THE HIP HOP WARS

What We Talk About When
We Talk About Hip Hop
—and Why It Matters

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Six Guiding Principles for Progressive Creativity, Consumption, and Community in Hip Hop and Beyond

ENJOYING BLACK POPULAR CULTURE, especially hip hop, in a way that reflects progressive principles isn't easy these days. If rejecting it all isn't an option, then how do we make meaningful distinctions? How can we determine where to invest our energies? It would be far easier if this problem could be solved merely by boycotting a given artist. But the situation is far more messy than this. The cross-marketing of ghetto-gangsta-cool saturates so many aspects of hip hop that doing a strict artist-by-artist evaluation and cutting those who are complicit with this trend could leave us with a mighty short playlist. This strategy could even mean rejecting pop-friendly artists such as Justin Timberlake and other pop stars who collaborate with rappers like T.I., Snoop, Jay-Z, and 50 Cent who trade primarily in the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity. Instead, it seems more effective to let some guiding principles shape our responses to songs, artists, trends, and images. The point is to disable the trade in destructive images and visions of black people, to make them undesirable and unprofitable no matter where they take place. This means tackling the power of such images and rejecting them, not letting one particular artist become the focus of our ire. Zeroing in on the underlying politics of the images and words helps us to keep our eye on what we specifically do not want, not just what we'll settle for. It keeps us actively engaged in setting the terms for what we'll support in hip hop and everywhere else.

Toward this end, I am proposing six principles that I hope will provide a starting place for encouraging all who love black music to create a progressive community around it: (1) *Beware the manipulation of the funk.* (2) *Remember what is amazing about chitterlings and what isn't.* (3) *We live in a market economy; don't let the market economy live in us.* (4) *"Represent" what you want, not just what is.* (5) *Your enemies might be wrong but that doesn't make you right.* (6) *Don't settle for affirmative love alone; demand and give transformational love.* These principles are especially meant to support young artists in their efforts to energize and innovate in the spirit of good will, in the presence of justice.

Beware the Manipulation of the Funk

On countless occasions over the past decade or so, I have found myself listening, driving, or dancing to a song, yet only later really heard the lyrics. One such song was Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg's 1992 classic and unbelievably funky "Gin and Juice"; another was 50 Cent's 2003 hit, "In da Club." In some cases I was unaware of the words because I couldn't actually make out the lyrics or translate the slang; but then there were the times I heard the "clean version" and then got depressed when I learned what the artist really wanted to say. At still other times, I was mostly listening to the music or merely letting the music, the style, and the swagger move me so completely that only the most oft-repeated phrases really sunk in. Once I really listened to the words and thought about the story being told, it was hard to know what to do: Respond to the funk and ignore the words, or reject the story and give up the funk that goes with it. The moment I realized that I was being asked to give myself over to the power of the funk—which in turn was being used as a soundtrack for a story that was really against me—was very sad for me. I thought my feelings must be very much like those of *Washington Post* writer Lonnae O'Neal Parker when she reached a turning point with this music, saying that she could no longer sacrifice her self-esteem or that of her two daughters on the "altar of dope beats and rhymes."[1]

Some people swear that they can "ignore" the words and just enjoy the music. No matter what gets said, they are not affected; the words don't matter. I've asked my students if there was any limit at all for them—any lyric that would upset or anger them enough to make them reject the song outright. The hip hop fans among my students would bravely say "No, the words don't matter" to show that they would always be down with hip hop. So, then I'd ask them if a pro–Ku Klux Klan performer came up with an incredible, infectious, undeniable beat and rhyme, but the words celebrated the domination of black people, would they just "block out the words" and still claim that "the words don't matter"? Of course, few would still say "yes." My point in drawing this volatile analogy is not to imply that hip hop lyrics are in any way comparable to white supremacist rhetoric. But I want to point out that we all have a line to draw. It's not a "free for all," "anything goes as long as its funky" situation but, rather, a matter of recognizing that before we reach our limit, we are saying "yes" to what we shake our hips to. My analogy also reveals that once we have pledged allegiance to something, we will submit to excesses and a negative influence that, if expressed by others, would be grounds for self-defense.

