelley's larger body of work *Race Rebels*, which encourages academics to reconsider their definition of resistance within the black working class. Drawing from James C. Scott's work on the "hidden" and "public transcripts," Kelley insists upon re-defining the term "politics" and calls for historians to examine the everyday lives and cultural productions of black working class people in search of alternative forms of resistance that fall outside the traditional narrative of African American protest.[4] Rap music, for Kelley, is a prime example of such resistance. It is within this framework that this thesis was generated.

Tricia Rose's work, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, was also very influential to this study. Rose's book was one of the first academic works that took a serious look at hip hop and examined it through "the lens of

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[3] Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," from *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York, Free Press, 1994), 183-227.

[4] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*, (New York, Free Press, 1994): 4.

contemporary scholarship."[5] Rose, like Kelley, demands that academics be open to analyzing hip hop as a legitimate academic subject. Rose's work was the first to tackle complex issues concerning hip hop culture and analyzed the politics of race, gender, class and sexuality associated with rap music in particular. Her work is particularly revolutionary in that it places hip hop and black culture within Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Rose demonstrates how hip hop is like any other culture that develops in reaction to and defiance of the dominant hegemonic culture. While hip hop's motives were to disconnect itself from the dominant culture that attempted to limit young black and brown social mobility, the culture risked re-affirming the hegemonic culture, particularly through rap lyrics.[6]

Several people, particularly journalists, sociologists, and musicologists, have written narratives of hip hop. The most influential to this study are Jeff Chang's work *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation,* Raquel Cepeda's work *And It Don't Stop: the Best American Hip Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years,* and Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn's work *Yes Yes Y'all: the Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade.* Chang's work is a social and cultural history that places hip hop within the narrative of the post-civil rights era and the massive deindustrialization that occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century. His analysis, based on oral histories from hip hoppers, shows that hip hop did not emerge

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[5] Josh Kun, "Two Turntables and a Social Movement: Writing Hip-Hop at Century's End," *American Literary History* 14, no. 3 (October 1, 2002): 580.

[6] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 19.

randomly; rather, it was a response to and reflection of the circumstances of urban ghetto life.[7] Chang's work is significant not because it adds tremendously to the historiography of hip hip music; rather, it illustrates that hip hop culture has always had a purpose. Chang's work is dedicated to illuminating the political messages the hip hop generation supported over the decades and aided me in identifying several causes significant to the hip hop generation. My work adds to Chang's in that it provides an analysis of how the media portrayed the actions taken by the hip hop generation in showing their support for political and social causes identified by Chang.

Cepeda's work on hip hop journalism shows how and why hip hop journalism changed over time and helped me situate the evidence I collected into a broader historical narrative.[8] *And It Don't Stop* confirms the argument that editors for New York City newspapers did not allow journalists to cover hip hop within the first decade of the culture's existence. This fact proves that hip hop was not taken seriously as a form of black culture by mainstream media outlets, including those produced by the black community itself. Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn's work provided a wealth of primary sources from which to outline the emergence of hip hop and its rise to pop culture fame. Focusing on the "old school" generation of hip hoppers, *Yes Yes Yall* lends a wealth of information to historians who are interested in the rise of the culture.[9]

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[7] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

[8] Raquel Cepeda, *And It Don't Stop!: The Best American Hip Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004).

It is my hope that this study reveals a more complex history of hip hop and encourages academics to take hip hop seriously as a form of social protest and reflection of poverty and racism. Hip hop was a cultural product of a number of problems inherent in the neglected urban centers and yet was also a socially conscious movement. Hip hop was and is still often viewed as stereotypical "bad behavior" on the part of the poor and working class African Americans. It is thought (as seen in the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report on the black family) that challenging and altering the behavior of the poor will alter their living conditions. It seems as though the coverage of hip hop culture produced by the print media of New York City, particularly the *New York Times*, the *Amsterdam News*, and the *Village Voice,* indirectly aligned with such outdated claims. For the most part black and white print media outlets in New York City portrayed hip hop as simply a disorganized and overwhelmingly negative cultural influence that lacked political purpose or vision.

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[9] Fricke, Jim and Charlie Ahearn. *Yes Yes Y'all: the Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade,* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002).

CHAPTER II

PIGEONHOLING HIP HOP: EARLY PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE OF HIP HOP CULTURE

In the nineteen seventies the print media of New York City was not concerned with hip hop culture. Though hip hop culture was a vibrant youth culture that emerged out of the streets of the city itself, editors and reporters seemed to rarely care if the culture was considered in their headlines. When coverage appeared in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the *Village Voice*, and the *New York Times*, these publications rarely took the culture seriously as a counter attack to the established hegemonic culture. The print media outlets considered hip hop to be nothing more than disconnected youth fads, when in fact a strong counter culture was culminating and brewing into one of the most well-recognized pop culture sensations. In the early days, not only did the print media of New York City not expect hip hop to evolve into something substantial, the image the print media promoted concerning various facets of the culture pigeonholed hip hop and set the stage for media coverage of hip hop for the next three decades.

Many of the experts on hip hop claim that hip hop culture emerged as an alternative to the infamous street gangs of the greater New York City area in the 1970s. Many former members of these gangs claim that their interest in hip hop enabled them to slowly but surely veer from the gang lifestyle. However, others say that gang violence

was not totally replaced by a less aggressive form of battling known as break-dancing. Rather, as break-dancing became popular among the youth of New York City, gang simply incorporated dance battles into their culture, yet still maintained their use of violence to keep up with their reputation. Uprocker[10] and graffiti artist Burn! explains: "I used to go to John Jay High [Brooklyn], and all these writers used to hang out there. They used to dance and smoke weed. The term was rock, burning and jerking. That's bullshit about how dancing took the place of fighting--they were gangs, they always fought. Gangs had their dancers, their graffiti writers, and their stick-up kids! It all started with the gangs, all over--Bushwick, Bedstuy, East New York, Coney, every block had dance crews and they rocked."[11]

Whether hip hop developed as an alternative to gangs or as a cultural element of them, there is no denying that gangs like the Black Spades, the Savage Skulls, the Savage Nomads, the Javelins, the Royal Charmers, and the Seven Crowns were connected to the rise of hip hop culture in New York City. Some gang members, like the famous DJ and founder of the Zulu Nation Afrika Bambaataa, seemed to mature out of the gang lifestyle and converted themselves into the original hip hoppers.[12] Others, particularly the youngest members of certain gangs, used b-boy battles to "fight" and graffiti tags to claim territory but never abandoned their use of physical violence to intimidate as well.

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[10] Uprockers were break dancers who performed a specific type of break dancing that originated in Brooklyn, New York.

[11] Ibid., 8.

[12] Afrika Bambaataa was a founding member of the street gang, the Savage Seven. This gang later became known as the Black Spades, one of, if not the most, infamous of the New York City gangs of the 1970s.

If the circumstances called for it, b-boys would transform into stick-up kids and professional scrappers.[13]

However, even though gang life was probably the foundation from which hip hop developed, hip hoppers were not by any means stifled or constricted to the cultural realm of gangs. Nor were they detached from or unaware of greater historical events such as the rise of black power, the Vietnam War, dissent on university campuses, and forms of social protest that came about as a response to the political climate of the era. Afrika Bambaataa recalls that he was highly influenced by such events and even founded the Zulu Nation as a response to what was occurring around him and across the nation:

> I grew up in the southeast Bronx. It was an area where back in the late 60s, early 70s there was "broken glass everywhere," like Melle Mel said in "The Message." But it was also an area where there was a lot of unity and a lot of social awareness going on, at a time when people of color was coming into their own, knowin' that they were Black people, hearing records like James Brown's "Say It Loud-- I'm Black and I'm Proud," giving us awareness….Seeing all the violence that was going on with the Vietnam War and all the people in Attica and Kent State, and being aware of what was going on in the late '60s, with Woodstock and the Flower Power….just being a young person and seeing all this happening around me put a lot of consciousness in my mind to get up and do something; it played a strong role in trying to say, "We've got to stop this violence with the street gangs.[14]

Clive Campbell, also known as DJ Kool Herc and the father of hip hop, launched his hip hop celebrity by throwing parties that were known for the unique

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[13] Stick up kids is slang for youngsters who went around robbing average citizens and other gang members randomly.

[14] Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all,* 44.

records played and also Herc's lack of patience for violence and drugs. Herc also dismisses the assumption that all hip hoppers in the 1970s were former gang members. He maintains that gangs approached him and his crew and asked them to become members and leaders of the organizations, but he and his friends dismissed the idea of forming or becoming members of a gang: "we wasn't going for that because we respected each other, and we just said, 'Look, we don't need that.' They [gangs] respected us; we respected them. We didn't need no colors to be on our back to be recognized or put fear in people's heart, stuff like that. When they come to the party, they know if they mess with us, we was gonna have our business."[15]

Coming of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, DJs beginning with Kool Herc were familiar with and danced to funk and soul music like that of James Brown and George Clinton. These funk songs were the basis for break-beat DJing. The breaks of funk songs were used in isolation and repeated to create a bass-thumping percussion beat for dancing. The first time this act was performed publically, at least according to the old schoolers, was around 1973. Kool Herc first unleashed the break-beat strategy at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx.[16]

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[15] Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all,* 26.

[16] David Gonzalez, "Will Gentrification Spoil the Birthplace of Hip Hop?" *New York Times,* 21 May 2007, B1. The building located at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue is in danger of becoming gentrified and the residents of a low-income housing subsidy are at risk of being evicted. The owners of the building have the option of withdrawing from the Mitchell Lama program which provides them with tax-breaks and other financial incentives to keep rental rates lower, so that lower income families can afford a place to live. According to the Gonzalez article, the residents, in an attempt to save their building, did some research and found out that the building was the birthplace of hip hop. They are fighting to keep their homes by using this

Herc and his sister Cindy Campbell threw parties in the community room of their building to earn extra cash for a better sound system and to give the neighborhood teenagers and young adults something to do.[17] What took place in this community room in the Bronx forever changed the world of music and popular culture. Hip hop had humble beginnings in the streets of New York and it was the streets that created the soul of hip hop. The street gangs of the 1970s were undeniably violent, and hip hop culture is deeply rooted in the culture of the Black Spades and other groups like them. However, because the pillars of hip hop (break-dancing, graffiti writing, Emceeing, and DJing) were created by those who were in one way or another familiar with the gang lifestyle, hip hop developed into a culture that reserved room for resistance within the political and social landscapes. The gangs represented an alternative to being eaten alive by the circumstances of the five boroughs of New York City. Gang lifestyles, then and now, served as a way to resist authority of all kinds. Without its roots in gang culture, hip hop would not be widely recognized as the social mirror that it was and still is.

