

“Thisniggaugly”: Understanding Violent Hate Speech in Rap Music

A large proportion of modern rap lyrics contain violent hate speech that is directed at groups or individuals. These lyrical choices have been blamed for causing disobedience, vandalism, and violence amongst listeners, leading to state-sponsored attempts at censorship of the offending artists. However, the ability of violent hate speech in music to incite violence is dubious. To attempt to show how hate speech in rap lyrics, though generally offensive, poses no physical threat to targeted individuals, I will begin by debunking the myth that violent speech can create violence, or is a form of violence itself. Next, I will reveal how the sonic context of violent rap more powerfully affects listeners than its lyrics due to the undervalued effect of sonority on human arousal. Similarly, I will then counter the assumption that violent music and violent action are causally related, but rather that violence accompanying music is often due to contextual cues such as interpersonal/group dynamics and environmental triggers. I will then show how historically racist and oppressive white patriarchal power structures were the root cause of the three main forms of hate speech (anti-authoritarian, misogynistic, and homophobic) in rap music. Finally, I will examine how attempts of state-sponsored censorship of violent rap music is rooted in the aforementioned patriarchal power structures, the very same constructions that were the historical precedent for hate speech in the first place. This complex series of analytical steps is extremely important to ensure that freedom of speech not reserved for those of a racial or cultural majority. Though we can agree that violent hate speech in rap is a problematic element of modern social and

cross-cultural discursion, we must accept its innocuous nature (or, its inability to incite violence) and understand its causes (unjust and racist subjugation via white patriarchal power structures) in order to eliminate the ignorance and biases that foster it.

To investigate the dangers of violent hate speech in rap, we must first understand hate speech outside of an artistic or musical context, in linguistic terms. Due to our reliance on oral language as a main means of communication, we have allowed ourselves to be increasingly affected by speech. In her book “Excitable Speech”, Judith Butler similarly notes that because our shared human culture is “formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decisions we might make about it” (1997:2). It therefore seems plausible that violent speech may well act as a form of violence itself, or in the least drive people towards violence. However, Butler cautions against this interpretation on both accounts. First, she notes that though critics often suggest “linguistic injury acts like physical injury, the use of the simile suggests that this is, after all, a comparison of unlike things” (1997:4). “Oppressive language,” she continues, “is not a substitute for the experience of violence” (1997:9). This is an important distinction: violent speech, though it may cause the listener to “suffer a loss of context”, “[it] appears not to wield its own violence” (1997:6). By deflating this myth of speech as violence, we may then examine speech’s capabilities to incite violence. In this regard, Butler posits that “speech is not a simple sort of context”, emphasizing the need to identify what is “unanticipated about injurious speech acts” (1997:9), which might include sonic or environmental cues in the case of music. Most poignantly, Butler argues that “the recent controversies in rap music suggests that no clear consensus is possible on

the question of whether there is a clear link between the words that are uttered and their putative power to injure” (1997:13). Words can threaten, yet “the statement itself cannot produce that forthcoming act as one of its necessary effects” (Butler, 1997:11). Therefore, one cannot blame hateful language for violence, but rather one must investigate the contextual cues, or “unanticipated” aspects of violent words.

Hate speech in rap is indelibly tied to the music within which it is contained. Lyrical music differs greatly from pure speech due to not the sonic elements it contains, but the physicality it lacks. Modern musicians are physically separated from their audiences (thanks to the advent of recorded music, and more recently portable music devices), engendering a divide between the “threat [emerging from] a performative act” (Butler 1997:11) and the threat contained within the speech. The threat is instead complicated by the sonic context of the music. Musicality has a profound and often overlooked effect on human arousal, defined as the confluence of both “the affective tone of an emotion, from negativity to positivity...and the amount of activity of an emotion, from excitement to languor” (Johnson and Cloonan 2009a:128). The “non-lexical sounds [of music] are decisive in the generation of an affect” (Johnson and Cloonan 2009a:140), be it emotional or physical. Musical devices including volume, harmonic complexity and subtlety, and tempo are known to effect a listener in extremely varied ways both physically (i.e. increased heart rate, shallow breathing, internal temperature increase) and emotionally (i.e. depression, anger, nervousness), depending on personal taste and especially their “cultural memory and context” (Johnson and Cloonan 2009a:140). In this sense, lyrics (including those in hate-filled rap songs) do not act alone, or even

necessarily have a major role in the arousal to violence. As Johnson and Cloonan (2009a) note:

“While we do not deny for a moment that lyrics of, for example, vilification can compound emotional responses, our argument here is that the framing sonority plays a prior role in shaping emotional responses... Without the ‘affective platform’ provided by the music, the most inflammatory lyrics written on a page are likely to produce little more than amusement tinged with irritation.” (141)

