

Hip Hop Photography: From Revolutionary to Commodified

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Abstract

This thesis examines Hip Hop's commercialization, and more specifically the photographs of the progression of Hip Hop from a revolutionary movement to a commercial art form. It outlines the influences of the Hip Hop Movement, and also the denial of these influences as rap music continued to be corporatized. This thesis then compares photographs of enslaved African Americans from *Harper's Weekly* and photographs of Frederick Douglass to photographs of revolutionary rappers such as Public Enemy and mainstream artists such as Rick Ross. The intention of this is to prove that as Hip Hop and rap music have become more corporate and commercial, rappers have been objectified in photography and have become commodified spectacles, just as enslaved African Americans had been in the photographs from *Harper's Weekly*.

Introduction

Photography has played a major role in the lives and experiences of black Americans. It has served as evidence for the peril and struggle that so many African Americans experienced in the United States. This documentation began with photographs of enslaved African Americans that objectified and commodified black Americans for the purpose of furthering agendas. This was not an uncommon occurrence. African Americans were dehumanized and stripped of their individuality and experiences in life, and in photographs. Blacks were not invited to define what it meant to be a black American through photography until the 1880s when Frederick Douglass began his process of the self-definition. His daguerreotypes served as works of art that re-defined the black experience and life as valuable, intellectual, and human. Throughout history African Americans have continued this struggle through a series of powerful movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Hip Hop Movement. This essay argues that photography of rap artists after the commercialization of Hip Hop has returned to the commodifying and objectifying of black Americans that was present during the times of slavery.

Within the 4 decades that Hip Hop has been widely available to the public, it has evolved from a form of underground artwork deeply rooted in resistance to oppression and inspired by movements such as the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, to a mainstream cash cow exploited by the capitalistic structure of the United States. Hip Hop started as a movement, and morphed into a business. This business was crafted from the ground up, with each step greatly considered, in order to achieve mass appeal; which is exactly what happened. Hip Hop MC's became, and still are, major influences on United States culture. Rap artists began to focus less on the Hip Hop Movement, and began to focus on their brand; a personality that

could appeal to the most people, thus yielding more sales, and more money. Rappers have changed a great amount in relation to the commercialization of the art form; a change that has transformed rap artists from revolution-inspired MC's, to individualized brands who are commodified and exploited by the recording industry.

Each step towards the commercialization of Hip Hop took place while the whole world watched through media such as photography and music videos. The photography began in the mid 1970s and documented the birth of the movement in the South Bronx. Ernie Paniccioli was the primary photographer and documenter of the birth of this movement. He took pictures of emerging artists such as Public Enemy, Kool Moe Dee, Ice-T, and many more. His photographs captured the emotion and resistance that played a major part in the start of Hip Hop. As rap music continued to be commercialized photographs of rappers began to focus less on the collective mission to end oppression and became more about becoming individual, marketable, brands attempting to prove their authenticity by portraying themselves as “gangstas.” This was a result of the influence of the record industry and their pressure to create music that will sell. Spectacles sell in the United States, and spectacles are what the industry created. This essay examines the photography documenting this change in the Hip Hop Movement from revolutionary, to commercialized and commodified.

This essay is a contribution to the field of Hip Hop studies. The commercialization of Hip Hop has been analyzed very proficiently by many scholars and academics, but even still, never has there been any writing published discussing how this commercialization shows specifically through photography. There has also never been any published writing relating photographs of modern rappers to photographs of enslaved African Americans. Since its inception, Hip Hop

Studies have made a vast amount of information available on Hip Hop, and this paper adds a discussion of Hip Hop's commercialization through photography to this field of study. That being said, there are many facets that come together to form Hip Hop studies that this thesis does not address. This paper primarily focuses on the commodification of African American males, which is not to say that there is a lack of commodified women in the world of Hip Hop. Women have played a major role in the creation of the Hip Hop Movement, and the lack of discussion of their contributions and suffering in this paper is by no means a result of their lack of involvement. This thesis also specifically focuses on the commodification of enslaved African Americans through photography in order to create a clear, concise argument. African Americans have been commodified in many other photographs, but for the sake of the conciseness of the paper and its thesis, they are left out.

Chapter 1 of this essay explains the influence the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement have had on the Hip Hop Movement. It specifically focuses on the influence of the Black Power Movement and the Hip Hop Generation's denial of the nonviolent structure of the Civil Rights Movement. It highlights certain artists and songs as examples of this influence and resistance. It is important to understand what Hip Hop inherited from previous movements in order to understand the true ideals of the Hip Hop Movement. The connection between these movements and Hip Hop is often overlooked, and even blatantly ignored, even though this is such an important aspect of Hip Hop culture. After showing this influence, Chapter 1 outlines the birth of Hip Hop in the South Bronx and explains how Hip Hop was born as a result of the deplorable conditions caused by the urban policies enacted by Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

Chapter 2 begins the discussion of photography with photos from *Harper's Weekly* of Gordon, a slave who entered the lines of the North looking for freedom. These three images show Gordon as he entered the lines, Gordon's extremely scarred back from his medical examinations, and Gordon dressed in his uniform as he fought in the Civil War. The purpose of these images, and especially the image of Gordon's scarred back, were to shock the public into siding with the Abolitionist movement. Although *Harper's Weekly* had good intentions in publishing these images, this paper argues that they objectified Gordon; his purpose was to be a spectacle, nothing else. The chapter continues through the history of African American photography and examines the self-defining daguerreotypes of Frederick Douglass from the 1880s, and the shift from images of African American men from commodification to self-definition and power. It then relates the photographs of the golden age of Hip Hop by Ernie Paniccioli to those of Frederick Douglass' powerful images.

Chapter 3 begins with an explanation of the history of commercialization and especially of the black music divisions of major record labels in the 1960s and 1970s. Before describing the commercialization of Hip Hop, it is important to understand that this commodification of black music has been present throughout the history of the United States, and that it has not only happened to Hip Hop. After giving a basis of the history and mistreatment of the black music divisions throughout history, the chapter goes on to explain the corporatization and commercialization of Hip Hop. It explains the relations between black music divisions in history and the treatment of rap music by the major labels throughout the process of commercializing. It goes in depth into the effects of this commercialization on United States popular culture, and on the perception of black males within that culture. Lastly, Chapter 3 provides photographic

evidence as to how images of popular rappers have returned to the days of Gordon, the days when black males were commodified, objectified, and used for spectacle.

Chapter One: Hip Hop's Awakening

Origins

The key to understanding Hip Hop lies within its roots in African American social and political movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power Movement. The Hip Hop Movement built off these two movements. MC's learned from their leaders, learned from their mistakes, and created a new modern movement that could elicit the most cultural change. Although this point is argued, there is no denying that Hip Hop and Rap Music are a part of, and built off of, black American history. Rappers had become the voice of the post-Civil Rights United States; they were the voice to end poverty, police brutality, drug abuse, and class inequalities.¹ With further envelopment and understanding of Rap and the Hip Hop Movement comes an acute awakening to the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement and especially the Black Power Movement still preached through Hip Hop.

The Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and much of the history of black's struggle for freedom has been based in a quest for self-determination.² In order to achieve this goal, throughout history black Americans created forms of religion, art, and music unique to their experience, guided by this need for control over their lives. These songs, prophets, and pieces of art were inherent to the black experience; they gave African Americans an opportunity to define what it really meant to be black.³ This drive for self-determination was a key part of both the

¹ Alridge, Derrick P. "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: A Nexus of Ideas." *The Journal of African American History* 90.3 (2005): 226. ProQuest. Web. 20 Dec. 2014.

² Alridge, Derrick P. 234.

³ last 2 sentences Alridge, Derrick P. 234.

Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. In his book, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, James H. Cone describes that both Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X believed that “freedom meant black people affirming their humanity and demanding that whites recognize them as human beings.”⁴ Even though they disagreed on many different topics, both men agreed self-determination was key to the emancipation of all African Americans. Malcolm X even described that learning what it meant to be black and learning that he was of value to society and did not deserve to be treated like an animal was “mind blowing.”⁵ These ideals of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement are reflected in the song “Oh My God” by Michael Franti. In this song he uses his lyrics to critique discrimination, prejudice, the criminal justice system, and capitalism, just like King Jr., and Malcolm X had done before him.⁶ Black Nationalism and the Black Power Movement critiqued Black America’s involvement in popular culture, religion, and politics, and called for a redefinition of being black in the United States.⁷ With “Oh My God,” Michael Franti is doing just that: redefining and exposing the black experience for what it truly is, and how it feels. Although Hip Hop did not inherit the primary means of conveying the messages of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement such as sermons and speeches, it did inherit and build upon the still relevant ideals of each movement. Instead of speeches and sermons, Hip Hop used lyrics over beats, breakdancing, and graffiti as an outlet and agent of spreading the message. Hip Hop has drawn from both of these movements, however the Black Power Movement was by far the most influential on early MC’s and Rappers.

⁴ Cone, James H. *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992. Print. 247

⁵ Cone, James H. 155.

⁶ Alridge, Derrick P. 226.

⁷ Ogbar, Jeffrey Ogbonna Green. *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004. Print. 23.

Along with this prevalent association with the Black Power Movement and Black Nationalism came tension between the Civil Rights Generation and the Hip Hop Generation. Just as Malcolm X openly critiqued Martin Luther King Jr's "turn the other cheek" theology, rapper Talib Kweli questioned this nonviolent attitude towards oppression in his song "Going Hard."⁸ James Cone offers a fine explanation for why rappers generally reject nonviolence: "unless theology can become 'ghetto theology,' a theology which speaks to black people, the gospel message has no promise of life for the black man—it is a lifeless message."⁹ With this statement, Cone is essentially calling black theology back to the people, and addressing that the ghetto "street trained" youth have overpowered the "book trained" theologians from the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁰ Black ghetto youth have always been instrumental in each of these movements—and have sometimes been invisible in their contributions—because of their involvement in black popular music and their centrality to black popular movements. The African American youth has repeatedly taken what they've inherited and remixed these sounds and ideologies to "capture and convey the good and the bad, the aspirations and frustrations, the thought and behavior of black ghetto youth of the historical moment under consideration."¹¹ In other words, through music and art black ghetto youth redefine what it means to be black in the current time. Rappers such as Talib Kweli represents this disdain for nonviolence and the Civil Rights Generation's denial of the Black Power and Hip Hop Movement in his song "Hostile Gospel":

Every Sunday dressing up catching gossip at its worst
 Couldn't see the difference in the Baptist and the Catholic Church

⁸ Watkins, Ralph C. "From Black Theology And Black Power To Afrocentric Theology and Hip Hop Power: An Extension and Socio-Re-Theological Conceptualization Of Cone's Theology In Conversation With The Hip Hop Generation." *Black Theology: An International Journal* 8.3 (2010): 329. EBSCO. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.

⁹ Watkins, Ralph C. 328.

¹⁰ Watkins, Ralph C. 329.

¹¹ Last Two Sentences From: Rabaka, Reiland. *The Hip Hop Movement: From R&B and the Civil Rights Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Generation*: 35-36. Lanham: Md., 2013. Print.

Caught up in the rapture of the first chapter and second verse
If we all God's children then what's the word of the reverend worth?¹²

It is clear that the Hip Hop Generation's has inherited a great amount from both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, but they intend on remixing this inheritance to make it more relevant and empowering for contemporary black Americans. Cone puts it plainly: "The fact that the prophet does not come from the institutionalized church does not obviate the need for the prophet. The prophet is now found in the voice of the hip hop 'hood theologian.' That voice is Lauryn Hill, Jill Scott, Erykah Badu, Dead Prez, Immortal Technique, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Outkast, Goodie Mod, Cee-lo, and other emerging prophetic voices."¹³

The youth remixed these movements and reinterpreted them, defining what it meant to be an African American. They decided how resistance to the oppression that came along with being black in America was going to play out, and be exposed. One of the most famous prophetic voices of the Hip Hop Movement was Tupac Shakur. Mutula Shakur, who was a former Black Panther and Tupac's mentor, helped him create the social and economic philosophy of "Thug Life," which stands for "The hate u give little infants fucks everybody." Tupac referred to this philosophy as a "contemporary version of Black Power."¹⁴ His words critiqued the capitalist structure of the United States, and advocated economic solidarity and entrepreneurship just as the Black Panther's and leaders of the Black Power Movement had done before. In an interview, Doug E. Fresh explained how important African American history was to his craft:

I read about a lot of the ones that we learned about in school. Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner

¹² Watkins, Ralph C. 332

¹³ Watkins, Ralph C. 335.

¹⁴ Last 2 sentences from: Alridge, Derrick P. 244.

Truth. A lot of the famous black people that made a sacrifice with their life. I'm into Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey, Nelson Mandela. I go by a lot of the things the Honorable Elijah Muhammad said that was real strong. Minister Louis Farrakhan. Even some things that Jesse Jackson might say here and there. I have a family background that's very conscious. My father is very aware, and he played a major influence in my life.

Black ghetto youth birthed a major social and political movement, with its genes lying in the history of African American social movements. It all began in New York City, in a Borough called the South Bronx.

The Birth

*"Hip hop has to be real. It has to be from the heart. It has to be something that you live. It can't be something that you just come out and do. It has to be on the spiritual level where you just come out of your spirit and say what you really feel. It's a combination of a way of life. It's special. It's not like anything else."*¹⁵

-Doug E Fresh

In the late 1960's and 70's, the United States of America was riddled with inequality. Racism was still openly prevalent, especially for African Americans. Life was still undoubtably harder for a black man than for a white man, as it had been for so many years before. John F Kennedy had been tragically assassinated, and replaced by Lyndon Johnson, followed shortly by the not-so-liberal administrations of Richard Nixon and later, Ronald Reagan. All these factors, and many more, sparked a revolutionary spirit in the youth of the 60's with major protests on all

¹⁵ Eure, Joseph D., James G. Spady, and Doug E. Fresh. Nation Conscious Rap. 5. New York: PC International, 1991. Print.

fronts: from the Civil Rights Movement to the Vietnam war. It was a time of great social and political change within the United States.

At the time in New York City, the South Bronx was a ghetto containing mostly Black and Latino/Latina citizens, and it was bearing the brunt of America's urban policies. In the 1950s, massive interstate highway construction took place and displaced a significant amount of low-income urban black neighborhoods.¹⁶ Starting in the late 1960s the Bronx was swept with an arson epidemic that trickled into the late 1980s. This arson was a result of "planned shrinkage," a state led withdrawal of community services such as fire fighting, police, and public transit in order to cut the losses on a community that "couldn't be saved."¹⁷ These state programs followed the conservative trend of presidents such as Richard Nixon who believed that poverty and crime associated with lower income communities was the result of personal failings and wrong doings, rather than institutional and structural problems.¹⁸ These urban policies lead to landlords illegally burning their properties because of how much they had been devalued in order to receive insurance money. Meanwhile, the residents of these neighborhoods felt that they had been "left for dead."¹⁹ By the end of 1980, 600,000 homes had been burned and abandoned, leading to an 'urban crisis' that birthed new cultural and political movements like the Hip Hop Movement, the rise of the "politically revolutionary street gang," and a devotion to community economic strength.²⁰

¹⁶ McClain, P. D. "Thirty Years of Urban Policies: Frankly, My Dears, We Don't Give a Damn!" *Urban Affairs Review* 30.5 (1995): 641. EBSCO. Web. 12 Dec. 2014.

¹⁷ Tang, E. "How the Refugees Stopped the Bronx from Burning." *Race & Class* 54.4 (2013): 51. EBSCO. Web. 12 Dec. 2014.

¹⁸ McClain, P. D.: 642.

¹⁹ all information in this sentence and the sentence before is from Tang, E: 53.

²⁰ Tang, E.: 53.

