

The State of the Hip-Hop Generation: How Hip-Hop's Cultural Movement is Evolving into Political Power

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The question of the role of Black art has long faced African American artists. It was addressed by Langston Hughes in his 1926 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain'. It was raised again during the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and many times in between, before and since. For young African Americans today, several important variables have helped raise this question anew, albeit in bold and curious ways.

For much of the last two decades, African American intellectuals from the activist's battlefield to the ivory tower's armchair have endlessly debated the question, why is there no contemporary Black political movement? Aside from those on the frontlines of the flash-in-the-pan African-centered and Afrocentric movements of the mid to late 1980s, few would vehemently argue that there has been any concrete political movement in the US since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ironically, the very cultural movement that has often been on the receiving end of much criticism and disdain from the civil rights/Black power generation, due to its sometimes anti-Black, sexist and homophobic lyrics and seemingly endless celebration of bling bling,¹ consumer culture, just may be the vehicle for Black America's next major political movement.

To begin with, this is the first post-segregation generation of African Americans. We hip-hop generationers (young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984) are the first generation of African Americans to have grown up without legalized segregation. We're also the first generation for whom the civil rights movement, its ideology and its heroes, loom large over our definition of ourselves and our fellow Americans. Although Martin Luther King, Jr is not our generation's hero, it's been impossible – in part due to the creation of the King Holiday – for us to escape the institutionalization of certain aspects of Dr King's ideas. As such, his famous 'I Have

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a Dream' speech and the idea of judging 'by the content' of one's character, rather than by skin color are both central to our identity.

At the same time, this is the first generation of Americans to come of age at a time when consumer culture dominates the American imagination alongside American ideals like 'free market' and 'democracy'. These ideas too, for better and sometimes for worse, are critical to our identity. As our idea of democracy is often morphed with the omnipotence of the free market, we feel the innate right to loose the chains of old ways of being and knowing, including definitions of race.

This free-market madness in part has helped to usher in the hip-hop arts explosion. In the short decade between 1985 and 1995, the dominant cultural movement of our time, hip-hop culture, has become, seemingly overnight, mainstream American popular culture. This centering of hip-hop art, most specifically rap music, in American popular culture has given young African Americans unprecedented national and international visibility, at a historical time when images via the 21st century's public square of television, film and the internet are more critical to identity than ever.

This visibility, and most certainly the often anti-Black and stereotypical images that accompany it, forces distinctions to be drawn between today's Black popular culture and traditional ideas of Black culture, including what is art and what's at stake in cultural commodification.

To see our way clearly as we contemplate these questions, we should also draw distinctions between the various cultural ideas that converge as hip-hop has become a staple of American popular culture. Black popular culture is not a carbon copy of hip-hop culture. And elements of prison culture that have worked their way into hip-hop should not be viewed as Black youth culture. Likewise, because street culture in the realm of popular culture is deemed what it means to be young and Black, doesn't make it so, even when played out as such in rap music, accompanying videos or in Black gangster films – from *Menace II Society* to *Paid in Full*.

In this climate, inevitably the question arises, does Black art still play a role as a place of sustenance for an oppressed people's spirit, as a site of resistance? The answer is a resounding No! and Yes!

Hip-hop as a cultural movement is often defined by its commercial manifestation – the platinum sales, the overnight millionaire movers and shakers, the bling-bling glitz and glamour. This commercialized aspect of the cultural movement – with some notable but rare exceptions – most certainly would lead most to conclude that the market has in fact overtaken the concern of Black cultural integrity as part of the psyche of young Black artists.

But then there is too the resounding Yes!, as analyses of hip-hop's impact are incomplete if they fail to consider the off-the-radar segment of hip-hop's cultural movement: those neighborhood hip-hop kids pressing their own cds, those looking to break into the commercial sector, those happy doing their thing at the local level, those simply tuning in to hip-hop, via local party, music videos, mixed tapes, etc., in anytown, small or large, USA. This is the slept on, underground element of hip-hop's cultural movement that is feeding into the spoken word movement. Both are fueling the emerging political movement. Here is where you will find obscure hip-hop

artists like Medusa, Capital D and countless others for whom Black traditional concerns are still part of what it means to be an artist.