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historical and cultural fact to their advantage. This possible eviction is definitely not the first of its kind. Thousands of buildings around the greater New York City area have closed their doors to low-income renters and opened them to wealthier tenants who can afford higher prices. The contract of the Mitchell Lama program only holds owners for twenty years. They are then allowed to raise their rental rates to meet their financial expectations, leaving tenants homeless or at least in debt with little protection against the change over.

[17]Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 67.

Black power rhetoric was highly misunderstood by outsiders in the post-civil rights era. As recent scholarship shows, because violence was a major focus for the Black Panther Party, the organization was targeted by the media, local, state, and federal authorities and pinpointed as a threat to larger society. However, it is also important to recognize that even though violence in the name of self defense was a major concern of the Panthers and other black power advocates, the organization maintained free health care, breakfast programs to feed children, and other community outreach programs that demonstrated the fact that the black community could be self sufficient. This complex existence was not seen as legitimate in the eyes of the many ordinary onlookers. The outreach programs were overshadowed by negative imagery produced by the government and the media. The Panthers were simply viewed as angry black men who were dangerous threats to the general population.[18]

During the seventies the image of the "angry black man" was very prominent in newspaper publications of New York City. Examples of this image emerged in the form of ads for blaxploitation films.[19] Blaxploitation films were intended to target a black audience and were not intended to create racial stereotypes. However, contrary to these intentions, blaxploitation films re-

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[18] Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, (Fayetteville Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2006).

[19] "Hell Up In Harlem Ad," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 January 1974, D5. This is just one of dozens of ads that were run by the black press in the seventies that targeted a black audience to watch blaxploitation films.

affirmed stereotypes white audiences were familiar with. What was intended to be a source of racial power and pride backfired. Black directors and producers of such films intended to reverse the role African Americans played in the cinema from submissive and obedient servants to commanding and authoritative individuals by empowering them through new roles. However, mainstream audiences saw these characters and storylines (often set in the urban ghettos) as evidence that further legitimized racist and sexist ideologies pertaining to African Americans.[20] As Tricia Rose points out in *Black Noise*, these counter cultural productions risked reaffirming stereotypes that the hegemonic culture produced concerning African Americans. This trend continued further into the late twentieth century when those not well-informed about the conditions in which hip hop developed continued to project the "angry black man" image onto young black men just as they had done with the Panthers and blaxploitation films. Though the Panthers, blaxploitation actors, and eventually hip hoppers made attempts to challenge the negative connotations associated with their own people, their actions often translated into misunderstood imagery that further stereotyped African Americans in the end.[21]

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[20] Peter C. Rollins, *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 212.

[21] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 19.

As mentioned before, young hip hoppers were well aware of the current events and political movements of their day. Not only were they aware, but hip hoppers were also heavily influenced by those events and movements. A cultural reflection of the black power movement was James Brown's 1968 song "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud."

> Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves
> We tired of beating our heads against the wall
> And working for someone else
> A look a'here,
> One thing more I got to say right here
> Now, we're people like the birds and the bees
> We rather die on our feet,
> Than keep living on our knees
>
> Say it loud,
> I'm black and I'm proud
> Say it louder,
> I'm black and I'm proud[22]

This song and others of Brown's, were co-opted in the break-beats of early hip hop music. But obviously this anthem connected hip hoppers to a political message as well. By using soul and funk songs at their dances, DJs opened up a significant space within hip hop for resistance. Over the late 1970s and through the 1980s hip hop emerged as the poster-child for cultural resistance. It seemed as though hip hop was destined to become a mouthpiece for poor black and brown America. Much like jazz and the blues, hip hop soon became feared and shunned

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[22] Brown, James. "Say It Loud. I'm Black and I'm Proud," *Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud,* King Records, 1968.

by Americans who subscribed to more conservative forms of culture. Hip hop was expressed through black power anthems, aerosol strokes, and politically charged lyrics. These characteristics automatically placed the genre on the outskirts of acceptability. Through music, dancing, and graffiti artistry, hip hoppers were able to resist a variety of powers: the power of their parents, other gangs, white folks, the local government, the New York Metro Transit Authority (MTA), police brutality, cultural conformity, racial and economic bias, etc.

In the 1970s when hip hop's seeds began to germinate in the cracks of New York City sidewalks, the media rarely, if ever, exposed mainstream America to the elements of hip hop culture that developed early in its history.[23] In fact, the majority of articles written in New York City about hip hop during the 1970s were not recognized by most readers as being about hip hop. Rather, they were about young African American and Puerto Rican New Yorkers being arrested for practicing graffiti artistry. The MTA constantly engaged in "graffiti wars" and maintained a police team that busted graffiti artists in action under the city.[24] However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most editors of popular and

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[23] Nelson George, forward in Raquel Cepeda, *And It Don't Stop!: The Best American Hip Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004), xi-xiii. The author of this essay has also examined the historical record for evidence of hip hop in the print media of the 1970s. Based on those findings, it is safe to assume that Nelson George is correct in his view that New York City editors did not care for hip hop headlines until the culture took off as pop culture.

[24] Both the alternative and mainstream presses published articles during the 1970s and 1980s on the subject of the MTA's war on graffiti. These publications include but are not limited to: the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*. For years, the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *New York Times* covered the story of Michael Stewart, a graffiti artist, who was beat to death by MTA officers.

alternative presses were either ignorant of the growing culture or simply did not think hip hop deserved to grace headlines. This cultural attitude continued to dominate the offices of New York newspapers, both "black" and "white," until the mid-to-late 1980s when hip hop took off in popular culture.

Probably the most infamous event involved in the graffiti wars was the death of Michael Stewart. Stewart was a twenty-five-year-old, one-hundred-and-forty-pound graffiti writer from Brooklyn who was caught writing in the subway of New York City at the First Avenue and Fourteenth Street stop. He struggled to escape from *eleven* police officers and was "subdued" by these men. He was hogtied with tape and a cord, sustained several bruises and cuts from the officers, and was thrown into the back of a van where he was beaten even more. By the time the officers arrived with Stewart at the Bellevue Hospital, a mere thirteen blocks from where the incident began, Stewart was literally beaten to death. Stewart had no heartbeat when he arrived at the hospital and yet the officers simply tossed him onto a gurney, face down, still hogtied. A nurse who worked in the emergency room where Stewart was transported testified at the hearing of the officers. She stated that it took the police several minutes to find a key and take the hand-cuffs off Stewart's wrists. The only reason the officers took Stewart to the hospital in the first place, according to them, was because they thought he needed to be psychologically evaluated.[25]

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[25] Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 194-198.

During a series of litigations several medical examinations were carried out on behalf of the Stewart family and the defense team that represented the Transit Officers involved in the beating. The Stewart family's doctor that examined their son's body stated that Stewart had sustained blows to every major part of his body, "without exception." The city's chief medical examiner, Dr. Elliot Gross, stated that Stewart's death was caused by a heart attack, insinuating that there was no evidence that Stewart had been beaten to death.[26] Many citizens, especially those of color, suspected that Gross was not only wrong but also intentionally skewed the facts. It was obvious to most that Stewart, just like Eleanor Bumpers and so many others, had been a victim of extreme police brutality.[27]

The *New York Times* ran a four-part series that reported that Gross had mishandled the case and had "produced a series of misleading or inaccurate autopsy reports on people who died in custody of the police."[28] Because of this series, New York City's Mayor Koch was persuaded to call upon the city's Health

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[26] Because Stewart's blood alcohol level was high when he was taken into custody, it was easy for authorities to go along with Gross's original assertion that Stewart had a heart attack. A portion of a marijuana cigarette was also found on Stewart. The officers who arrested and beat him said that they also found cocaine on Stewart's person. However, this charge was later dropped when it was discovered that Stewart had no cocaine on him, only an small empty plastic baggie, a mirror and a straw.

[27] Selwyn Raab, "Atopsy Finds Bumpurs Was Hit By Two Blasts," *New York Times*, 27 November 1984, B3. Bumpurs was an elderly woman killed by two shotgun blasts from NYPD officers during an October 1984 eviction in the Bronx.

[28] Sydney H. Schanberg "The Protected Coroner," *New York Times*, 29 January 1985, A27. Philip Shenon was responsible for the series that ran in the *Times*. Similar quotes can be found in his article: "Broad Deterioration in Coroner's Office Charged," *New York Times*, 30 January 1985, A1.

Commissioner to conduct an investigation of Gross. The *Times'* series was based on information from individuals who worked in Gross's office and from other pathologists who did not work with Gross. The investigation launched by the *Times* showed that Gross not only mishandled cases, but also "he intervened to alter the findings of other pathologists in an apparent attempt to shift responsibility for deaths away from the police and that he has told less than the whole truth on the witness stand."[29] Later on in the 1980s, after Gross had been completely cleared of all charges despite the claims made by the *Times*, he filed a libel suit against the *New York Times*.[30] Articles pertaining to the misconduct of Dr. Gross and the medical examiner's office dwindled very quickly. In the end, the *New York Times* reneged on its call for justice concerning what many New Yorkers considered unjust deaths. However, even though the *Times* became bored with or feared repercussions from Dr. Gross, during this fiasco hip hop culture drew from its historical legacy of resistance to make political statements. Not only was Michael Stewart displaying resistance when he wrote on the subway walls in 1983, but through his death and the litigations that followed, graffiti writing, and thus hip hop culture, also brought police brutality and racism to the forefront.

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[29] Schanberg "The Protected Coroner."

[30] "Gross Files Libel Papers Against the Times," *New York Times*, 25 January 1986, 31.

Several trials occurred regarding the Stewart case. The first was dismissed because of a tainted jury. The officers indicted (there were only three in the first trial) had all charges dismissed. Six officers were indicted in the next trial in February 1985, two years after Stewart's death. On November 24, 1985, the six accused were all acquitted of the charges brought against them. Louis Clayton Jones, an attorney present at the trials stated: "What we have witnessed has been a farce. And all the players happened to be white. The six defendants, the six defense lawyers, the two prosecutors, the twelve jurors, the judge, and even every court officer in the well of the courtroom was white. The only Black person there was the victim, and he was unable to testify."[31] Over the course of the trials, Gross changed his analysis of Stewart's body and the cause of death several times. However, the final and official examination showed that Stewart's death was caused by "physical injury to the spinal cord of the upper neck."[32]

Stewart's death and the politics surrounding the case provided New York City's newspaper editors with a headlining story connected to hip hop; after all, Stewart was arrested while attempting to tag the subway walls. However, to editors and journalists the story was not headline material because it was connected to hip hop; rather, the Stewart case was about black crime in the city and accusations concerning the rise and

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[31] Isabel Wilkerson, "Jury Acquits All Transit Officers in 1983 Death of Michael Stewart," *New York Times,* 25 November 1985, A1.