In 1970, right in the midst of the burning of the Bronx, the South Bronx had numerous active gangs that even took over the Lincoln hospital for a day to bring attention to the terrible quality of health care provided to Bronx residents. The South Bronx was a war zone, until gang leaders from across the neighborhood came together to form a peace treaty, which did not necessarily end the violence, but created room for the already budding Hip Hop culture to emerge.²¹ Thus began the movement called Hip Hop, comprising of DJ's such as Cool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, visual art from the anonymous graffiti artists, and new dance techniques from break dancers. "Hip-Hop, like Rock and Roll before it, is not only a genre of music; it is also a complex system of ideas, values, and concepts that reflect newly emerging and ever-changing creative, correlative, expressive mechanisms, including but not limited to song, poetry, film, and fashion."²² These artists, otherwise known as b-boys, were born, lived through, and were inspired by the injustices they saw in American culture, and the knowledge they inherited from the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement. Instead of falling victim to the struggle of the ghetto they lived in, they decided to embrace it, and empower the people inside it. The South Bronx became a cultural epicenter. The movement quickly spread from center out, influencing the youth across the country. The lack of funding in the public school systems of the South Bronx meant that kids had no music class; the streets enabled the youth to create and explore musically. Doug E Fresh explains that turntables were easy to access, so kids just started "rubbing" records and making pause button tapes.²³ Birthed out of the poverty and out of the

²¹All the information in this sentence and the three sentences before it is from: Kugelberg, Johan, Joe Conzo, and Afrika Bambaataa. *Born in the Bronx: A Visual Record of the Early Days of Hip Hop*. New York: Rizzoli, 2007. Print.

²² Taylor, Carl S., and Virgil Taylor. "Hip-Hop and Youth Culture: Contemplations of an Emerging Cultural Phenomenon." *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 12.4 (2004): 251-53. Proquest Central. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.

²³ Eure, Joseph D., and James G. Spady,. *Nation Conscious Rap: 2*. New York: PC International, 1991. Print.

abandoned and burnt buildings of the Bronx, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, b-boys knew that “only a highly dynamic cultural force will bring some equilibrium into existence.”²⁴ Hip Hop would become this dynamic cultural force. During this golden age, there was a revolutionary power within Hip Hop. Groups such as Public Enemy were using the medium to expose the injustices experienced by people daily. Songs like *Fight the Power!* were anthems of the resistance.

In the late 80's, Hip Hop became too big to ignore, and it grabbed the attention of mainstream record labels. Ernie Panicioli attributes this interest to the realization that “The MC was a marketable element.”²⁵ With careful consideration of presentation, rappers could become more than just lyricists, they could become brands. However, record labels did not see the profit in the politically conscious music in which Hip Hop was rooted.²⁶ They saw profit in music and artists based on the pleasures of life. Krista Thompson explains this transition from underground to mainstream:

...the message, and the medium that delivered that message, in hip-hop started to change. In the late 1980's as hip-hop gained visibility and commercial success nationally and globally, rappers increasingly turned their attention from politics to pleasure, a focus on earthly and bodily gratification, hedonism, and even nihilism.²⁷

Popular rappers increasingly began to rhyme about drug money, material possessions such as chains and other jewelry (referred to as “bling”), and the objectification of women. Gangsta rap was created, and the American public adored it. Although there was a strong mainstream

²⁴Eure, Joseph D., James G. Spady, and Doug E. Fresh. *Nation Conscious Rap*: 162. New York: PC International, 1991. Print.

²⁵Shabazz, Jamel, Fab 5. Freddy, and Ernie Panicioli. *Back in the Days*. New York: PowerHouse, 2001. Print. pg. 192

²⁶ Shabazz, Jamel, Fab 5. Freddy, and Ernie Panicioli. *Back in the Days*. pg. 195

²⁷ Thompson, Krista. "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop." *Art Bulletin* 91.4 (2009): 483. CAA of America. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.

influence, the rappers of this time still had not completely lost the revolutionary spirit of “the golden age.” Thug oriented rappers such as Tupac and Notorious B.I.G rhymed about selling drugs, not for pleasure, but for necessity: to feed their families, because inequality was still holding them back from what they deserved. However, that being said, both these artists still made commercial songs based on the pleasures of life, and materialism. These songs became their most famous. These artists and early gangsta rappers represented a time when rap music was equally commercial and political. As time went on and commercial gangster rap progressed, however, new artists emerged all around the country, and the music became more focused on pleasure and less on critical issues in American society. Hip Hop began to top the music charts, and never stopped.

Chapter Two:

The Photograph of the African American: From Slavery to Hip Hop

Since its invention, the photograph was designated as a powerful tool because it was believed to capture unbiased truth. This fact led to the photograph being used as the main tool of the documentary of American history. It is no secret that there are dark aspects to this history, none being as harmful or regrettable as the enslavement of African Americans. Photography played a major role in not only documenting this slavery, but also exposing abolitionists across the country to the atrocities of the treatment of African Americans.²⁸ In their documentation, photographers usually objectified the black male body and spoke for their experience, rendering the photograph not as a tool of documentation, but propaganda.²⁹ This objectification completely erased the individual experience of the slave from history, leading to freed enslaved African Americans such as Fredrick Douglass using photography to define and show the true African American experience.³⁰ This theme of defining and documenting the actuality of black experience through photography continued throughout American history, and became the theme of photographs depicting the birth of the Hip Hop Movement. However, as rap music continued to be commercialized, the photography of the movement began to return to these roots of objectifying the black body and experience. Rappers themselves have become objects and commodities that can be sold, and distributed widely.

²⁸ Best, Stephen. "Neither Lost nor Found: Slavery and the Visual Archive." *Representations* 113.1 (2011): 150-63. Web. 27 Feb. 2015.

²⁹ Silkenat, David. "'A Typical Negro': Gordon, Peter, Vincent Colyer, and the Story behind Slavery's Most Famous Photograph." *American Nineteenth Century History* 15.2 (2014): 174. *Proquest*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014.

³⁰ Silkenat, David.: 171.

Gordon: The “Typical Negro”

One of the most famous photographs from the era of slavery in the United States is an image that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* and many other Northern magazines in July of 1863.³¹

It depicts “Gordon” in three images;

one when he “entered our lines,”

another of his “medical examination,”

and the third of “Gordon” in his “Union

uniform.” These three images served

the purpose of exposing abolitionists of

the east to the “cathartic trajectory

typical of the generic conventions of the

slave narrative.”³² This is exactly what

happened. This photograph’s publication fell

right when the CDV was invented, which was a new form of photograph that made reprinting

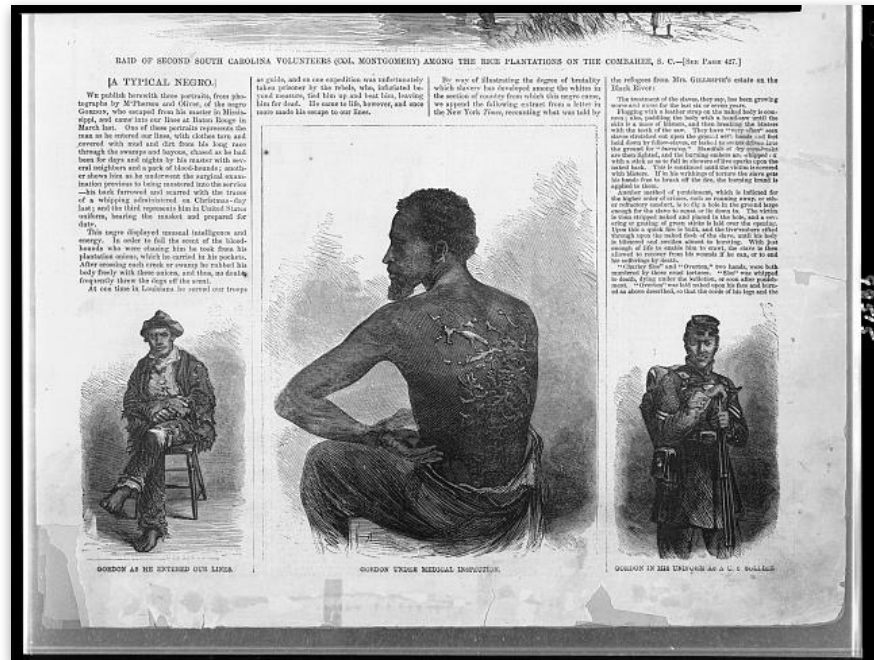
and distributing these images easier, and inexpensive. Newspapers even charged individuals 15

cents for their own copy. The image was printed in numerous abolitionist papers, and made a

huge impact on the people of the United States.³³ Even though these photograph’s intentions

were to expose the damage of slavery in order to convince the public to end it, these photographs

arguably did more damage than they did good.



