
Analysis Of The Language Used In Early Commercial Rap Music Of The 1980s And 1990s As A Cultural Response To The Socioeconomic Oppression Plaguing The Black Community

Introduction

In the mid to late 1980s the cultural shockwave known as hip hop with its roots of rap and “gangsta culture” flourished in the economic and social insanity that paralysed American cities and neighborhoods. The form of music was a cultural response from the neglected black and Latino neighborhoods such as the Bronx, New York City that captured a part of youth culture and career opportunity. This paper will attempt to coincide the the different critiques that answer the question: To what extent did the language used in early commercial rap music of the 1980s begin as a cultural response to the socioeconomic oppression plaguing the black community?

As the 1980s came to a close, rap and hip hop only increased in popularity and criticism. Republican and Democratic politicians and many black leaders blamed hip hop music such as gangsta rap for the socioeconomic plague that showered black communities across America. They accused the genre of promoting violence such as drug use, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, gang violence, and high school dropouts. However, many black rappers – notably Ice-T and Sister Souljah – contend that they are being unfairly singled out because they believe rap music gives people of all races and genders an outlet for their societal neglect, anger and pain, and even happiness. This essay will argue how the music outlined black people’s social predicament and opportunity and lastly will acknowledge the perception of authoritative discrimination in which black rappers used music to aggressively respond. Analysis of these arguments will include rap songs produced and released between the years 1979 and 1989. Artists that will be pursued include Schoolly D and Ice-T, and groups such as N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), Sugarhill Gang and Grandmaster Flash. Their generation defining music include songs “Rapper’s Delight”, “Fuck tha Police”, and “The Message”.

In recent years, controversy over rap music and its gangsta culture has been the forefront of the American media. From the hype of the East Coast to West Coast rivalry that shadowed the murders of rappers Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. to the demonization of modern music in the wake of school shootings in Littleton, Colorado. Critics are quick to place blame on rap for a seeming trend in youth violence, but they are missing the way rap culture has defined artists today and their promotional messages such as black expression. Old school rap lyrical content

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definitely began as a form of black expressionism of the violence and aggression faced by the black community in socioeconomic situation of the 1980s to 1990s.

Argument 1 - Social Prejudice and Opportunity: Black rappers expressed their feelings against the seemingly present racism and social prejudice of the 1980s with the use of offensive and violent language such as profanity and racial slurs in their songs. In 1989, artists Chuck D, Hank Shocklee, Eric Sadler, and Keith Shocklee released their hit album "Fear of a Black Planet" which targeted racism as the chorus of many songs, specifically the song "Fight the Power". Elvis was a hero to most But he never meant shit to me you see Straight up racist that sucker was simple and plain Mother fuck him and John Wayne Cause I'm Black and I'm proud (Rap Genius). Public Enemy expresses their thoughts on the white community, notably Elvis and John Wayne, calling them 'motherfuckers' because they believe they were only known to be racist to black people. The pioneer of 'Gangsta Rap', Schoolly D wrote the song "Don't Call Me Nigger" in 1989 as a statement to end the use of the word "nigga". Don't call me nigga....WHITEY! Don't call me nigga (nigga) WHITEY! Now take that word nigga, and this is what I figure A nigga, is ignorant, shiftless and lazy So what you tryin to say boy, is that I'm crazy (Rap Genius) Schoolly D explicitly defines the word "nigger" as a racial slur and the chorus tells the white population directly to not say it because it is offensive and racist. Calling them "WHITEY" was the juxtaposition with "Nigga" in the sense that he had a right to also demonize. His tone is very violent because he feels motivated to speak the truth on behalf of the black community. Retaliation against the white community was just one of many foundations for decade defining rap music. It was an outlet for Public Enemy and Schoolly D to voice their views with racial slurs through hard language and profanity.