[32] Sam Roberts, "Injury Reported in Death of Man After His Arrest," *New York Times,* 3 November 1983, B4.

continual threat of police brutality within the city. The media coverage of Stewart's death was massive and went on for several years. Indirectly the journalism that covered Stewart's murder also covered hip hop culture, whether the journalists or the readers realized it. The coverage of Michael Stewart's murder may have been many New Yorkers' and Americans' first taste of journalism related to hip hop culture. As hip hop became popular around the city and country and average citizens were able to recognize that graffiti art was a fundamental pillar of the culture, the stereotype of the African American or Puerto Rican hip hopper/vandal grew. Additionally, while graffiti writers made attempts to defy the hegemonic culture, their actions, like those of Michael Stewart, risked legitimizing the stereotypes average New Yorkers and Americans around the nation believed in.[33] Hip hop culture would continue to struggle with this problem for decades to come. Beginning in the seventies and early eighties with articles concerning incidents like Stewart's death, the print media of New York set a precedent for the coverage that would be produced in the future concerning graffiti artistry and other pillars of hip hop, particularly the music. That precedent helped legitimize the stereotypes that still haunt hip hop today.

Average Americans who strolled the streets of New York did not view graffiti writing as an art form in the early eighties. It was viewed as a destructive form of vandalism. Parents in New York City most certainly discouraged their children from becoming graffiti writers after Stewart's death. However, there

[33] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 19.

were individuals who embraced graffiti as a legitimate art form. Wealthy liberals, such as Sidney Janis, opened their galleries to graffiti artists. What was meant as an act of cultural resistance was harnessed in an "appropriate" setting. After all, if it was in fact art, then graffiti belonged on the walls of a well-to-do gallery in Manhattan, right? As if the gesture of "rescuing" the graffiti writers from their ways by locking their artwork in a gallery was not enough, the reviews the press gave of Janis' show revealed what the majority of the outsiders honestly thought: "By and large, their products are as much an eyesore on canvas as they are on the trains."[34] Sidney Janis even made negative comments about the state of graffiti artistry and the artists themselves, after his experiment with the artists did not go as planned: "They were young, unreliable, and always broke no matter how much money they made."[35] Michael Stewart's death inspired another graffiti artist to become a social activist of sorts. In 1985 Keith Haring channeled the spirit of Stewart and others like him, into a painting he titled, "Michael Stewart -- USA For Africa." This painting explained Stewart's death as a form of social injustice and racially motivated criminal act. Haring compared New York City to Johannesburg, South Africa, where apartheid ruled. Through Stewart's wrongful death, hip hoppers were able to carve out yet another space for social outcry.

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[34] Grace Glueck, "Gallery View: On Canvas, Yes, But Still Eyesores," *New York Times*, 25 December 1983, section 2, 20.

[35] Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 199.

For many, the song "The Message" reflected their daily reality and lived experiences. For most people, the lyrics embodied what it meant to be economically oppressed in the inner cities:

> Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge
> I'm trying not to lose my head
> It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
> How I keep from going under
>
> My son said daddy I don't wanna go to school
> Cause the teachers a jerk, he must think I'm a fool
> And all the kids smoke reefer, I think it'd be cheaper
> If I just got a job, learned to be a street sweeper
> I dance to the beat, shuffle my feet
> Wear a shirt and tie and run with the creeps
> Cause its all about money, ain't a damn thing funny
> You got to have a con in this land of milk and honey
> They push that girl in front of a train
> Took her to a doctor, sewed the arm on again
> Stabbed that man, right in his heart
> Gave him a transplant before a brand new start
> I can't walk through the park, cause its crazy after the dark
> Keep my hand on the gun, cause they got me on the run
> I feel like an outlaw, broke my last fast jaw
> Hear them say you want some more, livin' on a seesaw[36]

New York Times reviewer John Rockwell published an article in 1982 reviewing "The Message" and a show Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five performed. While Rockwell admitted that the song was a "graphic depiction of the frustrations and anger of an urban black," Rockwell seemed more concerned with describing hip hop techniques. He knew the mainstream population and readers

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[36] Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, "The Message," *The Message*, Sugarhill Records, 1982.

of the *Times* were still vastly unaware of the ins and outs of hip hop culture. Rockwell did not go into detail about the group's motivation for creating such a song nor did he praise it as a socially conscious piece. Instead, he found the group "entertaining and charming."[37] Rockwell's critiques, praises for creativity, and musicology-oriented analysis overshadowed the fact that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five had managed to take advantage of the space hip hop created for cultural resistance.

Marie Moore of the *New York Amsterdam News* regarded "The Message" as a record that taught a lesson. In the 1970s Moore was involved with campaigns to discourage popular American musicians from performing in apartheid South Africa. She was well known for making her music and entertainment reviews "personal" and political.[38] Not too long after Moore wrote about Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and her experience in combining black culture with a political message, Sugar Hill Records, the label Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were signed to, placed an ad of sorts in the *Amsterdam News* thanking not the newspaper as a whole, but Marie Moore personally, "for making the Message the Most Powerful Record of the Year 1982."[39] Aside from Moore's portrayals of hip hop and a scattering of other journalists, by the mid-nineteen

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[37] John Rockwell, "Rap: the Furious Five," *New York Times*, 12 September 1982, A84.

[38] Marie Moore, "The Most Popular Record of '82 Taught Us a Lesson," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 January 1983, 28; "Motown Rolls Back the Prices," *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 July 1983, 34.

[39] "Thank You Marie Moore," *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 January 1983, 15.

eighties the *New York Amsterdam News*, even though it was an African American publication, had failed to build a positive image of hip hop within its pages. Hip hop was still overwhelmingly ignored and when it was covered, the headlines reflected ill-informed opinions about the culture.[40] These articles rarely if ever, provided an interpretation of the culture that focused on the fact that hip hop was not simply a culture of ignorance and violence.

An example of this one-sided coverage the *Amsterdam News* produced in the nineteen eighties was published two years after "The Message" was released, The publication was still branding hip hop as a youth fad that hopefully would disappear with time. Dr. Gerald Deas of Long Island created a poem called "Felon Sneakers." The *Amsterdam News* published Deas poem and explained that the poem would be distributed by black community activist groups around the greater New York City area:

> Peace, Black Brother….
> The race of life is hard and long-
> And your sneakers have to be tight.
> Life's road is bumpy and hard
> You're gonna have to win this fight.
> There is no way in the world that
> Your felon sneakers can fill the bill
> Because those sneakers are usually worn
> By Black Brothers who have lost their will.

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[40] Raquel Cepeda, *And It Don't Stop!: The Best American Hip Hop Journalism of the Last 25 Years* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004). In the forward of this work Nelson George confirms that editors of New York City newspapers, including the New York Amsterdam News, refused to allow writers to publish in-depth reports on hip hop for the first two decades of it's existence.

When our unfortunate black brothers go to jail,
The law-manties up their feet.
He makes them wear felon sneakers,
With laces that cannot meet.
Those felon sneakers slip up and down
When the Black Brothers try to run.
Nobody has to worry about them-
Not even the law-man with the gun.
Now, to all my young Black Brothers,
If you really want to win the race,
Tighten up on your laces,
So, you can keep up with the pace.
So tighten up on your sneakers,
Put a goal right in your mind.
Put your nose to that grindstone,
And success in life you will find.[41]

This poem embodies what the older generation of the black community saw in hip hop culture. They thought it was a fad that would eventually give way to another coming fad in youth culture. Or at least they hoped so. To Deas, and many others like him, loose shoes, and thus hip hop fashion and style, was associated with criminal activity and a lack of a political and/or moral agenda. The *Amsterdam News* noted that the fad of wearing shoes loosened instead of tightly laced originated in Rikers Island's prison system.[42] Who actually knows if

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[41] "Hey, Guys! Are You Wearing 'Felon Sneakers'?" *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 December 1984, 30.

[42] Ibid., I could not find any information that conclusively linked the style of so-called "felon sneakers" to Rikers Island in particular. Some experts attribute the gangsta' style created on the West Coast in the late eighties and early nineties to Los Angeles inmates. This style consisted of dark denim, Chuck Taylors, baggy pants, plaid flannel shirts, etc. However, it should be noted that it is possible that the fad of un-laced, or loosened shoes could have originated from prison culture. Anything that can be used as a weapon against oneself or others, is usually taken from prisoners when they enter prison, including shoe strings. This fact would explain the possible connection. Interestingly enough, there is a shoe currently made that is actually called Felon Sneakers. It has less to do with hip hop and more to do with skateboarding though.

this is true? Either way, even large sections of the black community were unwilling to accept hip hop style and art as acceptable forms of expression for black youth. They considered it not only unattractive, but also linked it to criminal activity and laziness.

Older African Americans in the New York City area, including those who were employed at the *Amsterdam News*, were afraid that hip hop culture was a negative influence that affected the moral reasoning and political awareness of young people. Ali Stanton's article, "Music and Dance Shaping Us?" shows that members of the black community were concerned that hip hop was more than fashion and tunes. Stanton writes:

> Nobody will pay attention to what politicians promise -- in fact, these future citizens, might not heed anybody. With their music boxes constantly turned up to the "max"-- several decibels above the noise level tolerance of the last generation, their battered eardrums won't receive anything but "Dinners ready!" and "Drinks free on the house." They'll all be deaf…. No wonder they call them "Break" dancers -- could be broken dancers in the not too distant future. Unless these performers are in superb condition like those pampered professional athletes, let's hope the insurance program of public medicine offers broad coverage for our future dancers and musicians that includes repairing hearing and broken bones suffered in our latest artforms.[43]

Stanton's article portrays hip hoppers as socially negligent and irresponsible citizens. She makes hip hoppers out to be burdens on the system, stating that they are politically unaware and that they will soon suck the public healthcare system

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[43] Ali Stanton, "Music and Dance Shaping Us?" *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 June 1984, 21.

dry. These stereotypes were not new to the black community. For years the image of the welfare queen and the shiftless black dominated portrayals of the black community, especially in the inner cities.[44] Now, this image was being placed on young minorities, only this time it was projected on African Americans by their own community. Just because a young black person wore loose sneakers, listened to loud music, or was a b-boy or girl,[45] their elders, including those at the *Amsterdam News,* often assumed that they were thugs and products of social ills.

Outlets such as the *New York Amsterdam News,* however, did take advantage of the appeal of hip hop to raise money to publish their newspapers. In 1982 the first hip hop movie ever produced was independently released: *Wild Style!* This film featured well-known hip hop artists such as Fab Five Freddy, the Rock Steady Crew, the Cold Crush Brothers, Patti Astor, and Grandmaster Flash. When the film was released on home video several large ads appeared in the *Amsterdam News* promoting the film as "easily among the best musical films of the past half decade."[46] Of course, the business of newspapers all depends on ad sales, but for many people this advertisement, and the dozens of others that followed or preceded it, sent a message that the *Amsterdam News* was divided on

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[44] For more information on the stereotype of the welfare queen and other negative images of African Americans see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: the Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[45] The terms "b-boy" and "b-girl" are slang for break dancers.

