

The McMaster Journal of
Communication
Volume 3, Issue 1
2006
Article 2

Pimpin' Pimps: Explaining the
Presence of Pimps in Hip-Hop
culture.

Erick Barkman

McMaster University

Copyright ©

2006 by the authors. The McMaster Journal of Communication is
produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).

<http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/mjc>

Pimpin' Pimps: Explaining the Presence of Pimps in Hip-Hop culture

Eric Barkman

Abstract

Within Hip-Hop culture the pimp is a prominent figure that is often misread by people who condemn him as overtly sexual, sexist and hedonistic. This misconception fails to recognize the tradition of signifying that precedes rap music and the affects of deindustrialization on the black working class within the United States. The pimp becomes a celebrated figure he achieves wealth and success in a community that faces the perils of institutionalized racism. There is an important difference between the narratives described in rap lyrics and the realities of the Hip-Hop lifestyle that is often ignored by critics. Most public representations of Hip-Hop culture are performed acts and rappers using aliases become characters for the purpose of entertaining the audience. This paper seeks to complicate the simplistic reading of the pimp as only a whoremonger and instead explore the reasons why the pimp figure exists and is celebrated in Hip-Hop and what it is this character is used to represent.

Key Words: Hip-Hop, pimp, rap-music, Hustle & Flow, black-culture, signifying, mack, trickster

The McMaster Journal of Communication
2006 Volume 3, Issue 1

Pimpin' Pimps: Explaining the Presence of Pimps in Hip-Hop culture

Eric Barkman
McMaster University

The pimp is a highly visible character in North American Hip-Hop and his presence is often misunderstood. Critics claim that the popularity of the pimp in Hip-Hop is just another characteristic of a culture that objectifies women and has little regard for the law. This simplistic dismissal of this figure fails to understand why the pimp has become an often imitated and even celebrated character within public representations of this culture. The development of rap has influences that are shared with the creation of the pimp as an icon rather than simply a whoremonger. The pimp icon and Hip-Hop is in general a result of more than just life in the ghetto. In short, Hip-Hop did not develop in a vacuum divorced from the greater socio-political effects of North American society. The development of the music has been highly influenced by mainstream society and white perceptions of black life and art. The effects of capitalism, individualism, modernity, slavery, marketing and the privileging of the visual all play significant roles in the development of Hip-Hop culture as it is represented on MTV. Those who misunderstand and label it to be as less valuable than other types of music and art dismiss Hip-Hop culture too easily by assuming that it is an exercise in realism and representative of the larger black reality in America. By examining the pimp and determining what this figure represents and why it has been visible within public displays of Hip-Hop, we can derive a better understanding of the music and the communities that originally developed it.

The pimp does not become a celebrated character all of a sudden, but is the modern embodiment of the trickster character that long predates Hip-Hop. This trickster character is also an early influence on the development of *toasting*, arguably the precursor to rap (Quinn, 2000:118). The pimp becomes associated with the Signifying Monkey, a popular trickster character, because they both demonstrate dominance over language (Quinn, 2000:120). Both of these characters are able to attain positions of power by controlling authority figures through language. The Signifying Monkey is able, in one narrative, to convince a lion that the elephant has been tarnishing his image. In this case the Monkey is able to gain power over the lion, which is able to dominate him physically, through the use of language. When the elephant inevitably trounces the lion, the Monkey has in effect, beat up the lion without actually touching him. The Signifying Monkey's only access to power is through his dominance over words and his ability to manipulate the lion with them. In a society where blacks have limited access to power because of structural racism and the unfavourable family histories that are a result of those structures, control and mastery over language is a tangible goal and a viable way of attaining power. The pimp, through his association with the Monkey, becomes a symbol of this power over language and a celebrated figure in a genre that privileges control over language.