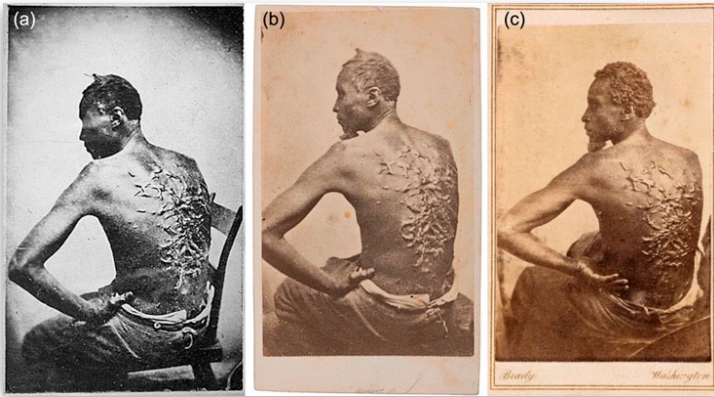
(Fig 1) Images of “Gordon” in *Harper's Weekly*

³¹ Silkenat, David.: 169.

³² Silkenat, David.: 170.

³³ Last 3 sentences: Silkenat, David.: 171.

The true origins of these photographs lead to a much different discussion regarding this publication. In his article, David Silkenat searched to find as much information on them as he



(Fig 2) The Original Images of “Peter”

could. He found that these images actually depicted 2 different enslaved African Americans, Gordon and Peter (Peter is in the middle, and Gordon is on the left).³⁴ He also found that newspapers such as *Harper’s*

Weekly rushed to

publish these images first,

leading their illustrators (most of whom never even left New York City)

to cut corners in their honest representation of the photographs.³⁵ This

fact in itself shows how little these abolitionist newspapers cared for

Gordon or Peter’s individual experience, and how they commodified

them as objects for a white gaze. Gordon and Peter had become

“commodified spectacle[s].”³⁶ The viewer of these images was not

invited to identify with these humans, or to “experience their visual

display as sublime, transcendent and transformative ‘works of art’,”

but rather they were shown the “favour of foregrounding a visual

representation of the formerly enslaved body as predicated solely upon physical rather



(Fig 3) The Original Image of “Gordon Entering Our Lines”

³⁴ Silkenat, David.: 179.

³⁵ Silkenat, David.: 174.

³⁶ Bernier, Celeste-Marie. "A 'Typical Negro' or a 'Work of Art'? The 'Inner' via the 'Outer Man' in Frederick Douglass's Manuscripts and Daguerreotypes." *Slavery & Abolition* 33.2 (2012): 288. *Proquest*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014.

psychological revelation.”³⁷ In other words, the primarily white audience of these photographs and publications were not interested in Peter and Gordon’s personality or individuality, but rather were interested in the proof of their physical struggle. African Americans were commodified in the world of photography, that is, until Fredrick Douglass decided that needed to change.

Fredrick Douglass saw the power of liberation in the photograph; its power to cause his viewers to “experience empathy on intellectual grounds, which would leave intact a rational basis upon which to construct social movements grounded in resistance.”³⁸ He sought to redefine and individualize the black male, and black experience through the use of photography as art. He argued that no white photographer could accurately depict an African American in his artwork; that even if they tried with good intentions, they usually exaggerated their distinctive features.³⁹ Thus, Douglass fought “to fashion himself as an art object or performer as he continually sought to control how he appeared in his portraits.”⁴⁰ He rejected the Gordon-and-Peter-like objectivity of the physiognomy of the African American, and manipulated his own physiognomy to create a work of art that symbolized his revolutionary spirit.⁴¹ In this sense, Douglass’ photographs were meant to fix the damage done by publications like “The Typical Negro.”⁴²

The perfect example of this is Figure 4 below. This daguerreotype of Douglass was taken by Samuel J. Miller in 1882.⁴³ Douglass is depicted in a suit and his posture mimics those portraits of the famous white Americans before him. His dignity is impossible to overlook. He

³⁷ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 289.

³⁸ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 294.

³⁹ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 297.

⁴⁰ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 293.

⁴¹ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 294.

⁴² Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 291.

⁴³ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 290.

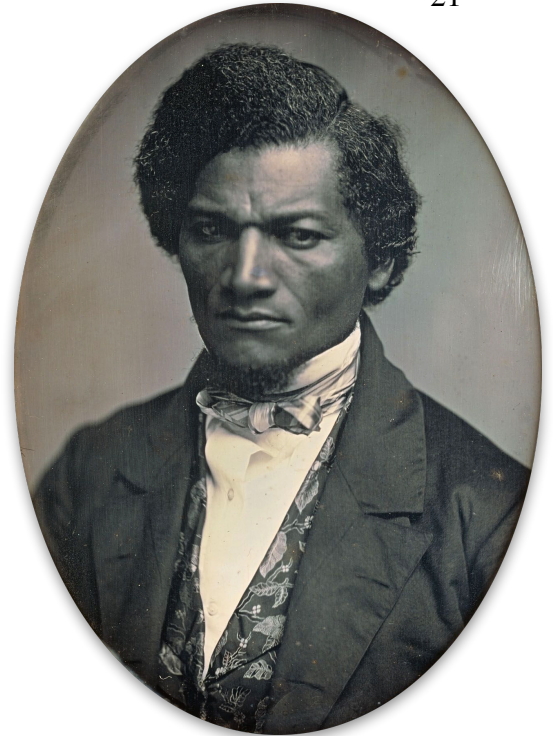
appears distinguished and proud. The incredible detail of the daguerreotype confirms this picture's accuracy to the viewer. Douglass' facial expression is hard, even intimidating. He seems deep in thought, and his direct gaze into the eyes of viewers forces them to recognize him as human. His face tells a story of "psychological torment and turmoil" giving this daguerreotype a "sense of depth" that was previously never seen in photography of freed enslaved African

Americans.⁴⁴ This portrait speaks to Douglass' heroic action in the fight for black liberation in the United States, and his

incredible dignity and intellect. His white strands of hair within the sea black show his premature aging, as if this fight has taken its toll on him, yet he has not given up yet.⁴⁵ Celeste-Marie

Bernier offers a fine analysis of this image in her article; she states:

Shedding light on his otherwise often elided ambiguities and ambivalences of self-representation, the haunting and transformative high-art power of Miller's daguerreotype ultimately resides in its symbolic dramatization of an enslaved consciousness within a newly found emancipated identity. In telling ways, Douglass's simultaneous sense of the blurred boundaries between 'bondage' and 'freedom' remained the defining conflict of his life. Dealing not in absolutes, but in relative terms, his oeuvre testifies to contrasts, difficulties and unresolved tensions within competing psychological and physical states of being as he became a slippery work of art.⁴⁶



(Fig 4) A Portrait of Fredrick Douglass

⁴⁴ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 295.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Bernier, Celeste-Marie.: 296.

Douglass had successfully created some of the first photographs that did not portray African Americans as a commodified object; photographs that were in fact works of art, that reflected a free slave's experience.

Photography as an art form changed drastically in the time of Gordon and Peter to Fredrick Douglass. African Americans were once photographed only as ways to prove the physical evils of slavery to be used as propaganda for abolitionists. Their distinctive individuality and experience was ignored in order to simplify and marginalize the black experience in the United States. Fredrick Douglass worked his entire life to change this, and to make black American artwork that reflected the true experiences of African Americans available to the public as a more inclusive tool for revolution. In the early stages of the Hip Hop Movement, rappers, MC's, and their photographers did just this; they used photography as a way to reflect the revolutionary spirit and passion of the African American in the United States.

1970's-1990's Hip Hop: Photographing a Revolution

The photographic imagery of the vast Hip Hop movement is essentially a roadmap of this transition from underground to mainstream. The vast majority of Hip Hop's history was photographed by Ernie Paniccioli, who began to take portraits of MC's during the "golden era" in the late 1970s. He published a book of these photographs, edited by Kevin Powell, entitled *Who Shot Ya? Three Decades of Hip Hop Photography*. His photographs document, and took part in, the evolution of Hip Hop from underground to mainstream. He recognizes this in the introduction of his book: "a lot of the things I have photographed have had either a direct or

indirect effect on the visual style of the youth.”⁴⁷ His photographs not only influenced the visual style of the youth; they also played a major part in the development of an MC’s image, and the movement’s influence. The revolutionary spirit of the “golden age” of Hip Hop is captured in each portrait Paniccioli photographed in the 80’s and early 90’s. This was when the music stemmed out of the resistance to racial inequality and injustice. “They, like the generation before them, were looking for a revolution, which they expressed through their music and culture.”⁴⁸

One of the most obvious representations of this is an image Paniccioli took of Public Enemy backstage at the Apollo theater (*Fig. 5*). Just like Frederick Douglass, Public Enemy sought to make their photograph a work of art that symbolizes the revolutionary nature of the black male in resistance to passive examples in popular culture. They consciously posed for this photograph to manipulate its meaning to the viewer.



