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More Than Music: The examination of a genre that sparked social change

Music has always served as a medium to express the moods and feelings of its artists. Precisely, Hip-Hop has played a significant role in the expression of social and political injustices for blacks in America. The passing of knowledge orally has been a tradition for African Americans since slavery. The Hip-Hop genre was destined for activism and social change and it exists because of these deeply rooted traditions. Slaves would use songs to embed messages in them while at work on cotton fields. They would utilize rhyming games to pass their intellect underneath slave owners' provision, and oral stories to pass down their history. Each of these oral mechanisms provided the framework for what would later be called Hip-Hop.

The Hip-Hop genre dates back to the nineteen seventies making it approximately forty-four years old. Hip-Hop is rich and deeply ingrained in American culture with its creation hailing from the Bronx, New York. It began as commentary "rap" and lyrical expression, often referred to as emceeing. The nineteen seventies mark the start of the Hip-Hop movement and the emergence of many controversial Hip-Hop groups like Public Enemy, Sugarhill Gang, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, N.W.A, Eric B and Rakim to name a few. The music of early Hip-Hop groups was created to send political messages in order to inspire action, social change, and convince its listeners to adopt a particular worldview. What began as intellectual lyricism in a rhythmic cadence later became the political voice for African Americans, a pioneer for American culture, and a catalyst for cultural discussions. The history, and political

involvement of Hip-hop has unmasked the social injustices in America, made a cultural impact on society, and encouraged activism.

Throughout history Hip-Hop has provided a platform for artists to share their experiences and empower its audience. This platform has created the space for artists to unmask the social injustices in America. Through thought provoking lyrics rappers were able to directly influence the views of their audience and shed light on their personal struggles and social issues. Hip-Hop's creation did not just make a music genre for audiences to enjoy but provided a platform that still stands today and creates a safe haven for artists to express and share their authentic experiences of life in America. During Hip-Hop's creation era, African Americans were still suffering from the post effects of slavery. Struggling to conform to a "white society" Hip-Hop served as an outlet to express their subconscious feelings towards the unequal American system. During Hip-Hop's rise of popularity, Assata Shakur states "The world was silent about the American truth, Hip-Hop was loud and real" (Shakur 23). Hip-Hop Artists began to embed their true feelings towards American society in their song lyrics in order to stimulate change and provide vivid details of their life's truth. Common, a prominent Hip-Hop artist from Chicago, Illinois known for his thought-provoking lyrics and consciousness quickly gained the hearts of audiences across America. His music not only inspired but empowered and activated his listeners.

"It's a cold war, I'm a colder soldier

Hold the same fight that made Martin Luther the King

I ain't using it for the right thing

In between lean and the fiends, hustling and schemes

I put together pieces of a dream, I still have one”

From Common's "A Dream" single, he softly eludes the war on America for African American rights. His lyrics reference the cold war and suggest that there are two "Americas" one divided geo-politically and one into blocs. He does this by referencing Dr. Martin Luther King's speech. In a sense, Hip-Hop began to make the shift to politics gaining more and more attention from media and news outlets. Before the Fair Housing Act, the population of blacks in American urban places rose from 6.1 million to 15.3 million. Whites swiftly left these areas taking necessary opportunities along with them. The neighborhoods that housed African Americans often resulted in high crime, lower education quality, and an inclination of unemployment. Common's lyrics address this problem and suggest that he is too distracted by his everyday life of recreational drug use and making quick money like many African Americans at this time. Common's lyrics speak of his everyday schemes. He highlights that although he is sometimes suppressed by his surroundings, he still holds something sacred, a dream. Lyrics like this began to appear everywhere. These housing policies adhere to the social and class divisions placed upon African Americans at that time and many of those still divisions remain in place today. During the late sixties and early seventies historical events began to happen that directly impacted the African American community. Historical moments like The Fair Housing Act of 1968 immediately followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and fueled the emotions of blacks. Common's "A Dream" was released to the public right after The Fair Housing Act and King's assassination. African Americans became aware of their presence in America and wanted to communicate the inequalities they suffered through their music.