Stereotyping is a form of social prejudice that society used to categorize blacks and whites as dangerous and friendly when it came to activity of drug dealing. Schoolly D's "Don't Call me Nigger" emphasized the neglectfulness in using the racial slur but also a reason it was used so commonly is because it reinforced the image that black people especially from ghetto neighbourhoods were always to be accused when it came to the sale and production of narcotics. The whitney my man, you you're my fan I look into your face and I gots to say damn I feel a lot of pain, the money you gain Because I'm black you think it's come out of 'caine (Rap Genius) Schoolly D raps from the perspective of both a white and black man. Schoolly D is implicitly accused of being a drug dealer by the way a white person looks at him. Illegal use of drugs such as cocaine was very common in the 80s and it formed the image that the only way black men raised in the poor neighbourhoods got by was drug dealing.

In 1988, O'Shea Jackson (Ice Cube) and the N.W.A wrote the single "Fuck tha Police" after a false accusation was made by the police that they were affiliated with a gang based upon their appearance. Ice Cube was enraged by the stereotypes police officers accuse young black men of and mentions selling off narcotics as their go to reason to looking like commonly dressed

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gang members in their controversial song. Fuckin' with me 'cause I'm a teenager With a little bit of gold and a pager Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product Thinkin' every nigga is sellin' narcotics (Rap Genius) Police officers of white decent largely accused young black as being affiliated with a gang. The fast rhythm and rhyme emulates Ice Cube's distraught on the stereotype, he is making a statement addressed to the police. This view is what N.W.A. was known for speaking and rapping about many other songs such as "Gangsta Gangsta" and "Straight Outta Compton" which will be analysed in the next argument. Ice Cube's passion and motivation was the influence he had on behalf of his community to end the drug dealing, cop harassing stereotypes society demonized them as.

In the early 1980s, "The Message" would change the direction of the self-congratulatory boasting and party chants of mainstream rap to provide hip hop with its first prominent rap song that instead communicated a social commentary. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five "The Message", released in 1982, highlighted the harsh stereotypical life a 'ghetto' black man endured. Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers Pickpocket peddlers, even panhandlers You say "I'm cool, huh, I'm no fool." But then you wind up dropping outta high school (Rap Genius) Young black men resort to crime and unconscious decisions as forefront of the image they wanted the community to see them as, powerful, such as being a feared criminal. Their economic upbringing was poor and as a result it became the stereotype that all black people were 'screw ups' in society. Now you're unemployed, all null and void Walking 'round like you're Pretty Boy Floyd Turned stick-up kid, but look what you done did Got sent up for a eight-year bid (Rap Genius) The last line tells us the last place you'll end up is jail and this is the very same thought white people considered the timeline of a black man to be. This true and metaphorical use of language communicated a story Grandmaster Flash wanted his 'brothers and sisters' to understand. Another infamous example, is Schoolly D's "Am I Black Enough for You?". The satirical lyrics challenge the stereotype America founded for black people, "Am I black enough for ya, America? I'm black! Too damn powerful. I'm still a bad boy, and get a hour full." Schoolly D's rhetorical question about if he lives up to the "power" stereotype for just being black challenges those who believe it to consider his point of view. These artists used their music to communicate a message about their emotional and pivotal understanding of the difference in opportunity between races.

Argument 2 - Police Brutality and Discrimination: On April 29, 1992 came the screams of South L.A. in deep need of security, employment, and respect. The L.A. Riots resulted in over 50 recorded deaths, 2,000 and more injuries, and about \$1 billion in damages. Integral to the skepticism of the story of the L.A. Riots were the lyricisms of prominent hip hop figures such as N.W.A. (Ice Cube, Ice-T, and Dr. Dre). Through their music, the needs of the people of South L.A. were finally heard and echoed worldwide. In 1991, the United States Department of Commerce released a statistical abstract that highlighted the poverty rate of South L.A. increased between the years 1989 and 1991. The abstract mirrored Ice Cube's hit "My

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“Summer Vacation” released October 29, 1991 telling of the tense relationship between the community and police, paired with the economic strain of the people. Now this is a young man’s summer vacation No chance for rehabilitation Cause look at the motherfuckin years that I’m facin’ (Rap Genius) For most kids returning to school in September, it is usually something you are happy to discuss about, whereas Ice Cube contradicts this view, in the sense that the dirt he did, there is no option for rehabilitation to a hefty prison sentence. In the same year, The Baltimore Sun released their report showing civilian complaints of “excessive force” from LAPD officers, increased by 33% between the years 1984 and 1989. Ice Cube interpreted these claims as ‘a typical summer vacation’. After it was announced police officers would be set free of all charges, the community of South L.A. was in flames and raging acts of violence became of 1992.