(*Fig. 5*) Public Enemy Messing Around Back Stage At The Apollo Theatre

In this image the rap group is literally fighting against a white man, dressed in traditional KKK ritual clothing. Although this image may make it seem as if these MC’s were messing around, the social commentary being addressed within the frame is incredibly serious. It brings the racial inequality in America right to the foreground and out in the open, which is exactly what Public Enemy achieved with their music. Even the color in this image personifies the movement: the

⁴⁷ Paniccioli, Ernie, and Kevin Powell. *Who Shot Ya?: Three Decades of Hip-hop Photography*. New York: Amistad, 2002. Print.!

⁴⁸ Paniccioli, Ernie, and Kevin Powell. *Who Shot Ya?: Three Decades of Hip-hop Photography*. New York: Amistad, 2002. Print. 185.

stark white of the KKK member's cloak is being overpowered by an overwhelming wave of black. In one spur of the moment image, Panccioli captured the essence of the roots of Hip Hop.



(Fig.6) Ice-T With a Zulu Nation Shirt, 1984

In his portrait of Ice-T (Fig.6), Paniccioli photographed the group mentality engrained within the Hip Hop movement to empower the youth of South Bronx to stop the violence. In the image, Ice-T is proudly wearing a Zulu Nation shirt, which was an international Hip Hop awareness group started by Afrika Bambaataa that worked towards ending the violence in the streets of the South

Bronx.⁴⁹ Ice-T's body language in this image conveys a sense of empowerment, pride, and strength. His body takes up

most of the space in the frame, and

his intense glare encapsulates his passion for change. Figure 7 is an image of Kool Moe Dee in which he is wearing a shirt that says "Never Forget African Tradition." This image plainly depicts the revolutionary ideals of Hip Hop, and also attests to its connection with black Nationalist movements such as the

Black Power Movement. Moe Dee's action of grabbing the bottom of his shirt in order to make the message written on it the subject of

the photograph attests to these early images being less about the rapper him or herself, but rather more about the Hip Hop Movement. In an essay in the book *Nation Conscious Rap*, Kool Moe



(Fig. 7) Kool Moe Dee

⁴⁹ Shabazz, Jamel, Fab 5, Freddy, and Ernie Paniccioli. *Back in the Days*. New York: PowerHouse, 2001. Print. 192.

(Fig. 8) Public Enemy



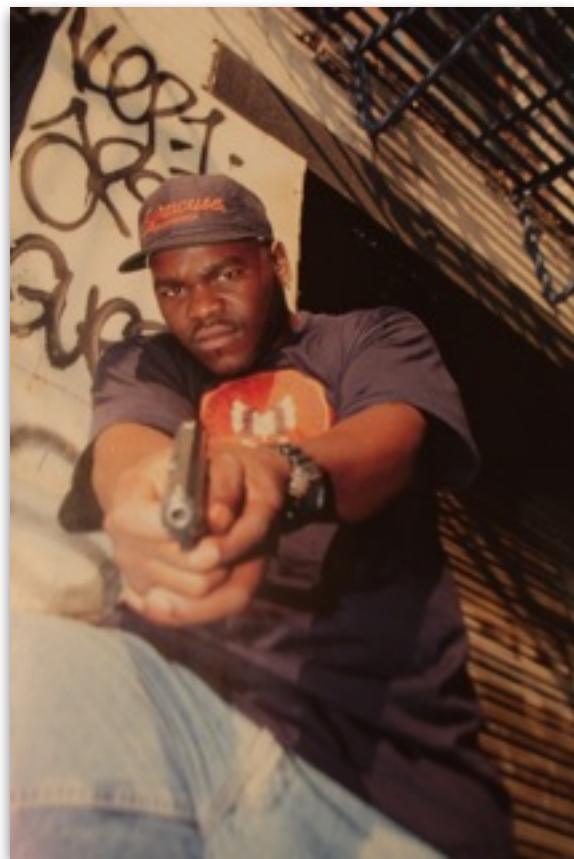
Dee explains the harm of not remembering African tradition in the Hip Hop world: “without any African awareness, without knowing the spiritual connection which connects us we allowed ignorance to help us disrespect each other.”⁵⁰ Kool Moe Dee decided he was not going to be a commodity to a white record label, and that he would represent his African roots as often as possible, in his music, and in photographs. Paniccioli took a fair amount of images of Public Enemy, in all of which the rappers sacrifice their own ego’s identities in the imagery in order to make the Hip Hop Movement the subject of the photograph. Figure 8 is a reflection of this conscious or subconscious strategy used by golden age MC’s. The image is of the entire group, yet when viewing the image as a whole, the group becomes one. Every single one of their faces serves as a metaphor for the emotions that coincide with the black experience in the United States. Public Enemy uses their body language and facial expressions as tools to convey this message, just as Fredrick Douglass did before them. They both use the photograph to redefine

⁵⁰ Eure, Joseph D., and James G. Spady. *Nation Conscious Rap*. New York: PC International, 1991. Print.

the black experience. For Instance, Chuck D (pictured at the far left) has a very stern, serious, and angry facial expression. His eyes are almost covered by the shadow of his hat brim, yet the viewer can still read his emotions from his gaze. His facial expression and the crossing of his arms depict his resistant spirit and dignity; his anger with those who may see this image and judge, and his courage to face and disprove these judgements. This photograph is less about Public Enemy and more about the anger African Americans feel as a result of years of oppression, and the dignity that they were now demanding. There is an incredible sense of empowerment within this image, just as with Frederick Douglass' daguerreotype. None of these images from the golden age of Hip Hop were about any singular artist. Although they may be portraits of artists, they represent much more than that. They represent just what Frederick Douglass was trying to achieve: black Americans telling the story of their own experience in the United States. A story that is full of active, and passionate revolutionary men and women who constantly had to prove their own worth in society. Paniccioli's photographs are not about branding a specific MC; they are about branding the ideals of the Hip Hop movement itself, setting it in its role as the exposé of the injustices faced in the South Bronx, and around the world.

As the Hip Hop world became more commercialized, and local record companies helped create gangster rap, Paniccioli's images started to become less about the Hip Hop movement, and more about the branding of each individual MC as a gangsta. In an essay about how Hip Hop has effected the War on Drugs, Stuart Poyntz explains that: "Hip hop imagery represents more a style for presenting the people and worlds effected by drugs in North America than an actual force motivating the mainstream public to more fully understand how the decade-long war on drugs

has affected the most vulnerable in our society.”⁵¹ Hip Hop imagery became more about being a gangster as a result of these injustices. Weapons became prominent in photographs of MC’s. In



(Fig.9) Freddie Foxxx

Paniccioli’s portrait of rapper Freddie Foxxx (*Fig. 9*) the viewer feels as though Foxxx is pointing the gun barrel directly at them, empowering him, and proving no one is safe from his gangster mentality. When Paniccioli took this photo, he was below Foxxx looking up, rendering the viewer powerless against him. Foxxx’s facial expression very clearly expresses his anger through the furrowing of his eyebrows, and the intensity of his glare. Foxxx personalizes this anger, as if it’s directed at the viewer, by looking straight into the camera. Every element of this image makes the viewer feel as if they are being victimized by this ever-powerful being. That said, even though

this image is more centered around branding an MC as

“gangster,” it still speaks to the injustices the Hip Hop Movement fights against: African Americans’ anger towards the society that has undervalued and disproportionately imprisoned black people. Tricia Rose explains the record industry’s interest in this intimidating gangster persona: “black ghetto gansta-based sales are the *result* of marketing manipulation and the *reflection* not only of specific realities in our poorest black urban communities but also of the

⁵¹ Poyntz, Stuart. "Honey, I Shot the Kids: Hollywood and the War on Drugs." *Emergency Librarian* 2nd ser. 25 (1997): 12. Proquest. Web. 14 Apr. 2014.

exploitation of already-embedded racist fears about black people.”⁵² In other words, the primarily white-owned record industry perpetuated the perception of African American men as “dangerous.” While the MC’s were still rapping about the African American experience, recording industries were exploiting their images in order to make their music more controversial, and sellable. The viewer is supposed to be afraid of Freddie Foxxx, and that’s what gangster rap was all about. This fear is ever prominent in Panicioli’s portrait of The Notorious B.I.G (*Fig.4*), who is one of the most famous MC’s of all time. In the picture, B.I.G is sitting in the passenger seat, looking directly into the camera, and pointing an imaginary gun at the viewer. Although there is no physical weapon pointed at the viewer like in the



(Fig.10) Notorious B.I.G

Freddie Foxx image, this photograph is no less intimidating. As a result of B.I.G’s lyrics about dealing crack cocaine and death by gang violence, a real gun is not necessary in the image. It is implied. B.I.G made a conscious choice to put his hand in that position to appear as if he was holding a gun to reinforce his status as “gangster” for the recording industry, but also to reflect the truth about what African Americans sometimes have to do to survive. Although the beginning of gangsta rap was still grounded in the revolutionary roots of Hip Hop, the more commercial Hip Hop became, the more MC’s became branded as gangstas.

