Part I

Did the Decline of Sampling Cause the Decline of Political Hip Hop?

Erik Nielson explores the correlation between the rise of copyright enforcement and the shift from rap's "golden age … [of] socially or politically engaged lyrics." While these two do, in fact, coincide, I take Erik's point that he is skeptical about it being a "coincidence". Sampling was functionally a way of using the sample as a musical element as part of a composition. Quoting Hank Shocklee, "The reason why we sampled in the beginning was that we couldn't afford to have" musicians come in. The form of the music changed after the deprecation of sampled music, and the correlative "thematic" content changed alongside. Shocklee again, "artists' lyrical reference point only lies with themselves" when the "socially conscious, socially relevant record" samples are not available. Essentially, function follows form. If you remove the ability to use samples in music production then the resulting work will be less connected to the ("socially conscious") past.

Not to be overly pedantic, but opening the piece with a reference to Tanaka and Minaj was a bit odd. Tanaka's case has nothing to do with sampling, but rather that Minaj ripped off his song. Charitably, I will concede that there is a larger point of the effect of a multi-million (or billion) dollar cottage industry of copyright claim and enforcement which no artists, including superstars like Minaj, are immune. Nielson reinforced this in quoting music critic Chris Richards assessment of Kanye West's latest (at the time, 2013) release that "the overriding message was, 'This cost me a lot of money.'"

Nielson references the 1991 court case *Grand Upright Music, Ltd. V. Warner Bros Records, Inc.* as the effective starting pistol for the beginning of the end of "free-

for-all sampling", and included the opening of Judge Kevin Thomas Duffy's opinion that "Though shalt not steal." While this case dealt with the issue of copyright usage of music samples in other works, it certainly was not happening in a vacuum. It may have been the start of the decline of sampling, but it was also the culmination of a long line. My first exposure to "sampling" was the Dickie Goodman 1975 novelty hit, Mr. Jaws. This inspired my Grade 5 teacher to assign my class the project of composing our own 'songs' using the technique of intercutting a narrative with music samples. The rise of home taping (and 'mixtapes') was followed by the 1980's decade-long campaign by the music industry, 'Home Taping Is Killing Music.' Along with this, media corporations were successfully extending the time and reach of their copyrighted material.

I agree with Nielson that the decline of sampling and the decline of "Political Hip Hop" is not **just** a coincidence. However, correlation is not causation, and certainly not in the way this article implies. The same "corporate and legal system" which gave rise to the industry of copyright enforcement is part of the same social, cultural, and especially the economic shift over this same time. The neoliberal corporate forces which led to, ultimately, the strictures placed on music sampling are the very same which altered the content from "socially conscious" to "material excess." Extracting the example of the correlative effect between sampling and political messaging misses the cultural and social momentum which affected both of these.

Where Did All The Female Rappers Go?

Erik Nielson examines and expresses skepticism about the general claim that 2014 will be "the year female rappers are going to break their way back into the mainstream." He describes a general decline from the heyday of the decade leading up to 2003 which resulted in a precipitous drop from "40 women signed to major labels" in the "1980's and early 1990's" to just three in 2010. He examines the needed value of female representation, but also makes the case that representation alone may not be sufficient. The trend concentrates on the image of women towards increasingly sexualizing "specifically black female" expression represented in both male and female rap artists' works. Despite a gloomy environment for female rap, Nielson offers some glimmer of hope outside of the "major media outlets … by women who have created their own space to perform."

My initial reaction is that this article serves as confirmation of a prevailing popular preconception of rap as inherently misogynistic. That is not a criticism of the article itself, but rather that an acknowledgement that an article which focuses on existing biases can (and will) end up reinforcing and supporting those biases. Criticism serves a larger purpose which obviates concerns of how that criticism is received and used. Everything in the article is valid. However, the focus on the role of women in rap suggests that this is unique to rap rather than reflective of trends and the general environment. This ends up indicting rap alone rather than examining it within the context of the broader cultural and economic environment. The larger consequence of singling out rap for this type of criticism is that it distracts from the possibility of industry-wide or general cultural environmental shifts.