Were this about one bitty song that uses the word "bitch," or only one or two rhymes that use violence, metaphorically or otherwise, to settle "beef"; or if only an occasional song relied on insults such as calling neighborhood enemies "bitch ass niggas," well, maybe we wouldn't need to raise our defenses so high. But unfortunately, this kind of spirit has become too common in commercial hip hop. Yes, we can ignore some lyrics on occasion; but when the music that gets played over and over at the clubs and on hip hop–oriented commercial radio, BET, and MTV is saturated with hustlers, gangstas, bitches, hoes, tricks, pimps, playas, and stories that glamorize domination, exploitation, violence, and hustlers—when this becomes the primary vocabulary for hip hop itself—then the power of the funk has been manipulated. The life force of the funk has been wedded to a death imperative.

Black music has played an extraordinary role in the history of black people and in the world. It has helped black people to protect, nourish,

and empower themselves, and to resist forces operating against their freedoms. This music has not always been explicitly political or dubbed as "protest music." Indeed, its political significance has gone far beyond the confines of a direct protest standard, registering in the positive spirit of sounds tied to stories that exhibit a fundamental love of black people.

There is no doubt that this tradition lives today. But it *is* under duress, and we need to pay attention, to be aware of the manipulation of the funk. It is being pressed into a spirit-crushing repetition of unreflective, instant gratification. As Cornel West said during BET's October 2007 *Hip Hop vs. America* forum: "Dominant forms of hip hop are about what? A repetition of the present; over and over again—the next orgasm, the next pleasure; no history, no future. No different future can emerge in a present that's just repeating itself over and over again without a difference." It is not just about saying "no" to manipulative uses of the funk; it is about saying "yes" to music that doesn't force us to block out the words as a form of self-protection. For those who don't melt at the power of an amazing rhythm, drum, or bass line, this may be hard to understand. The funk is the Achilles' heel for lovers of black music. The love of a great funky beat is like kryptonite for Superman. Our places of weakness make us vulnerable but also open us up to our greatest places of connection. This is why the music must be revered, not discarded. But, like any other powerful and compelling force, beats can be distorted, used as a baseline for stories that undermine the spirit. Music comes from but also makes community, so the question becomes: What kind of community do we want to make?

Remember What Is Amazing About Chitterlings and What Isn't

The genius of black creativity has often involved making something good out of the scraps—creating a delicacy out of undesirable, discarded parts. Sometimes, though, we get so excited about the resilience and transformative power of black people's creativity that we

confuse the creative energy and talent with the creative output. In hip hop this has meant reveling over the ingenuity of hip hop's creative genius for using scraps from the urban landscape to make music—presenting exhilarating dances on cardboard in the street, reusing obsolete technical-trades equipment to rebuild stereos, telling stories on street corners in ways that made people in corporate offices listen—while at the same time ignoring the toxic conditions under which such creativity occurs.

This confusion between the genius of remaking and the final product reminds me of chitterlings. There is a crucial distinction between the genius behind turning pig guts into a grassroots delicacy and the actual chitterlings themselves. Poor people around the world have made delicacies out of nearly every part of an animal. In Europe, brain chitterlings, andouilles (pigs' large intestines), trotters (feet), snouts, and tripe (stomach) have been common menu items. Traditional Scottish haggis consists of sheep's stomach stuffed with rolled oats, boiled liver, lungs, and other animal parts. And the West African tradition of using all edible parts of plants and animals in cooking has meant that eating hooves, intestines, and the like was already part of a larger pre-enslavement tradition for African-Americans.

What makes the case of chitterlings as an African-American soul-food tradition unique is the fact that slaves were given *only* what were considered scraps—food that slave owners and their families would not eat. So, no matter how well they were prepared, no matter how much creative efficiency surrounded previous decisions to eat intestines, ears, hooves, and other animal parts, the context for African-Americans' use of chitterlings—or chitlins as they are affectionately called—symbolizes not just black people's resilience, tradition, and creativity but also their mistreatment. Chitterlings were not part of a diet filled with other, more nutritious animal parts. They were just one "part" provided, while whites were given access to all available food sources. Pig guts were considered inedible trash and were given to enslaved black people as such. Enslaved people were given bare-minimum nutrition—just enough to keep them alive so they could work endlessly for the profits of others.