[46] *Wild Style* Ad, *New York Amsterdam News*, 10 December 1983, 24.

hip hop. Many copycat films were made in the years following *Wild Style*. The *Amsterdam News* published advertisements for movies like *Beat Street,* a film that emulated the mode of *Wild Style.*[47] In one daily edition the newspaper even published photographs of young hip hoppers auditioning for *Beat Street.*[48]

Obviously, there was a divide within the offices of New York newspapers concerning hip hop culture. Some were more progressive in their outlook on hip hop than others. At the *New York Amsterdam News,* in addition to Marie Moore, Abiola Sinclair sought to shed a positive light on hip hop. She described what hip hop was and also created a positive image of the culture. Her focus was break dancing and she described it as a form of hope and a "celebration of life."[49] Sinclair focused on the history of break-dancing and hip hop more generally while also demonstrating that break-dancing was an expression that was inspired by the b-boys and girls' environments. She presented street dance groups as professionals, not thugs: "So, alas, Breaking is no longer classified as subculture and young people have once again shown they're not only not dead, but just as alive and witty and imaginative as young people ever were."[50]

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[47] *Breakin*' Ad, *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 May 1984, 23. The *New York Amsterdam News* also ran ads for "*Breakin' 2*." See *Breakin' 2* Ad, *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 December 1984, 21.

[48] "Break Dancers Get Break at Beat Street Auditions," *New York Amsterdam News,* 26 November 1983, 30.

[49] Abiola Sinclair, "Break Dancing: From the Street to the Ritz," *New York Amsterdam News,* 8 October 1983, 30.

[50] Ibid.

For the most part though, the attitudes of Ali Stanton and Dr. Deas of Long Island remained in the majority. Perhaps Ali Stanton did not read Sinclair's 1983 article before publishing her editorial that bashed breakers as social afflictions and strains on the economy. Sinclair notes the attitude reminiscent in Stanton's article: "Some critics look disdainfully on these outdoor antics, forgetting that Hani Coles, Buster Brown, and Bill "Bo-jangles" Robinson were among the many dancers to start their careers most humbly in the streets."[51]

Another journalist who seemed to understand the true complexity of hip hop culture and its grimy youth-oriented nature was Steven Hager. He was one of the first writers who capitalized on the culture in 1984 when he published *The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music and Graffiti.*[52] Hager was one of the only outsiders who realized that hip hop was more than a passing fad.[53] To him hip hop culture was similar to other counterculture movements that came about in the sixties and seventies, and Hager took all counterculture very seriously.

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Hager's book was the first to be written exclusively on hip hop. He was one of the first to recognize that this culture was very much grounded and had a history that was already over a decade old.

[53] In a December 1983 letter written to Bob Miller of St. Martin's Press, Hager's literary agent Lucy Stille wrote that she was sending a copy of Hager's book proposal. She explained that his manuscript was "basically a book about a hot new cultural movement, how it got hot and who makes it happen." She referred to Hager as, "the foremost chronicler of graffiti artists, break dancers and rap dee-jays." The fact that she referred to hip hop as a new cultural movement combined with the fact that Hager felt the need to create a work that basically outlined the basic premises behind the movement shows how unaware most of New York City was concerning hip hop.

Unlike other New York City papers in the early 1980s, the editors of the *Village Voice* allowed for the publication of a considerable number of articles pertaining to hip hop, and most of the articles were not devastatingly negative. Most of the articles the *Voice* put out took hip hop seriously, just as Hager's book did in 1984. Hager himself was a journalist for the *Village Voice* and wrote many articles outlining hip hop culture. He truly was the foremost chronicler of the culture. From the early eighties forward, Hager wrote strong pieces dedicated to the founding fathers of the culture including Afrika Bambaataa.[54] Hager not only worked hard to explain these hip hoppers' rise to underground ghetto fame, but he also included testimony that described how hip hoppers replaced gang activities with hip hop events. Hager devoted a lot of attention to the legacy of Bambaataa's Zulu Nation and wrote works that showed how Bambaataa and others served as role models for youngsters around the city, especially those from Bambaataa's home of the Bronx. Contrary to popular belief, Bam advised his followers not to drink, smoke, or fight and also stressed the importance of an education. Hager made sure this fact was known. Hager also foreshadowed the vast and deeply entrenched impact rap would have in the years to come. He states:

> Who knows? In another five years, hip hop could be considered the most significant artistic achievement of the decade. There are certainly signs that its influence is on the rise….Few New York subcultures in the past decade have been

[54] Steven Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip Hop," *Village Voice*, 21 September 1982, 69, 72-73.

> so relentlessly creative as the one that has given us rap music, graffiti writing, and break dancing, perhaps the first youth culture to put its highest premium on individual imagination….If subcultures are the experimental laboratory where society tests new cultural concepts, then hip hop represents the most imaginative leap forward since the 60s, hip hop has the capacity to infiltrate and subvert the mass media culture, energizing it with a fresh supply of symbols, myths, and values.[55]

Hager was not interested only in the musical pillars of hip hop. He was also fascinated with the graffiti art world. Hager wrote many pieces that covered graffiti artistry and often landed interviews with his subjects, something other writers would probably have been terrified to attempt. Hager explained to mainstream New Yorkers that graffiti writing had survived to become a legitimate art form in the eyes of many New York art lovers.[56] Hager dug up historical evidence that showed that graffiti writing had been considered legitimate art a decade prior when multiple books and magazine articles were published that critiqued and analyzed graffiti artwork.[57] Hager chronicled graffiti's evolution from the status of a street conscious art form to a "legit" variety of art, showable to the Manhattan art world.

Hager's stance on hip hop as art was very honest at a time when most writers in New York simply criticized the art for what it was not. Hager wrote

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[55] Steven Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip Hop," *Village Voice*, 21 September 1982, 69, 72-73.

[56] Steven Hager, "Graffiti: Is the Art World Ready for it?" *New York Daily News*, 30 March 1981, M1-M2.

[57] Hager was referring to the work of Richard Goldstein, Norman Mailer and John Naar, all of whom the artists despised according to Hager.

several stories about graffiti, yet never sugar-coated the true grittiness of the art. He also was well-informed by the hip hop artists themselves, often publishing graffiti artists' own interpretations of their artwork and their opinion on the state of their cultural movement as a whole. In 1973 the United Graffiti Artists (UGA) became the first group of graffiti writers to be welcomed into an art gallery, placing their work on the walls of the Razor Gallery in New York City. Hager explained that the opening of the graffiti exhibits was widely covered by the local media, yet the paintings did not sell for the most part and the exhibits lost their place in the legit art world. As with his other articles, Hager made sure to include quotes from the graffiti artists themselves. In certain instances, as seen in his article on the UGA, graffiti artists would criticize other graffiti writers who "sold-out" to the art world. Hager did not omit this information for fear of creating a less glorified and "acceptable" image of hip hop art.

Instead, he focused on the opinions of writers like the Fabulous Five. To this group, placing your artwork in a gallery in Manhattan and swearing to never write on trains again meant that you had taken the heart and soul out of graffiti writing. To sell out to the refined taste of the art world meant that you had lost touch with what it meant to be a writer. Writing on trains and subway walls was more than a defiant violation of the law. It was more than a simple middle-finger to the system or white folks. Graffiti writing was a form of cultural resistance that was intended to make those outside the culture uncomfortable; it was not intended to be hung in their living rooms or on their gallery walls. Graffiti was meant to be

"in your face" while you rode the subway or the train. It was meant to cause you to see and experience the grimier side of the inner city. Graffiti writers took their art to the streets because they believed "painting the trains is what gives our work credibility."[58] Hager's work described a schism in the culture of hip hop that constantly plagues the culture through the present day: old school versus new school, underground versus mainstream.

Other than the *Village Voice* and a few sporadic articles in various popular New York City newspapers, hip hop was virtually ignored and/or distorted throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s. During what many old school hip hoppers refer to as the "golden years" of hip hop, writers from the *Village Voice* were advocates for a more open-minded interpretation of hip hop culture. They seemed to understand that hip hop was a reflection of daily life for many people and that hip hop music was basically a way for artists to share that lived reality with individuals of their own class and members of the dominant culture. As seen through the work of Steven Hager, these writers made attempts to illustrate the complexities of hip hop culture. It is also easy to overstate the positive impact of the *Voice* because the information included in the articles, like Hager's work on Afrika Bambaataa, was often intermingled with information on the violence of

[58] Steven Hager, "Graffiti: Is the Art World Ready for it?" *New York Daily News*, 30 March 1981, M1-M2.

street gangs, which were mostly composed of black and brown inner-city youth.[59] Hip hop's history haunted it and motivated it simultaneously.

Many hip hoppers claim that it was the film *WildStyle* that brought the art-forms of DJing, emceeing, break-dancing, and graffiti writing together under the single cultural name of hip hop. According to Fab 5 Freddy: "at that time people weren't seeing all these different elements as one thing, you know? It was like people doing graffiti were just doing graffiti. Rapping people were rapping. The break-dance scene would go on at hip-hop parties, but it was pretty much like a Latin thing….So I had this idea to bring these things together, and Charlie was like, 'This is cool.'"[60] Fab 5 Freddy may not have considered the pillars to be united before *WildStyle*, but the case could be made that since emceeing and break-dancing went hand in hand with and depended on DJing, in reality the connections were valid. Just because outsiders did not understand the connections between the pillars does not mean those connections did not exist. And just because certain hip hoppers chose to master one aspect of the culture does not mean that the pillars did not have any sort of connection to one another.

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[59] Steven Hager, "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip Hop," *Village Voice*, 21 September 1982, 69, 72-73.

[60] Fricke and Ahearn, *Yes Yes Y'all*, 290. It should be noted that even though people chose specific elements of hip hop to perform, the culture was in a way connected before "WildStyle." Hip hop's origins in gangs, and the fact that Emceeing and break-dancing went hand in hand with and depended on DJing, shows that even though it may not have been viewed as a culture by outsiders, in reality the connections were very real.

By 1984 hip hop was solidified into one cultural movement, though many people in the city had no clue about the complexity of the culture or its main purposes.[61] To the average New Yorker, graffiti was still an eyesore, and the Sugar Hill Gang's song "Rapper's Delight," was the only dose of rap music they were familiar with. Even those who knew about the ghetto-oriented culture doubted its ability to survive as a legitimate art form. Little did they know, hip hop would soon storm the music business and also become the nation's foremost emblem of what the dominant culture feared and despised.