A new artist who is known for his lyricism and witty storytelling is J Cole. His single “Brackets” uses a cyclical storytelling approach incorporating the essence of time and the true value of money to make a point that taxes are another evil agenda created by the government to keep people in destitution. The song *Brackets* makes its appearance on J Cole's fifth studio album titled *K.O.D.* The album includes a track list of songs that reference injustices in America. He uses his lyrics to influence his listeners worldview and steer them away from one that is so absolutist. His album offers his views on society. His audience is able to listen and partake in his wisdom. J Cole’s song *Brackets* eludes the true agenda of corporations and the government.

“Yeah, I pay taxes, so much taxes, shit don't make sense

Where do my dollars go? You see lately, I ain't been convinced

I guess they say my dollars supposed to build roads and schools

But my niggas barely graduate, they ain't got the tools

Maybe cause the tax dollars that I make sure I send

Get spent hiring' some teachers that don't look like them

And the curriculum be tricking them, them dollars I spend

“Got us learning about the heroes with the whitest of skin

One thing about the men that's controlling the pen

That write history, they always seem to white-out they sins

Maybe we'll never see a black man in the White House again

I'll write a check to the IRS; my pockets get slim

Damn, do I even have a say 'bout where it's goin'?”

This verse begins with Cole saying he pays his taxes, which happen to be a large percentage of his earnings. The taxes are so much that J Cole begins to ponder on where his money actually goes. He uses this moment of thinking to persuade his audience and listeners of their entire worldview. He mentions the things his money is said to be used for by the government but flips it and raps that in spite of his money seemingly being contributed towards good economic things that his people aren't seeing the positive effects of the things the government has set. He reveals what he thinks is the real agenda set by the government which he thinks is hiring teachers who do not identify with African Americans. Cole suggests that the curriculum of the school system is set to trick them. He believes that the alternate motives of the government's system are to teach a view of history that White-Americans have falsely created making them seem heroic. He refers back that he will be paying the IRS until he is ultimately without money. Everything is told in a circular storytelling method J Cole is calculated with both his lyrics and timing of when they occur throughout the whole song. The content of newer artists lyrics and songs began to change as the commercialization of music began to make rappers more money. Nevertheless, the themes remained the same. Rappers still felt the urgency to voice the social injustices they faced. Song lyrics began as the medium to express rappers' harsh realities but soon this passion to communicate transferred to their music videos.

Artists began to use Hip-Hop as a platform to convey their experiences in America through their music videos. In this analysis I will use some of Hip-Hop's most iconic music videos and the lyrics from a revolutionary song that sparked change for the African American community on a larger scale to explain Hip-Hop's ability to influence the masses and encourage change. A particular music video from the nineties Hip-Hop era that gained attention from the media and sparked conversations of race and social injustice was *Straight Outta Compton*. The

music video was created by the well-known Hip-Hop group N.W.A. The music video is roughly four minutes long and has accumulated over one hundred five million views. It begins with Dr. Dre, one of the group members stating, “You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge.” His statement serves as a powerful introduction. The music video begins with the group walking in unison towards the camera appearing angry and outraged. Throughout the video they each contribute a verse detailing life in Los Angeles, California. The video sheds light on the police brutality that was prevalent in Los Angeles at the time and how race and inequality are evident in their everyday lives. The Hip-Hop genre is still providing a platform for its artist. A more recent music video that unmasks social injustice in America is Kendrick Lamar’s *Alright*. The song first sparked viewers interest at a protest in Cleveland. The song was released on the track list of Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* album. According to NPR “the chanted hook became a fixture at other protests”. immediately after his album release, Kendrick Lamar released the visuals for *Alright* which accumulated over one hundred fifty million views and contributed to his gain of eight million subscribers. The video is shot in black and white purposely highlighting the things taking place throughout the music video. Frames of African American kids riding bikes, teens being shot and laying on the ground, as well as the recurring theme of police brutality are incorporated in a cinematic quality. Chaos is happening all over the world and images of the church flicker upon the screen, Still Kendrick chants “We gone be Alright.” The entire scope of the music video mirrors Kendrick’s Lyrics. He explains that although African Americans are still facing struggles and racial discrimination it is just another thing that they will overcome.

“Alls my life I has to fight, nigga

Alls my life I
Hard times like, yah!
Bad trips like, yah!
Nazareth, I'm fucked up
Homie, you fucked up
But if God got us then we gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
We gon' be alright
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
Huh? We gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright"

His lyrics are a mantra of encouragement while his music video vividly displays the oppressive nature of life in America for African Americans. By incorporating Imagery in their music videos, and thought-provoking lyricism, artists are able to utilize Hip-Hop as a platform for unmasking the social injustices in America.