⁵² Bothwell, B. (2010). The hip hop wars: What we talk about when we talk about hip hop-and why it matters. *Current Musicology*, (89), 95-102,143. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/749618867?accountid=14503>

Photographs of the Hip Hop Movement changed from the golden age to the era of gangsta rap; showing the ever increasing importance of the brand in terms of the rap star, and also the industry's denial of the true principles of the Hip Hop Movement. What started out as MC's referencing the ideals of the movement within each photograph began to morph into rappers proving how gangsta they were in order to reflect their horrid experience in the ghettos of the United States and also; to sell more records. Still, it is important to note that early gangsta rappers did not completely forfeit the ideals of the Hip Hop Movement. They used rap music as a window to expose the country to the injustices they faced daily. They created this music with the hope that the next generations of Americans would not have to be exposed to the perils they had to be exposed to. Photographs of golden age, and the first wave of gangsta rappers held true to Frederick Douglass', but as Hip Hop began to become increasingly commercial, rappers began to become "commodified spectacles" just as Gordon and Peter had been.

Chapter Three: The Cost of Commodification

The History of Musical Commodification

It comes as no surprise that the American recording industry's main goal was and still is to obtain as much profit as possible. What is surprising, however, is their absolute dismissal and exploitation of the rights of their artists. Throughout history, record companies and the music industries' treatment of black musicians reflected the racist world that surrounded them. In the 1970s, primarily white-owned record companies saw the profit they were missing out on in black music and began to create black music divisions.⁵³ They sought to increase their market share, and did so by growing and acquiring other music labels.⁵⁴ This coincided with the classic strategy of record labels to create "portfolios" of artists divided into different genre divisions, labels, or even teams working with specific artists, which allowed a high degree of surveillance and accountability within the ranks.⁵⁵ The black music divisions of these labels were held especially accountable and were regularly subjected to closings and cut backs if there was not enough profit.⁵⁶ Keith Negus argues that even though these companies claimed that each decision they made was solely based on business, they were really informed by "a number of value judgements and cultural beliefs."⁵⁷ Therefore, the racism and devaluation of black Americans was not only happening in the United States in general, but also within businesses such as the music industry.

⁵³ Johnson, Christopher K. "Danceable Capitalism: Hip-Hop's Link to Corporate Space." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 2.4 (2008): 81. EBSCO Host. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.

⁵⁴ Negus, K. "Cultural Production and the Corporation: Musical Genres and the Strategic Management of Creativity in the US Recording Industry." *Media, Culture & Society* 20.3 (1998): 364. Web. 21 Mar. 2015.

⁵⁵ Negus, K. 365.

⁵⁶ Negus, K. 369.

⁵⁷ Negus, K. 366.

The consequences of black music divisions did not stop at their constant cutting and restructuring that lead to loss of jobs for many black Americans. They also had profound cultural impacts. Negus summarizes these societal consequences with the phrase “industry produced culture,” referring to “how entertainment corporations set up structures of organization and working practices to produce identifiable products and ‘intellectual properties’.”⁵⁸ The “identifiable products” of the black music divisions became “ghettoized.” That is, they were considered cheap moneymakers that were easily expendable. Artists were signed to exploitative deals and were forced to produce music that was easily marketable, and that would turn a profit.⁵⁹ This strategy of the recording industry of “industry shaping culture” ignored the content, form, and meaning of the art that was being created. They cared less about the meaning of the song and more about how much it would sell.⁶⁰ This was largely the result of the radio industry and what it decided to play. These decisions were often based on how much money the recording industry paid to have the music played. By the 1990s this commodification continued and became more rampant. Major labels started to acquire the radio stations, leading to underrepresented artists being cut out of airplay altogether.⁶¹ There were slim to no options for black artists who wanted to be successful in the music industry other than signing exploitative deals that controlled exactly what music they created. Lastly, considering the amount that black Americans contributed to popular culture and music in the United States, these black divisions were “not allowed to develop a continuity and a sense of history that is consonant with the

⁵⁸ Negus, K. 359.

⁵⁹ Last two sentences are from: Johnson, Christopher K. "Danceable Capitalism: Hip-Hop's Link to Corporate Space. 82-83.

⁶⁰ Negus, K. 361.

⁶¹ Johnson, Christopher K. 85.

African-American contribution to US musical culture.”⁶² This exploitation and devaluation of black musicians continued and began to change hip hop in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Hip Hop's Commodification and Corporatization

While mainstream media and record companies promote hip hop that's violent, misogynistic, materialistic, and individualistic, this depiction is really more of hip hop as commodity, a product of corporate America, and a reflection of mainstream America's appetite for reified black images. Black rage is now entertainment. Unfortunately, the cost is more than the \$17.99 price tag on a CD.

The real cost is an innovative and multi-dimensional culture that becomes essentialized, a revolutionary culture that's too often under-valued within it's own community, and a collective identity that's too easily prejudged and misrepresented...while the *whole world* watches.⁶³

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hip Hop, specifically rap music, began to be present in most American households. Many of the exploitative strategies of the record companies from the 1970s carried over into the 80s, 90s and into the new millennium. Rap began to be less about reflections of the black American experience, and became a race to see who was the most authentic, or “real.” This authenticity began to take the form of rappers (and industry executives) creating brands for themselves that helped prove their realness. Murali Balaji argues that “the more authentic a product appears to be, the better the product can sell.”⁶⁴ In the commercial Hip Hop world, this authenticity is earned with street credibility, or, in other words, by building a marketable story.⁶⁵ Hip Hop and rap music had become “the bedfellow of

⁶² Negus, K. 370.

⁶³ Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony. Neal. "Rise Up Hip-Hop Nation: From Deconstructing Racial Politics to Building Positive Solutions." *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 520. Print.

⁶⁴ Balaji, Murali. "The Construction of “Street Credibility” in Atlanta's Hip-Hop Music Scene: Analyzing the Role of Cultural Gatekeepers." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 29.4 (2012): 316. EBSCO Host. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.

⁶⁵ Balaji, Murali. 316.

marketers by giving centre stage to brands.”⁶⁶ At this time, the “gangsta” image was thought to represent the “real” black urban experience.⁶⁷ The American public seemed to be infatuated with the “badman” of the Hip Hop world, which was a reflection of the incessant media coverage on black-on-black violence in the United States. In reality, however, violent crimes in the United States dropped 53 percent between 1993 and 2003.⁶⁸ The once balanced rap scene comprising of party music, political music, gangster rap, and black nationalist music “was replaced by a unified contingent of players, gangsters, and pimps in the commercial hip-hop scene that followed.”⁶⁹

In 1995 R&B and rap had sold 132 million albums and accounted for 21 percent of the music market in the United States.⁷⁰ With that much money involved, record industries began to see the value (in dollar signs) of the Hip Hop Movement. Major labels began to acquire smaller Hip Hop labels under their mass umbrella of ownership: “the labels that have epitomized hip-hop’s prominence in popular culture, Def Jam, Bad Boy, Death Row, Cash Money, So So Def, Roc-A-Fella, are now either wholly owned by or in joint operating agreements with major corporations such as Universal, Sony, and Warner Music Group.”⁷¹ However, these companies did not and still do not see the profit in positive, revolutionary rap.⁷² In fact, a senior executive of a record company claimed that he sat in on meetings and heard his colleagues claim that some rap songs were “too black”; that lyrically rap was “parochial.”⁷³ Just as in the 70s, these urban

⁶⁶ Wilson, Jonathan A J. "New-school Brand Creation and Creativity – Lessons from Hip Hop and the Global Branded Generation." *Journal of Brand Management* 19.2 (2011): 98. EBSCO Host. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.