[61] The fact that Lucy Stille, Steven Hager's Literary Agent, had to describe what hip hop was to the publishers and the fact that Hager, Nelson George, Sally Banes, and other hip hop journalists were still describing the culture to their readers in after 1984, shows that the vast majority of the population, both within and outside New York City, were fairly unfamiliar with the culture, even though it was established by 1984.

CHAPTER III

RISKY BUSINESS: THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE AND MISOGYNY IN RAP MUSIC

West Coast hip hop began to blossom in the late eighties and by the early nineties hip hoppers across the country, including those in New York City, subscribed to West Coast hip-hop culture. They purchased the albums of artists like Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, N.W.A., Ice Cube, and Ice-T. Gangsta rap spread like a wildfire, and the violence and misogyny that was once described in songs to educate the masses on social ills, was put into a different context. By the early nineties descriptions of violence in hip hop music became centered on bragging about gang lifestyles. Gangsterism was no longer seen as an outside force, as Run from Run D.M.C. tried to explain in 1986 in the wake of concert violence. The links between gang activity and rap were once again merged, like they were in the early stages of the movement. However, the circumstances were different in the nineties than they were in the 1970s. Gangs like the Cryps and Bloods were nationwide killing machines, unlike the gangs of New York City in the seventies. The level of misconduct, the selling of crack cocaine, and the scale of brutality that gang members participated in was much more violent and widespread than the activity of the young gang members who turned to hip hop in the seventies. West Coast rappers claimed to be members of these violent gangs and glorified the lifestyle of extreme violence that accompanied gang activity. By the early nineties journalists across the nation, including those in New York City, had maintained a twenty-year long and

overwhelmingly biased image of hip hop. These newspapers introduced mainstream readers to simple interpretations of hip hop that misrepresented the vast majority of artists. By the nineties the media was willing to pay attention to the genre because of the outrage expressed by many parents whose teenage children were listening to West Coast gangsta rap. As result, it was very difficult for hip-hop artists like KRS One, NAS, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, the Roots, and Common, who built their images around socially conscious messages, to receive any sort of positive reaction on the part of the print media. The groundwork for stereotypical perceptions of hip hop was laid by the New York City print media beginning in the seventies and early eighties. When West Coast hip hop emerged and became the most popular form of rap music in the late eighties and early nineties the door that had been opened by the print media decades prior was kicked wide open. The media capitalized on the fact that the gangsta' rap emphasized violence.

Although the media does not have a brainwashing effect as some scholars believe it does, the consequences of its messages are very real, especially when it comes to informing the public about controversy surrounding popular culture. Beginning with Charles Lindbergh, mainstream America became engrossed in concern for celebrities. Hip hoppers became Charles Lindbergh's of the late-twentieth-century, oddly enough. The media played a pivotal role in the expression of the appeal of celebrity status and critiqued its origins all in the same breath. However, the rappers, DJ's, emcees, graffiti artists, and b-boys and girls, unlike Charles Lindbergh, resided in the overwhelmingly black and working-class sectors of society. The lyrics, aerosol strokes, moves, and riffs of hip hoppers were reflections of the status of young black people in America. This fact

forced hip hop into a cultural realm nuanced with unique yet all too familiar circumstances.

Though the mainstreaming of hip hop culture cannot be credited to one single person or group of hip hoppers, a lot of credit, or blame depending on what type of hip hop fan you are, should be given to Russell Simmons and the artists he promoted in the mid-1980s. The Simmons family still continues to capitalize on hip hop as popular culture, and it is responsible for the growth of billion dollar businesses related to hip hop culture, such as urban fashion-wear.

Perhaps Simmons and his family's lucrative empire can be attributed to Russell's unique yet practical interpretation of hip hop and ghetto culture. Since his early involvement in the business, Simmons has referred to hip hop as "black teenage music" and has refused to place hip hop in the position of becoming dichotomized as a "positive" or "negative" influence. In an interview with Nelson George published in the *Village Voice*, Simmons stated, "I want to make successful black heroes, like what I've tried to do with Run D.M.C. and Kurtis. I didn't say 'positive' because that's a trap. It's got to be real." Russell saw hip hop as the double edged sword it was and would continue to be. Hip hop, as youth music and as a child of the ghetto, was meant to be intense and rebellious. It was meant to be "real" in Russell's words. Being "real" in hip hop culture does not (and certainly did not then) mean preaching a socially conscious message at every chance. Rather, hip hoppers believed that being real meant staying true to the roots of the culture. It meant progressing without cutting ties with the ghetto. They viewed

cutting ties with the ghetto as a sin because it would take the heart and soul out of the music and the culture as a whole. To hip hoppers removing the ghetto from rap would alter the music so much so that it would become unrecognizable to its followers.[62]

The opportunity for the music to have a social and political impact on the ghetto and the nation as a whole also existed, and Simmons wanted to capitalize on that possibility, when it presented itself. But to continuously make the attempt to label hip hop as positive backed the culture into a corner. When a song or album emerged within the hip hop community that made no apologies for grim lyrics or crude style the media was supplied with ammunition to attack the culture. Simmons recognized the fact that a politically charged rap would resonate with black teens, just as "The Message" had in 1982.

One of the first groups promoted by Russell Simmons was Run D.M.C., and it quickly became the poster-child for the rebel attitude that had became synonymous with hip hop. Though Run DMC's lyrics and swagger do not hold a candle to other hip hop artists of the 1990s in terms of foul language or arrest records, Run DMC did represent the bad-boy, hip-hop image during their rise to fame. In 1986 Run DMC put out an album entitled "Raising Hell." The title of the album alone attracted the media to the group and allowed journalists to create headlines that portrayed the group as bad boys. Though the lyrics sounded rough and tough in tone and style, the actual words and verses

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[62] Nelson George, "Rappin' With Russell: Eddie Murphying the Flak-Catchers," *Buppies, B Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 46-58. This work originally appeared in the *Village Voice*, New York, 30 April 1985.

in the songs were more about empowerment within the black community and inner cities than they were about violence or any other negative connotation. One song from "Raising Hell" entitled "Proud to be Black" illustrates this point clearly:

> D.M.C., the man, that's causin the beef
> I got a message for the world so listen up it's brief
> Like Malcolm X said I won't turn the right cheek
> Got the strength to go the length, if you wanna start beef
> Start beef!
>
> Chorus
> You know I'm proud to be black y'all
> and real brave y'all
> And motherfucker I could never be a slave y'all
> So take that!!
>
> There was a man - an inventor - who invented so well
> He invented a fortune - for a man named Bell
> George Washington Carver, made the peanut great
> Showed any man with a mind, could create
> You read about Malcolm X - in the history text
> Jesse Owens broke records, Ali broke necks
> What's wrong with ya man? How can you be so dumb?
> LIKE DR. KING SAID, WE SHALL OVERCOME![63]

By calling upon the memories of the past, including the legacies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., Run DMC made it clear that hip hop was no longer in its infancy stage and had developed into more than a simple product of gang culture and inner-city violence. Nor was it a hodge-podge business, but it was certainly on its way to becoming a thriving capitalist endeavor. Though hip-hop culture had always been about cultural

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[63] Run D.M.C., "Proud to be Black," *Raising Hell*, Arista Records, 1986.

resistance to a certain degree, by the mid-1980s the music scene had moved from the ghettos of New York to the popular clubs of Manhattan, and hip-hop developed into a style that purposely rebelled. Before the mid-1980s "The Message" was probably the most popular rap song that was also a reflection of the society's major economic and racial problems. But the message within "The Message" did not reach as many ears as the message Run DMC conveyed in their work. By 1986 hip hop had become popular culture and Run DMC, along with LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys, and Whodini, embarked on a tour that hit sixty-four cities across the nation, spreading their rebel culture to anyone who would listen.[64]

Thanks to Russell Simmons and his associates, any political message placed in hip hop music, including messages of black power, would definitely reach millions of ears. Due to their ignorance of the true nature and goals of black power organizations, many journalists reinforced the idea that black power represented a violent and unnecessary force that threatened the authority of the government and sought to accomplish white demise. The only memory and awareness many Americans had regarding black power was what the media published in the late 1960s and 1970s. Images of Black Panthers armed with automatic weapons and stern expressions resonated with Americans who lived through the turbulent decades of the sixties and seventies. Many were unaware of the Panthers' free breakfast programs and free health care

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[64] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 209.

offerings.[65] Using Malcolm X's name in a rhyme always conjures up mixed emotions about self-defense and a resistance to white authority. To hip hoppers and those who interpreted hip hop as a creative art form, Run D.M.C.'s lyrics in "Proud to be Black" would definitely fall into the "positive" category in terms of its overall message.

Journalists recognized that the song and the album were throw-backs to older forms of black power. However, they did not explain to their readers the positive impact that could result from such messages. Therefore, the song "Proud to be Black" and the 1986 album "Raising Hell" was portrayed as a simple form of black aggression, not a politically conscious message. There were exceptions to these negative interpretations of black power and Run D.M.C. Though many doubted rap's ability to survive as a popular form of music, by the mid-1980s a few New York City journalists, following in the footsteps of individuals like Steven Hager, recognized that rap's rise to pop culture status coincided with its choice to question the inequalities around the nation, particularly those of the urban settings.[66] Robert Palmer of the *New York Times* recognized the connections between Jamaican reggae music, known for its social consciousness, and rap:

> The complex associations between Jamaican and New York rapping have not yet been fully explored. But the two subjects preferred by the Jamaican artists - protests against racism and pleas for racial solidarity on the one hand, boasting self-delectation on the other - are also the principal subjects on New York rap records. The rap duo that calls itself Run-D.M.C. recently made an album of that

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[65] Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, (Fayetteville Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2006).

[66] Palmer compares Run D.M.C.'s lyrics to that of Yellowman, a Jamaican toaster (poet) musician of the eighties who balanced a political and socially conscious rhetoric with boasts of "sexual prowess."

> name (on Profile, 250 West 57th Street, New York 10107) that presents an exceptionally sparse and spartan sound, mostly unadorned drum-machine rhythms, synthesizer colorings, and declamatory recitations. "Blacks rise higher every day," they chant, "but we receive much lower pay; it's like that, that's the way it is.[67]

Even so, as Russell Simmons indicated in his interview with Nelson George, most hip hoppers were not willing to categorize their art as wholly politically motivated. Doing so would limit the art form in terms of creativity and make hip hop a target for critics. While Palmer's article is an example of coverage that enlightened readers concerning the complex and socially conscious lyrics present in hip hop music, articles like this were the rare case and rarely explained the dual agenda of many hip hop artists to balance their politically conscious messages with music that entertains.

