

Analysis of African American Identity and Cultural Dilemmas in the United States: The Case of Rap Music

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Abstract. Rap music originated in the South Bronx, New York City, and can be traced back to the late 1970s. The oral performance and storytelling traditions of African Americans have found a new home on the streets of New York, where young artists express their reality through sound. As a form, rap music serves as a means for African Americans to document their history and social environment, shaping their identity in a predominantly white American society and culture. This essay used rap music as an example to analyse the sense of identity it brings to African Americans and how they use rap to express the cultural dilemmas they encounter. The research method used in this paper is presented through literature analysis and case analysis. This study demonstrates that rap music is not only an important cultural medium for African Americans to record history and express their identity, but has also become a tool for mainstream resistance against social oppression. Through sampling, African American dialects, and narrative techniques, rap music both preserves the collective memory of marginalized communities and reshapes identity culture. However, commercialization and the reshaping of identity culture, as well as the internal dynamics of class, gender, and culture within the group, have placed this culture in a position where it must defend its spiritual integrity while also facing challenges related to authenticity and cultural integrity.

Keywords: Cultural Resistance, Commercialisation Dilemma, Linguistic Politics, Internal Power Dynamics

1. Introduction

African American music has long served as a vehicle for cultural resilience and identity-building. From the earliest forms of spirituals, blues, and jazz—musical genres deeply influenced by African rhythms, oral traditions, and collective expression—emerged a series of musical forms deeply rooted in shared history and emotional power. Against the backdrop of social marginalisation and collective displacement, this artistic heritage provided avenues for expressing displacement and reshaping identity. By the late 1970s, hip-hop culture emerged in the South Bronx, with rap (one of its four core elements) challenging mainstream narratives and providing urban youth with a platform to reflect on real-life experiences through rhythm and spoken-word storytelling. Rap was far from a mere form of entertainment; it became a countercultural movement, transforming experiences of poverty, oppression, and community resistance into creative expression and social consciousness [1].

The research questions are how the development of popular culture through the interaction of dominant and subordinate cultures influences the issue of African American identity in rap music, and Judith Butler's view that vulnerability can be mobilised as resistance to the cultural predicament of black people. There are three paragraphs to explore the first question and two paragraphs to explore the second question. The research method used in this paper is presented through literature analysis and case analysis. This article explores how rap music serves as both a mirror and a weapon for African Americans: a mirror reflecting the struggles and hybrid identities of their lives, and a weapon resisting cultural marginalisation. The article emphasises rap's dual role as both a repository of cultural memory and a tool of resistance in a commodified society.

2. Sense of identity

2.1. Resistance in musical form

Rap music employs sampling techniques to remix African American spirituals and jazz, thereby constructing a form of "sound archaeology." This is evident in Kendrick Lamar's opening of his song with a compelling excerpt from Boris Gardiner's 1970s soul track "Every Nigger Is A Star." The song's harmonic elements and turntable effects evoke nostalgia and a sense of historical continuity, consciously reminding listeners that the past is being revived in the present. The highlight of this sample is its connection to the early history of African American music, evoking the optimism and pride of the civil rights era. It is not only nostalgic but also genealogical, awakening suppressed or marginalized Black memories and reconstructing them within the contemporary protest art of "sound archaeology." The funk and jazz sample in the song "King Kunta" is created using interpolated samples, including Curtis Mayfield's drum beats and guitar effects inspired by The Temptations' "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone." One lyric reads, "Everybody wanna cut the legs off him / Kunta. Black man taking no losses." Here, "Kunta" refers to Kunta Kinte from *Roots*, symbolising relentless resistance against enslavement. Lamar borrows Kunta's image to express defiance against oppressive structures and unwavering resolve. The sampling and stylistic borrowings in this song function as layers of sound archives, embedding past styles and information into contemporary rap to preserve African American collective memory and identity. Lamar reconstructs funk and jazz elements in "King Kunta" to emphasise the enduring influence of African American musical innovation and its role in expressing political resistance. Thus, Lamar's sampling demonstrates how rap music serves as cultural resistance and collective memory—a living archive that both preserves African American history and reshapes identity in the face of ongoing social adversity [2].



Figure 1. The story of O.J

2.2. The political expression of hybrid identity

The use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in rap music exhibits duality, both deconstructing the authority of standard English and reflecting the cultural roots anxiety of dispersed ethnic groups. Hip-hop language (HHL) shares some basic grammatical features with AAVE, such as the omission of the copula verb "to be," the use of the habitual verb "be," double negation, and the use of the perfective verb "done." These features break away from the grammatical norms of standard English, making non-standard grammar a legitimate linguistic code. For example, J. Cole uses the habitual verb "be" in the lyric "Pistols be poppin'," expressing habitual or ongoing actions that standard English cannot precisely convey. This linguistic strategy highlights the alternative authority within Black identity and life experiences, and through regional dialect differences (such as East Coast vs. West Coast), it creates cultural barriers that make it difficult for outsiders to fully grasp its historical and social significance. Thus, AAVE in rap is not only a form of cultural preservation but also an important tool for Black people to negotiate identity and belonging within and outside diaspora communities [3]. For example, Jay-Z references the stereotypical images of early Disney and Warner Bros. blackface animations in the music video for "The Story of O.J.," combining them with financial terms like 'credit' and "real estate investment" to critique structural racial inequality within the capitalist system. This dual symbolism of language and imagery not only reveals the challenges Black people face in accumulating wealth but also subverts and reconfigures racial stereotypes to achieve empowerment and cultural critique [4]. Thus, the use of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and HHL (Hip-hop language) in rap music vividly demonstrates how language itself can become a vehicle for cultural resistance, both safeguarding black identity and challenging the authority of mainstream language.