Hip-Hop music soon became a way of life for African Americans. Its history and political involvement began to inspire films, media, books, and has made an impact on the overall culture of America. While critics often argue that Hip-Hop is aggressive, offensive, and promotes social rebellion, its lyrics and undertones do not cancel out the fact that Hip-Hop has redefined cultural

norms. The nineties was an important era for the Hip-Hop genre. During this time Hip-Hop directly influenced social interaction and as a means to rebel against a systematic society, gangs began to form and shape the entire culture of certain areas throughout the United States. Hip-Hop established a sense of community for some people and directly impacted the lives of the youth. Slang from Hip-Hop songs as well as other forms of communication made an impact on language and its usage by youth to date. The popularity of rap culture inspired several fashion lines like Tommy Hilfiger, FUBU, Phat Farm, and Baby Phat. Aside from fashion, many films and iconic television shows of American culture were inspired by Hip-Hop. For instance, *The Fresh-Prince of Bel-Air* which stars Will Smith, a rapper in the nineties during the show's peak. Movies like *House Party*, *Boyz in the Hood*, and *Do the Right Thing* also emerged. In a sense, the use of the Hip-Hop culture to influence fashion and entertainment was an act of commercialization. American's saw the growing popularity of the culture and designed clothing and entertainment with Hip Hop at its basis. These films and television shows included references of rap culture and were directly influenced by Hip-Hop unknowingly shaping American culture.

The history of Hip-Hop is rich, authentic, and deeply rooted. It has created a new forum of self-expression, given a voice to a generation of politically conscious people, and most importantly, encouraged activism. One of the first well known forms of public activism directly stemming from Hip-Hop was the creation of the Black Panther Party. The political organization dates back to the end of the 1960's during Hip-Hop's rise to popularity. The group was created to aid African Americans in everyday life and serve as a means of protection against corrupt police enforcement. The Black Party instituted the Free Breakfast for Children Programs to address food injustice in their community. During its reign, The Black Panther Party also created

community health clinics for education, disease treatment for tuberculosis, and later HIV/AIDS. Many of the group's members were heavily involved in Hip-Hop music. One of its more distinguished members was Assata Shakur. While affiliated with the Black Panther Party she was accused of murder, escaped from prison, and later sought refuge in Cuba. Her autobiography became important to American literature and is still used at universities to date. Her autobiography details the contrast of cultural and racial differences that she experienced in Cuba and includes her feelings towards the racial injustices she encountered in America. Her autobiography ignited many protests and encouraged its readers to become both politically and socially involved. The Black Panther Party pushed social activism and provided the blueprint for citizens and rappers to follow. Eventually, Hip-Hop became a movement. Concerts became meeting grounds for communities to push social and economic change. Hip-Hop activism began to address a range of topics including globalization, education, and prison reform. Rappers took on larger roles and became the face for protests in their communities. Their music provided many hopeless African Americans a voice and encouraged others to campaign and bring about a difference. Hip-Hop music encouraged activism for individuals, became an avenue for citizens to activate conversations of civil rights, and bring once silenced problems to the forefront.

In later years, Hip-Hop has remained popular and still serves as a medium for rappers and artists to address their political and social issues. While it is important to celebrate hip-hop culture, it is equally important to recognize and preserve the function that rap has served for its original community. In order to understand the themes and forms of rap music, it is important to follow the history of African-Americans from their beginnings in West Africa, to their enslavement throughout the early history of the United States, to their struggles against racial prejudice and segregation after Emancipation, to the continuing battles against *de facto* economic

segregation and reclamation of cultural identity of many African-Americans today. Without the essence of Hip-Hop music, we can assume that much of American popular culture would be different. Hip-Hop is heavily rooted in its origin and has combated feelings of inadequacy and oppression for African Americans. The history of Hip-Hop and its political involvement has unmasked the social injustices in America, made a huge cultural impact on society, and encouraged activism. The context of Hip-Hop Music has always felt heavy and eluded on the bigger problems that surround the African American Community. Hip- Hop is more than music. It is a form of expression, a religion, a way of life and is embedded in the souls of its predecessors.

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