Among the hostility between the black community and the LAPD, Ice Cube wrote the song “Black Korea” released in 1991 that discussed the animosity between the black and Korean community. Thinkin’ every brother in the world’s out to take So they watch every damn move that I make They hope I don’t pull out a gat and try to rob They funky little store, but, bitch I got a job (Rap Genius) Korean store owners stereotyped black people as dangerous criminals. Ice Cube explains such tactics of racially profiling the community heightened the tension and bitterness between the races. Korean owners were eventually driven to bear arms to protect their property as majority of their stores were engulfed during the L.A. riots.

Another notable example of a defending black artist against racial tension was Public Enemy and their single “Fight the Power” released June 1, 1989. People, people we are the same No we’re not the same Cause we don’t know the game (Rap Genius) Chuck D. of Public Enemy explained that there is only one race, the human race. The point of these lines is telling anyone who claims racism is dead that they are lying as it still continues to hurt the community. Public enemy is saying that blacks don’t have equal rights as the white majority society because they are not given fair treatment. “Fight the Power” broke out as an influential and strategic protest for the black community and their motivation for the L.A. riots. The early 90s became the forefront of police brutality and their ability to over exercise their power in wrongfully accusing black men of criminal negligence.

The Los Angeles Police Department has a history of racial discrimination and use of excessive force against the black community. This behaviour inspired Ice Cube and the N.W.A to create “Fuck Tha Police” (1988), an aggressive social statement against police. Pull your goddamn ass over the right now! Aww shit, now, what the fuck you pullin’ me over for? ‘Cause I feel like it! Just sit your ass on the curb and shut the fuck up! Man, fuck this shit! A’ight, smartass, I’m taking your black ass to jail! (Rap Genius) Police officers judge, accuse and harass innocent black men walking down the streets and instantly labeling them as dangerous largely because of the way they dressed resembles gang members. This everyday incident was a disgrace and

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brutally emphasized law enforcement as above the law. “Fuck Tha Police” was a statement that served as a manner of reappropriating the derogatory language for a positive change, projecting the black’s voice regarding injustice, through hip hop.

Tupac Shakur, among many born instigators such as Ice Cube, was known for rapping this revolutionary theme in “Trapped” as one of his earliest mature signs of his revolutionary potential. Tupac’s message was much more complex, way beyond his complete melodies and irresistible ethos. They got me trapped, can barely walk the city streets Without a cop harassing me, searching me then asking my identity Hands up, throw me up against the wall, didn’t do a thing at all I’m telling you one day these suckers gotta fall Cuffed up throw me on the concrete Tupac was viciously assaulted by the Oakland Police Department around this time after he cussed and jaywalked against the police. He was bruised badly after the incident and arrested on the spot. Tupac addresses police profiling the minority and their brutality in this song. Black artists such as Tupac and Ice Cube are not writing to tell a story, they are writing to tell their story, a story they want heard about authoritative discrimination and expressionism.