Making decent chitterlings out of pig guts took deft culinary skill. It required expert cleaning, preparation, and seasoning—especially given African-Americans' limited access to a wide range of cooking materials at the time. Making them edible was truly an art. But the artistry of making chitterlings out of pig guts under stress and mistreatment is only really appreciated when we understand the context. Having pig intestines to serve as the basis for a meal was a clear symbol of the deep disregard and dehumanization that black people experienced under slavery. African-Americans' ability to make a delicacy out of discarded trash, to make nourishment out of the nearly indigestible—all the while knowing that it was part of a larger system of dehumanization—should be lauded and honored. But this should be a somber honoring because it also represents the duress under which such creative culinary genius evolved.

Hip hop was born and grew up under extreme social and economic pressure; its powerful tales of fun, affirmation, and suffering should be honored but also recognized as reflections of the stress under which it was brought into creation. It relied on various black musical traditions and approaches to sound, language, and rhythm but also continued the long tradition of making something out of nothing. Too much celebration of hip hop's creativity deemphasizes the fact that it reflects the genius of black people's ability to make delicacies out of scraps.

This is a warning not to forget the mistreatment and the debilitating context in which so much black creativity must operate. It's a call to remember what is amazing about chitterlings and what isn't. It is a call to strive for optimum circumstances, to reject limiting conditions, and to avoid getting so caught up in celebrating the ability to create under limiting and destructive conditions that this context becomes an acceptable norm, a black badge of honor. Challenges to destructive energies in hip hop that are countered with claims that at least the rapper is not robbing people reflect the worst of this embrace of toxicity. What would the genius of black creativity produce with normal levels of social resources, with less social starvation, and without high levels of violence and incarceration? Shouldn't we

demand more than the intestines of society, no matter how creative we have been with them?

We Live in a Market Economy; Don't Let the Market Economy Live in Us

Today, it would be unreasonable to ask people to permanently turn their backs on the mass media or on our society's consumer-based focus. Not everything that goes on in consumer culture is negative. The problem is the way that the very logic of the market—the designation of things as valuable only when they can be exchanged for profit—has become the governing logic not just for market trading but for human exchanges and cultural value as well. The emphasis on valuing the wealthy and all the trappings of luxury and excess is constantly marketed to us all. The rich, the famous, and the financially powerful are considered more important than the rest of us; they take up enormous media space simply because they have power through wealth; they can dazzle us with their fancy cars, jewels, multiple homes, and glamorous lifestyles. This larger U.S. drive to value those who can consume the most drives the "bling-bling" aesthetic in hip hop. Exactly what have wealthy celebrities like Donald Trump done in service of expanding democracy? Why was Paris Hilton's forty-five-day jail sentence covered in news reports with such empathy and concern while stories about the thousands of poor and ill-educated black and brown men and women in jail for multiple years for nonviolent crimes are rarely addressed? Our consumption-based culture perpetuates the coveting of the bling-bling lifestyle as it encourages us to spend in the hopes of emulating celebrities' lives, looks, and fashions. This pursuit keeps us from constantly asking why it is that so few have so much, why even the legal system seems to reinforce higher and higher levels of wealth accumulation and concentration, why such excess is okay when so many starve, suffer, and live on the streets. It's not surprising that dog-eat-dog capitalistic logic has become a visible fact of commercial hip hop: It reflects larger trends in our society. But these trends, internalized among those who have

the least, intensifies suffering. It feels exhilarating to see someone from the 'hood make it, but we must not forget to ask how that success was made and on what ideas about black people it might have traded. To avoid these questions is to let the market's overemphasis on exchange value take hold of our spirit. While we live in this market economy, let's try not to let market value and personal profit rule over love, collective well-being, and sacrifice for the larger good.

