

## **“Yele, Yele”: Caribbean Identity and the Rubric of Race in U.S-Based Hip-Hop**

Conference Paper

Caribbean Studies Association

May 2001

**Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar**

Hip-Hop, since its beginning in the South Bronx, New York in the early 1970s, was influenced by the international dimensions of race and ethnicity. Working class African Americans, Puerto Ricans and English-speaking West Indians formed hip-hop in a culturally dynamic environment that was a direct response to the larger socio-political world around them. Poverty, reduced social resources and pathology were the impetus to the development of the “four elements” of the culture: graffiti art, deejaying, breakdancing and rapping. And though African American would dominate and establish cultural hegemony in hip-hop, the influences of Caribbean-descended rappers has grown and become more expressive since the earliest years of rap. From the pervasive use of the n-word among Caribbean rappers (Latino and Anglophone) and its conspicuous absence from the lyrics of virtually all Chicano rappers, the understanding of Latino identity and race becomes increasingly complex. Central to the discussion of identity is the constant pursuit of authenticity among rappers. For many, authenticity is predicated on fundamentally narrow definitions of race, class and gender. To be sure, the social construction of race is particularly salient when examining the crucible of race in the U.S. rap scene. The complexity of race in rap is a reflection of the dynamic and inexact notions of ethnicity and identity in the larger U.S. society.

The denizens of Hip Hop were a multicultural lot since the veritable nation's founding in the early 1970s. Despite the prevailing notion that it is solely an African American art form, hip-hop has roots that are, in fact, more Pan-African, than popularly perceived. This idea is not novel. Dozens of scholars have taken note of the Puerto Rican and West Indian influences of hip-hop. As Robin Kelly notes, “hip hop's hybridity reflected, in part, the increasingly international character of America's inner cities resulting from immigration, demographic change, and new forms of information, as well as the inventive employment of technology in creating rap music.”<sup>1</sup> Still, other observers often marginalize or entirely ignore the non-African American contributions to hip-hop. Writer Aida Croal argues that “No one questions the origins of rap – that it came out of the Bronx and out of black urban culture.”<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Marvin J. Gladney argues that hip-hop is “the most recent 'seed' in the continuum, of Afrikan-American culture.”<sup>3</sup> For Gladney, hip-hop is inextricably tied to the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. And by extension, hip hop is bound to the musical, folkloric and stylistic traditions of African Americans. While his argument has significant merit, he fails to mention the influence or participation of non-African Americans in the formation of the art. The centrality of Puerto Ricans, for example, is ignored for sake of the “black aesthetic.” And while some overlook non-African Americans, others simply argue that only black men are authentic representatives of hip-hop. In 1999 the New York Times hosted a two-sided debate entitled, “The Hip-Hop Nation: Whose Is It?” writer Toure, argued that, despite the

multiracial origins of the hip-hop nation its "leadership is and will remain black. As it should."<sup>4</sup>

Even hip-hop media maintain the hegemonic hold that African Americans have on the art. A survey of The Source, and other the leading hip-hop magazines, since the late 1980s will find one Latino (Big Pun) soloist and one Latino group, Cypress Hill, out of the cover of hundreds of magazines. In the summer of 2000 Eminem became the first white rapper to appear on the cover of The Source, XXL and Vibe magazines. Latinos, who have been with hip hop since its beginning, have played central roles to the development of b-boying and graffiti art. Though there were early rappers like Charlie Chase, they have been less involved in MCing. This has led to a general ignorance about the involvement of Puerto Ricans to the origins of hip-hop. The cause of the historical myopia stems chiefly from the marketing of hip-hop.

Corporate America has generally been unable to market breakdancing and graffiti art, which fell outside the confines of an easily commodified art. The music, which has been the centerpiece of the culture, was easily marketed throughout the 1980s and 1990s. African Americans had long held hegemony in those two elements. Though turntablism traces its roots to Jamaican-born DJ Kool Herc, African American DJs like Grand Wizard Theodore and Grand Master Flash<sup>5</sup> dominated the scene. Though Jamaican toasting influenced early rapping, it was from an African American lyrical aesthetic, rooted in urban "badman" narratives that gave it its force and character. Several other academic and popular press writers have likewise reduced hip-hop to an African American art, which is quite simply, narrow and incorrect. Some simply reduce all contributions under the rubric of "blackness." While it is easy to situate Latinos and West Indians in the framework of blackness, the popular understanding of Latino exists outside the parameters of the popular understanding of being black. Thus, the question of "authenticity" and race is a complicated one. On one level graffiti and b-boying have been suffused with the talent and artistic input of non-African Americans since their beginnings. In fact, Taki 183, widely considered one of the first hip-hop graffiti artists to achieve notoriety, was a Greek teenager from the Bronx. Subsequent "kings" such as "Zephyr," "Seen" and "Cope2" have also been melanin-deprived. The mostly-Latino Rock Steady Crew is the most popular crew of b-boys and b-girls in the world, while Crazy Legs, a Puerto Rican, is perhaps the most popular b-boy. Some have pointed to Brazilian Copiera as the chief inspiration for b-boying, though original b-boys like Crazy Legs argue that the earliest b-boys found inspiration from the creative dance styles of James Brown in the late 1960s.