It is not only mastery of language that connects rappers and pimps. In order to succeed in the rap game an artist needs to sell him/herself along with his/her music. In effect these musicians must pimp themselves in order to succeed. Self promotion is needed to gain larger audiences, market

shares and record deals. Rappers need to sell themselves to the public in the same way that a pimp sells women to a john (Frazier, 2003). Rappers are simultaneously pimps and hos participating in both self-exploitation and self-promotion while marketing their images and art to the public. Self-promotion runs the risk of backfiring if a musician is seen as vain but this is countered when the pimp image is adopted because it is an already respected character that is already assumed to be a self-promoter. Successful black rappers who associate with the pimp also avoid challenging the status quo by remaining in a profession that is coded as a black endeavour that does not challenge the position of whites in America (Frazier, 2003).

The pimp is also a symbol of upward mobility in a community that has few opportunities for success. This is coupled with a narrative tradition that has celebrated the pimp lifestyle (Quinn, 2000:135). Iceberg Slim is identified as the dominant figure in the pop-cultural production of the pimp character and the popularity of his books is a direct influence on Hip-Hop artists (Quinn, 2000:123). Ice-T sums up what is required prior to rap success, "You better get into some of that Iceberg stuff" (Quinn, 2000:123). This celebration of the pimp and his success in a difficult and biased society is easy to imagine in the consumerism of the 1980's and the Reaganomics affect inner city blacks. The negative effects of policies directly harming the infrastructure and services result in a society that is told to buy more and more but provided with fewer and fewer opportunities to pay for food and shelter let alone frivolous purchases. A character like the pimp that is able to exploit patriarchal capitalism (Quinn, 2000:134) is going to be associated with success because he is one of the few people thriving.

As an icon for success the pimp aesthetic becomes the model for flaunting achievement and wealth. Rappers who achieve huge contracts often rise quickly from poor to rich and they imitate those characters in their lives that they associated with money. This imitation and appropriation of the pimp aesthetic also indicates an important divide between pimps who actually own prostitutes and pimps found within the Hip-Hop scene (Quinn, 2000:122). Hip-Hop artists are not pimps, though critics often do not see much difference between the two figures. It is the pimp's lifestyle, not his job, which is the attraction and the characteristic that rappers are trying to represent through their imitation of him (Quinn, 2000:124). Lavish clothing and the outward presentation of a pimp is an indication that rappers are aware of "being seen" (Saddike, 2003:111) and are portraying a character rather than representing truth.

Critics of rap artists fail to appreciate that gangsta rap is a highly constructed performance that it is not a representation of truth nor is it an attempt at realism (Saddike, 2003:112). North American arts are often strictly divided with few people crossing these boundaries and participating in many different forms. But Hip-Hop culture has a long list of performers who excel at both music and film because Hip-Hop artists are constructed characters (Saddike, 2003:117). Unlike rock or country music in which performers do not often overtly perform their roles, rap music is full of artists who consciously act out roles as rappers. The assumption by many whites that rap music is about realism and that musicians are unfabricated characters leads to the condemnation of Hip-Hop as violent and dangerous. Films are not held to the same standard as rap albums because society has labeled them as works of fiction but because music has such strong ties to supposed reality Hip-Hop is attacked when it is clearly involved in fiction.

Two main tropes arise out of the fiction of Hip-Hop are socially conscious rap and playful rhyming. Before judging the content of a song it is import to identify whether the author is being serious or "just having fun" (Saddike, 2003:110). Once again we need to be aware that rap is representing violence not acting on it and promoting it. Violence in ghettos neighbourhoods is symptom of the structures that create those areas not a result of people listening to music. The music contains violence because it was created in an environment full of suffering and rap quite often presents violence in a negative light as a way of subverting a dangerous reality of ghetto life.

All too quickly people dismiss the violence of Hip-Hop as a promotion of terrible actions instead of recognizing the subversive nature of a song detailing the consequences of violence (Saddike, 2003:120) or that rap is an outlet for violence that does no physical harm. Venting through music is a positive action that avoids and prevents conflict. Rivalries can remain within rhetoric rather than being actually carried out (Saddike, 2003:115). Conflicts voiced through songs remain in the tradition of the dozens and work to lesson violence rather than promote and increase it. When we recognize that rap is fiction we must also realize that is more complex than a simple retelling of ghetto violence and it is in fact a way of preventing and critiquing violent actions.