I have not watched any award shows since last century, so I honestly have no idea what the implications or consequences are of the inclusion or removal of any category type. This includes the Grammy's and the recording industry. Nielson noted the Grammy's had eliminated the Best Female Rap Solo Performance in the 2005 (47th) Grammys, but failed to mention that the gendered categories were eliminated for the rock genre that same year. By the time of the writing of the article in 2014, the gendered categories had been removed for Country and Pop categories for two years (since the 54th Grammys). I do not know what the consequences are of removing gendered categories in awards, but making note of it happening in only one genre while it happened across all genres can result in a distorted representation.

One other data point which Nielson points to is the precipitous decline of female rap artists signed to major labels from the 1980's and 1990's to 2010. The reader is left to assume the raw numbers tell the complete story. Was the decline of signed female artists limited to just the rap genre? Perhaps the 1980's and 1990's was the unique era where females were over-represented relative to other music genres. Regardless though, the music industry was in the midst of an entire restructuring with commensurate consequences of artist signings.

Isolating the misogynistic attributes within rap music tends towards the presentation of a distorted image. This isolation obscures the profound potential value. A more robust examination of rap and hip hop can provide a narrow lens to observe the broader social, cultural, and economic environment.

Rap and Race: Beyond Sister Souljah—The New Politics of Pop Music

This article was published in the wake of Bill Clinton's 'Sister Soulja Moment' in June, 1992 where he condemned both Sister Soulja and fellow Democratic Party Presidential candidate Jesse Jackson. The article examines the role of rap as political expression. The article is bookended with a profile of Lisa Williamson (Sister Soulja). The focus centers a specific lens towards the racial politics of both rap and culture. Rap, through songs like Sister Soulja's 'The Final Solution', is a counterpoint to the contemporaneous colorblind popular music like Michael Jackson's 'Black or White'. Rap is both "leading the change" in perspective and reflecting "the massive schism between the races – consuming the rift as entertainment, a world view and beat you can dance to."

Rap is presented as a discussion on race in America, but not in the "racial melding" of 'We are the World'. Def Jam staffer Bill Stephney (presented in the article as "cofounder of the group Public Enemy") offered that rap was the exact opposite of "watering down" to appeal, but "curry[ing] favor with a white audience by showing rebellion." André "Doctor Dré" Brown (not to be confused with Andre Romelle Young's Dr. Dre) suggested a similarly cynical assessment. "We're marketing black culture to white people." Chuck D's more nuanced take in rap as "Black America's CNN" in which rap is the only way "a white kind in Indiana is going to pick up a slice of black life." This serves as the kind of 'edutainment' that KRS-One refers to. It is an indictment of the existing mainstream media and social institutions to deliver the "questions of identity, community, authenticity, language, fashion – all now filter[ed] through notions of race." It

is the void of the sanitized version of race relations which rap has stepped in to fill and confront.

Rap resets the role of music as it “mediates between them [races], providing a metaphor for the separation.” This more confrontational style of music led to (what persists through the past three decades since the publication of the article) “the overreactions to rap and its lyrics: when art stands in for life, it’s easy to confuse the two.” One of the consequences of rap was the resurgence of Country music, “ ‘cause it runs people to country” according to Liberty Record’s Jimmy Bowen. Rap functions to both expose and elevate the racial tensions in the country.

Though the link only cites “Newsweek Staff” as the author, I believe the author is John Leland. Leland captures the intersection of rap, race, and politics particularly well in the midst of Bill Clinton’s ‘Sister Souljah Moment’ in June, 1992 in the run-up to that years Presidential election which Clinton would go on to win. The problem is that it is reductive, and intentionally so. Quoting Jimmy Bowen again: “That's what inner-city life is: it's hell, it's gangs, lack of self-esteem, crime, rage, murder-it's all of the things in [rap] music.” Leland responded to this quote: “He’s talking about race.” Not that Bowen’s quote exposes him as a racist, but rather that Bowen is code-talking about race. While Leland does an admirable job of contextualizing a discussion about rap in terms of race and politics within the timeframe of the article, he ends up leaving the very concept of ‘race’ as some free-floating idea completely disconnected from material conditions. Leland describes why race matters in rap, but never bothers to describe why race matters in the first place.

Part II

Recontextualizing Rap

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. At its most basic, it is the what and how we know what we know. I became interested in something called the Epistemological Crisis (E-crisis) over the past decade. This is the chasm among people preventing meaningful mediated activity. Simply, it seeks to answer Rodney King's pleading question: "Can we all just get along?" Explaining and defining the E-crisis is a vague and difficult task. However, the past two years of the Covid pandemic made it demonstrable. The simple task of wearing a face covering became an absurd negotiation which heightened conflict in many parts of the US which include the efficacy of masks and even questions about the existence of a virus in the first place. The E-crisis is the focus of my Master's of Liberal Arts program, and so I enrolled in the 'Voices of Hip Hop' course.