The question of authenticity and how race and ethnicity intersect with it is addressed easiest by isolating the music from hip-hop, particularly the lyrics of rap. It is in this realm that we can more effectively address the intellectual process of affirming one's place in hip-hop. The rhymes and styles of rap reveal fascinating examples of how race is perceived in a genre obsessed with "keepin' it real" and a society at large where race is an obsession. In rap, the realest is often the blackest, though the meaning of blackness is in constant flux. Is the black nationalism of early 90s X-Clan the apogee of blackness? Or are N.W.A's gangsta niggas blacker? Is Prodigy the real HNIC or perhaps dead prez reigns as the blackest of the current crop of MCs. Can anyone really get any blacker than the ghetto fabulous, ostentatious styles of the platinum-grilled, iced-out, Ebonics-speaking, booty-centric Cash Money Millionaires from New Orleans?

Dozens of songs laud realness. Whether gangsta or prophet, being a real nigga has currency in rap. N.W.A took realness to new heights with *Niggaz4life* (1990). Subsequent rappers like Tupac and Jay-Z have celebrated the thug life while underscoring their real nigga status. Not to overlook the black nationalists, Jeru the Damaja in 1995 refers to himself as a “real nigga” who rescues hip hop from the corrupt, greedy and materialistic forces of the industry. Though the definition of authenticity is inexact, there is a general ethos that situates authenticity with an urban, young, African American male centrality. In this framework, rappers that extol ghettoized pathology (drug selling, gang banging, beat downs, pimping, etc) affirm their realness. All other groups become peripheral and must conform to the standard established by this group. So lyrically and stylistically all artists place themselves in this contextual framework and to varying degrees appropriate young African American male styles and cultural markers. In order to secure greater points in the realm of realness, pathology must also be added to the mix.

Thus, non-African Americans who aspire to represent the real, do so by celebrating the same activities that groups like N.W.A, Geto Boys and other gangsta rappers have established as standards of ghetto authenticity in the late 1980s. The group Cypress Hill, composed of two Los Angeles-based Cuban rappers and an Italian-American DJ, exploded on the scene in 1992 with their self-titled CD. Though not African American, the two rappers did not hesitate to rap about killing “niggas.” In “How I Could Just Kill a Man,” they rap: “Sawed off shotgun, hand on the pump, sippin’ on a forty/ puffin’ on a blunt/ pumped my shotgun/ the niggas didn’t jump... looking at all those funeral cars.” Emerging from the tumultuous world of gangs and drive-bys, the Latin rappers of mixed African, Spanish and Indian descent fused the styles of the LA-area’s Chicano and African American gang systems in their brand of gangsta rap. Mixing Chicano and African American slang, the group situated itself between two distinct gang systems where violence has historically been intraethnic. Black gangs concentrate on killing rival black gangsters in a system known as the Crip-Blood binary. Similarly, Latino gangs prey mostly on Latinos in a separate and distinct system known as the *Norte-Sur* binary. With a relatively small Cuban community, Cypress Hill, affirmed their street credibility with gangsta styles that borrowed from both cholos and mostly-black Bloods and Crips. Unlike Chicano rappers such as Kid Frost Tha Mexakins, Brownside and MC Man, they unabashedly call themselves niggas and became the first Latino group to go platinum and appear on the cover of major hip hop magazines. Other Latino hardcore groups have acknowledged Cypress Hill for opening doors for them. LA rap group Funkdoobiest not only praised Cypress Hill, but exclaimed that it was due time for Latinos to get recognition for their contribution to hip hop. Said one member of the group: “I’m up on that Latin supremacy shit. I mean, we was there from the giddyup and nobody gave us funk in’ no props.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 1990s Cypress Hill sold millions, becoming one of the most successful rap groups ever. In 1999 Nuyorican Big Pun became the first Latino soloist to go platinum. His incredible skills on the mic, thugged-out lyrics about hoes, shooting niggas and Cristal earned him an unquestionable status as authentic. He even promotes himself as a “real nigga.” Much of the same can be said of lesser known Latino acts like the Beatnuts and Cuban Link. While Latinos, who have been with hip hop since its beginning and have played central roles to the development of b-boying and graffiti art,

Asian American and white rappers have had a more arduous time acquiring the valued authenticity enjoyed by the “realest” in the game.