This fictitious nature is also revealed through the outrageous characters that are presented in Hip-Hop videos. Scenes of men surrounded by women are clearly the in the realm of fantasy rather than reality. Half-naked women, regardless of what is shown on MTV, do not constantly surround rappers nor does anyone literally throw cash around. The fridges full of Cristal champagne, the pools surrounded by hundreds, the luxury cars lined up, and the dance offs in the middle of streets do not exist outside of the music video. These are all fictitious creations and while it is important to critique the sexism and commodity fetishism that they promote these events do not happen when the cameras are not rolling and to solely critique Hip-Hop for promoting negative aspects or our society means ignoring the rampant violence and sexism present on all TV and films we view.

These blatant displays of wealth also receive criticism because they are not the same ways that whites display their wealth; i.e. the 'proper' way. Within a demographic that is not actively prevented from attaining wealth obvious embodiments of wealth are eschewed. A luxury car, a nice watch and a huge home are the expected results of affluence. Because of this already prescribed code of conduct for the rich, the flashy and extravagant presentations of Hip-Hop wealth are considered vulgar and misguided. It is hardly fair to criticize someone who has just received unexpected wealth to be modest and quiet especially if that wealth is an indication of attaining success despite a society that seeks to deny it (Saddike, 2003:114). White society misunderstands the visibility of Hip-Hop wealth, displayed through jewelry and excess, as bragging and immaturity. The visual representation of wealth in Hip-Hop is a consequence of an entire society that is obsessed with commodities and money. Rap musicians are celebrating their unlikely financial success not because they are vain and frivolous but because it is so unexpected.

When portraying a character in Hip-Hop culture, it is important that we realize that "to 'talk the talk' is to 'walk the walk'" (Quinn, 2000:127). More emphasis may be placed on rapping the role of a pimp or a gangbanger than actually participating in the actions of one. Singing about 'bitches' and crime is all part of the act that has been proven successful. Most black rappers have connections and knowledge of the lifestyles of pimps and gang members but not through experience. Young rappers have a tradition of music nearly thirty years old to draw from and the success of acts rhyming about pimps are sure to lead to other acts imitating them and copying a genre that has proved successful.

Further complicating this misconception about Hip-Hop is the incorrect assumption that it speaks for all blacks. The result is a sub-group that is responsible for the dissemination of all public knowledge concerning black culture in white America. If we consider that Hip-Hop is a black adolescent culture then a juvenile culture is the only interaction with and presentation of black culture that many people are exposed to and it represents only an immature viewpoint (Gordon, 2005:1). An important difference between adult music and adolescent music is the playing that music essentially is. Music is not a serious endeavour but a leisure activity. However, child's play is different than adult play in its perception of the world. Adult play contains memento mori's as it is always aware that play must end and that life is finite. Child's play instead seeks to continue and avoids ending because children do not have a sense of their own mortality (Gordon, 2005:17).

This concept is visible in Hip-Hop as it celebrates youth and pleasure with less thought given to the future and more emphasis placed on living a luxurious life.

Up to this point I have attempted to explain the presence of the pimp in Hip-Hop as a continuation of a tradition and a result of the specific spaces that black society exists in America but the American culture that is disseminated across racial and class boundaries also encourages black men to celebrate the pimp. In fact, many of the negative aspects of Hip-Hop are found throughout American culture and not limited to the black population (Saddike, 2003:115). During the 1980's and the Reagan era the decline and loss of public space, such as parks and schools, initiated a shift in Hip-Hop from the public sphere to the private sphere (Gordon, 2005:15). This accompanied a rise in individualistic capitalism that dominated all peoples in America. The individual became the highest priority and resulted in a fragmentation of conscious Hip-Hop that was concerned with benefiting everyone rather than each person separately. As laissez-faire capitalism becomes more prevalent and Hip-Hop is individualized the art and message is sacrificed in the name of profit (Gordon, 2005:9). Coupled with the fact that most Hip-Hop CD's are purchased by white teenagers (Quinn, 2000:133), success in Hip-Hop is no longer based on the music's relevancy for black communities. An artist does not need to produce conscious and thoughtful material because uninformed consumers, with no experience with ghetto life or the hardships it entails, dominate the market.