Our professor opened up the first class by asking us to define hip-hop. With fits and starts, a definition emerged encompassing breakdancing, rap, graffiti, and education. I have difficulty defining the E-crisis in terms other than exemplars, so I was not totally dissatisfied with this approach. I asked if the professor had a definition for it beyond this collection of categories, and he responded that "Hip-hop is a lifestyle." My initial incredulity at the apparent vagueness of this has transformed these last thirteen weeks into appreciation for the subtle accuracy expressed in that phrase and definition.

We were introduced to the Stagolee myth during that first class. Cecil Brown writes that Stagolee is "a symbol of the enduring black male struggle against white oppression and racism." That same theme runs through the twentieth century up to and including rap, and that same myth presents and embraces violence and misogyny. I

could not get my head around the idea of combatting white oppression which is steeped in violence and misogyny by using that same form. It seemed incoherent. The professor, correctly, pointed out part of my problem in grappling with this was due to my 'white privilege'. I am a fifty-eight-year-old white cis-gendered heterosexual boomer male living in the United States of America. I am aware that I carry a variety of privileges. This does, however, have the sole downside that I fail to comprehend how my own identity can get in the way. This was highlighted for me when I read Michelle Shocked's infamous 1992 column in Billboard: "The chicken-thieving, razor-toting "coon" of the 1890's is the drug-dealing, Uzi-toting "nigga" of today." Sometimes, white people really do need to sit all the way down. Trying to sort out the meaning of the Stagolee myth was taken to new heights when a similar concern (and conceit) of mine was expressed in such starkly racist terms.

The problem with this handwringing by people like Shocked and myself goes beyond just 'white privilege'. It advances the cause of white supremacy. Wittingly or not, we are embracing and promoting what Teju Cole refers to as 'The White-Savior Industrial Complex'. We are riding in with our white hats on our white horses to save the savages from themselves. Even more insidious is just how pervasive this approach is in the formative and influential children's literature. Shocked, like myself, would have grown up on Dr. Seuss, and perceiving Seuss as a kind of nurturer. The hypocrisy of the white savior riding in to fix the problems created by white oppression goes even further. For Shocked, there are good and bad types of 'Zip Coon' imagery. She condemns black artists like Ice Cube and N.W.A. for perpetuating this counter-productive messaging. However, there is not a peep about the rainy day minstrelsy Zip

Coon imagery of The Cat In The Hat. Perhaps it is just a coincidence a white artist created 'The Cat in the Hat'.

Shocked moves forth from the never-sublime to the ridiculous. According to her, Rap confirms "what white folks have always believed about black men." The violent imagery in some Rap is more than just confirmation. It provides justification for the perpetuation of racist stereotypes. I'm sorry, but what? I can easily imagine an early twentieth century Michelle Shocked analogue arguing the rise of the Ku Klux Klan was due to Stagolee. I don't have to go searching though, because Shocked virtually makes this point herself. White America doesn't need justification to perpetuate racism. Arguably, the most racist film in US history (certainly one of great consequence) did lead directly to the rise of the KKK. "Birth of a Nation" didn't need Stagolee. It had the President of the United States. Based on the Thomas Dixon Jr., an "intimate friend" of Wilson, novel 'The Clansman', it was the first film ever shown in The White House. This is where you can insert the ironic eye roll!

Shocked isn't done. She levels these accusations at the feet of "the greed-artists of gangster rap." Their crime is successfully selling their music to a white audience. I am just guessing here, but I doubt there has ever been a throng of black people lined up to buy the latest Michelle Shocked album or concert ticket. Whether it is myth or reality, the idea that a majority white (and male) audience buys the majority of hip hop music continues to propagate. There is a good reason for that. Purchasing of a non-essential consumer good requires disposable income, and the racial wealth and income gap in America is massive. Why do white males buy the majority of rap music? For the same reason they buy the most of everything. Because they are the ones with the money.