"Represent" What You Want, Not Just What Is

Far too much of the "representing" energy in hip hop deals with the reflection of what "is" (whether true or not). No matter the level of creativity applied to this realist model, it does not open up enough space for imagining things beyond where we are now. The emphasis on representing reality doesn't encourage us to seriously consider what we actually want (which we must imagine) but, rather, trains our eye on reflecting where we are (what we see all around us). To redirect the destructive energies in hip hop toward building humanizing communities that will challenge injustice means focusing as much as possible on the cultivation of ideas and visions about what we want to build. Representing what "is" (especially if that is a perpetual snapshot of the worst aspects of living in the ghetto) but without constantly taking that next step to ask "What do I want my community to look like?" can turn into a vicious visionless cycle.

Serious reflection on the question of what we want is a risky venture because it means displaying a sense of hope and longing. If we want affordable housing and good schools and safe streets, then we have to work toward getting them. Even when anger drives some of this wanting, there is a vulnerability in it. It expresses a wish that can be denied, mocked, and rejected—especially by a get-mine-at-all-costs attitude. Hoping, such an attitude suggests, is for suckers. Given the multigenerational betrayal of African-Americans' many demands for equality and justice, it shouldn't be surprising that disengagement from hope sometimes becomes a necessary form of self-protection.

Cynicism takes root where hope has begun to wane. The hustler is a quintessential cynic.

We must keep thinking about what we want—not money, cars, and material things, but what kind of communities do we want? How do we want to be treated? What kinds of schools, homes, stores, jobs, parks, childcare, and police work would uplift and transform our communities? How can we create cultural spaces that nurture ideas about the communities we want, not just the ones we already have?

Your Enemies Might Be Wrong But That Doesn't Make You Right

The "blame versus explain" approach to conversations about the state of hip hop winds up encouraging the best artists, writers, and thinkers to expend too much energy responding angrily to mean-spirited and sometimes ignorant opponents, and, at the same time, discouraging the allocation of energies for developing and sharing an internal critique. A number of artists, such as Nas, The Roots, and Lupe Fiasco, have used their considerable musical and lyrical talents to address the state of affairs in hip hop eloquently and at length. Yet, in fact, internal critique of hip hop is highly underreported. Those working to do the necessary groundwork do not get nearly the airtime they deserve. Even worse, the lack of awareness that results perpetuates the distracted self-defense model of politics being cultivated among hip hop's youngest fans. The mainstream conversation about hip hop reinforces the oppositional model that drives media ratings and provokes a good deal of self-protective energy in response.

This seems clear, given the polarized debates over violence and sexism in hip hop. Too many conversations draw their energy from proving hip hop's "enemies" wrong as a source of bonding and hip hop allegiance. And, unfortunately, this allegiance doesn't make what goes on in a lot of mainstream hip hop right. Nor does it allocate adequate energy toward the creation of a hip hop–based position that serves as a guiding light for the young people who identify with it

so strongly. One aspect of this guiding light is the ability to develop serious internal critique and to be able to fully assess the value of others' perceptions as objectively as possible.

Misguided attacks on people we feel solidarity with (even though we may have our own quarrels with them, too) often encourage folks to close ranks. The constant barrage of hyperbole about rap's "cause-of-all-evil" role in U.S. society has siphoned off energies that could otherwise be augmenting internal critique and analysis. It also contributes to an inability to really think about what might be wrong. If our cultural energy is going to help create interactions that fuel and support growth, healthy challenges to injustice, community sacrifice, and collective good will, then we have to spend the majority of our energy on refining what we do and say, and learning how it can be improved to serve our larger goals. This means expanding the internal criticisms of hip hop in the interests of social justice. If our goal is to prove our enemies wrong rather than to figure out how to make what we love right, then we could be working against our own interests and not even know it.

Don't Settle for Affirmative Love Alone; Demand and Give Transformational Love

The history of African-Americans is marked by an ongoing, multifaceted experience of disaffirmation. Enslavement in the United States was rationalized by the idea that Africans were only three-fifths human. This fundamental disaffirmation, the denial of African humanity, is reflected in the U.S. Constitution itself. The idea that blacks were not fully human—that they were less intelligent than whites, lacked any valuable culture, threatened civilization, and were therefore not worthy of protection or full rights—was perpetuated across various, legal, scientific, social, and cultural spheres for hundreds of years. This disaffirmation in nearly every arena continued uninterrupted throughout most of our history leading up to the period of the civil rights movement. While civil rights laws attempt to redress this extensive history, the application and enforcement of them have