Black resistance and lifestyle becomes a dominant commodity in North America and the type exploitation, of both the individual and the community, demonstrates lasting effects of the slave trade in the Americas. Black sexuality again becomes the obsession of white culture and Hip-Hop is influenced by this obsession. This leads to the destruction of black women in many of the lyrics and music videos of Hip-Hop (Frazier, 2003). Black men's masculinity and self worth is once again based on their sexuality. Procreation is a successful demonstration of this manliness and the number of women's bodies possessed becomes the measure of masculinity (AGBM).

Inevitably this trend is compounded and worsened by the entertainment industry's preference for dumbing down all of its products resulting in even less relevant Hip-Hop. The pimp becomes a misunderstood figure that is copied and re-presented over and over to an audience that has no appreciation for his significance. He is coupled with the drug dealer and used to promote an "authentic" black culture consisting only of crime and weak morals (Dunlap, 2005). The success of rap that deals with these characters creates a widespread perception of black people as both ghettoized and sexualized. When American society was attacked on 9/11 popular Hip-Hop was unable to develop a dialogue or movement that could deal with the resulting mass confusion and sadness. A culture that had developed in communities concerned especially with survival and dealing with the loss of the naivety of the American dream was so stylized and without substance that it was unable to handle the affects of the attacks on New York, the birthplace of Hip-Hop (Muhammed, 2006). The consciousness that had given rise to rap was been lost when it was packaged and disseminated by entertainment corporations.

It is the contradictions of modernity that have transformed Hip-Hop from a conscientious endeavour into a moneymaking enterprise. The benefits that some receive in laissez-faire capitalism are insignificant when compared to the lack that the majority must live with. The rhetoric of freedom in individuality is meaningless for an entire race of people that must deal with the biases of the dominant group. The praise of progress in markets and economics is an insult for a community that sees no improvement (Gordon, 2005:5). The only thing of value that all poor blacks possess is their supposed authenticity that is marketed to the general public and hailed by misguided academics ignoring the consequences of essentialism (Gordon, 2005:10). Perceiving black culture as somehow more authentic assumes black people to be less educated and not as well read as whites (Stallings, 2003:181). It also is indicative of a privileging of written texts over oral texts by a group that assumes that rappers do not read (Stallings, 2003:182). The connection to the hood is needed in order to market a success Hip-Hop star as an authentic piece of black culture (Foreman, 2000:72). The

message contained in the music becomes secondary to the image that a performer can display. The loss of overt consciousness and political activism in mainstream Hip-Hop is a result of capitalism, marketing and the individuality of American society. Hip-Hop has not lost the ability to be a progressive and positive force but it has been hindered by its assimilation into mainstream society.

The latest mainstream representation of the pimp is found in Craig Brewer's *Hustle & Flow*. This film depicts the transformation of a pimp into a Hip-Hop star, an obvious reversal of the typical adoption of the pimp aesthetic by a rapper. Djay, the pimp in the film, does not portray the pimp as a flashy, rich and successful character. Instead he is a poor man struggling with his own mortality and the need to feed the three women he protects. The film, however, does depict some disturbingly stereotypical black characters including Djay, an undereducated, aggressive and immoral black man, Lexus, a highly sexualized black single mother, Yvette, a proper, devoted, black lower-middle class wife and Shug, a helpless, pregnant, single woman dependant upon Djay for everything (Hylton, 2006). It also creates relationships along racial lines as the only two prominent white characters develop an instant friendship. The film does to a good job of depicting the necessity of making money through any means but it also seems to privilege the idea of personal responsibility. Djay is unsuccessful in life because he does not apply himself or work hard. Nola repeatedly points out that it is not clear what Djay does to deserve most of the money she earns through prostitution. This laziness or lack of action is juxtaposed against all the time and effort he puts into creating music. He is able to succeed because he finally worked hard enough to achieve the rewards of the American dream.