Similar radical critiques informing hip-hop artists can likewise be found among more popular artists like The Goodie Mob, Common and others. Rap groups like the Coup for example, whose MC Boots Riley considers himself a communist and who comes out of an activist family, are not aberrations in the hip-hop world, but a strong tradition. This is true too when it comes to many mainstream artists, even the most so-called gangsta and thugged-out ones. The Jay-Zs, the Babys, the Camrons and the Ja-Rules at the center of hip-hop's commercial mainstream too have been politicized, like most hip-hop generationers, by American public policy in the 1980s and 1990s. These artists rap about the growing scarcity of working-class living wage jobs, inequalities of incarceration and inferior education, albeit right alongside lyrics about 'niggas', 'bytches', 'hos',² blunt-smoking, Moet and Cristal-drinking, and killing Black people.

'Consciousness', the late Kwame Toure (former SNCC³ activist and former chairman of the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party) often reminded us, 'is multi-form'. And it may not always come in nice, neat, familiar packages – but that doesn't mean it's not there.

Likewise, whereas artists like Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Boots Riley and dead prez all get behind activist causes on the ground, in the case of most other artists it may be more difficult to trace a direct line from artists' lyrics to concrete activist work. However, if asked about a specific political issue, most hip-hop generationers could easily recall the first time that their awareness was raised via rap music in regards to said issue. Perhaps even more important than actually attempting to be activist themselves, what rap artists have done is helped to create a national infrastructure and solidify a national youth culture that more and more young activists, mostly at the local and regional level (organizations like the San-Francisco-based Third Eye Movement, the Chicago-based Hip-Hop Political Action Committee, the DC-based LISTEN Inc., to name a few), are tapping into as they seek to bring about political change.

Rather than buying into popular culture notions that all hip-hop generationers do not harbor traditional Black cultural concerns, we should more closely consider the current climate of Black culture and politics. When it comes to hip-hop and the younger generation, we are in a unique moment in history where our generation's cultural movement is preceding its political one. Ironically it is in the off-the-radar segment of hip-hop's cultural movement that some of our generation's most political artistic expressions are found. These are the ones participating in political rallies, organizing the hip-hop generation voting bloc, bridging the gap between the cultural movement and the emerging political one. These are the folk whose concerns, including the sometimes anti-Black and anti-women lyrics, will become more central as hip-hop solidifies its role as a political force.

Already in terms of mainstream politics we can find rap artists like LL Cool J, Naughty By Nature and MC Lyte lending their voice and influence to political concerns. In Dallas, Russell Simmons' Hip-Hop Action Network Summit recently provided space for senatorial candidate Ron Kirk to address hip-hop generationers. In New York City, the Urban Think Tank Institute recently hosted a conference with

the theme 'New Politics in Urban America: A New Generation Dialogue'. In Chicago, the Hip Hop Political Action Committee places its emphasis on voter education and provides a platform for candidates to address hip-hop kids. In Little Rock, Selma, San Francisco, LA, etc., young activists are calling on hip-hop's influence and hip-hop kids to work for change at the grassroots level and beyond. All of this was unimaginable even three years ago.

That hip-hop culture, which at its mid-1970s origins consisted primarily of rap music, graffiti art, breakdancing and DJ party culture, has evolved over the last two-and-a-half decades into both a pop culture sensation and, not surprisingly, a thriving commercial entity (annual multi-billion dollar rap sales and multi-million dollar clothing lines included) is widely known. What's less known, outside of youth culture circles, is the extent of a growing political activism among America's hip-hop kids.

On college and university campuses across the country, students have been the impetus for a near explosion of hip-hop clubs that parallels the emergence of Black studies on college campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These clubs are part of a fledgling student activist movement that is too using hip-hop culture's influence to politically organize youth. They are demanding courses on hip-hop culture and are organizing hip-hop conferences. Both the courses and conferences, like those at University of California-Berkeley and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for example, are pushing the envelope on political concerns.

Youth community activist organizations like the San Francisco-based Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, the Philadelphia-based Inner City Games, and the DC-based LISTEN, Inc. all are connecting up with local hip-hop kids to spread the word and engage their peers in social issues affecting their lives. In Chicago, young activists involved in the youth division of the Chicago Alliance for Neighborhood Safety, for example, were on the front end of raising community awareness of the unfairness of Chicago's Anti-Gang Loitering Ordinance, which led to over 45,000 arrests before being ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court.