been met with sustained resistance. As George Lipsitz argues in his book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness:* "At every stage over the past fifty years, whites have responded to civil rights laws with coordinated collective politics characterized by resistance, refusal and renegotiation." And Cornel West's Preface to *Race Matters*, published in 2001, reminds us that "[n]o other people have been taught systematically to hate themselves—psychic violence—reinforced by the powers of state and civic coercion—physical violence—for the primary purpose of controlling their minds and exploiting their labor for nearly four hundred years." "Loving Black people," then, as Patricia Hill-Collins rightly argues, "in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act."[2]

There is ample and powerful rejection of the legacy of dehumanization in African-American communities, but also in those of many other racial groups, including whites. The heroic tradition of affirmation among African-Americans is a crucial part of the love ethic—what Cornel West, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and other great minds have identified as a vital form of survival. Toni Morrison's extraordinary body of work insists that we consider the power and importance of love. In *Salvation: Black People and Love*, bell hooks says that "the denigration of love in black experience, across classes, has become the breeding ground for nihilism, for despair, for ongoing terroristic violence and predatory opportunism. . . . [We thus must address] the meaning of love in black experience today, calling for a return to an ethic of love as the platform on which to renew a progressive anti-racist struggle, and offering a blueprint for black survival and self-determination." And in *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin tells his nephew about how much black survival depends on love: "We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived."[3]

The love ethic needs as much support as it can get. But what should this love ethic look like? Is it enough to affirm the disaffirmed in this historical moment? Can this strategy bring about what Michael Eric Dyson has called "the rehab of the black psyche"?[4] It seems that multiple types of love might be more necessary now than

ever. In particular, I am interested in a strategy that emphasizes the ability to experience some kinds of critique as a central part of the love ethic. Theologian William F. May, in talking about parental love, presents us with a model for loving that seems especially useful in navigating the conversation about black youth, hip hop, and the future of black America. May says that parents give their children two types of love: accepting love and transforming love. Accepting love is a kind of *affirmational* love, one that attends to the unconditional support of the child. Transforming love seeks the child's well-being. May claims that each corrects the potential excesses of the other: Whereas affirmational love alone can stunt growth because it produces a calm acceptance of where things are, *transforming* love sets boundaries in the interests of change, growth, and health.[5]

The parent/child model is a special and limited one, but the larger idea that different types of love are vital to helping us reach our fullest potential is applicable far beyond the family context. All of us, adults included, need from our closest friends, community members, leaders, lovers, and supporters both accepting or affirmational love (a love that affirms us fundamentally) and transforming or transformational love (a love that pushes us past our comfort zone, that demands that we wrestle with standards and challenges growth in the interests of society's well-being). Given the larger history of denial about the powerful reach of racism and the continued attacks on black people, there is an understandably high investment in affirmative love just to break even. The universal need to have one's experience validated is exaggerated by such a history of refusal and denial. But transformational love is necessary and crucial. Giving and receiving transformational love are more challenging under hostile conditions, since the need for affirmation might be very strong and hearing critique might feel like adding salt to already raw wounds. But these circumstances—in which it is so easy to reflect the hostile world in which one must live—may only make transformational love all the more important. Affirmation for destructive responses to destructive conditions quickly fosters more of both.

In the battle over hip hop, many hip hop fans—especially the black youth among them—feel that there has been too much hostility directed toward them, too little affirmation of them, and far too much rejection of hip hop artists' music and creativity. And, I would add, too much denial of what they have been asked to shoulder. In many ways they are right. Supporters and too many visible and powerful rappers have responded to these attacks by defending hip hop unequivocally. But depending on what is being defended, explained, and generally allowed, this gesture of love and defense can be and has been crippling. Not all critics of hip hop are the proverbial "haters," and to label them this way stymies the powers of transformational love. The struggle, in this climate of "blame hip hop versus explain hip hop," is to be able to give transforming love and have it be received in that spirit. Defending the indefensible, even in the spirit of love, doesn't create well-being for the beloved. I have written this book in the spirit of both affirmational and transformational love, and I hope both spirits have arrived intact.