His hard work is centralized around his struggles to figure out the right lyrics to use in his songs. This is an example of the power and opportunity that words provide for a community that is largely powerless. When Djay does eventually get the right words, he attains a level of power and stability that he lacked at the beginning of the narrative. The film also depicts violence as a product of the setting rather than the actions of Djay himself. He is constantly needed to assert himself physically before he is empowered through a control over language. This eventually leads to his incarceration but it is also necessary because he has yet to achieve a position of power. The end of the film is problematic because Djay's success is ultimately dependant upon Nola's body and sexuality. Even though Djay is in jail she continues to prostitute herself for his benefit by sleeping with radio DJ's in order to get his song played. The exploitation of women becomes the method by which Djay is able to survive and the film seeks to justify his macho posturing and aggressive control of women in the film.

The film contains elements that do shed light on the reasoning behind the adoption of the pimp figure in Hip-Hop but it also contains many misconceptions and dangerous proposals. By depicting women as tools for attaining success the film reiterates the problems of gendered roles in Hip-Hop. Unlike music video representations of women, however, this film does not depict a fantasy by instead attempts depicting reality. This promotes a dangerous ideology that claims that women can be used to achieve positive results. It also claims that hard work can achieve success regardless of a person's race or background, which is problematic when we consider the realities of structural racism. The film depicts Djay as an authentic rapper who is not acting out his performance. This claim to authenticity plagues Hip-Hop, as I mention earlier, because it is not always easy to identify whether a rapper is producing conscious lyrics or simply playing and leaves the culture open to misinterpretations by critics. The film does touch on the subject of authorial intent and the possibility of Djay's lyrics being misunderstood but the authenticity of his character is never discussed. He speaks of his own personal experiences and it is clear that he is not attempting to become a voice for the larger black community. As a Hip-Hop figure Djay reaffirms many of the misconceptions surround Hip-Hop culture but he does provide, in the very least, a more complicated representation of the pimp. Despite the sexism the stereotypes found within, the film

does well by challenging and complicating simplistic readings of the pimp. It becomes clear that the pimp figure is not easily dismissed when we examine the histories that created the fiction character and the reasons why he is appealing to icon of the Hip- Hop community. The character cannot be seen as either an entirely negative persona nor completely positive, as he does actively reinforce sexism and gendered roles, but he is nonetheless a character that requires evaluation and critique and definitely not simplistic dismissal.

Works Cited

- AGBM. "The Dark Side of Black Love". Mar. 27, 2006. *A Good Black Man Inc.* <<http://www.agoodblackman.com/blkmag.shtml>>.
- Dunlap, Kamika. "Is 50 Cent's Movie The Hard Truth Or Just A Stereotype?" *Black Electorate*. Nov. 11, 2005. Mar. 27, 2006. <<http://www.blackelectorate.com/articles.asp?ID=1507> >.
- Frazier, DuEwa. "Pimp or Wimp?: Why Black Rappers Glorify the Pimp Mentality". *Global Black News*. Oct. 24, 2003. Mar. 27, 2006. <<http://www.globalblacknews.com/DuEwa.html>>.
- Forman, Murray. "'Represent': race, space and place in rap music". *Popular Music*. 19.1 (2000) 65-90.
- Gordon, Lewis R. "The Problem of Maturity in Hip Hop". *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 27:1-23, 2005.
- Hustle & Flow. Screenplay, Dir. Craig Brewer. DVD. Paramount Pictures, 2005.
- Hylton, Tricia. "The 'Hustle and Flow' of Black male stereotypes". *Rabble News*. Mar. 30, 2006. Apr. 4, 2006. <http://rabble.ca/news_full_story.shtml?sh_itm=02ae2b40455e515863acd7edd97c4524&rxn=1&>.
- Muhammed, Cedric. "The Irrelevancy Of Hip Hop Lyrics". *Black Electorate*. Sept. 28, 2001. Mar. 27, 2006. <<http://www.blackelectorate.com/articles.asp?ID=445>>.
- Quinn, Eithne. "'Who's the Mack?' The Performativity and Politics of the Pimp Figure in Gangsta Rap". *Journal of American Studies*. 34.1 (2000) 115-136.
- Saddike, Annette. "Rap's Unruly Body" *The Drama Review*. 47.4 (2003) 110-127.
- Stallings, L. H. "I'm Goin Pimp Whores". *The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003) 175-203.