Which brings me back to my own claims about the incoherence of an art form which uses violence and misogyny to rebel against the violence and misogyny of white oppression. It is my own utterance of incoherence which is truly incoherent. I had stripped the art form of any and all context as if it were some free-floating logic puzzle. It is expression birthed in a profoundly white supremacist and racist country. If it makes some white people like myself and Michelle Shocked uncomfortable, then there may be a good chance there is something more there we should look at. But first, we should probably sit down and hold up a mirror.

Musically at least, my own trip to rap followed a similar historical journey described by Jeff Chang in Can't Stop Won't Stop. I liked reggae. In 1981 at seventeen, I attended a Peter Tosh concert. It was at a suburban theater concert hall replete with high vaulted ceilings and plush seats. The emcee walked out announcing: "Ladies and Gentlemen, please extinguish your cigarettes … and light up your spliffs." At that, he threw out a fistful of joints into the audience, the crowd jumped to their feet and rushed the stage as Tosh rode out on his unicycle to the refrain of "Wanted Dread and Alive." The rest of the concert is both a literal and rhetorical haze for me. I was hooked though. A tad embarrassed looking back, I was the host of the Roots Reggae Hour show at CJSW, my campus radio station. I am not sure how much a white twenty year old really knows about reggae, but I was a fan.

It wasn't just the drum and bass, and weed and dreadlocks. I loved the themes of rebellion and redemption in the music. One of the first songs I heard over the speakers at university in 1982 was Gil Scott-Heron's "B Movie". Though Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" was popular at both the campus station and dance clubs at the time,

Scott-Heron became a mainstay at the campus radio station. The radio station was as old as I was and filled with records I had never heard. This led me through a path of discovery through the mid-1970's George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic. Still in casual rotation in 1982, a local Calgary group, The Patabeatnik's, had recorded a protest song called "Wake Up Students" similar in theme and style to the 1970 song by The Last Poets. This was an era well prior to the "N-word discourse", and The Last Poets unambiguously used the "hard R". Digging even further back led me to Dick Gregory's "The Light Side: The Dark Side" spoken word album from 1969.

There was an abundance of politically and socially conscious black art and commentary which began to seep into and through the culture prior to and following the 1964 signing of the Civil Right's Act. This resulted in an even more forceful pushback by the white establishment. It is perfectly symbolized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1970 memo to Nixon advocating for "benign neglect" in response to the "Social Pathology" Moynihan identifies representing the "extraordinarily high … incidence of anti-social behavior among young black males." This shockingly racist diatribe epitomized the received wisdom of the time. This push and pull on social and economic policies through this time was represented in the music.

Because of (or despite) my time at college radio, I tend toward a genre-bending attitude about music. During that same first class about the meaning of hip-hop and Stagolee, we were asked to identify the earliest rap song we had heard I mentioned Gil Scot-Heron and The Last Poets, and I was told they weren't Rap though. Other people named Sugar Hill Gang. "Rappers Delight" sounds familiar, but I don't know whether I recognize it for itself, Chic, or Blondie. I like to think of the early years of Rap in terms of

political messaging. Perhaps genre-bending is a better way though. This perspective does have its own political implications which possibly represents the uncertainty of the late 1970's and early 1980's.

The Run DMC and Aerosmith hit "Walk This Way" defined the genre-bending cross-over feature. For me, it was Little Steven's "Sun City" featuring "rockers and rappers united and strong." It may not exactly be Rap, but it is certainly not "We Are The World." The Artists United Against Apartheid may have been pleading as well, but they were protesting the violent racism of South African Apartheid and the inherent racism of Ronald Reagan and the US Government's response.

The anti-apartheid movement of the 1980's is a central feature of Jeff Chang's chapter "Things Fall Apart -The Rise of the Post-Civil Rights Era" and my own experience in university throughout that time. It was a way of combining white liberals with more activist people of color. The starkness of the violence of Apartheid enabled a scaffold to turn that same awareness toward domestic racism. This was a moment of collective awareness of and action against systemic racism both abroad and domestically. Regardless of whether it was a coincidence or intentionally reactionary, there was a commensurate backlash. Reagan supercharged Nixon's "War on Drugs" with a tenfold increase in domestic enforcement during his first term, a move which disproportionately targeted the black population. The rise of broken windows theory of policing created an environment of rationalizing strict and harsh enforcement particularly in minority communities. The resulting explosion in incarceration rates and numbers in the US disproportionately targeted and affected black males.