Counter Arguments - Public Criticism: The commercialization of rap music has been, for many decades, accused of being stolen from the community, repackaged by money-driven businessmen and sold back to the ghettos and the streets of their origin as music videos and Billboard Top-100 charts. By early 1990s, hip hop became a market for business professionals and “gangsta rap” became a valuable commodity. Journalist, Christopher John Farley, objectifies rap music’s commodification as also being a form of resistance, “Corporate America’s infatuation with rap has increased as the genre’s political content has withered. Ice Cube’s early songs attacked white racism; Ice-T sang a song about a cop killer; Public Enemy challenged listeners to “fight the power”...They rap about shooting other blacks, but almost never about challenging governmental authority or encouraging social activism.” Many aspects of rap’s lyrical content are objected to promotion of violence, misogyny, and narcotic use as rapper lifestyle. This is a function of rap’s commodification that Christopher argues. Politicians such as C. Delores Tucker have publicly voiced concerns with sexually explicit and misogynistic lyrics featured on rap tracks. Tucker, a prominently-ranked African American women in the Pennsylvania state government, claimed such lyrics were threatening to the black community. She was most concerned about the evolution of rap in the 1980s, labeling it as “pornographic filth” and claiming it was offensive and demeaning to black women. She stated, “You can’t listen to all that language and filth without it affecting you.”

In 1992, U.S. Vice president Dan Quayle blasted the rap recording and hip hop industry for producing music associated with “gangsta culture” as leading to acts of violence and aggression. Quayle urged Interscope Records to remove Tupac’s 1991 debut album “2Pacalypse Now” from stores and stated, “There is absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published — It has no place in our society.” Many politicians such as Quayle and Tucker

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were barriers to business-minded rappers and rappers trying to advocate change like Tupac. Prior to his statement, the family of Texas state trooper Bill Davidson filed a civil lawsuit against Tupac and Interscope Records after he was shot by African-American Ronald Hay Howard who was driving a stolen car and listening to 2Pacalypse Now. They claimed the tape's violent lyrics incite "imminent lawless action" in which the judge eventually claimed the music was protected speech under the First Amendment.

Rebuttal Arguments - Artist's Point of View: Many rappers contend the presence of violence in their lyrics as the manifestation of American history and culture. Journalist Michael Saunders writes, "The violence and misogyny and lustful materialism that characterize some rap songs are as deeply American as the hokey violence long before hip hop." Michael is specifically referring to the legacies of slavery, segregation, and economic and political tension that has been labeled by society as incidents of violence. "Many black rappers — including Ice-T and Sister Souljah — contend that they are being unfairly singled out because their music reflects deep changes in society not being addressed anywhere else in the public forum," wrote journalist Chuck Philips in a review about the battle of contrasting views of rap music. The reason rap has been marked a hostile form of expression by many politicians is because its contradiction to American lifestyle and culture. Rapper Chuck D thinks that much of the violence and nihilism in rap music is the legacy of the hate that minorities have faced in the United States, "We were a product of what hate produced. We were taught to hate ourselves, so a lot of intraracial conflict is bred off of ignorance."

On June 15, 2015 Ice Cube was interviewed by Milk Studios in Los Angeles following the release of his movie "Straight Outta Compton." He was asked about his motivation for "Fuck Tha Police" and the L.A. riots as a backstory to its popularity. He explained the reason for making this type of music is because they wanted to show the effect the neighborhood had on them and they to the neighborhood. Creating "Fuck Tha Police" was statement for the people about what just happened to them; brutality and deprivation. He said the song "was more of an anthem for people to be able to fight back and to have a song they can all rally around that feels the same way they feel." His main message he wanted the people to understand is that the violent lyrics had a purpose, it was the community's turn to make the impact rather authority.

In a 1991 promotional interview for Tupac Shakur's debut album "2Pacalypse Now." in which he vents about his frustrations with corrupt policemen and the government. He calls out many different audiences by name and says harsh words about major forces that he believes have caused the oppression. As a result of his comments featured on many tracks throughout the album, Tupac was attacked by many different groups most controversially Vice President. Dan Quayle after boasting that it was responsible for the death of state trooper Bill Davidson. Quayle addressed the album as "an irresponsible corporate act." Tupac answers to this accusation his in interview, "They hear the songs and they go, 'Damn, he's shooting police

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officers?’ But to me, come on, be real. Everybody knows that this is a song about shooting police officers. Let's talk about about the reality of police brutality. Let's talk about the reality of a situation like Rodney King.” He says the songs very clearly represent police brutality and he trying to make a public statement in a way that will showcase the harsh reality of discrimination in expressing yourself, through rigorous hip hop lyrical content.

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