Not apologizing for the intense tone and subject matter of their lyrics definitely put artists like Run D.M.C. in a position to be classified as promoters of a negative image, especially when violence accompanied their tours. Even though Run D.M.C. and other artists backed by Russell Simmons and Def Jam Records did not promote violence, if and when any violent or illegal activity took place at their concerts, they indirectly became the target of the media. The articles published by the New York mainstream media often made sure to explain that Run D.M.C. did not promote violence, but the press releases also insinuated that the image Run D.M.C. promoted was one of "toughness." In August of 1986 the nationwide tour that Run D.M.C., LL Cool J, Kurtis

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[67] Robert Palmer, "The Audience for Rappers Broadens," *New York Times,* 23 May 1984, C24.

Blow, and Whodini embarked on took a turn for the worst. While performing at a Long Beach, California, venue gang members from the Los Angeles area wreaked havoc on the audience, stabbed at least forty-two fans, and shot one. Naturally, mainstream newspapers dedicated headline space to this violent occurrence. An Associated Press release published in the *New York Times* told that Run D.M.C. worked diligently on socially conscious projects, but harped on the perceived image of Run D.M.C. stating, "But the group also revels in an image of toughness, and has dubbed its current album and tour 'Raising Hell.'"[68]

What the media of New York failed to fully promote was that hip hop was not to blame for the violence that occurred. The majority of rap concert-goers went to be entertained and see their favorite rap artists perform. However, because hip hop also attracted violent and negligent individuals, particularly gang members, the entire culture was assumed to be violent. The fact that concert after concert in the eighties attracted this type of individual did not help the overall image of rap music and hip hop culture. Because hip hop often took on political messages that resonated with a variety of groups who resided in the urban centers of economic decay, naturally, gang members, who were products of these environments, were attendees as well. Rap artists could not control this fact. They often spoke out against the violence that occurred and placed blame on the negligence of security officers and police forces.

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[68] "42 Are Hurt as Gang Fighting Breaks Up California Concert," *New York Times*, 19 August 1986, A18.

Concerning the Long Beach incident, Run of Run D.M.C. rebutted, "These kids have nothing to do with Run D.M.C. They would have hit me in the head, too. They are against everything I am for." Run also said, "There was a bunch of kids, gang members, and wherever they walked the crowd would move out of their way. They just took over, and the security was soft." The road manager for Run D.M.C. also added, "They should have not been let inside the building. We had two Detroit and two Philadelphia shows with no problems. The knuckleheads never got into the building."[69] Though the hip hop community saw these acts of random violence at rap concerts as the product of government sanctioned poverty, the print media of New York City did little to promote this idea. While the journalists often did not directly state it, the language and the tone of their articles that covered violence at rap concerts was parallel with the idea that there was a direct link between the art and violence. Many articles did not separate the culture of hip hop and the culture of violence that stereotyped minorities around the nation.

African American newspapers, though they cannot be held liable for the majority of the biased information published regarding hip hop culture, promoted an image of hip hop during the eighties that misrepresented what the culture was about at heart. The *Amsterdam News* often published articles that bolstered the more critical view on hip hop and at times seemed to side with the black middle class' opinion that hip hop should be ignored as a legitimate cultural influence in the black community. The *Amsterdam News* summarized the feeling of unease citizens had regarding the arts and the ability of artistic

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[69] "42 Are Hurt," *New York Times,* 19 August 1986: A18.

leaders to address concerns the community had.[70] Even though hip-hop culture, and rap music in particular, was a reflection of the daily realities faced by millions of African Americans and working-class people, the journalists chose not to credit hip hop as such. Journalists and editors asked: where was the socio-cultural influence going to flow from if artistic leaders did not get their act together? Employees of the *Amsterdam News* and members of certain sectors of the black community ignored the fact that it was already flowing from hip hop!

When a group of violent individuals stormed through the crowd at a rap concert on Long Island in 1988, killed one person, Julio Fuentes, and wounded several others, the print media of New York City made sure to spill the details to local readers and to subscribers across the nation. Immediately, the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and the *New York Amsterdam News* granted the story space in their columns. The *New York Times* called on the knowledge of several employees of the Nassau Coliseum, where the incident occurred. The reporter, Eric Schmitt, also interviewed "officials" from other arenas to get their opinion of the incident at the Nassau Coliseum.[71]

The publication of the following quotations clearly illustrates how the media's portrayal of hip hop was biased and only took certain opinions (those that were biased against the genre) into perspective. The media's power of persuasion existed in the

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[70] Yusef A Salaam, "Are Artistic Concerns Lagging Behind?" *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 July 1988, 28.

[71] Eric Schmitt, "Nassau Coliseum Bans Rap Concerts Til Murder Inquiry Ends," *New York Times*, 13 September 1988, B4.

journalists' choice in language. "This was a gang of chain snatchers," said Hilary Hartung, the coliseum's director of marketing. "The kids here were wearing a lot of jewelry. They were a perfect target." As if the victims asked or deserved to be robbed. Hartung went further and defended the Coliseum's safety policies. She also made sure to inform the *New York Times* that she was confident that the assaults were isolated events and that the safety of the rest of the crowd remained under control. The *New York Times* reporter, Eric Schmitt, quite possibly included this particular quote in his article because he wanted to protect hip hop from being pinpointed as the cause of illegitimate violence. He may have wanted to reassure the readers, if you will, that hip hop was not the cause of the fiasco that killed Julio Fuentes. If so, the reporter failed to realize that relying on this quote as a shield for hip hop was faulty. Hartung was an employee of the Nassau Coliseum. Of course, she would say that these were isolated incidents in an attempt to assure the public that it was safe to return to the venue in the future.

Though the print media may not have conjured an attempt to discredit hip hop, the article concerning this incident did not provide any testimony from the performers themselves, nor did the article give readers any information that explained the complexities surrounding the culture of hip hop. The media's biased coverage of the violence at Nassau Coliseum simply reinforced cultural racism toward African Americans. By quoting representatives of other similar venues in order to compare their experiences with rap concerts, to that of the Nassau Coliseum, journalists reaffirmed the racist idea that large numbers of African Americans could not congregate without turning on one another in violence. Workers from other venues stated that rap concerts called for

extra security.[72] Schmitt, and the police, also intended to show a pattern of violence associated with rap concerts. Schmitt's article stated, "Last month, there were several stabbings at a Run-DMC rap concert at the coliseum, but no one was killed, the police said."[73] This particular article provided readers with information that portrayed hip hop as the culprit that stirred the pot of violence in the African-American community.

Quotes like that of Carol Kirkendall, the concert promoter who organized the event, were coded in radicalized and classist language and showed that traditional social fears were still alive and well in New York. Kirkendall's statements revealed the organizers' ignorance in thinking crime had a specific address, as if the suburban sprawl of Long Island was crime-free anyway. For an individual steeped in potent fears of the poor and people of color, the choice to hold the event away from the boroughs made sense. However, the journalist did nothing to provide readers with an opposing viewpoint. Kirkendall stated, "We felt it would be better to play on Long Island. We didn't want to take a chance with inner-city problems and play at Madison Square Garden."[74]

In the late 1980s certain sectors of the black community itself still had reservations about accepting hip hop culture as a legitimate form of art. A few months after the incident at Nassau Coliseum, the *New York Amsterdam News* printed an article

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[72] Schmitt, "Nassau Coliseum Bans Rap," *New York Times*, 13 September 1988, B4.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

entitled, “Rapping about rhyme and reason of Black Poetry ’88.” This article reflects not only the media’s ability to color the public perception of hip hop, but also illustrates how the black community itself was divided concerning the youth culture, especially when it came to the lyrics of rappers. Claiming that hip hop music was a “bastardization of black poetry,” the article states, “they are not committed to the same revolution that the poets before were.”[75] If in saying “revolution” these particular African American poets and artists meant the prolongation of black power into the 1980s as an agency of social change in their communities, or the continuation in a demand for social justice, the cases of Public Enemy, KRS One, Big Daddy Kane, and various others, claims that their work embodied black empowerment and social justice contradicted the Poet’s claims and the article’s tome.

African Americans who considered themselves “real artists” in comparison to hip hoppers blamed the “illusion of money” for rap music’s flaws. Artists in the black community expressed that they were not impressed with hip hop’s ability to inspire the masses, and community members wanted to take a serious look at poetry and essentially get back to their roots of who they were as a people. The author of the article insinuated that poets knew that whatever they were, it was not hip hop. The individuals quoted by the journalists wanted the readers of the *Amsterdam News* to make a clear distinction between rap music and their own art-form of poetry. Rap music, it seems, was a threat to a different, more “acceptable” form, of black culture. Yet contrary to popular belief,

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[75] Abiodun Oyewole, “Rapping About Rhyme and Reason of Black Poetry ’88,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 December 1988, 25.

rappers relayed many of the same public service announcements to their communities as traditional black poets did. Not only does this particular article reveal the black community's own dilemma over hip hop culture, but it also is a great example of how the media, even in the black community, inadvertently served as a promoter of a negative image of hip hop. Even though it was intended to shed a positive light on a particular form of black culture, the statements made in this article did nothing to shed light on the socially conscious efforts being made by hip hoppers across the city at the time. Hip hop was pitted against its own cultural forefathers.[76]

The year 1987 was marked by the release of several rap albums that shocked the nation, and those albums were often misunderstood by the media. At times, mainstream publications manipulated specific lyrics from certain songs and created an image of hip hop that was far from reality. 1987 was the year one of the first gangsta' rap albums dropped. Ice-T, a Los Angeles, West Coast rapper released his debut album "Rhyme Pays," and this album alone sparked incredible amounts of controversy. Boogie Down Productions (the duo of Scott La Rock and KRS One) and Public Enemy also released albums during 1987. Both of these albums were considered controversial as well. There were vast differences in the lyrics of KRS One and Public Enemy compared to Ice-T. While KRS One and Public Enemy spoke out against racism, poverty, police brutality, and purposely illustrated the harsh realities of ghetto life to educate listeners, Ice-T took a different approach, rapping about his gangsta lifestyle steeped in money, women, and

[76] The poets referred to in this article claimed to be the forefathers of rap music because of their rhyme-talk style of spoken word poetry that was started in the 1960s and 1970s.

cars. Ice-T did not appear to create music for purely educational value. Instead, he created raps about the West Coast gangsta lifestyle for pure entertainment value.