While Caribbean-descended rappers universally conform to the generally tropes of hip hop, there is a palpable deference in the degree to which Anglophone Caribbean rappers acknowledge their island heritage vis-à-vis their Latino counterparts. In fact, Anglophone Caribbean-descended rappers like Biggie Smalls, Heavy D and Special Ed make virtually no mention of their West Indian heritage, perhaps reflecting the degree to which they have been absorbed in the larger social framework of race, as understood in the traditional black-white binary. The conspicuous absence of (im)migrant narratives, however, can not be simply attributed to who is “black.” Wyclef Jean has consistently heralded both his blackness and his Haitian heritage since the Fugees first CD, *Blunted on Reality*. (1994) Juju of the Beatnuts simultaneously calls himself a “real nigga” while constantly reminding his listeners of his Dominican background. He explains that “We’re never gonna deny where we come from. A lotta people think I’m black... I make it clear that I’m not.”<sup>7</sup>

While the search for authenticity is an obsession for many white rappers, few have been able to achieve the ultimate ghetto pass: free usage of the n-word. Eminem has achieved a pronounced acceptance in hip hop, he has yet to utter the magic and paradoxical n-word. The word nigger/nigga is a powerful word pregnant with great emotion. It can in one sentence connote warmth and companionship as well as hostility and hate. To be sure, it often means diametrically opposed things to its black users. The 504 Boys refer to themselves as “real niggas” with pride, while simultaneously boast about killing niggas who step out of line. Detractors of the word argue that it is such a vile word, born of intense hatred and, should never be uttered by blacks or whites. The defenders of the word in rap typically argue that it is a “term of endearment,” appropriated from racists and rendered inept as a racist word. Yet, Dr. Dre expressed his hostility over the use of the word in an acoustic cover of an N.W.A song by a white group in 2000. A telling truth of the word’s enigmatic use is demonstrated in the brilliant comedy *Fear of a Black Hat*. In a scene when an eager white rapper “Vanilla Sherbet” attempts to gain acceptance with NWH by using the n-word, his good natured acceptance abruptly changes into a vicious beatdown. Nothing suggests being “down” than a non-African American who can freely call black people niggas and get away with it. Even Eminem has not ventured down that path in all of his anti-social messages. In fact, he conspicuously the only artist on the Up in Smoke Tour who did not use the word.

Universally, thugged out black and Latino gangsta rappers use the word with great agility and zeal. White hardcore rappers like RA the Rugged Man, Haystack or early Everlast, appropriate all other staples of gangsta rap: beatdowns, shootings, slapping hoes and the routing of various adversaries in and outside the rap game. Both RA and Haystack affirm their place in the realm of realness by recognizing their impoverished background. Growing up in poor black neighborhoods in particular further reifies their positions as authentic. For many poverty is racialized as a black thing, thereby poverty has currency in the pursuit of authenticity. Still, they avoid use of a word, even calling themselves crackers and white trash. Though the word evokes vitriolic responses from many black folks when whites use it, some white rappers have proudly and unabashedly used the word. White Dawg, a Southern thugged out rapper not only employs southern so-called

“Bama” vernacular, he can scream at niggas throughout the south to get crunk on his song “Skraten Up.” Cage, a white underground rapper from Buffalo similarly uses the word and has justified his use by exclaiming that he was raised in a black community and was called a nigga his entire life. Most of his friends are black and he could care less what people think of what he says. Necro, a Brooklyn-based white rapper uses nigga as well. Despite the growing use of the word among white rappers, controversy has not yet arisen. Instead, underground fans of White Dawg, Cage, Necro and others (black, Latino and white) have generally embraced the word as a word with multiple meanings. There is little question that when Cage attacks fellow white rapper Eminem as a “bitch as nigga” that Cage appropriates African American cultural markers, ubiquitous in hip hop. He simultaneously deracializes the word and affirms his place as an authentic and real member of the rap game.

Keepin it real has long been central to hip hop. In a highly racialized society, realness in an African American-dominated art has special meaning. Rappers who attempt to secure and affirm their place in the rap game have often contrived, repackaged and embellished their images to situate themselves at the center of what it means to be legitimate in hip hop. Fashion, style, language and personal history all play crucial roles in the construct of realness, though it is often in flux. The decline of black conscious rap has meant the decline of a pro-black standard of authenticity that both challenges white supremacy and lauds black people. Since the early 1990s, authenticity is less measured by any quasi-black nationalist politics and more by ghetto authenticity, shaped by romanticized notions of pathology and dysfunction. As the core thrust of rap styles are in flux, there is no doubt that the core thrust of what it means to keep it real will likewise remain dynamic.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. (Boston) Beacon Press. 1997. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Aida Croal. “Eminem: Legitimate Heir or Thief in the Temple?” *Africana.com* retrieved December 12, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Marvin J. Gladney, “The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop,” *African American Review*, Summer 1995 v. 29 n. 2 p. 291.

<sup>4</sup> Touré, *New York Times*, “The Hip-Hop Nation: Whose Is It?” August 22, 1999, Sec. 2, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Grandmaster Flash, though born in the U.S. had ‘close relatives’ from the Caribbean. See Nelson George, *Hip Hop America*. (New York), 1998, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Mandalit Del Barco, “Rap’s Latino Sabor,” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*, edited by William Eric Perkins, (Philadelphia), 1996, 81.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Here “black” is mutually exclusive with being Latino for Juju, who, with brown skin and frizzy hair is much “blacker” looking than many other black MCs. “African American” is perhaps a more accurate expression of his sentiment.