Public Enemy, a popular political rap group from the early nineties, provides some notable examples of affects driven by sonority rather than lyrics. Their songs were deemed dangerous to the public by many conservative listeners due to their lyrics, yet the intentional act of the producers to “place [rapper] Chuck D’s vocals to clash with the key of the backing tracks, to create abrasion” (Walser 1995) were the underlying drivers of outrage. In this case, and many others, “sonority circumscribe[d] affect, irrespective of lexical content” (Johnson and Cloonan 2009a). Supporting this trend, a number of studies on the listening habits of teenagers reveal that many disregard or simply don’t pay attention to the core meaning in the lyrics of their favorite songs, identifying the musical element as much more important to their enjoyment (Nuzum 2001: 65). Though hateful, violent lyrics are implicated in as the cause of violence, proactive and innovative anthropological investigations note “their gradual disappearance from the equation” (Johnson and Cloonan 2009a:146). With lyrics discredited as both a form and trigger of violence, we must investigate the context within which the music is heard as a possible cause of violence.

Music has a long history of accompanying violence, causing a great number of social scientists to assume causality (Johnson and Cloonan 2009c). However, the simple

confluence of two factors, one artistic and one physical, does not necessarily mean one is a direct result of the other. There are numerous cases where the physical and the artistic are in thematic opposition, rather than appearing to have a causal relationship. For example, many of the songs German Holocaust prisoners were ordered to sing were popular and well-loved national tunes during their punishment (Johnson and Cloonan 2009c:72). The relationship between these cheery songs and the horrors of German death camps is associative, not causal due to the complete lack of violent themes in the lyrics. Conversely, violent lyrics can pervade and strengthen cooperative, loving communities. Insane Clown Posse (ICP), a notoriously misogynistic and violent rap group, “celebrate[s] ‘clown luv,’ the bonding ethic among [those] who define themselves as outsiders” (Halnon 2006:42). Again, the violence in one realm is only accompanying, rather than affecting, the other; ICP fans in fact see themselves as a “family” (dubbing true fans “juggalos”) rather than bitter antagonists (Halnon 2006:42) as a result of the shared themes of violence and hate contained in their musical interests. These examples emphasize George Kent’s notion that “music is peaceful or unpeaceful not because of the inherent character of the music itself, but because of the way it is used” (2008:104).

The above examples show how the intimation of violence through lyrics and the performance of violence through action are often in opposition. There are, however, notable instances in which violent music and violent actions do occur simultaneously. These violent outbursts, which occur most visibly at large music festivals, necessitate explanation to reveal their underlying causes. Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan (2009c) examined the Woodstock 1999 music festival, a notoriously sordid

commemoration of the original, which included performances by rap groups Limp Bizkit and ICP, to reveal the “ambiguity of the relationship between music and actual violence”. Attendants pelted on-stage musicians with refuse, started massive fires, and caused two deaths and hundreds of hospitalizations. The concert was itself poorly planned and created an unsafe environment, including inadequate sanitation systems, a deficit of potable water, and the sense that “[the concert] was billed in a way that required it to bear a semiotic and mythic burden far beyond its capabilities”, which upset many concert-goers (Johnson and Cloonan 2009c:90). Furthermore, the aggregation of disparate musical “communities” (such as the aforementioned “juggalos”) embodied Woodstock ’99 with “a very different internal dynamic, with different relationships between all participants and a wider range of invisible agendas” (Johnson and Cloonan 2009c:92). Johnson and Cloonan (2009c:92) suggest that the “size and audience profile make large rock festivals likely sites for violence”. Similar incidents occurred at the annual Leeds Festival (U.K.) in 2002 and 2005, maintaining this trend overseas. Violence at both the Newport Jazz Festivals (U.S.) and the Beaulieu Festival (U.K.) indicate that even lyric-less music can incite brutality in the proper context (Johnson and Cloonan 2009c:92). These examples reveal that interpersonal/communal dynamics and environmental triggers are the root causes of violence associated with violent music, rather than the lyrics themselves.