3. Cultural dilemma

3.1. The struggle between commercialization and cultural authenticity

Although rap music first emerged as the voice of marginalized groups, the recording industry and social media algorithms often regulate its expression, transforming radical messages into consumable symbols. The article "How Trap Music Went From a Genre to a Fully Embraced Culture" or "drug house music" serves as the raw soundtrack to the extreme hardships faced by marginalized African American communities. It originated from poverty, violence, and survival, embodying the authenticity of underground street culture. However, as Atlanta emerged as a music hub, the recording industry swiftly commodified trap music, with artists like T.I., Gucci Mane, and Kanye West laying the groundwork for its mainstream adoption. Gucci Mane became a paradigm, described as "the embodiment of trap music: rising from the bottom to prominence... His contributions to the culture gave rise to many of the artists we love today, such as Brick Squad, The Migos, Metro, and 808 Mafia." In this process, the survival narrative of trap music was repackaged as a highly marketable lifestyle symbol. This commodification phenomenon transcended hip-hop music and permeated global consumer culture. Trap music has been absorbed by electronic dance music (EDM), fashion, and even the fitness industry. The article notes: "Peloton even launched a trap music-themed fitness class." Once a radical fringe art form, trap music has been transformed into a universal aesthetic symbol representing energy and resistance, with its original socio-political context stripped away and repackaged as a cross-cultural consumption template [5]. The article "TikTok Gains Global Momentum — but Also Raises Sticky Privacy Question" in Variety magazine uses Lil Nas X's hit single "Old Town Road" as an example to explain how algorithms are reshaping

rap content. TikTok's system favours short, danceable, and remixable clips, meaning songs with playful or "cute" qualities spread faster than those with profound social commentary. As the article points out, the platform's algorithm tends to select "lighthearted, fun, and infinitely replicable" content, effectively transforming "Old Town Road" into a family-friendly internet meme rather than a serious cultural critique. This algorithmic preference dilutes critical themes into entertainment content. While the song could have highlighted the tensions of cross-racial and urban-rural identity, its viral spread on TikTok smoothed out such discomfort, transforming it into a universally appealing "cute country rap anthem. The article further notes that this process forces artists to self-censor, adjusting their content to chase viral spread. Rap singles no longer pursue radical expression or sharp social commentary but are optimized to be "algorithm-friendly," prioritizing marketability over resistance. In this way, TikTok acts as a gatekeeper, redefining rap as entertainment rather than protest—commodifying an art form once steeped in political meaning into easily digestible pop culture [6]. Therefore, the commodification of rap music through the record industry and algorithmic platforms reflects a core cultural dilemma: an art form rooted in resistance and identity-building is repeatedly repackaged as marketable entertainment, undermining its political urgency while reshaping the way African American identity is represented in global culture.

3.2. Power discourse within ethnic groups

The power dynamics within hip hop reveal deeper cultural dilemmas, as issues of class, gender, and cultural ownership reshape the representation and contestation of African American identity. According to "Rolling Stone" magazine's analysis of "4:44", Jay-Z abandoned the brash, domineering style of his early works and instead used tracks such as "The Story of O.J." to convey insights about financial literacy, investment strategies, and the systemic barriers that hinder black wealth accumulation. An article in "Ploughshares" further notes that the album embodies "African American" money aesthetics," showcasing how Jay-Z shifts the narrative from survival struggles to capitalist responsibility, reflecting the tension between authenticity and bourgeois aspirations [7,8]. Meanwhile, in "Thee Megan Movement", Megan Thee Stallion redefines cultural expectations through the "Hot Girl" discourse, reclaiming sexual agency while resisting both white patriarchal objectification and moralistic judgments within the Black community [9]. These shifts reveal the complex power dynamics within hip-hop music: Jay-Z's transition from street-struggle narratives to capitalist education highlights the contradictions of class mobility—success may lead to alienation from the community that empowered the music—while Megan's uncompromising self-expression emphasizes the gender struggles faced by Black women in rap music, who must navigate the tension between external stereotypes and internal criticism. Thus, hip-hop music reveals that African American identity is not only challenged by external oppression but also faces controversy within its own community. Class mobility, gender power, and cultural ownership collectively constitute an ongoing dilemma of representation and authenticity.

4. Conclusion

As an extension of African American musical tradition, hip-hop music continues to serve a dual role as both a cultural archive and a tool of resistance. Through techniques such as sampling and the use of African American vernacular English, hip-hop music preserves suppressed history and reconstructs identity to counter mainstream cultural narratives. Meanwhile, its evolution within the recording industry and algorithm-driven platforms reveals the ongoing tension between authenticity and commodification, with radical messages at risk of being diluted into marketable entertainment.

Additionally, the internal dynamics of class, gender, and cultural ownership indicate that African American identity faces challenges not only from external forces but also within the community itself. Ultimately, rap music embodies the dual nature of African American culture: it is both a powerful voice of resistance and a fragile entity navigating the cultural dilemmas of survival, representation, and global consumption.

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