Hip-hop generationers attempting to seriously engage in the mainstream political process are doing the same. For the last several years, the New York City based Urban Think Tank Institute has been critical in raising the bar on hip-hop's responsibility to Black cultural integrity and emphasizing the need to politicize the post-civil rights generation. Ras Baraka, son of 1960s activist Amiri Baraka and spoken-word poet with ties to rap industry major rap figures like the Fugees for example, lost by a close margin in a recent city councilman election in Newark, New Jersey. In 2000, activist Malaika Sanders helped create the 'Joe's Gotta Go' campaign, which registered hip-hop kids to vote, organized them into an educated voting bloc, and helped to vote decades-long mayor Joe Smitherman and former segregationist out of office, electing that city's first-ever Black mayor. Efforts like these are tapping into the influence of hip-hop to reach a younger generation of voters.

Many of these grassroots activists, student activists and political operatives have recently joined together and are currently organizing a national political convention for the hip-hop generation. The convention is scheduled to take place in May 2004 and is largely seen as a take-off from the national Black political convention, which took place in Gary, Indiana in 1972. The organizers for the May 2004 convention

envision hip-hop generationers coming together to forge a national political agenda for the hip-hop generation. Organizers hope participants will take that agenda back to their local communities and continue to use hip-hop as a tool for holding elected officials accountable and bringing about social change in areas that have most affected hip-hop kids, such as education, incarceration and living-wage jobs, to name a few.

It may be difficult for us now to imagine a day when a Jay-Z or a P. Diddy would follow the lead of a Newark deputy mayor Ras Baraka, journalist-author Joan Morgan, Minister Conrad Muhammad, Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr or activist Malaika Sanders, but that day is not as far off as we think. The work of these hip-hop generation activists, politicians and thinkers, as many like-minded others, hints at the range, resolve and innovation of progressive political thought emerging in the younger generation. While on the one hand these efforts may appear as routine forays into reformist mainstream politics, beyond the limelight can be found a vanguard that is synthesizing the various ideologies of yesterday and today into concrete unforeseen political perspectives that can and will bring about radical change for our time. In the meantime, generation gap debates like the ones over the content of commercial rap lyrics and the inter-generational name-calling in the *Barbershop*⁴ will continue to unfold. That is, until the hip-hop generation proves unequivocally that such debates are played out.

As a community, African Americans young and old concerned about the role of art in these times, must work diligently to look beyond the blinding light of popular culture. For it is there that a generation of young African Americans who are as engaged in the concern over Black cultural integrity as any previous generation can be found. In the final analysis, given the way that this generation has influenced the marketplace in its adolescent years, we may prove equally, if not more, effective in the years ahead at using art as a weapon of resistance.

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Notes

1. The term 'bling-bling' became prevalent in hip-hop lyrics beginning in the late 1990s, made popular by rappers like Jay-Z, Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, Mase and Puff Daddy. It generally refers to expensive platinum and diamond-encrusted jewelry and the light reflected by such. The term as I use it here also suggests status-centric high-priced commodities of American consumer culture.
2. The terms 'bytch' and 'ho' frequently used in hip-hop for the last 14 years generally refer to Black and Latino women. Prior to the late 1980s, these terms were rarely used in hip-hop, but have gained frequency as members of the hip-hop generation have become caught up in America's criminal justice system as a result of the US war on drugs that disproportionately targets poor Black and Latino neighborhoods. These terms, as they are used in hip-hop to refer to women, have their roots in American prisons where a hierarchy is formed among men using the same.
3. SNCC: Student Non violent Co-ordinating Committee. A national organization founded by young people, mostly college students, in 1960 during the civil rights movement, SNCC was created with the help of SCLC and with the vision that young people should have their own organization. SNCC was

a training ground for key leaders of the Black Power Movement which would emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s and is often a point of reference for hip-hop generation activists for what's missing in our own generation.

4. *Barbershop*, a popular 2002 movie that caused a generational rift. In the film the actor and comedian Cedric the Entertainer makes disparaging remarks about Jesse Jackson, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil-righters found the references to be disrespectful. Hip-hop thought the old-school response showed how out of touch they are with young people.