Even with Ice-T's emergence onto the rap scene, the overwhelming majority of hip hop music was still not misogynistic or insanely violent for no apparent reason. Hip hop artists claimed that the violence that surfaced within the lyrics of the majority of eighties rap songs was promoted as public service announcements of sorts. The KRS One and Scott La Rock song "9MM Goes Bang" is a prime example of this type of message:

> Wa da da dang
> Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
> Listen to my 9 millimeter go bang
> Wa da da dang
> Wa da da da dang (Ay!)
> This is KRS-One...
>
> Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter
> Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter
> He said I had his girl, I said "Now what are you? Stupid?"
> But he tried to play me out and KRS-One knew it
> He reached for his pistol but it was just a waste
> Cos my 9 millimeter was up against his face
> He pulled his pistol anyway and I filled him full of lead
> But just before he fell to the ground this is what I said...[77]

While many may have seen these lyrics as violent and unnecessary, Boogie Down Productions saw them as a genius way to educate listeners on issues of violence. Essentially, KRS One saw himself as a storyteller whose verses could be viewed as

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[77] Boogie Down Productions, "My 9mm Goes Bang," *Criminal Minded*, B-boy Records, 1987.

stories that contained practical life lessons for people of the plagued inner cities. However, for many media outlets these lyrics were nothing of the sort. Again the connection between violence and hip hop was misunderstood. On the cover of their debut album "Criminal Minded," Scott La Rock and KRS One are seated at a desk, armed with automatic weapons and ammo. The media questioned this album cover and suggested that this image conjured negative stereotypes. However, according to KRS One, he and Scott La Rock "were not advocating violence but, rather, were explaining that people who are criminal minded are the people on top today."[78] When Scott La Rock was shot and killed in 1987 in a random act of violence, the print media did publish positive information about his life. However, the mainstream media also expressed the fact that many people questioned hip hop's link to violence. Coming to hip hop's defense after the death of Scott La Rock, Boogie Down Productions manager Scotty Morris stated, "In some respects rap music and violence go hand in hand, but it's not the music itself, it's the environment. Violence was here long before hip hop."[79] Furthermore, the media rarely questioned the linkage of poverty and oppression with violence in the city. Once again, hip hop artists were forced to defend themselves against media portrayals that misunderstood hip hop and saw it as a cause of violence, not as a reflection of inner city realities. At the time Scott La Rock was murdered, hip hoppers felt the backlash that often occurs when subordinate cultures challenge the hegemonic culture in a controversial way. The media helped reinforce the hegemonic culture by publishing

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[78] Esther Iverem, "Violent Death Halts Rap Musician's Rise," *New York Times,* 31 August 1987, B1.

[79] Ibid.

biased info that did not question the linkage between poverty, racism, and inner city violence.[80]

Certain aspects of Public Enemy's lyrical content, like that of KRS One and Scott La Rock's, was also sensationalized by the print media of New York. There is no denying that the lyrics to Public Enemy's 1987 song "Sophisticated Bitch" are misogynistic. The last two versus of the song represent one of the earliest occurrences of the rise of misogynistic rap lyrics in the latter part of the 1980s:

> Now she wants a sucker but with an attache
> And if you ain't got it, she'll turn you away
> You can smile with stile but you lost your trial
> Cause you got a gold tooth, she thinks you're wild
> She don't want a brother that's true and black
> If you're light, you're alright, better stay back
> Cause the sucker with the bag is out the catch
> With something in his bag keepin' her attached
> The man's got a plan, it's IBM
> The devil at her level, yes it's him
> His Audi she rides, his gold and clothes
> The ill base method, turning up her nose
> Lack a lack a lack, now beaming her up
> She still got the nerve to turn her funky nose up
> Her status looks at us from down below
> Now the bitch is in trouble
> Cause she was so-
> phisticated
>
> Little is known about her past
> So listen to me cause I know her ass
> Used to steal money out her boyfriends clothes

[80] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 19.

And never got caught, so the story goes
She kept doin' that to all her men
Found the wrong man when she did it again
And still to this day people wonder why

He didn't beat the bitch down till she almost died[81]

However, it should be noted that while the overwhelming majority of songs from their album, excluding "Sophisticated Bitch," were songs that were meant to uplift the inner cities, the print media chose to focus on the lyrics that were misogynistic while simultaneously ignoring other politically motivated lyrics. The lyrics were gritty and often shocking, but to Public Enemy shock value not only sold albums, but it got the attention of black people and encouraged them to question the racial and class strife going on around them. The New York print media at times understood Public Enemy's role as storytellers and community activists. However, the mainstream media could not ignore a song like "Sophisticated Bitch." In fact, in certain instances this song became the focal point for rap music as a whole. When the song dropped in 1987, journalists focused on the misogyny rather than the political messages. John Pareles of the *New York Times* considered Public Enemy's album to be an example of, "Rap's typical hatred for women." He stated, "If Mr. D. wants his audiences 'livin' lives civilized from the lessons I taught,' as he says in Raise the Roof, he ought to give up his misogyny."[82] While there is no legitimate excuse for Chuck D and Public Enemy to degrade women, it is simply invalid to suggest that hip hop was by 1987 overwhelming misogynistic.

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[81] Public Enemy, "Sophisticated Bitch," *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, Def Jam Records, 1987.

[82] John Pareles, "Defiance and Rage Hone a Debut Rap Album," *New York Times*, 10 May 1987, H21.

Journalists also stereotyped the majority of rappers as braggarts of violence. Public Enemy and other rappers more than often claimed that they included stories of violence in their albums to educate listeners on political and social issues that were especially important to people of color who dwelled within urban centers across America. However, once again this inclusion of violence in rap lyrics was risky business for socially conscious and politically motivated rap artists. As Tricia Rose explains, they risked reaffirming the stereotypes they wished to eradicate and they risked handing the cultural power they had won back over to the dominant culture that saw them as illegitimate.[83]

Though Public Enemy claimed their violent lyrics were intended to educate the African American community, the group continued to attract negative media attention in the last few years of the eighties. For a period of time, it seems the writers and readers of the *Village Voice* were obsessed with Public Enemy. In the years 1988 and 1989, Public Enemy was at the peak of its career, according to the newspapers and critics. Chuck D, the leader of the group, seemed to be obsessed with making shocking statements, and the media seemed to be totally absorbed in reporting Chuck D's statements for shock value. In an article that rubbed Chuck D. the wrong way, Greg Tate questioned Public Enemy's motives and criticized the group's lyrics for over-simplifying the issues at hand.[84] While Tate certainly made valid points about Public Enemy, and also included some praise for

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[83] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

[84] Greg Tate, "The Devil Made Them Do It," *Village Voice*, 19 July 1988, 71-74.

the group, he directly challenged the group's racialized view and their rhetoric. Tate questioned Public Enemy's interpretation of racism and lyrical advice for the average black man and woman. Tate exposed Public Enemy's weaknesses concerning anti-Semitism, misogyny, and what many considered "reverse racism" towards whites. It is important to recognize the possible impact this article, and others like it, had on the image of Public Enemy and hip hop in general. One of the most "liberal" publications in the nation, the same publication that endorsed Jesse Jackson in his run for the presidency, the same publication that published masses of material on gay-life and rights, doubted the potential impact Public Enemy possessed in terms of socially conscious and politically motivated lyrics.

Although many hip-hop artists refused to label themselves as "positive" artists, as the eighties progressed, some chose to take on the role of the socially conscious rapper and created an entire image around this concept. One artist who did so was KRS One. KRS One launched a campaign called "Stop the Violence" in 1988. This campaign had a theme song, released in 1989, called "Self-Destruction." In the song rappers warn that black-on-black crime must cease. In his first verse, KRS was careful to illustrate to listeners that those who commit crimes against their own people are the exception, not the rule:

> Well, today's topic, self destruction
> It really ain't the rap audience that's buggin
> It's one or two suckas, ignorant brothers
> Trying to rob and steal from one another
> You get caught in the mid
> So to crush the stereotype here's what we did

We got ourselves together so that you could unite
and fight for what's right
Not negative 'cause the way we live is positive
We don't kill our relatives[85]

Rappers who lent verses to the song, particularly MC Delight of Stetsasonic, also proclaimed that they, and thus hip hop culture, were not the inventors of black-on-black crime and should not be held solely responsible for crimes categorized as such:

Pop pop pop when it's shot who's to blame?
Headlines, front page, and rap's the name
MC Delight's here to state the bottom line
That black on black crime was way before our time[86]

In the late 1980s, however, coverage of this positive hip hop movement was very limited. Instead of focusing on the "Stop the Violence Campaign," the *New York Times* chose to focus again on violence that occurred at particular rap concerts.[87] Don Terry's article that covered a shooting at a 1988 Big Daddy Kane concert did not directly blame hip hop music for violence. However, the fact that articles like Terry's that covered violence at concerts heavily outweighed coverage of socially conscious hip hop indicates that the print media of New York City was not interested in promoting the fact that hip hop had a purpose beyond violence. While Terry's article did not directly link hip hop to violence, his coverage did not promote the fact that Big Daddy Kane was a politically

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[85] Stop the Violence Movement, "Self Destruction," Jive Records, 1989.

[86] Stop the Violence Movement, "Self Destruction," Jive Records, 1989.

[87] Don Terry, "Man Is Shot to Death As a Gunman Fires Into a Concert Crowd," *New York Times*, 2 September 1988, B2.

conscious rapper that denounced violence and inner city conflict. Terry merely mentioned that Kane was the headliner.[88] Instead of highlighting the fact that many rappers were making strides to educate their listeners on significant social issues, writers described scenes of violence in detail, as did Terry, and at times made comments that oversimplified the linkage between rap music and violence. Similar to the coverage of the violence that occurred earlier in the decade during the first nationwide Def Jam tour featuring Run D.M.C., the mainstream media once again failed to explain that violence at concerts was not the result of hip hop culture; rather, violence was the product of the neglect of the inner cities. While reporters for the *Times* may have thought they were simply reporting the facts, the stereotypes that these articles evoked bolstered racial bias against people of color. Virtually ignoring the positive actions of hip hoppers, writers for the *Times* and other print sources voiced an ill-informed message to their readers that hip hop had a terrible influence on young black people.

Like KRS One, many West Coast rappers also claimed to provide a public service announcement to their listeners. While most articles stereotyped these rappers as simply gang bangers, Charles Rogers from the *New York Amsterdam News* provided an outlet in his column that attempted to explain why the West Coast was so enraged. In a review of Compton's Most Wanted's album "Music to Driveby" Rogers included quotations from Eight, a member of the group that described the reasoning behind their lyrics. Rogers admitted that the lyrics were full of shocking and violent imagery, but also told why

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[88] Ibid.

Eight and his crew included such imagery. Rogers stated, "driveby shootings are almost a daily event, cutting down innocent bystanders as well as gangbangers. Eight, however, says his album isn't condoning the deadly practice, but is nevertheless a reality that he's compelled to report on. By doing that, he's hoping he'll wake up the ones doing it and those responsible for stopping it."[89] Roger's articles and those like his that provide a more unbiased view of hip hop are the rare case in the historical record. Rogers never made excuses for violence, yet he provided an outlet that allowed hip hop artists to express to the general public why they made the decisions they made regarding their art.