⁶⁷ Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony. Neal. "Rise Up Hip-Hop Nation: From Deconstructing Racial Politics to Building Positive Solutions." *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 520. Print.

⁶⁸ Last 2 sentences from: Johnson, Christopher K. 90.

⁶⁹ Johnson, Christopher K. 89.

⁷⁰ Negus, K. 366.

⁷¹ Balaji, Murali. 315.

⁷² Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony. Neal. 522.

⁷³ Negus, K. 371.

wings of record companies sacrificed the true meaning of rap music for financial and political reasons.⁷⁴ The record industry's version of rap music would appeal to black youth, liberal whites, and "those who wanted to gaze upon what they perceived as naked, Black male aggression."⁷⁵ In other words, Hip Hop had become a form of a "cultural safari." That is, Americans could dive into the violence, misogyny and materialism that was falsely presented as the black American experience.⁷⁶ As a result, not only was rap music commodified and corporatized, but the African-American experience was as well. Black rage was officially owned and exploited by the very power structure that created it.⁷⁷

What should be understood about the commercialization of rap music and its artists is that it is solely based on branding those very artists as "authentic". That being said, after becoming aware of the amount of work that goes into this branding, it is impossible to deny that this sense of "authenticity" is not authentic at all to the core values of the Hip Hop Movement. Rap instead has become a reflection of the worst ideologies of American society: violence, misogyny, and materialism. The artists, the industry, and American society in general are all equally to blame for this rampant commodification of the black experience. Currently in the United States, there is a resistance to this commodification. Two different forms of rap fans have been born; there are those who listen to the radio, and generally have no idea there is even a Hip Hop Movement, and there are those who listen to "underground rap", rap which stays true to the revolutionary roots of the movement. This "underground rap" has been especially prevalent during the technological boom in the United States throughout the new millennium. Artists now

⁷⁴ Johnson, Christopher K. 89.

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Johnson, Christopher K. 90.

⁷⁷ Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony. Neal. 522.

have little reason to sign to a major label. It is much easier now to produce, record, and release their own music than it ever has been. Getting this music to fans across the diverse spectrum of class and race in the United States, however, has remained difficult. These artists are rarely, if at all, played on the radio. In order to dive into this underground scene one must either buy each CD as it comes out, or have access to the internet and knowledge of the websites that support these artists. Thus, the underground Hip Hop scene and its conscious music do not often reach those who are being oppressed because they generally do not have the funds to acquire the music.⁷⁸ Therefore, commercial rap continues to influence the majority of Hip Hop fans.

Photographic Evidence: Backtracking Towards Gordon

The commercialization and branding of rap music is evident through the photographs of Hip Hoppers from this new era of the Hip Hop Movement. From the days of Ernie Panniciolli to the peak of commercialization of rap, the manner in which artists portray themselves in photos has changed a great amount. They have evolved from photos reflecting the revolutionary ideals of the Hip Hop Movement to photos solely reflecting an individual, calculated, brand. This individualized approach to Hip Hop differs greatly from the golden age, when rappers banded together for a greater good. Although it may not be obvious, these images express a return to the commodification of the black American for spectacle when observing them in concurrence with the images of Gordon from *Harper's Weekly*. Gordon was commodified and treated as an object by white America for the purpose of furthering the abolitionist agenda, whereas rappers are now treated as objects in order to produce income for primarily white record label owners.

⁷⁸ Last 2 sentences from: Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony. Neal. 524.

In 2015, the essence of the individualization and commodification of rappers is reflected in the majority of commercial rap stars branding themselves as materialistic, womanizing, drug users and dealers. Smoking marijuana, using other drugs, and acquiring money and women have become tools to prove the authenticity, or “realness” of a rapper. Each new photograph of an artist trying to break into the commercial world serves a purpose: it reinforces their own individual brand, which as mentioned before, is easier to market, and sells better. Unlike Paniccioli’s images, most photographs of modern rap stars have nothing to do with the movement itself. They only reinforce the disastrous effects that the commercialization of Hip Hop has had on the music and the culture. This can be no more obvious than with the rebranding of former gangsta rap star Snoop Dogg. In 2013, after a trip to Jamaica, Snoop Dogg decided to



Fig. 11 Snoop Lion (formerly Snoop Dogg) holding his blunt

change his name, and way of living. Even though he was always an avid marijuana smoker, now he is rarely seen without a blunt or in the act of smoking. Figure 11 is an image taken by Terry Richardson of Snoop’s arm. Snoop Lion is not the subject of this image, but rather the blunt is. The viewer’s eye is guided from the top left corner of the image straight down to the object at the apex; the marijuana. Snoop’s numerous Rastafarian colored bracelets also become symbols of marijuana smoking and marijuana culture. Much like Figure 11, Figure 12 is a photo from the same series of images; Snoop Lion is shown exhaling marijuana smoke with his hands in the air as if he is dancing. This image again reinforces his brand as a marijuana lover and

smoker, and also represents his commitment to the legalization movement. In 25 years, Snoop

Lion evolved in relation to his growth in popularity from a rapper who not only represented himself but those who struggled through the same perils as him to a more individual entity who represents his own brand, which many people can relate to. Similarly, In Figure 13, Maybach Music Group owner and rapper Rick Ross is shown smoking a joint without a shirt on while he frames



Fig. 12 Snoop Lion

his face with his hands. The smoke is rising and covering his face, rendering his identity masked by the marijuana smoke. Around his neck and wrists are heavy, diamond studded chains, bracelets, and a watch. This symbolizes his acquisition and love of material objects and also his success as a rapper and music mogul. The subjects of



Fig. 13 Rick Ross

this image are the joint, it's resulting smoke, Ross' hand signal, and his jewelry. Nowhere within the image can one see anything about Rick Ross' struggle, or his life story. This image shows the viewer nothing about his unique individuality other than that he smokes and likes expensive things, but does show the viewer his brand, and attempts to prove that it is

authentic. Just as Gordon's true name and individuality were masked in the images taken of him, Rick Ross' individuality is stripped and replaced with the personality that he is selling. In a nearly identical photo, rapper Waka Flocka Flame is also shown shirtless and draped in diamonds

and expensive watches. He is shown taking a bite into six expensive watches, symbolizing again his materialistic nature and his identity as a money maker and spender, all while authenticating his street image. Lastly—just to prove how common pictures like this are—is Figure 15, a picture of well known bad-boy of rap, Lil’ Wayne. In the



Fig. 14 Waka Flocka Flame

picture he is depicted smoking a joint while also drinking “Sizzurp”, or cough syrup, which has become a trademark of his brand. “Leaning” as he calls it, has led to his having seizures and



Fig. 15 Lil’ Wayne Smoking and Drinking “Sizzurp” (Cough Medicine)

almost to his untimely death.⁷⁹ Yet, Lil’ Wayne continues to drink cough syrup because it is a principle part of his brand. In most images he is shown drinking out of two Styrofoam cups full of his “sizzurp”, and this image is no exception. The drug has become a part of his brand and is his tool to gain authenticity; to

prove that he is gangsta and does not abide by laws. Rick

Ross, Waka Flocka Flame, Snoop Lion, and Lil’ Wayne are only some of the commercial rappers who symbolize this “bad” persona that increasingly fascinates the people of the United States and perpetuates the perception of all black males as gangstas. All of these artists and most artists within the commercial rap world use drugs and material wealth to prove their authenticity and brand themselves as a sellable object.

⁷⁹ Lee, Chris. "Lil Wayne Seizure Puts Spotlight on Rappers' Use of 'sizzurp'" Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, 23 Mar. 2013. Web. 24 Mar. 2015.