Reagan decimated social spending while going ballistic (literally and figuratively) with military spending. Though largely immune from his polices, I loathed Reagan, and proudly continue to see his administration as the worst in modern history. I was a solidly middle-class white male, and I was insulated against the harshest effects of Reagan's policies. Minority communities didn't fare so well. Reagan's rhetorical flourishes such as the mythos of the welfare queen exacerbated interracial tensions. Released within a couple months of each other in 1988, Public Enemy's "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back" and N.W.A.'s "Straight Outta Compton" were pointedly direct commentaries on the reality of being black in America and the experience of many in marginalized communities.

By the end of 1989, the Berlin Wall had come down and I had moved away from campus radio in a relatively large city to a small community on Vancouver Island. While Public Enemy was touring with Sisters of Mercy on their Tune In, Turn On, Burn Out tour, I was tuning out, turning off, and I was well beyond burnt out. So, what has happened over the last thirty years?

The demise of the Soviet Union meant a de facto win for the west in general and the United States in particular. This meant the prevailing model of Reaganism (in the US, and Thatcherism in the UK) set the course for success. Western liberal democracy and market capitalism were declared the winners. Liberal here means, specifically, the private right of ownership of property. The massive privatization efforts under Reagan have continued. Underfunding of domestic investments led to multi-trillion dollar shortfalls just to repair the failing physical infrastructure. Overspending on the military means the US outpaces the next ten countries combined. A bipartisan neoliberal

consensus emerged which prioritized individual rights and responsibilities over any sort of collective good.

Did the Decline of Sampling Cause the Decline of Political Hip Hop?

This asks the wrong question. Public Enemy's Flavor Flav makes the claim that "you can't copyright no beat man." The courts answered back in 1991 that you most definitely can. The private right of ownership reigns so supreme in the US that even the merest snippet (sample) shall be protected with biblical ferocity and the moral imperative of "Thou Shalt Not Steal." Collective and social considerations are secondary to the individual private right of ownership. Private ownership is the more moral position than considerations of public interest. The concurrent effect of the evolution of Reaganism was the rise of patriarchal virile masculinity. This is highlighted in the "wimp factor" rhetoric about Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush. Virile masculinity which seeks private property accumulation and control is the default morally superior position in post-cold war United States. Why did rappers turn from politically social conscious messaging to imagery of power, wealth, and masculinity? Because that is what both the courts and society in general said was the good thing to do. Owning "beats" and owning lots of stuff is what a morally correct person does in the United States. It is both moral and patriotic: "The most patriotic thing we can do, is make money." The obverse of this is to consume. In the wake of September 11, 2001, Bush the Younger urged people to consume by going shopping and visiting Disney World to help the country and battle terrorism.

One of the problems of the ongoing "culture war" is the perception that politics is downstream from culture. This transforms discussions of culture into a political power

agenda which raises the stakes and the heat. This perspective has turned us all into Maoists. I believe the relationship of culture and politics is a complex interplay, but what I have tried to demonstrate here is the power which politics has had in shaping certain aspects of popular culture, specifically hip-hop and rap. You must look at culture and cultural artifacts (such as art and music) in the context they were created. English professor at Kansas State University, Philip Nel, provides the necessary framework for this contextualization of Dr. Seuss: ""What you have to do is take a deep breath, step back, and realize that the culture in which these books live and in which these books were written is a racist culture and a sexist culture." It is a disservice to extract a single piece (or entire genre or movement) of culture outside of the broader society.

Which brings me back to a question you may have been wondering about since the first paragraph: What does hip-hop have to do with the E-crisis? Art (in all its forms) is a way of conveying a narrative – telling a story. One of the most effective ways of telling a story is to make sure that it resonates emotionally, and "emotions are the filters through which we see the facts" according to retired Harvard instructor David Ropeik. This means stories (and music and art) are an important way to mediate and integrate our knowledge. Our personal and social epistemologies are affected by and affect interdependently our cultural artifacts.

One way to research something big (like the E-crisis) is to find a smaller model which has enough relevant features. The rise to and establishment of hip-hop's prominence spans the same past four to five decades which are crucial to understand the current E-crisis. Hip-hop may be an ideal analogue for the current broader E-crisis in the US. So, what did I learn then? I am working on it! However, I think I stumbled across

something on the value of narrative, meaning, and context: The stories we tell about the stories we tell may be just as important as the stories themselves.

… kenny buchholz