In the same year that Rogers published his review of Compton's Most Wanted's album he published a review of the album "From Pyramids to Projects," by 2 Kings in Cipher. Though Rogers admits that the images on the video that coincided with the group's single "For the Brothers Who Ain't Here" were disturbing and hard-edged, Rogers provided the readers of the *Amsterdam News* with explanations as to why these disturbing images were applicable to the plot of the album. He included quotes from the members of the group to shed light on their rationale behind what Rogers calls "reality rap." He, unlike other writers for the *Amsterdam News*, compared them to the Last Poets as opposed to stating that they were not in the same cultural realm. Rogers also made it clear that rap was not all about the Benjamins: "For this group the music-business isn't a money-making, ego-faking exercise. It's a forum to express their true selves." Rogers included a quote by Aman Ro, "We know that the entertainment factor is a large part of

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[89] Charles E. Rogers, "Different Stages: Compton's Most Wanted, Music to Driveby," *New York Amsterdam News*, 31 October 1992, 28.

the business, and we do that on stage. But for us it's very important to get our message across. The ultimate goal is to help our own."[90]

In 1990 when Big Daddy Kane appeared on the Arsenio Hall show he revealed much about the character of hip hop as a culture. He, according to another article by Charles Rogers, admitted that he refused to perform in front of a specially-made backdrop on the set of the show because it was "graffiti saturated." Rogers article revealed that Kane had decided to incorporate political messages in his songs and wanted to help inspire improvement in the black community: "There are more political messages coming through in my music. I'm particularly concerned with young people, especially young black people, in terms of social-economic security, independence, and education." Once again, Rogers seized upon an opportunity to portray hip hop as a socially conscious movement as opposed to other writers who seized upon the existence of violence and misogyny in hip hop to create attractive headlines.[91]

Charles Rogers, like Steven Hager of the *Village Voice*, seemed to understand hip hop's struggle with balancing educating and appealing to the masses and simultaneously striving to challenge the dominant culture. The work of Rogers, Hager, Marie Moore, and Nelson George were the rare exceptions when it came to journalism covering hip hop. While these writers did not ignore or attempt to legitimize the presence of violence,

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[90] Charles E. Rogers, "Different Stages: 2 Kings in a Cipher," *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 January 1992, 20.

[91] Charles E. Rogers, "Big Daddy Kane Reigns Again," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 March 1990, 27.

misogyny, anti-Semitism, homophobia, etc., in hip hop, they made an effort to explain the complexities behind the presence of those negative elements and chose to emphasize the political awareness and socially conscious messages promoted by hip hoppers.

It was difficult for journalists to understand the complexities that surrounded rap and hip hop culture more generally. As a counterculture and as a subordinate group hip hop made strides to expose the dominant culture for its prejudices and injustices. However, because of the choices particular hip hoppers made concerning the manner in which they expressed their outrage with the dominant culture, they in turn reinforced stereotypes concerning themselves and their fans. This same issue continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Hip hoppers across the country are plagued with difficult decisions concerning how they will convey their messages to their audiences in an effective manner without reaffirming social stereotypes about young black people.[92] The fact that hip hop is big business now makes these decisions even more difficult for artists. The media continues to oversimplify the facts surrounding the culture as well. Rarely are headlines about rap music positive and rarely do journalists take it upon themselves to explain the complexities of the mission of the counterculture.

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[92] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In the past year Americans were exposed to many celebrity racist tirades. Duane "Dog" Chapman, better known as Dog the Bounty Hunter, was exposed by the national media when he went on a racist rant condemning his own son for dating an African American women. In a recorded phone conversation Chapman repetitively used the "N-word" to describe his son's partner and went into great detail about why his son would be forced to disassociate himself with his girlfriend or else. In November of 2006, Michael Richards who played the hilarious character of Kramer on the sitcom "Seinfeld," was also recorded screaming racial slurs in a deranged manner. Richards' tirade was carried out in public while performing a live comedy act.

The most infamous example of a racial tirade in the twenty-first century to date was when Don Imus directed sexist and racist remarks at the Rutgers women's basketball team, calling them "nappy headed hoes." Certain members of the media ignored America's lengthy history of racial and sexist strife and instead chose to investigate how *black*-male chauvinism affects "helpless" black females. Many members of the media pinpointed hip hop as the fundamental cause for such a tirade and insinuated that because many hip hop artists use derogatory language to describe women, Don Imus should not be held responsible for his antics. In other words, Imus was only mocking what he thought blackness embodied. According to the logic of this thinking, if wealthy white

men like Imus are racist or sexist, it is only because they learned it from black males, particularly rappers. For example, in 2007 an article in the *New York Beacon* attempted to revive the late C. Delores Tucker's fight against lewd lyrics by drawing links between Don Imus and rappers. "It's time to pick up where Tucker left off and declare language that degrades females, whether uttered by Don Imus or rappers, must not be tolerated." This particular article also pinpointed several hip hop artists including Tupac Shakur and Eminem. While attacking Shakur and Eminem is not particularly surprising because of their typical lyrical content, it is surprising to see KRS One under scrutiny for his position on lyrics. He also denounced Tucker's campaign though he was and is still known for his politically and socially conscious raps.[93] Veronica Hendrix of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* stated, "It is remains frustrating that they don't get it. In fact, they don't see any nexus between [Don Imus]' comments about African American women and their own brand of disparaging lyrics about African American women captured in the melodic beats of their edgy songs."[94]

In opposition to the biased coverage of hip hop that emerged during the Imus scandal, Kalefa Sanneh of the *New York Times* elaborated on the connections being made between Don Imus and hip hop artists. Sanneh questioned why the media was looking to artists who made their name in the early 1990s for evidence that Imus was a product of their lyrics: "The strangest thing about the last few weeks was the fact that hardly any

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[93] George E Curry "C. DeLores Tucker's Fight Against Offensive Lyrics," *New York Beacon*, 26 April 2007, 8.

[94] Veronica Hendrix "After Imus, Rap is Ripe for Redress," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 26 April 2007, C4.

current hip-hop artists were discussed. (All these years later, we're still talking about Snoop Dogg?) Maybe that's because hip-hop isn't in an especially filthy mood right now. It sounds more light-hearted and clean-cut than it has in years." Sanneh concluded the article with the suggestion that hip hop really did not factor into the Imus scandal: "For all the panicky talk about hip-hop lyrics, the current situation suggests a scarier possibility, both for hip-hop's fans and its detractors. What if hip-hop's lyrics shifted from tough talk and crude jokes to playful club exhortations -- and it didn't much matter? What if the controversial lyrics quieted down, but the problems didn't? What if hip-hop didn't matter that much, after all?"[95]

Why did the media make the choice to focus on hip hop artists instead of white supremacy and sexism? By default, hip hop was the obvious target for the media. In the wake of the Imus incident few television shows questioned the fact that American culture was founded upon and heavily schooled in male chauvinism and racism and that hip hop was merely a reflection of those isms, although many members of the hip hop generation and African American activists did attempt to call attention to the deep-seated problems. The media played a role in creating this skewed opinion of hip hop.

Even in the early years when hip hop was not misogynistic, racist, anti-Semitic, or overwhelmingly violent, the majority of the media coverage was biased and the political motivations artists had were rarely explained by journalists. When violence appeared in

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[95] Kelefa Sanneh "How Don Imus's Problem Became a Referendum on Rap," *New York Times*, 25 April 2007, E1.

early rap songs, rarely did journalists in New York City convey to their readers that hip hop culture, being a counterculture at heart, contained violent imagery for specific reasons. Journalists rarely differentiated between socially conscious rappers and gang bangers. Nor did journalists write about hip hop in such a way that illustrated to their readers that hip hop, though it often risked reaffirming the stereotypes the dominant culture promoted concerning African American working class men and women, strove to detract from popular negative images of African Americans and made strides toward creating positive change in the black community.

As this study illustrates, for years the media published accounts of hip hop that tarnished the image of the culture as a whole. This trend continued into the twenty-first century and repetitively blamed hip hop for Don Imus, Michael Richards, and Dog the Bounty Hunter. Being informed by stereotypical and antique views on black culture and identity, the mainstream American media chose to revitalize and legitimate traditional views of African Americans and hip hop culture and questioned it as the cause for white, wealthy, transgressions as opposed to pointing the finger at the individuals who actually made the specific comments. As Tricia Rose argued in 1994 with *Black Noise*, hip hop had repeatedly, by 2007, legitimated the hegemonic culture it attempted to contradict and discredit.[96] By using violence in lyrics, hip hoppers called attention to themselves, yet as seen in this thesis, their usage of violence was misunderstood by the media and was eventually used against them. This is precisely what happened in the more recent

[96] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 19.

racialized incidents of the twenty-first century. Because the media continues to further amplify negative incidents that occur in hip hop culture and neglects to inform the public of the positive impact hip hop has on the black community and young people in general, this pattern will continue in the future unless a more constructive approach is taken by historians, writers, and public officials when investigating hip hop culture.

In his introduction to *Race Matters,* Cornel West asserts that Americans have by default divided themselves on social issues based on political labels of conservative and liberal, Democrat and Republican. As a result, our ability to create realistic solutions to poverty and racism has become stagnant. According to West, whatever the view, conservative and liberal, "still sees black people as a "problem people."[97] Controversy surrounding hip hop over the past three decades proves that Dr. West's theory on divisive politics is true. Even though many journalists did not intend to harm the image of the black community, the universal view that black people are a troubled race was reinforced by the print media of the late twentieth century in their coverage of hip hop, especially when the topic was rap music specifically. No matter if the papers had reputations of being conservative or liberal, they contributed to the stereotype of hip hop as a culture absent of social and political consciousness.[98]

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[97] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 4-5.

[98] The three main sources used in this work (the *New York Times,* the *Village Voice*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*) are all known for their "liberal" approach to news. If the "liberal" media of New York City was not well versed in hip hop politics, one can only imagine what other more "conservative" publications had to say about hip hop culture.

Michael Eric Dyson says that hip hop should be studied because it gives the voiceless a voice.[99] The problem is very few individuals outside the hip hop community ever saw hip hop as a legitimate voice. Instead, they viewed hip hop as immoral and black. The ideas of what it means to be black and poor in America are still very skewed in a large percentage of the population. Though biological racism is losing its power in America day by day, cultural racism is still prominent, making it difficult for the black community to be heard and understood. In regards to hip hop, the media of the late twentieth century did very little to correct this misguided view of the black community. In looking at the historical record, it is evident that several print media outlets in New York City helped reinforce these backwards views concerning hip hop whether they intentionally did so or not.

[99] Michael Eric Dyson, "The Culture of Hip Hop," in *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, edited by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (London: Routledge, 2004), 61-68.

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