By delegitimizing the theory that either violent and hateful lyrics are violence or can incite violence, we have still not solved the problem of the popularization of hate speech in rap. It is difficult to contest (and will not be contested here) that hate speech of

any form is a nuisance at best and extremely hurtful at worst. We should then examine why these lyrics are so pervasive in rap music in the first place. Hip-hop was born out of the specifically inner city black social problems of the 1980's, such as poverty, joblessness and racism (Nuzum 2001:108). These injustices were historically grounded, a product of the "development of the capitalist patriarchal system based on the principles of White supremacy, elitism, racism and sexism" (Adams and Fuller 2006:942). By the 1980's, a combination of poor in-movement and a decline in the income level of long-term residents in the inner city led to the perpetuation and fixation of the modern urban ghetto (Rosenbaum 1995:1). It was these communities that birthed rap. Residents in these areas experienced what Phillippe Bourgois (2001:8) categorizes as structural violence (i.e. historically entrenched systems of exploitation, such as slavery), symbolic violence (i.e. internalized systems of humiliation, such as racism), and everyday violence (i.e. interpersonal, domestic outbursts, such as gang violence). These types of violence are rooted in governmental systems and policies, such as the racially discriminatory Federal Housing Act of 1949, described by Max Weber (1946:3) as one form of the "traditional domination exercised by the patriarch".

It is then little wonder that the earliest instances of hate speech were directed towards the (largely white) authoritarian figures and lawmakers that were deemed to be the cause of many of these problems: "rap [was] an expressive art form – a soapbox from which to make political and social commentary" (Nuzum 2001: 107). Early gangsta rap artists, such as Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.) and Public Enemy, were resentful of the government's inaction and the discriminatory brutality of local police forces (Nuzum

2001:109). These rappers offered a non-violent, artistic method of rebellion, “music that is combative in tone, [yet nevertheless] peaceful [because] it seeks justice” (Kent 2008:108).

Misogyny became the next hate speech trend in rap, and also had its roots in the symbolic violence of the white majority. Both racialized sexism and the mythic female archetypes (Sapphire as the “bitch”, Jezebel as the “whore” or “ho”) proffered by the white majority created anti-feminist sentiment in African-American communities, and thus its most culturally specific musical form (Adams and Fuller 2006:945). Finally, homophobia, rap’s most modern form of violent hate speech, can also be traced back to White colonial enslavement. African American men have been blocked, due to historical oppression from the white majority, from playing ideal masculine roles of provider and protector in heterosexual relationships (Lawrence-Webb et. al 2004:628). This impediment has been a significant source of frustration, leading to the desire to exercise the hyper-masculine black male ideal (2004: 623). It is evident that the power structures and forms of violence applied to blacks in America in many ways resulted in the hate speech we so regularly hear in rap music.

As rap rose in popularity as a genre, the white patriarchal powers saw it as threat to their socio-political dominance. Steps towards censorship were immediate exercises in the power of the state judiciary, another form of legitimation of violence Weber identifies (1946:3). These measures often had strong racist biases: songs were deemed to lack “redeeming social value” (Nuzum 2001:184), exhibit “primitive” musical knowledge

(Walser 1995: 195), or that rebellious lyrics were “worthless speech” (Nuzum 2001: 183). On one occasion, rapper C-Bo was arrested for violating parole because of the intimations of violence in his songs, not his physical conduct (Nuzum 2001: 163). These juridical actions are representative of “disciplinary forms of power that destabilize the very discourses of belonging that claim to bind subjects to the state and its laws” (Das and Poole 2004:9). African-Americans, demoralized by systematic violence proffered by the state, currently find their culturally specific form of non-violent musical expression silenced by a patriarchal, white judiciary power. Sadly, these same oppressive powers are the historical precedent for the violent and hateful modes of speech that it now attempts to censor. Though we can agree that violent hate speech in music is generally offensive, we must recognize these deeply ironic and unappealing connections between racism, state power, and disenfranchisement.

Hate speech, out of the context of rap music, is often a protected, though disdained, civil right in the United States. However, violent and hateful rap music is still overwhelmingly despised by academics and laypeople alike, drawing calls for censorship, under the incorrect assumption that it can incite targeted violence. In his book entitled “Parental Advisory: Music Censorship in America”, author Eric Nuzum questions the validity and bias of FCC censorship techniques:

“Often, rap songs are heavily edited for broadcast to remove indecent language. However, Top 40 songs by artists such as Green Day, Marilyn Manson, and the Clash contain a great deal of uncensored, indecent language that seems to go unnoticed and cause little turmoil. Why the difference? Is it because rap music is a more controversial medium than pop tunes, or is it because the majority of artists usually involved in rap are black and come from urban areas?” (185)

The connections between hate speech in rap music and a long history of white patriarchal oppression seem to indicate that racism does indeed play an important role in censorship. It is with great difficulty that we must turn to question larger societal issues that cause this animosity, rather than only blaming musicians for their offenses. Investigation into rap lyrics should instead be directed towards understanding what causes targeted hate speech, including deep-seated and historical economic, social, and political inequalities amongst African-Americans, and how solutions to these macro issues may result in a decline of antagonistic and targeted lyrics.

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