Alongside drugs and material objects, commercial rappers earn authenticity and money for the record label and themselves by womanizing females, and objectifying their bodies. No rapper has stirred up as much controversy than as Nelly with his hit song “Tip Drill”. The video outraged women and men across the United States, and is the epitome of rappers perpetuating



Fig. 16 A Screenshot from Nelly's "Tip Drill" Video

and celebrating misogyny in order to authenticate their brand as gangstas. Both Figure 16 and 17 are images from the “Tip Drill” video, and clearly showing how this video was so offensive to so many people. In Figure 15, Nelly is shown in between a woman’s legs with another on his lap, while he looking back up at the woman. Both

women are dressed in small bikinis that barely cover their body, making their purpose in the video obvious: to be an object of spectacle. In Figure 16, he is shown in between the behinds of two women whose faces are not part of the photograph. Not only have rappers been the only victims of this rampant objectification, but black women have been as well. They are commonly used as “video girls” in music videos and are given no real role in the film other than to dance and look great. The “Tip Drill” video was extreme, even for some commercial rappers, yet nonetheless is the perfect example of how black women



Fig. 17 A Screenshot from Nelly's "Tip Drill" Video

have bore the brunt of this objectification as well. Just as Gordon's true identity was masked in the images from *Harper's Weekly* for the purpose of spectacle, these women are rendered identity-less, they are given no real purpose other than to authenticate the brand of the male rapper. This misogyny and hyper-masculinity is undoubtedly a reflection of United States society in general, but is extremely visible within the world of commercial Hip Hop. As a result of the great sales from misogynistic songs, women continue to be objectified and devalued within rap music. This has become a staple of being a gangsta.

Figure 18 is an image of Miley Cyrus, a Disney star turned pop icon who has found herself in the headlines for her controversial actions and imagery. Her sweatshirt is undoubtedly the focus of the image. Written on it are the words "rap music", located directly in the center of the photograph. The viewer's eye is guided from her face down to the text, and the meaning of the image immediately shows through. This picture symbolizes the result of the commercialization of the Hip Hop Movement. Here we see one of the most recognizable faces in the United States, a white female, recreating the "bad" persona depicted in the images above. Her intense stare directly into the lens of the camera is intimidating, and her crossed arms suggests an on edge, sour demeanor. It is without question that Cyrus is emulating images of rap stars she has seen throughout her upbringing during the peak years of commercialization of the music. That being said, the "bad" persona adopted by rap stars was a reaction to the great plight and struggle they were exposed to throughout their life. Thus, Miley Cyrus is appropriating a culture that she clearly does not understand. She decides to only perpetuate the themes of gangsta rap in

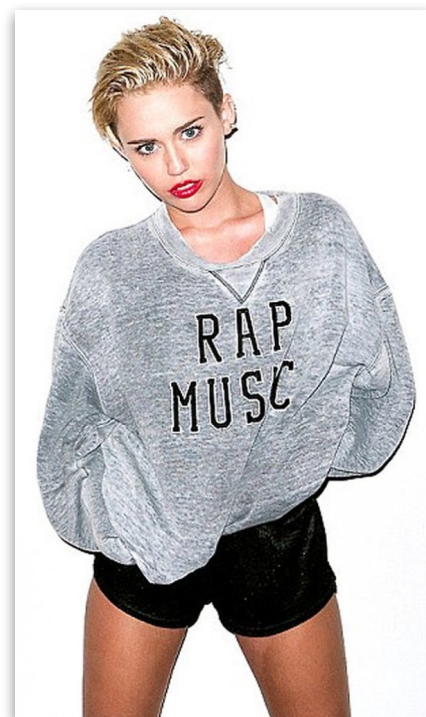


Fig. 18 Miley Cyrus

this image, not the revolutionary, reformative art of the golden era. This, unfortunately, has become a common occurrence for the listeners of commercial Hip Hop. The excessive individualization of single artists has taken the collective mentality out of the movement.

After viewing these images depicting the commercialization of Hip Hop, it is easy to see in comparison how commercial rappers have backtracked from the proud self-defining images that Frederick Douglass worked so hard to create, to images that mirror the objectification and commodification of the images of Gordon in *Harper's Weekly*. This incessant need to brand themselves has led rappers to forgo the revolutionary roots of the Hip Hop movement, and has turned them into spectacles for the rest of the United States to gawk at. Just as Gordon's scars shocked the East Coast when his images were released, images of commercial rappers have caused the same reaction. The only difference is that Gordon was treated as a spectacle and commodified for the greater good of the Abolitionist Movement, while rappers are commodified and treated as spectacle for the greater good of the recording industry, and their pockets. This results in people like Miley Cyrus appropriating what she thinks is Hip Hop culture, even though what she was told is Hip Hop has been wrong all along. Commercial Hip Hop and rap music have truly become a "cultural safari."

Conclusion

Very rarely has the role of the photography of rappers been examined in relation to the commercialization of the Hip Hop Movement. Until now, these images had not been thought to serve as commodified spectacles, and visual representations of this commodification and commercialization. It becomes evident after exploring the history of African American photography and comparing it to the transformation of Hip Hop photography that there are many similarities between the images of Frederick Douglass and images of golden age rappers, and the images of Gordon from *Harper's Weekly* and modern day rap stars. Golden age rappers like Public Enemy chose to represent the collective movement rather than their individual brands within their photographs following the lead of Frederick Douglass' strategy of self-definition. Popular rappers have unfortunately become increasingly commodified and this is conveyed through how they choose to portray themselves as authentic gangstas. It is conveyed through how record companies force rappers to create music that focuses solely on topics that most Americans can relate to, and how they shy away from uncomfortable topics for white America such as black nationalism and power. The image of Miley Cyrus in the "Rap Music" sweatshirt displays the effects of the increasing corporatization of a revolutionary movement. As Kristine Wright so elegantly put it: "Unfortunately, the cost [of the commercialization of Hip Hop] is more than the \$17.99 price tag on a CD."⁸⁰ While popular rappers view the world from their windows in their expensive mansions and sports cars, the world looks back and idolizes those they see in magazines and on TV. What they do not realize, however, is that what they see is not authentic, it is crafted from the ground up, with each step greatly considered, in order to earn as

⁸⁰ Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony. Neal. "Rise Up Hip-Hop Nation: From Deconstructing Racial Politics to Building Positive Solutions." *That's the Joint!: The Hip-hop Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 520. Print.

much profit as possible by any means necessary. What they see in those magazines and on TV has become a commodified spectacle, a shock producing entity that Americans cannot look away from. What they see is the modern rap star.

This paper intends to prove how modern rappers have become commodified spectacles, and it does so for a purpose. The American public is often not taught about the wholesome community and revolutionary aspects of the Hip Hop Movement. This essay addresses the rappers on TV and in other publications seen by the public and shows that they are not authentic to Hip Hop. That Hip Hop is much more than drugs, money, and women. Hopefully, they will realize the detrimental effects of this commercial form of the music and will tend to support it less, and spread this knowledge to their peers and influence them to do the same. Hopefully they will support artists who hold true to the core elements of Hip Hop like Public Enemy, Doug E. Fresh, and the many more undervalued and underrepresented artists within the Hip Hop world. Artists who reject the influence of the major labels, like Doug E. Fresh:

I can't let somebody turn around and manipulate me, and put me in a position where they control me, and I have to say just nice things. And there's a war going on and black people are at the forefront of the war, and I have to turn around and say, "I love George Bush". Kiss my ass George Bush. I'm saying I don't care. That's the bottom line, I really don't. The only thing I care about is my family, and my family is my black brothers and sisters, my Latin brothers and sisters. I love you and no matter what we're going down. If you're rolling, and your with the struggle I'm with you, Im with you all the way, and we're going to keep rising to the top.⁸¹

Popular Hip Hop and rap music are in dire need of a radical change in how the stars of the movement are represented. This essay shows that the industry and photographers of artists are just responsible as the artists themselves for the negative portrayal of black Americans in popular culture. In reality, as is shown by Doug E. Fresh's words, is that Hip Hop is a powerful,

⁸¹ Fresh, Doug E. "Doug E. Fresh." *Nation Conscious Rap*. By Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady. New York: PC International, 1991. 4. Print.

reformatory, and important movement of the post Civil Rights generation. We may live in a less segregated and racist world as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, but there is still much work to be done—work to be done by the Hip Hop Generation.

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(Fig 7) (Fig 8)

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(Fig 9) (Fig 10)

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(Fig 11)(Fig 12)

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